

## Forever the Frenemies of the Middle East? Türkiye's Regional Relations with Iran, 2002 to 2023

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the puzzle of Türkiye's fluctuating relations with Iran since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Contrary to many scholars' expectations, the AKP government's relations with Iran have competition and rivalry rather than just cooperation. Having improved significantly in the early 2000s, the relations became tense following the Arab uprisings and Syria's civil war. However, the relations between the two countries have included both cooperative and conflictual elements since 2016. This research argues that the most relevant level for analyzing Türkiye's fluctuating foreign policy strategies toward Iran between 2002 and 2023 is regional. Using the regionalist approaches of Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Lake and Morgan's theory of regional orders, the article examines how the "local security externalities" of the Middle Eastern regional security complex (RSC) affect Türkiye-Iran regional relations by particularly focusing on speech acts of Turkish high-level foreign policy actors. By acknowledging the multi-layered nature of Middle Eastern politics, this study also considers the role of extra-regional actors and non-state armed groups in Turkish foreign policy attitudes toward Iran.*

**Keywords:** Regional Security Complex Theory, Theory of Regional Orders, Türkiye, Iran, Middle East

### 1. Introduction

As two regional powers, Türkiye-Iran relations have played a significant role in Middle Eastern politics. These have varied between conflict, competition, and cooperation since the sixteenth century, making them "frenemies".<sup>1</sup> However, after the AKP took power in Türkiye, the two countries were expected to improve their relations due to the Islamic background of the AKP's leaders and its active foreign policy orientation in the Middle East (Sinkaya, 2009). Despite these expectations, while there was cooperation between 2002 and 2011, relations rapidly turned to competition and rivalry between 2011 and 2016. Although they still have several divergent policies, Turkish-Iranian relations have become more manageable since 2016. In this sense, these two countries have continued to be frenemies since they have been "perpetually torn by competing forces for and against cooperation" (Haas, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of enmity has been widely used in the International Relations literature to analyze the cooperation and rivalry dynamics among countries (Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner, 2012; Rowe, 2020; Haas, 2021).

Although these rapid fluctuations in Türkiye's foreign policy attitudes toward Iran under the leadership of the same political party are not unexpected, they create a difficult puzzle and raise questions regarding the underlying causes of Türkiye's foreign policy changes toward Iran between 2002 and 2023. In this sense, the article aims to demonstrate the impact of changes at the regional level of the Middle East on Turkish foreign policy attitudes toward Iran by revealing the evolution of Turkish elite-level discourses toward Iran.

Academic literature on Türkiye-Iran relations during the AKP period has been based mainly on analyses of domestic developments in Türkiye, such as the weakening of the security-oriented Kemalist elite, de-securitization of political Islam and the Kurdish issue, the new conservative elites' active foreign policy strategy toward the Middle East, and the new regional economic activism of Türkiye's "Anatolian tigers" (Constantinides, 1996; Murinson, 2006; Sözen, 2010; Stein & Bleek, 2012; Dalay & Friedman, 2013; Lüleci-Sula, 2018; Altındaş-Akdağ, 2021; Dalacoura, 2021; Özdamar & Canbolat, 2023; Zadeh & Tahmasebi, 2023; Türegün, 2023). While these domestic factors have played a role in changing relations, the article argues that they are not the main driving forces. Instead, it argues that this is due to changing Middle Eastern regional dynamics, specifically regional constraints and opportunities. The regional level inevitably plays a dominant role in relations because "many threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones. The impact of geographical proximity on security interaction is strongest and most obvious in the military, political, societal, and environmental sectors" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The shared 560 km border between Türkiye and Iran has made border security substantially interdependent, resulting in several security protocols to counter Kurdish separatism and other border threats. However, they have also used their shared border as leverage against each other by supporting each other's rebelling minority groups. Thus, the regional level is important for understanding Türkiye's fluctuating foreign policy toward Iran since it includes both the unit and international systemic level, which is "where the extremes of national and global security interplay and where most of the action occurs" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.43).<sup>2</sup>

