

6

DOMESTIC SOURCES OF CHANGING TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE MENA DURING THE 2010s

A Role Theoretic Approach¹

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 2010s, Turkey no longer had formal diplomatic relations with erstwhile allies and friends like Israel, Syria, and Egypt, and was experiencing serious problems in ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran. This chapter argues that Ankara's precarious relationship with the rest of the world, especially the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region, can be attributed in part to a string of events that gave the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) free rein in the enactment of its foreign policy preferences. For most of its history, the foreign policy of modern-day Turkey had been rooted in a number of core traditional roles that elicited domestic vertical and horizontal consensus and preserved generally good relations with countries in the MENA region. These roles were also embedded in institutions like the National Security Council and the Foreign Ministry, which ensured some degree of continuity and acted as a constraint on major foreign policy shifts.

Under these circumstances, when the AKP came to power in 2002, it generally continued to enact the traditional roles. As its domestic position solidified, however, the AKP sought to enact new roles that gave rise to significant horizontal role contestation from other elites and institutions. Interviews I conducted with Turkish elites, as well as an analysis of statements made by opposition parties, indicate that the AKP's new roles have generated sharp domestic contestation. These disagreements have had little effect on the AKP's foreign policy because the ruling party has managed to deprive the actors who disagreed with them of institutional levers with which to effectively contest these changes. This chapter is therefore an illustration of how domestic role contestation can be marginalized by a dominant political party that can secure control over institutions and neutralize

their possible status as sites of resistance. As will be seen, the consequences of the elimination of effective role contestation were more negative than positive, at least in the Turkish case.

This chapter proceeds as follows. It begins with a summary of Turkey's traditional roles and illustrates the AKP's general compliance with them from 2002 until 2009. I then describe the AKP's shift to enacting new roles, beginning with 2008–2009, and the horizontal role contestation that emerged as a result. Although disagreements have been sharp, the chapter demonstrates that they had little effect on Ankara's foreign policy, due to the AKP's control of domestic institutions that could have been possible constraints on the enactment of new roles. I conclude with some reflections on domestic role contestation and the value of a role theoretical approach in foreign policy. Methodologically, I identify top decision makers' role conceptualizations from 1997 until 2014. For this purpose, I conducted 50 interviews to depict the foreign policy elite's role preferences and a nationwide survey to collect data on the public's preferences on Turkey's foreign policy roles (Özdamar 2014).

Turkish Foreign Policy in the MENA and Its Traditional Roles

Turkey's involvement in MENA affairs has always been uneasy since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. After four centuries of dominance in the region through suzerain states, the Ottoman Empire lost all of its MENA holdings to the Allies during World War I. After this point, although Turkey had brief episodes of active involvement in Middle Eastern affairs—such as during the 1950s in Prime Minister (PM) Menderes's term—Turkey's regional initiatives were generally distant. In addition to the historical burden and the early Republican establishment's preferred distance from Middle Eastern affairs, Cold War politics was also a factor that led Turkey to have a low profile in the region. As NATO's southeastern flank, Turkey generally preferred not to become heavily involved in the pressing matters of the Cold War, such as the Arab-Israeli wars. In general, Ankara's foreign policy toward MENA during this period has been characterized by efforts to enact three traditional core roles—"defender of peace and stability," "regional system collaborator," and "global system collaborator"—along with the more recent roles of "bridge" between East and West and "mediator" or "facilitator."

These roles guided Turkish foreign policy since the foundation of modern Turkey in 1923. For example, Turkey attempted to resolve its border problems with Iraq and Syria through the League of Nations during the 1920s, supported the 1928–1929 disarmament movement in Europe (the Kellogg-Briand Pact), and was invited and joined the League of Nations in 1932 (Oran 2001). Since its beginning, Turkish foreign policy aimed to pursue peaceful relations in regional affairs and collaborated with regional and global international organizations. In addition, since the 1940s, Turkey debated a bridge role between East and West (Yanik 2009) and occasionally performed a mediator role between neighbors in

the region, most notably in the 1990s and 2000s. These foreign policy acts suggest Turkey successfully produced specific middle-power roles for itself and performed them according to its relative standing in the international system.

The “defender of peace and stability” role refers to a country assuming a special responsibility to defend the peace and stability in the world. The “defender of peace” role conception is also defined by Holsti (1970: 272) as “a universal commitment to defend against any aggression or threat to peace, no matter what the locale.” Turkey’s policy makers have often used this role conception to define Turkey’s role in the MENA. A survey of top Turkish decision makers’ speeches since 1997 reveals several references to Turkey’s special position as an “island of stability” in the middle of a conflict-ridden Middle East and North Africa (Özdamar 2014).

The role of “global system collaborator,” according to Aras and Gorener (2010: 84), “often includes references to supporting the global order. Emphasis on compliance with international rules and norms and active participation in global and regional arrangements is a fair indicator of the existence of this role conception.” The role suggests a country is willing to support the values and abide by the requirements and rules of international society. Turkey’s active participation in the United Nations (UN) and support for the Security Council’s (UNSC) efforts to ensure peace in the region have been indicators of this role.

Holsti’s (1970) “regional subsystem collaborator” refers to a state’s commitment to build regional systems of cooperation and “far-reaching commitments to cooperative efforts with other states to build wider communities, or to cross-cutting subsystems.” Examples include Turkey’s support to build the Balkan Pact in 1934 against Nazi aggression in Eastern Europe and leadership in forming the Central Treaty Organization in 1955 and the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in 1992. These former regional commitments have also paved the way for a larger role for Turkey in the MENA.

In addition, Turkish elites also articulated the country’s role as a “bridge” between East and West, which carried geographic, civilizational, and religious undertones (Yamık 2009). “Bridge” as a metaphor and role has been used for Turkey since the 1980s. Especially after the end of the Cold War, Turkey attempted to locate itself ideationally between East and West. This role was very prominent during the 1990s when newly established republics broke away from the USSR and tried to open their systems to the market economy and democracy. This policy was especially important for Turkish foreign policy due to shared history, ethnicity, and religious ties between Turkey and the Central Asian Turkic republics. Finally, Turkey’s foreign policy role as “mediator” and “facilitator” in the region has been traditionally emphasized. Based on Holsti’s description, the “mediator-integrator” role refers to leaders’ “perceptions of a continuing task to help adversaries reconcile their difference” (K. Holsti 1970: 265). References to a mediator role only in a single case will not be enough to talk about such a role conception. Instead, the country (or leader) should perceive a responsibility as a mediator of conflicts in more than one crisis. Turkey’s repeated involvement in different crises around the

region has proven this point. For example, Turkey has pursued a “facilitator” role between Palestinians and Israelis during the late 1990s and between Iraq and the United States in 1998 (Altunışık and Çuhadar 2010).

Elites have on occasion strayed from these traditional roles, most notably during President Turgut Özal’s time in office and during the controversy over PKK² leader Abdullah Öcalan’s presence in Damascus, but more often than not, decision makers have shared a belief that these were the roles to be enacted. As a champion of the campaign against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1990–1991, President Özal went beyond his office’s constitutional authority, and, according to many observers, dragged Turkey into operations against Iraq (Özdamar and Taydaş 2012). Such involvement in MENA was an unprecedented event for the foreign policy establishment (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Turkish Armed Forces) and was strongly opposed by these actors (Aydın 2004), which contested Özal’s attempts to move beyond Ankara’s traditional roles.³

Following President Özal’s sudden death in 1993, Turkey’s foreign policy regarding the MENA returned to its traditional distance, except for Turkey’s attempts to forestall the provision of regional support to the PKK from states such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Turkey conducted various raids into Northern Iraq to hit PKK targets and came to the brink of war against Syria in 1998, when the latter refused to expel PKK leader Öcalan, who was residing in Damascus (James and Özdamar 2009). After this crisis, Turkey’s relations with Syria, as well as Iraq and Iran, began to be normalized. As the PKK threat was contained (the group ceased its attacks against Turkey from 1999 to 2004), PM Ecevit and Foreign Minister (FM) İsmail Cem presided over a thaw in ties with these countries (Hinnebusch and Tür 2013). During this period, from 1998 to 2002, Turkey’s relations vis-à-vis the MENA region returned to traditional roles.

The AKP Comes to Power

In 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won nearly two thirds of the seats in Parliament and became a single-party government. Until about 2009, the new ruling party largely abided by Turkey’s traditional roles, developing cordial relations with different Middle Eastern governments. For example, in both Abdullah Gül’s (FM 2003–2007) and Ali Babacan’s (FM 2007–2009) terms the most cited roles by both ministers have been “defender of peace and stability,” “regional subsystem collaborator,” and “global system collaborator” (Özdamar 2014). Especially in the aftermath of the Iraq War and the following turmoil in the region, Abdullah Gül referred to the traditional role of “defender of peace and stability” as the number one preference of Turkish foreign policy in the region (Özdamar 2014). “Global system collaborator” was also frequently expressed; to enact it, Turkey complied with UNSC resolutions about Iraq and sent peacekeeping troops to Lebanon. Turkey also actively lobbied to become a UNSC nonpermanent member and served in this capacity in 2009–2010.

The traditional “regional system collaborator” role promoted regional cooperation institutions and regional governance initiatives like the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Turkey actively lobbied for a Turkish academic—Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu—to be the secretary-general of the organization. Bilateral relations with Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon were particularly close. For example, ties with Syria improved so much that the two countries convened joint cabinet meetings in Damascus (“Turkish, Syrian Cabinets” 2010). Turkey also led an initiative with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan named the “Levant Quartet” that sought to establish economic cooperation along the lines of the former European Economic Community, but instability after the Arab uprisings caused this initiative to be stillborn. In short, Turkish policy makers during this period subscribed to these three traditional middle-power roles of Turkey vis-à-vis its relations with the MENA region. Both the public and ruling elites were largely supportive of this continuity, even though the AKP’s more visible emphasis on ethnic and religious affiliations as a basis for foreign policy gave rise to some contestation from the secular opposition (Özdamar 2014).