This article, therefore, closely examines the regional context in the Middle East and its role in Türkiye-Iran relations between 2002 and 2023 by using a regionalist perspective (both Buzan and Wæver's RSCT and Lake and Morgan's theory of regional order). It aims to demonstrate Turkish elites' articulation of regional relations between the two countries while still acknowledging the agency of the Iranian government. It is mainly based on the evolution of Turkish high-level elites' discourses toward Iran by analyzing their speech acts in official statements and newspaper columns. To this end, the study first clarifies the theoretical framework and data collection method. Then, it analyzes the case study, divided into three time periods (2002-2011, 2011-2016, and 2016-2023), which mark a radical and observable shift in Turkish foreign policy elites' discourses toward Iran. Taking Türkiye's Iran policy as a case study, this study contributes to the wider literature on the nexus between the regional level and foreign policy by using RSCT and the theory of regional orders as well as utilizing elite-level discourses.

<sup>2</sup> There are several regionalist studies on Türkiye-Iran relations (Ünver, 2016; Charountaki, 2018; Chen, 2021; Balci & Monceau, 2021).

## 2. Theory and Method

The article uses the regionalist perspective, which examines geographical proximity and territoriality, whereby a state's "location in the system structure" is significant (Buzan et al., 1998, p.10). Accordingly, territoriality is important for a state's foreign policy because "nation-states are mutually non-mobile" and "face a specific and stable salient environment rather than the international system as a whole" (Mouritzen, 1998; Kelly, 2007; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012).

The regional sub-systems, specifically RSCs, are significant for states' foreign policy behaviors. According to Buzan's 1991 conceptualization of RSC, a region comprises a group of proximate countries "united by common security problems" (Lake and Morgan, 1997, p.11). Lake and Morgan redefined RSC as "a set of states continually affected by one or more security externalities that emanate from a distinct geographic area." According to Lake and Morgan's theory of regional orders, regional systems are "local externalities" which "create costs and benefits that affect only a limited number of states" (Lake, 1997, p.50). Accordingly, "geographical proximity is not a necessary condition for a state to be a member of a complex" since extra-regional great powers can join even distant regional security complexes. Hence, if one RSC's security externalities affect a state over a long period of time, it may participate in that RSC during that period.

In 2003, Buzan and Waever theorized RSC within RSCT to examine the post-Cold War security structure and defined it as a "subsystem of economic, political and security relations that exist among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other" (Buzan, 1991; Buzan et al., 1998).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Buzan and Waever's RSCT considers geographical proximity and membership of the same RSC as significant determinants of amity and enmity among states. However, RSCT is limited due to its exclusionary assumptions for regional membership since it argues that "all states can be located in one and only one RSC" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.483). This creates a problem for the positions of some regional actors and extra-regional powers in RSCs. Because this argument implies that so-called "insulator" states cannot belong to different regional clusters, it cannot account for extra-regional powers' intensive long-term regional entanglements.

To analyze Turkish foreign policy changes toward Iran, this article uses Lake and Morgan's conceptualization of RSC, which has also been emphasized and updated by several studies in the literature. For instance, Fawcett argued that regions cannot be defined only by geographical sphere and territorial proximity (Fawcett, 2007, p.432). In this sense, she argued that while territory is significant, redefinition of regions is required to include "commonality," "interaction," and "cooperation" (Fawcett, 2007, p.432). Similarly, Söderbaum pointed out the importance of "heterogeneity" of regions without clear boundaries and the role of external "stabilizer" (Söderbaum, 2012). This framework is also associated with the great power management (GPM) concept of the English School, which focuses on the great powers' involvement in the security structure of several areas (Bull, 2002; He, 2018; Zala, 2019).<sup>4</sup> This is a significant conceptualization for this article's objective to understand the relations among regional powers (i.e., Türkiye and Iran) in the Middle East RSC, which has witnessed

<sup>3</sup> There are several studies that use the regionalist perspective in their case studies (Bae & Moon, 2005; Altunışık, 2016; Mattos et al., 2017; Cannon & Donelli, 2019; Tüysüzöğlu, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, some works on regionalist theorizing assumed the key role of external actors in their proximate regions to maintain the security complex (Amable, 2022).

intensive penetration by extra-regional powers for centuries. However, despite this global penetration, the region retains its peculiarities (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.187). In this sense, when great powers intervene in the region, they tend to follow the rules of the regional game, which means they are as much affected by the region's local security externalities as regional actors (both states and non-state groups). Similarly, these great powers produce local security externalities for the rest of the region, affecting relations among regional actors.