The AKP’s first important decision regarding the Middle East involved the Turkish parliament’s rejection of the government’s bill to join the invasion of Iraq by American-led forces in 2003.⁴ Although the top AKP leadership supported joining the war, about 100 AKP MPs sided with the opposition and voted against the government bill or abstained (Taydaş and Özdamar 2013). AKP leaders represented the failed government policy as a “victory for democracy” and benefited from public opinion gains domestically, in Europe, and in the Middle East, where most governments and the public were against the Iraq War. In this way, Turkey pursued its traditional nonintervention policy in the Middle East and reaped the benefits of being a pro-democracy middle power that opposed superpower penetration into the MENA region. In this context, Turkey’s decision makers argued the parliament’s rejection of joining the Iraq War was part of Turkey’s “defender of peace and stability” role in the region (Taydaş and Özdamar 2013). The AKP also continued to emphasize the various aspects of the “bridge” role that, as mentioned earlier, became prominent since the 1980s.

Turkish policy makers during this period spoke to the different dimensions of the “bridge” role. First, many references in TFP leaders’ speeches refer to the geographical location of the country as bridging Asia with Africa, or the East with the West (Tank 2006; Yılmaz and Bilgin 2006). Second, references focused on Turkey as a bridge across civilizations. Especially during the first years of AKP foreign policy, decision makers expanded the role to bridging “Islam and Christianity.” For example, Turkey cofounded the “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative with Spain at the UN in 2005. Finally, Ankara enacted its “mediator” role by acting as a mediator between Israel and Syria, as well as between the P5+1 and Iran. Then-PM’s advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu’s repeated references to the “mediator” and “facilitator” roles in the region are also evidence of Turkey’s own role conceptualization in the region (Altunışık and Çuhadar 2010).

A review of the 2002–2009 period therefore reveals that the AKP subscribed to Turkey’s traditional global and regional roles. Turkey’s foreign policy enacted roles such as global and regional collaborator and defender of peace and stability. In addition Turkey has conceptualized its role as a facilitator between countries in the MENA and as a bridge between the Islamic and Christian civilizations. With the help of this mediatory position, Turkish foreign policy was generally applauded by the MENA governments as well as the EU and the United States. Domestically, the AKP’s enactment of Turkey’s traditional roles was met with little vertical or horizontal contestation.

This foreign policy framework began to change slowly in December 2008–January 2009, when Israel began its “Operation Cast Lead” against targets in Gaza. From this point onwards, Turkey’s relations with almost every regional actor progressively worsened and role contestation emerged as a significant factor in domestic debates on Turkish foreign policy, as the AKP began to enact new roles that did not elicit the same domestic consensus as did previous roles.

The AKP’s New Roles

By December 2008, when AKP decision makers first began to criticize Israel for its Gaza operation, the AKP had been in government for a little over six years. During this period, the party gained domestic legitimacy as a new party and international popularity by improving relations with almost all MENA countries, by beginning EU accession talks and by maintaining cordial relations with the United States and NATO. In terms of both regional and global initiatives, Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule was celebrated globally as a very successful example of a middle power projecting its influence at regional and global levels. Although AKP skeptics argued that the party had not given up its Islamist roots in foreign and domestic policy, most observers agree that AKP foreign policy was not ideological in the 2002–2009 period. However, since the party took power, AKP leaders, in addition to enacting Turkey’s traditional roles, wanted closer ties with Middle Eastern countries and were interested in enacting a number of new roles: “regional leader,” “protector of the oppressed,” “leader of the Muslim world,” “rule maker,” and “central country.”

The “regional leader” role projects responsibility to lead the region with which the leader identifies her country (K. Holsti 1970: 261). This role is identified by Aras and Gorener (2010: 82) in their analysis of Turkish foreign policy in the AKP period. They argue that “the majority of the AKP leaders’ statements are couched in language that indicates a strong self-identification as a regional leader.” The role articulates political, economic, and security leadership in the region. AKP officials were also likely to associate Turkey with a “central country” role. This role conception assumes a “globally” central status and a very special geographical and ideational condition that sees Turkey as a “hub” between different regions, cultures, alliances, and economic relations. Hence, rather than a “regional” role, this is more

a “global” role conception that presents Turkey at the center of a complex set of international relations. The “protector of the oppressed,” “leader of the Muslim World,” and “rule maker” roles were used in similar contexts, especially after the Arab uprisings. Then-FM Davutoğlu suggested Turkey had a responsibility to protect oppressed people in the region against their corrupt and authoritarian governments, such as in Syria against the Assad regime (Özdamar 2014; Özdamar, Halistoprak, and Sula 2014). Similar to “responsibility to protect” debates within the UN agenda, Turkey also assumed responsibility to protect people against their governments when necessary. Leadership of the Muslim world is a loosely defined role used frequently by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu (Strauss 2009). This role suggests Turkey should assume leadership especially in countries with a Muslim-majority population. The argument here was that its relatively old experience with republicanism, democracy, and a market economy allows Turkey to help Muslim countries in their developmental agenda. Lastly, PM Davutoğlu suggested that Turkey needs to act like a “rule maker” in the volatile MENA region. Although it is not a very clearly defined role, then-FM Ahmet Davutoğlu argued that Turkey is a rule-making actor in the region.⁵ Davutoğlu explained this role within the context of preventive diplomacy that targets establishing regional initiatives to resolve conflicts before they turn into diplomatic crises (Davutoğlu 2009).