Meanwhile, the RSC's local security externalities are most likely to affect regional powers. Regional powers in the Middle East are considered as Egypt, Iraq (in the 1980s), Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye, given that these powers are competing and have all claimed to be the regional power in this RSC (Nolte, 2010, p.893). Using both their hard and soft power resources, they have tried to maximize their regional spheres of influence (Lustick, 1997; Beck, 2014). Thus, as two such regional powers, Türkiye and Iran are likely to be susceptible to any change in the Middle East's local security externalities and, given their regional claims, tend to respond to regional power shifts differently from other regional actors. To exert their regional power, they have preferred to either balance against each other or cooperate against other regional actors, including extra-regional powers. Hence, all regional power shifts or involvement by extra-regional powers significantly impact their foreign policy attitudes and bilateral relations. All cooperation and competition between regional powers needs to be analyzed within this context.

Against this theoretical background, this article analyzes Türkiye's attitudes toward Iran by utilizing the Turkish high-level elites' (i.e., prime ministers, presidents, military representatives, ministers) speech acts in official statements and newspaper columns. Regarding the three time periods (2002-2011; 2011-2016; 2016-2023), this study utilizes different keywords to review online newspapers and official speeches. The common keywords for all the periods are "Iran," "high-level Iran-Türkiye talks," and "PKK." However, other keywords are distinguished for the three-time frames. Concerning the 2002-2011 period, the specific keywords searched are "US invasion of Iraq," "PKK/PJAK," "Northern Iraq," and "Iran's nuclear program." Regarding the 2011-2016 period, the primary keywords are "Arab Uprisings," "Syrian civil war," "American military withdrawal from Iraq," "NATO," "ISIS," and "PYD/YPG." The 2016-2023 period involves the following keywords: "Kurdish Regional Government," "Qatar crisis," "ISIS," "sectarianism," "PYD/YPG," "Aleppo siege," "Astana process," "Nagorno-Karabakh war." In this way, this study reveals the Turkish foreign policy elites' discourses and official statements toward Iran within the three different periods in the face of changing regional realities without neglecting the agency of the Iranian government.

### 3. Türkiye's Improving Relations with Iran, 2002-2011

Between 2002 and 2011, Türkiye-Iran relations experienced one of the brightest periods since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Unlike the tense, conflict-ridden relations of the 1990s, the AKP's foreign policy toward Iran became significantly cooperative and amicable. Mutual official visits dramatically increased, significant political, military, and economic agreements were signed, Türkiye mediated between the P5+1 countries and Iran regarding the latter's nuclear program, and official discourses were very amicable and cooperative. Given their deep-seated regional competition, how can Türkiye's increased cooperation be explained?

To answer this, various scholars have highlighted the AKP's foreign policy vision, specifically the Davutoğlu doctrine, the political Islamist background of the AKP's political elites, and the regional commercial objectives of Türkiye's Anatolian conservative class. While these domestic elements certainly shaped Turkish foreign policy, they are not the primary reason for improved relations. Instead, the main factor was the Middle East's local security externalities. Specifically, the US occupation of Iraq created a challenging regional environment that made the Turkish government improve relations with Middle Eastern neighbors, particularly Iran. Thus, the AKP's foreign policy discourses, such as "zero problems with neighbors" and "security and stability not only for itself but also for its neighboring countries" should be evaluated in terms of the new local security externalities of the post-2003 Middle East RSC (Davutoğlu, 2008, p.79).

This RSC changed radically due to the Bush administration's global war on terror strategy and the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 under Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), which made it a quasi-regional actor (The Washington Post, 2002). OIF profoundly impacted Iraq's domestic politics and had a "neighborhood effect" on the region (Hinnebusch, 2007, p.10-11). Given the Iraqi state's diverse ethnic and sectarian population, Iraqi politics became significantly polarized by inter-group conflict, particularly Sunni groups' violent resistance against the privileging of Shiite groups following the US occupation. Their insurgency found support from Sunni jihadi transnational groups and radical Islamists (Cleveland & Bunton, 2013; p.512; Robins, 2013, p.310). This has caused long-lasting instability in the Middle East RSC for both Arab states and non-Arab regional powers, including Türkiye and Iran (Hinnebusch, 2007; Terrill, 2008; Wehrey et al., 2010).

The 2003 Iraq war caused concern for the Turkish government regarding Iraq's territorial integrity and the empowerment of Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq. For example, the power vacuum in northern Iraq enabled the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) to escalate operations against Türkiye (Shiffrinson, 2006; Al, 2021). In 2004, over 2,000 PKK members allegedly infiltrated Türkiye from north of Iraq, intensifying fighting between the Turkish military and PKK terrorists in eastern and southeastern Türkiye (CNN Türk, 2004). Since 2004, the Qandil Mountains have become a secure zone for the PKK's terrorist operations in both Türkiye and Iran (Sinkaya, 2012, p.143). Meanwhile, Iran became concerned about a new PKK-linked Iranian-Kurdish organization, PJAK (Takeyh, 2008, p.27). Using shared Qandil mountain bases, PJAK fought Iran's security forces between 2004 and 2011 (BBC, 2011). Given these common threats, Türkiye increased security cooperation through security protocols, high-level official visits, and joint working groups. Türkiye's then Chief of General Staff, İlker Başbuğ, announced, "We are sharing intelligence with Iran, we are talking, we are coordinating. When they start an operation, we do, too" (The New York Times, 2008). This was the first time a top Turkish military official had publicly confirmed Türkiye's cooperation with Iran against the PKK and PJAK.

Improved relations with Iran were also stimulated by Türkiye's deteriorating ties with the US in the post-2003 regional environment, particularly after March 1, 2003, when Türkiye's parliament refused to allow over 60,000 US troops to deploy on Turkish territory and declined to send Turkish troops to Iraq. This decision caused a crisis in Turkish-US relations and reduced Türkiye's influence during the war (CNN International, 2003; Altunışık, 2006). The government and the Turkish public were then disturbed by the Sulaymaniyah (or Hood) event when US military personnel humiliatingly captured Turkish Special Forces

in Iraq. Although the soldiers were quickly released and a joint Turkish-US investigation commission decided to work more closely, the government lost confidence in US activities during the war (Donovan, 2003). Furthermore, Türkiye's relations with Israel also worsened in the post-2003 Middle East RSC, primarily because of differing regional threat perceptions. Whereas Türkiye's red line was an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, Israel was concerned about the rise of Iran and its allies in the Axis of Resistance, Hezbollah and Hamas (Oğuzlu, 2010). Meanwhile, Türkiye's government had hardened its pro-Palestinian position against the Israeli government since the 2008 Gaza war, as seen when then Turkish Prime Minister (PM) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>5</sup> criticized Israel's PM at the time, Shimon Peres, at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009 (Bank & Karadag, 2013, p.297). Finally, tensions escalated following an Israeli military operation against the Mavi Marmara (or flotilla) on May 31, 2010, with diplomatic relations reaching a nadir after the Turkish government accused Israel of state terrorism (Hale, 2009, p.150; Öniş, 2011, p.52).

Similarly, given the hostility between the US and Iran, Iran was highly concerned about the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its deployment of a large number of troops in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. During this period, the US's increasing military presence in the region pushed Iran to stabilize its relations with Türkiye (Sinkaya, 2019). In this sense, Türkiye's deteriorating relations with the US and Israel were welcomed by Iran. During the meeting with Erdoğan, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appreciated the Turkish position on the Palestinian issue (Reuters, 2009; Sinkaya, 2019).

Under these circumstances, Türkiye intensified its security collaboration with Iran by signing security protocols about border security, intelligence exchange, and organized crime. (McCurdy, 2008; Resmi Gazete, 2008). Moreover, Iran supported Türkiye's national interests by recognizing KADEK and Kongra-Gel as PKK branches (Milliyet, 2004a; Milliyet, 2004b; Kohen, 2004). During official meetings, both countries' political leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance of their regional cooperation. For instance, in October 2009, Erdoğan stated:

External powers cannot solve regional problems given their failure until now [...] [For this reason] Türkiye and Iran play critical roles in regional solidarity (Son Gelişme, 2011; BBC News, 2009a).