Unlike the enactment of the traditional roles, which met with very little domestic contestation, some of the AKP’s “new” roles in the MENA region faced institutional constraints, such as the National Security Council, where military officials shaped foreign policy decisions, and the judiciary. In short, although the AKP consistently sought to enact leadership roles and closer ties with the regional powers whose populations were religiously and culturally very close to the AKP electorate,⁶ domestic constraints prevented these roles from being enacted until 2009. This shift had significant consequences for Turkish foreign policy. Until 2008, Turkey had cordial relations with Israel, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. Five years later, after pursuing new leadership roles and taking many controversial positions regarding the Arab uprisings, Turkey did not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, Syria, and Egypt, and experienced considerable tensions in relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. I argue that this severe change was possible because domestic resistance that prevented the enactment of the AKP’s “new” roles in 2002–2009 was removed after 2009, giving the ruling elite more influence in role enactment. From then on, Turkey’s major foreign policy decisions were articulated in the context of the country’s enactment of new roles.

The change began with Turkey’s fierce criticism of Israel’s attacks on Gaza, when it sought to enact a new “protector of the oppressed” role. AKP governments, until Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009, maintained cordial relations with Israel, and relations thrived between 2002 and 2009. President Shimon Peres gave a speech in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) in November 2007, which was the first speech given by an Israeli president before the legislature of a Muslim-majority country. PM Erdoğan too maintained cordial relations with

Israel and the Jewish community in the United States. He received a prestigious award from the Anti-Defamation League in 2005 in New York.

As part of its mediator role, Turkey maintained negotiations between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights. At the peak of these relations—and, according to Turkish officials, when a solution about Golan was about to be achieved—Israel's attacks on civilian targets in Gaza were heavily criticized by the AKP government. Relations soured in early 2009 when PM Erdoğan had an argument with the Israeli president about the Gaza attacks in front of world media at the World Economic Forum in Davos. In May 2010, after a humanitarian aid flotilla organized by international (mostly Turkish) activists was raided by Israeli commandos in the Mediterranean and nine Turkish citizens were killed, Turkish-Israeli relations were frozen. Both at the rhetorical and diplomatic levels, Turkish-Israeli relations reached a historically low point. In dealing with Israel, Turkish policy makers regularly resorted to the “protector of the oppressed” role. PM Erdoğan and FM Davutoğlu repeatedly emphasized Turkey's “duty” to protect Palestinian people against Israeli attacks (Davutoğlu 2014).

The Arab uprisings also motivated Ankara to seek the enactment of the new role of “regional leader” and to reinforce its “protector of the oppressed” role. Protests in the Middle East caught Turkey unprepared, and Ankara was initially reserved about the events. Turkey was initially against any military intervention in Libya by NATO, for instance (“Libya Protests: Defiant Gaddafi Refuses to Quit” 2011), but then changed its position and took an active part in the NATO operation to bring about regime change. Turkey also supported regime change in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. At the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the Turkish government tried to use its influence on President Assad to find a peaceful resolution to the internal revolts. When these efforts failed and the civil war deepened, the Turkish government sided with the rebels. After the summer of 2011, Turkey openly aided rebels politically and diplomatically and adopted a clearly anti-Assad stance. Many independent sources claimed that the Turkish government also provided financial and military support to some opposition groups (Schmitt 2012); this was denied by Ankara.

Against criticisms of aiding the rebels, Turkish officials defended aid to rebels as part of the enactment of a new role—that of a “regional leader.” In an interview with Japanese daily *Nikkei*, President Gül noted that the course of action that Turkey follows in the region is in accordance with its regional leader role (Gül 2011).⁷ In the context of Turkish support for regime change, Turkey's officials also justified it as part of the expectations of its “protector of the oppressed” role that was vocalized in the case of Israel. Similarly, another new role, that of “leader of the Muslim world,” required Turkey “to act” at a time Muslims in Syria were persecuted. For instance, Erdoğan repeatedly noted during his presidential campaign that it is Turkey's duty to stand with the oppressed people of the Middle East, which he named as the Iraqi people, the Syrian people, and the residents of Gaza (Erdoğan 2014).