Furthermore, Erdoğan's following statement summarizes the Turkish foreign policy attitude toward Iran during this period: "Our friendly relations [with Iran] are satisfyingly improving based on non-interference principles and good neighborhood" (BBC News, 2009a).

In the same manner, Mohammad Reza Rahimi, the then Vice President of Iran, agreed with Erdoğan and added: "We believe that we will agree about more issues over time [...] We intend to achieve a great regional cooperation with Türkiye's assistance" (BBC News, 2009a). Thus, from Iran's perspective, the perception of insecurity was one of the main issues that united Iran and Türkiye during this period (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2008).

Between 2002 and 2011, Turkish officials' discourses toward their Iranian counterparts became more amicable and cooperative, as exemplified by Erdoğan's regular depiction of Iran

<sup>5</sup> He was elected President of Türkiye in the Turkish presidential elections held on 10 August 2014 and has been the incumbent since then.



as Türkiye's "neighbor, friend, and brother" during diplomatic visits (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2008):

As Türkiye, we are determined to preserve our peaceful intentions [in the region] as we have done until now [...] We will pay attention to maintaining our bilateral relations with Iran, which is our neighbor, friend, and brother [...] (BBC News, 2009).

During this period, parallel to the Turkish perspective, Iran's official explanations were generally based on the view that Türkiye and Iran had identical views on regional and international issues (Abdullah Gül, 2008). Accordingly, the common concern for Iran and Türkiye was to maintain peace and stability in the region, making Türkiye an "esteemed and significant neighbor" (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2008). The intense diplomatic and political relations between the two countries led to the declaration of 2009 as "The Culture Year of Türkiye and Iran" (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2008).

Reflecting their converging regional interests, this period was also Türkiye's most active period regarding Iran's nuclear policy. Türkiye's foreign policy elites consistently expressed their support for Iran's legal right to produce nuclear energy under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and, as a regional power, Türkiye tried to mediate between Iran and the P5+1 countries (Pieper, 2013; Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2020), which led to the Tehran Declaration signed by Türkiye, Iran, and Brazil in 2010 (BBC News, 2010; CNN Türk, 2010; Kibaroglu, 2013). The Western concerns that Iran was seeking to acquire nuclear power were regarded by Erdoğan as "gossip," and any attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities would be "insanity" (BBC News, 2009b). In addition, according to the then Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Davutoğlu, there was no need to impose new sanctions on Iran in light of the agreement secured by Türkiye and Iran.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Türkiye's Strained Relations with Iran between 2011 and 2016: Changing Regional Context?

As the Middle East RSC's local security externalities changed after 2011, Türkiye's shared regional interests with Iran weakened. In particular, the AKP government shifted its foreign policy behaviors, causing visible regional tensions with Iran. Although neither the government nor the domestic context changed, Türkiye's foreign policy attitudes became critical and less amicable, primarily due to changes in the regional context. This made Türkiye's foreign policy elites greatly concerned about Iran's regional policies, particularly after Syria's civil war erupted in 2011, and its relations with new regional actors like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and PYD (the Kurdish Democratic Union Party). Some described relations as being the worst since the AKP took power (Aljazeera Turk, 2015).

One crucial reason was that the US, becoming a quasi-regional actor in the post-Iraq war, became a more passive actor in the Middle East RSC. Specifically, the Obama government announced a full military withdrawal from Iraq by December 2011 (Arango & Schmidt, 2011). This "strategic retrenchment" allowed regional powers to enhance regional autonomy, escalating regional competition. Following the withdrawal, Türkiye and Iran became further involved in Iraqi domestic politics, supporting adversary political groups. Iraq's

<sup>6</sup> However, the Tehran Declaration was not confirmed by the P5+1 countries since "the agreement did not deal with core issues such as compliance with IAEA, uranium enrichment in defiance of the Council and the revelation of the previously undeclared facility at Qom" (United Nations, 2010; BBC News, 2020).

2010 elections had already divided them as Türkiye supported Ayad Allawi's Sunni and Shiite Iraqiya bloc whereas Iran supported Nouri al-Maliki's exclusively Shiite State of Law Coalition (Kane, 2011; Ayman, 2014).