These events also served as an occasion for the AKP to articulate two additional roles: “rule maker” and “central country” in the world. When asked by the opposition whether it was really Turkey’s responsibility to protect Syrian people against their governments, FM Davutoğlu suggested that the opposition did not understand Turkey’s new roles. Davutoğlu claimed the opposition represented the old elite and their outdated conceptualization of Turkey as a loyal ally during the Cold War. The government, he suggests, is trying to position Turkey where it deserves to be, such as a central country with global importance (Özdamar 2014). The claim of being a rule maker in the region was also voiced by Davutoğlu (“Davutoğlu” 2010). The same claim was asserted again within the context of Arab uprisings in 2012 during Davutoğlu’s visits to Brussels for a NATO summit and Paris for the Friends of Syria meeting (“Oyun kurucu” 2012). Davutoğlu’s desire to be a rule maker in the region was also apparent in his diligent efforts to hold the first meeting of the Friends of Syria group in Istanbul.

Similarly, Turkey’s position on the coup d’état in Egypt in 2013 that ousted newly elected president Mohammed Morsi was justified in terms of the new roles. Driven in part by the AKP’s ideological affinities to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ankara vehemently criticized the coup that ousted Mohammed Morsi and supported massive protests that criticized Western states as hypocrites. This episode was also an opportunity for Turkish leaders to defend their active involvement as required by the new roles of “regional leader,” “central country,” and “protector of the oppressed.”

Turkey’s relations were hurt also with Iran due to Turkey’s anti-Assad stance, with the central government in Iraq due to Ankara’s close cooperation in the oil sector, with the Kurdish Northern Iraqi regional government, with Lebanon due to its involvement in the Syrian civil war, and with Saudi Arabia due to its strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It is fair to suggest that, in 2014, the only friendly actors to Turkey in the region were Qatar, the Gaza Strip, and Northern Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government. Such a decline in relations with almost all neighbors in a region is rare for any government in the world. In a short period of two years, Turkey’s relations with many governments in the region were hurt due to positions taken in reaction to the Arab uprisings. These positions were rooted in Turkey’s efforts to enact new roles.

Domestic Debate About Turkey’s MENA Policy

Turkey’s worsening ties with the region caused a furious debate at home as the domestic contestation over Turkey’s roles in the region became more intense. Political polarization over foreign policy issues became particularly active after the Arab uprisings, to an extent that has been rare in Turkish history. In the past, most foreign policy issues in Turkey showed agreement and cohesion to a great extent, especially during the Cold War. Even the most contentious issues, such as the Cyprus question, did not cause such polarization and aggravation in political

discourse. In the 2012–2015 period, however, the debate about Turkey's foreign policy and roles in the region became very heated. My interviews with 50 respondents from all over Turkey (politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, academics, business people, local notables, union representatives) demonstrate that Turkish foreign policy initiatives in the region polarized the public debate on foreign policy to a great extent (Özdamar 2014).

Why did Turkey's foreign policy, which had been characterized by consensus, change so severely? I argue that one should look for the answer in the domestic political developments of the last decade. When the AKP came to power in late 2002, it gained unprecedented success for such a young party. Utilizing the secular parties' decline and a recent economic and political crisis in 2000, the AKP gained about two thirds of the total seats in the parliament. However, such electoral success did not allow the AKP to implement its agenda unimpeded. The AKP's first years were characterized by a conflict with the old establishment. In foreign policy, the elected officials found it hard it to implement new roles and largely followed a traditional line. The secularist Turkish Armed Forces intervened in and projected its influence over foreign affairs through the National Security Council (MGK), which includes the president, some select ministers, and chiefs of staff. The MGK has been generally criticized in the past as a platform for the Turkish Armed Forces to dictate its preferences to the elected civilian officials. For example, the MGK shaped policy about Turkey's fight against the PKK in and out of Turkey for decades, including the first years of the AKP mandate. The military members of MGK were also reported to be for Turkey's joining the Iraq War in 2003 but refused to make a formal endorsement to support the government's initiatives (Taydaş and Özdamar 2013). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, maintained Turkey's traditional pro-Western positions in foreign policy. The Ministry has aimed to maintain Turkey's commitments to international organizations, alliances, and agreements despite the political leanings of successive governments.

The change in the legal status of the MGK was an important facilitator for the AKP's independent agenda for nontraditional Turkish foreign policy roles. Starting in 2001, Turkey enforced several EU Harmonization Packages that included regulations about the position of the military within the political system. In particular, the seventh harmonization package that was enforced in July 2003 changed the composition of the MGK in a way that the number of civilian members surpassed the number of military-affiliated members (Secretariat General for EU Affairs 2007; Tocci 2005). From 2003 to 2007, the influence of the military over the political system gradually diminished because of many reforms. This period also witnessed fierce disagreement in the country over many issues, such as secularism and civil-military relations. By 2009, with the so-called Ergenekon Trials, many members of the military were imprisoned on the grounds that they planned a coup against the government, a crime that was never punished in Turkey before. By 2010, the AKP changed the constitution in a referendum—with a

58% majority—after which the judiciary was placed under the influence of the executive. In 2011, the AKP won 49.95% of votes, an unprecedented result in Turkish history for a party in its third term. After this point, domestic and international critics suggested that Turkey had regressed in many democratic standards, such as independence of the judiciary, freedom of speech, and political organization rights (Freedom House 2015). From the AKP's perspective, two traditionally powerful bureaucratic rivals—the military and the judiciary—have been tamed.