The competition in Iraq intensified due to conflicting regional stances on the Arab uprisings and Syria's civil war. That is, the regional consequences of the power shift in Iraq overlapped with the local security externalities of the Arab uprisings, which dramatically affected the Middle East RSC and the foreign policies of both regional and extra-regional actors. Particularly, the prolonged duration of Syria's civil war exacerbated regional polarization and disagreements among regional actors. The positions of these actors were significantly affected by the rise of violent non-state actors in Syria's civil war and Russia's active involvement. For example, Türkiye initially supported the democratic will of ordinary people in the Arab uprisings, which started in Tunisia in 2010 before spreading to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. In contrast to Iran's framing of Arab uprisings as "Islamic awakenings," Türkiye was willing to be a model country for "revolutionary" governments and "every Muslim state" (Sinkaya, 2009; The Matzav Network, 2011; Seibert, 2012; Savaş, 2015). Both countries defended their own regime type (Egypt Independent, 2011; Shadid, 2011), leading to regional soft power competition and discursive tensions.

Syria's civil war most strongly impacted the Middle East RSC and Türkiye-Iran relations (Rózsa, 2012; Lawson, 2014; Davis, 2015). As regional powers, they were both significantly affected by the local security externalities of Syria's civil war. Regional tensions emerged because their foreign policy strategies toward the Assad regime were substantially opposed. After the Assad regime's indifference to the AKP government's attempts to compromise the regime with the opposition groups, the AKP government broke off relations with the Assad regime (The Guardian, 2011; Oktav, 2015; Charountaki, 2018).

In contrast, Iran protected Assad against protesters from the very beginning. Assad's regime is a significant Iranian ally in the regional "resistance front" linking Iran to Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Ayman, 2014; Sinkaya, 2015). Davutoğlu explicitly stated Türkiye's criticism of the pro-Assad policy of Iran in August 2012:

Iran is applying the policy of 'resistance axis' for Assad, which it has implemented in the past [...] Iran makes mistakes in its Syria policy (NTV, 2012).

During this period, both Türkiye and Iran blamed each other's regional position for the slaughter in Syria. The then Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Hassan Firouzabadi, said that Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were "responsible for shedding of blood in Syria and supporting the war efforts of the US" and added (Sol Haber, 2012):

Supporting the Great Satan's (the US) war plans is not an accurate basis for Syria's neighboring countries. If they act on this basis, they should know that the next time, it will be Türkiye and other countries' turn (Sol Haber, 2012).

On the other hand, Erdoğan's criticism of Iran was notably more severe in tone:

Türkiye was the only country that sided with Iran in the period when no country stood by it. It was Türkiye that supported Iran concerning the nuclear energy issue. But I am asking Iranians, 'Is there a place in our belief in defending a regime that kills its own citizens? If Syrians leave their country and run away, isn't it Iran's responsibility to ask for accountability?' (Deutsche Welle, 2012)



This regional divergence damaged cooperation in other areas, resulting in substantially reduced intelligence sharing against the PKK since 2011 (Ali and Ismail, 2017). As Türkiye and Iran's regional positions diverged further, their geographical proximity became a national security issue. In particular, relations became even tenser after NATO deployed a radar system in Kürecik in September 2011 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, n.d.). Given Türkiye's active support for anti-Assad groups alongside Western countries, Iran feared that Türkiye was returning to its traditional pro-American bloc (Sinkaya, 2019) and claimed that the radar system would benefit its main regional adversary, Israel (Al Jazeera Turk, 2011). Tension increased yet further in 2012 when the AKP government requested the deployment of NATO's Patriot missile defense system to counter missile and aircraft threats from Syria (Stratfor, 2013). Iran's then Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi interpreted the system as a "provocative act with unforeseen consequences," and Iran's then foreign ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, stated that "it will actually make the situation more difficult and complicated as well" (T24, 2012). In return, Türkiye's response, as Davutoğlu noted, was much harsher:

Our expectation from Iran is to stop the Syrian regime that persecutes its own people, instead of criticizing the system that offers no provocation (Milliyet, 2012; CNN Türk, 2012).