The other traditional power centers—which could have served as a site of role contestation and a brake on the enactment of new roles—were also AKP-friendly during this period. Turkey's president Gül was a former member and founder of the AKP. Although the constitution suggests presidents are impartial and cannot be party members, President Gül worked in perfect harmony with PM Erdoğan. In seven years in office President Gül did not object to any foreign policy initiatives by the government. History suggests not all presidents have been as accommodating as President Gül. For example, President Demirel (1993–2000) prevented then-PM Tansu Çiller's plans to stage a coup in neighboring Azerbaijan; President Sezer (2000–2007) opposed the AKP's plan to join the invasion of Iraq alongside the United States in the 2002–2003 period.

Opposition within Turkish parties has also always been weak. Turkish political parties are all under the control of very powerful chairpersons. However, there is always some debate—albeit behind closed doors—within the powerful figure of a party over critical issues. After important senior politicians left the AKP over the years (e.g., Cemil Çiçek, Abdüllatif Şener, and Dengir Fırat) there was no alternative voice to the top leadership's preferences in the party. Therefore, there was no strong opposition to changing foreign policy from within the AKP either.

All these domestic developments suggest that when Turkey's MENA policy was gradually changing, the government was limiting the influence of almost all domestic actors that had any political or legal power in foreign policy. By the beginning of the 2010s, all actors that had traditional influence over foreign affairs lost ground to the AKP leadership. Except for the PM's very close circle of advisors, no other actor was able to seriously influence foreign policy. Combined with a historical change like the Arab uprisings, the newly established AKP dominance in Turkish political life created an opportunity for the party to enact its new roles and consequently led to Turkey's contentious foreign policies in the region. In a domestic political environment in which none of the traditional influences on foreign policy—such as the MFA bureaucracy, TAF, NSC, judiciary, media, business organizations, or universities—were strong enough to voice concern, the AKP found the necessary room to seek the enactment of a number of new roles in the country's foreign policy.

During this period, the major domestic opposition to the AKP's foreign policy came from the three major opposition parties in Parliament: the CHP (Republican People's Party, center left), the MHP (Nationalist Action Party, Turkish nationalist far right), and the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party, Kurdish nationalist/Marxist

party). However, the opposition's influence on foreign policy was limited only to the discursive level and had no real effect on policy. The only exception for this is use-of-force decisions, which the Turkish parliament has to approve with a majority. Since the AKP maintained a comfortable majority, they did not have difficulty passing legislation about use of force against Syria in 2013 and 2014.

The parliamentary opposition centered on three parties' different preferences about Turkey's foreign policy and roles in the world. The CHP was the strongest opposition party, with 135 MPs (24% of all seats). As a center-left party, the CHP's main criticism was to suggest that the AKP placed religion and sectarianism at the heart of Turkish foreign policy in the region. CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the party's foreign policy experts suggested that Turkey's involvement in Syria's and Egypt's domestic affairs was wrong for political and legal reasons. From the perspective of roles, the CHP rejected Turkey's role as a "leader of the Muslim world." CHP members also argued that the "protector of the oppressed" role disguised the AKP's foreign policy designed only to protect Sunni-Muslim Islamists (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas). Usually, the opposition asked during debates in the parliament why the AKP government was not interested in other humanitarian crises in the world, such as South Sudan and Congo ("Mecliste" 2012).

In addition, the CHP's criticism focused on the alleged sectarianism of the AKP's foreign policy. CHP politicians blamed the AKP for importing Syria's sectarian war to Turkey. An Alevi minority himself, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu accused Erdoğan of trying to topple Assad on sectarian grounds and endangering Turkey's stability by emphasizing the Sunni-Alevi sectarian divides in Turkey (Kılıçdaroğlu 2013). In terms of role conceptualizations, the CHP also argued that all the assertive roles the AKP sought to enact endangered Turkey's position in the world. Many CHP politicians suggest Turkey's material capabilities, such as its economy and military, were not enough to pursue a leadership position in the MENA, let alone be a "central country" globally. The CHP blamed the AKP for overstressing Turkey's limited foreign policy resources for unnecessary adventurism in the MENA. Instead, CHP officials I interviewed suggested Turkey should serve as a source of economic and human development in the region without ever resorting to leadership roles based on military power and hard power (author's interview with an anonymous CHP MP, April 4, 2014). The CHP generally proposes rather traditional roles for Turkey, such as a pro-peace position and global-regional collaboration.

The MHP leadership also heavily criticized the AKP's foreign policy role conceptualizations on similar grounds. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli suggested caution and prudence in MENA politics and blamed the AKP for dragging Turkey into wars that are not "ours." Bahçeli suggested that the AKP's "protector of the oppressed" and regional leadership roles were ill-conceived. As a nationalist party, the MHP criticized the AKP for shedding tears for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood while ethnic Turks were persecuted elsewhere in the world, such as Kirkuk,

Tuzhurmatu, East Turkistan, and Syria (“Bir Numaralı Tehdit” 2013). The MHP leader also repeatedly blamed the AKP for being an extension of U.S. politics in the region, especially in Syria. Bahçeli suggested Erdoğan’s personal vendetta against Assad endangered Turkey’s unity, meaning that Turkey’s focus on Assad’s regime gave the PKK autonomy in Northern Syria and Iraq, which will eventually lead to an independent Kurdistan that will have separatist demands on Turkey. The MHP’s suggestion focused on an “active independent” strategy, in that Turkey would maintain cooperation with the rest of the world on equal grounds but focus essentially on its own interests. The MHP, similar to the CHP, also suggested leadership roles in the region were adventurist and did not have connection with reality on the ground. The MHP urged caution in foreign policy regarding the MENA and focusing mostly on helping the Turkic minorities in the region.

The pro-Kurdish BDP, on the other hand, focused its criticisms on the AKP for not supporting the independent Kurdish canton (Rojawa) established during the civil war in Syria. BDP leaders argued Turkey pursued an expansionary foreign policy in Syria and supported the extremist groups against Assad toward that aim. The BDP attempted to bring Turkey’s position closer to the de facto Kurdish administration at the Turkish border. The BDP also criticized the AKP for pursuing a sectarian foreign policy and importing the Sunni-Alevi conflict to Turkey (“Yayılmacı” 2013).

In sum, all three parties strongly criticized Turkey’s foreign policy regarding the MENA in the 2010–2014 period. Although coming from ideologically very different backgrounds, the CHP, MHP, and BDP vehemently disapproved of Turkey as a “regional leader” and “central country.” All three party leaders suggest that these assertive roles went beyond Turkey’s means, and with their implications as to the Syrian civil war and Arab uprisings, endangered Turkey in many different ways. All three opposition parties also criticized role conceptualizations such as “protector of the oppressed” or “leader of the Muslim world” and have argued that the AKP used these roles only to conceal their real aim, which is to support Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (and similar) Islamist parties that are ideologically close to the AKP. These criticisms reached a peak after 2012, when Turkey became heavily involved in supporting the Sunni opposition in Syria, vociferously supported President Morsi and the MB in Egypt, and maintained close diplomatic relations with Palestinian Hamas.

During the interviews I conducted with important opinion formers of Turkey, I asked specific questions about the “central country” and “regional leader” roles. These two roles seemed to be the most polarizing of all roles among interviewees (Özdamar 2014). When asked about their attitudes toward Turkey’s rather new roles, many respondents referred to changing roles and their “negative influence” on the country’s foreign policy. All respondents acknowledged the shift in Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis MENA in terms of roles. Soft-power roles that were successfully used until 2009 were replaced with harder roles, such as “regional leader” and “central country.” The respondents also perceived very high levels of interelite

role contestation as well as vertical role contestation (Özdamar, Halistoprak, and Sula 2014).

Erdoğan and the ruling elite also used foreign policy discourse as an efficient tool of domestic policy. In other words, the discourse that intended to build strong roles in foreign policy also addressed the domestic audience that preferred a higher and more active profile in foreign policy. Öniş argues that “there is no doubt that the new-style foreign policy activism has helped enhance the popularity of the AKP in domestic politics” (Öniş 2011: 49). Given that Erdoğan reserved a considerable part of his campaign speeches for foreign policy issues during his presidential campaign in August 2014, one can observe the roles that framed Turkey as a “regional leader” and “protector of the oppressed” helped him to increase his popularity among the conservative constituency. A survey I designed and conducted in April 2014 also showed that foreign policy at the public opinion level is organized along partisan lines (Özdamar 2014). While most of the AKP’s electorate approve of its foreign policy, the three opposition parties’ supporters disapprove of Turkey’s foreign policy despite coming from ideologically very different backgrounds.

The consequences of this role contestation process in Turkey have been minimal due to the specific circumstances in domestic politics mentioned earlier. That is, the power of the executive is so overwhelming that one cannot see any real effect of the opposition’s voicing dissent on foreign policy. Turkey’s strong opposition to Syrian president Assad and the military coup in Egypt still continued at least through the end of 2014.

Perhaps the only capable actors that can influence the Turkish top leadership’s position regarding the Syrian civil war are the foreign ones. Although both Turkey and the United States agreed on toppling Assad, after the Obama administration decided not to intervene in return for Syria agreeing to destroy its chemical weapons, PM Erdoğan was reported to be very disappointed. In the summer of 2013, Erdoğan was for a comprehensive military action against the Assad government similar to intervention in Kosovo, rather than a limited operation (Hurriyet Daily News 2013). Strong Russian and U.S. opposition to Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian civil war may have prevented a larger military intervention by Turkey against Assad in 2013 and 2014. The possible effect of vertical contestation should also not be dismissed. Although the AKP continues to garner solid support from the public for the enactment of its new foreign policy roles, the erosion of such support could act as a further constraint on Ankara’s efforts, such as low levels of public support for a military intervention in Syria.