Iran-Türkiye relations have been further complicated by the involvement of two extra-regional powers (the US and Russia) and violent armed groups (ISIS and YPG) in the Syrian civil war. The rise of the Sunni extremist ISIS in 2013 challenged Türkiye's strategy of supporting Sunni opposition groups in the civil war, while the rise of the Kurdish PYD/YPG in Northern Syria and US military support in its struggle with ISIS seriously concerned Türkiye (Kayhan-Pusane, 2018, p.75; Ergun, 2018, p.165). Despite these concerns, US government officials met PYD leaders in Northern Syria (Ergun, 2018, p.165). Hence, US-Türkiye regional relations worsened due to US cooperation with PYD and Türkiye's alleged support for jihadist Sunni opposition groups in Syria, such as Al-Nusra (Ergun, 2018, p.165).<sup>7</sup>

Russia's active involvement in Syria's civil war, with its airstrikes against ISIS in 2015, has dramatically changed regional power dynamics (Ergun, 2018, p.159). Its continued support for Assad turned the war in favor of the regime (Ergun, 2018, p.159), which upset Türkiye's expectations that Assad's regime would be overthrown. Although Türkiye's government had already refocused from this to the PYD/YPG threat by 2015, Russian airstrikes threatened Türkiye's regional position (Aydıntaşbaş, 2016), because they mainly benefited Türkiye's adversaries, the Assad regime and Syrian Kurds vis-à-vis Turkish-supported opposition groups (Bechev, 2018). In November 2015, the lack of coordination between Türkiye and Russia regarding military flights over Syrian airspace led to a Turkish F-16 shooting down a Russian jet. This further damaged Türkiye's national interests because Russia suspended bilateral security mechanisms and imposed economic sanctions (Özertem, 2017; Bechev, 2018).

In contrast, Iran took advantage of these national security and regional power challenges by maintaining its strategic partnership with Russia, favoring the Assad regime, supporting PYD/YPG forces, and criticizing Türkiye over the fighter jet crisis (Cumhuriyet, 2015). These adversarial attitudes disappointed the Turkish government. As then PM Davutoğlu put it:

<sup>7</sup> However, as the ISIS threat escalated, Türkiye described al-Nusra as a terrorist group and sought to monitor its Syrian border more tightly (Anatolian Agency, 2014).

We did not abandon Iran during their hardest days. However, if they abandon us over an issue when we are right, they will hurt the long-term Türkiye-Iran friendship (Milliyet, 2015).

Türkiye and Iran also differed over PYD/YPG's rise in Northern Syria. In contrast to Türkiye's serious threat perceptions, Iran's foreign policy was more ambivalent and pragmatic. For instance, when ISIS attacked Northern Iraq in 2014, Iran immediately assisted the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which Türkiye had accused of aiding the PKK (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). Furthermore, Iran allegedly tried to cooperate with the PKK in Sinjar and the YPG in Kobane and Qamishli against ISIS to extend its influence on the Mediterranean, particularly the Syrian port of Latakia (Kayhan-Pusane, 2018). Accordingly, Iran criticized any Turkish cross-border operations in Northern Syria against PYD/YPG or ISIS, with Iranian officials calling on Türkiye to "respect the national sovereignty of governments" (IRNA, 2015).

During this period, the Iran Nuclear Deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) with the P5+1 countries created "cautious optimism" for the Turkish government (Kardaş, 2015). Even though AKP high-level elites welcomed the deal, they did not refrain from criticizing Iran's policies that would destabilize the region (Sinkaya, 2016). For instance, on the deal's implementation day, the then PM, Davutoğlu, called Iran to make a "constructive contribution" to the regional context (Hürriyet Daily News, 2016). Similarly, the then Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, expressed his support for the deal but asked Iran to "abandon sectarian politics" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2015). As relations with Iran have deteriorated, Türkiye's regional interests have temporarily converged with those of other Gulf state regional powers against Iran (Altunışık, 2019). Türkiye's improved relations with Iran's most significant Arab rival, Saudi Arabia, further widened their regional positions. For instance, Türkiye supported Saudi Arabia's military operation in Yemen while harshly criticizing Iran's military intervention in supporting the Shiite Houthi movement there (Altunışık, 2019). In one of Türkiye's most striking criticisms of Iran, Erdoğan declared:

Iran is virtually trying to dominate the region. Is it permissible? [Iran] started to disturb many countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and our country, which cannot be tolerated (Bianet, 2015a).