Conclusion

Turkey’s quick foreign policy change in the post-2009 period regarding the Middle East is a very interesting case study. I argue that in a region where most political discourse focuses on identity and ideology, role theory captures this dazzling

change for many reasons. First of all, role theory provides useful analytical frameworks to categorize and explain different policy choices among various alternatives. It helps to focus the analysis on an actor that seemed to have infinitely many policy positions, including conflicting and controversial ones. Focusing on specific roles helps the analyst to measure what ideational constructs matter to those specific policy makers. This way of identifying specific roles also helps to make connections between actions and motives.

Second, role theory helps us understand the link between the agent, the structure, and the agent's subjective perceptions of the agent-structure relationship. That is, by focusing on roles, one can explain Turkey's ambitious foreign policy in the MENA. The top decision-making elite's subjective perceptions as to Turkey's material, economic, and ideological power vis-à-vis others in the region and other great powers, such as the United States, Russia, and the EU, clarify the seemingly "irrational" decisions by Turkey. In other words, an agent's subjective view of herself in terms of the regional and systemic others can account for seemingly inexplicable policy choices. In this specific case, Turkey's positioning itself as a leader responsible for protecting oppressed people of the region was one of the main reasons for suboptimal foreign policy outcomes. These outcomes were exacerbated by the AKP's gradual elimination of institutional sites of domestic role contestation, whereby disagreements about roles did not constrain the ruling party's freedom in enacting new roles. The role theoretical approach does not subscribe to the neorealist assumption that structure shapes actors' behavior completely. Instead a more "realistic" picture of agent-structure relationship presents a different image in which there are rather two-way interactions. Also, actors are not perfectly rational and their own interpretation of the structure has direct influence on their behaviors.

Third, a focus on roles and domestic role contestation is a great remedy against the pitfalls of the "unitary actor assumption." Analyzing elite-level and vertical role contestation supports the idea that foreign policy decisions are products of domestic-level bargaining. Although in this specific instance Turkish domestic political actors could not influence the policy outcome, this case demonstrated the domestic dissent over foreign policy choices of the top decision makers.

Fourth, this case study refines the role approach to foreign policy by illustrating the process by which role contestation can be minimized. An actor cannot enact a role without the institutional power to do so. The AKP's control over institutions, and the concomitant marginalization of rival roles from those institutions, ultimately permitted the ruling party to enact the roles it desired without significant domestic pushback.

Lastly, domestic contestation also affects Turkey's international relations and the expectations alters have of the state. Antiwar CHP MPs, as internal agents advocating a different role for TFP, actually visited Assad in Syria, which was severely criticized by the Turkish government. U.S. expectations regarding Turkey's roles also changed in the course of three years. Although at the beginning of the Arab

uprisings the Obama administration tried to “sell” Turkey as a “model country” in the Middle East, when disagreements were apparent about military intervention in Syria, U.S. policy makers allegedly turned to anti-AKP actors in Turkish politics to replace top decision makers with those with views closer to the U.S. position on Syria. Role theory helps researchers make connections between internal-external linkages and changes in how the alters view the ego as policy preferences change.

Notes

- 1 This research was supported by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) grant 112K163.
- 2 The Kurdistan Workers’ Party is an outlawed armed group that has fought against the Turkish government since 1980s. The PKK’s original goal was secession of southeast Turkey in its first three decades. Since 2014, PKK leader Öcalan announced that the organization’s new aim is to gain only political autonomy from Turkey.
- 3 At this point, a question about whether the “older” roles Turkey held were at times mutually incompatible and generated disagreements may be raised. Generally these roles did not seem to contradict each other and therefore did not produce significant disagreements. It is possible for countries to subscribe to multiple roles that may contradict each other. Such contradictions are also likely to cause domestic contestation. However, in Turkey, domestic role contestation was very limited until the 2010s, if there was any. The only objections to the traditional roles came from the far right and left. Interestingly both camps’ criticism of Turkish foreign policy was similar. Representatives of these views suggested that as a NATO and other Western IGOs member (e.g., Council of Europe, OSCE, OECD), Turkey could not play neutral roles, such as mediator and facilitator in the MENA. However, these political views were not strong enough to create significant public debate and cause role contestation.
- 4 The government bill, voted on on March 1, 2003, would allow U.S. soldiers on Turkish territory to facilitate the invasion of Iraq from the north and Turkish soldiers to be deployed to Northern Iraq (Taydaş and Özdamar 2013).
- 5 Davutoğlu used the phrase “düzen kurucu” for this role. It may be translated into English as “system designer,” “order founder,” “organizer,” or “rule maker.” I believe “rule maker” conveys the best meaning, judging from the context in which the minister used the term.
- 6 AKP leadership emphasizes that people of the MENA region are very similar to the Turkish population due to shared history, religious affinity (Sunni Muslim), and even ethnicity since Turkey contains Arab and Kurdish minorities, just like rest of the MENA states host some Turkish minority groups.
- 7 This interview was published on the official webpage of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (see the references).