Iran's response to Erdoğan came from Iran's former Foreign Affairs Minister, Javad Zarif:

Those who have caused irreparable damage with their strategic mistakes and ambitious policies had better adopt responsible policies and use their capacities to maintain peace and tranquility (Bianet, 2015b).

Similarly, the discursive tension between the two countries continued to mark this period regarding the Syrian war. On the one hand, Erdoğan kept holding Iran responsible for its policies in the Syrian civil war by stating, "If Iran had not backed Assad for sectarian reasons, maybe we would not be talking about Syria today" (BBC News, 2015). On the other hand, Iran's Foreign Ministry continued to accuse the Turkish government's statements of "being used for specific political objectives linked to the current conflict in the region" (Sputnik Türkiye, 2015).

## 5. The New Regional Realities between 2016-2023: The Dance of Conflict and Cooperation in Turkish-Iranian Relations

In contrast to the strained relations during the 2011-2016 period, Turkish foreign policy attitudes toward Iran contained both cooperative and conflictual features in the post-2016 Middle East. Due to the changing local security externalities of the Middle Eastern security complex, Türkiye-Iran relations became more manageable during this period. The two countries still had different regional interests but sought to prioritize their regional autonomy and security over bilateral disagreements. Erdoğan's following discourse summarizes the Turkish position toward Iran in this period:

It is, above all, in our countries' interest to strengthen our political dialogue and reduce our differences of opinion to a minimum... We should work together to tackle the problems of sectarianism and terrorism that have occurred in our region (Reuters, 2016).

The altered regional conjuncture for Türkiye, its tension with other regional powers (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), the extra-regional power (the US), and the rise of Russia's regional role influenced Turkish foreign policy strategies toward Iran. In the post-2016 period, the Assad regime gained power in Syria at the expense of the opposition groups. Russia gave an opportunity to the Assad regime to increase its power due to its systematic air strikes against the opposition groups and ISIS. Following December 2016, the Syrian army entirely regained the northeast of Aleppo with Russian airstrikes and Hezbollah's land operation (Ulutaş et al., 2017, p.10). As a result, Türkiye was aware of the impossibility of the Assad regime's fall due to Russia's increasing military role and the US' lack of interest in Syria. Hence, Türkiye has removed its policy for "Syria without Assad" from its political agenda (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p.21).

In the post-2016 period, the Turkish government has struggled against the resurgence of YPG/PYD in northern Syria and the increasing ISIS attacks on Turkish territory. Due to these threats to its national security, Türkiye has had several cross-border operations in northern Syria (D'Almeida, 2017). Meanwhile, the Turkish government was concerned about the Trump administration's reliance on the YPG forces in the region. The two countries experienced various tensions due to the US support of the PYD/YPG (Şen, 2019). Additionally, Türkiye's relations became problematic with the significant Arab actors in the region. Türkiye's relations with Egypt already had difficulties following General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup d'état in July 2013, which toppled Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government (Altunışık, 2019). Türkiye's support for MB was a significant divergent point from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates during this period (al-Buluwi, 2014; Altunışık, 2019). In contrast, Türkiye had intensive diplomatic contacts with Russia and Iran regarding the humanitarian crisis in Syria, particularly following the fall of Aleppo to the Syrian regime in December 2016. As a result of bilateral diplomacy, Türkiye and Russia secured a ceasefire between the Assad regime and opposition forces aimed at enabling the evacuation of civilians, but this ceasefire failed (Demirtaş, 2016). During this period, Iran and Russia were crucial for Türkiye to balance against other regional actors with whom Türkiye had problems. Furthermore, the Syrian regime's rejection of direct talks with the opposition made the United Nations-backed Geneva peace talks fail (The Guardian, 2017; BBC News, 2017a). As a result, Russia and Iran became more influential political players in the post-Aleppo Syrian context.

The failure of the Geneva peace talks has also positively impacted Türkiye-Iran relations. To find a political solution to the Syrian civil war, Türkiye, Iran, and Russia launched the Astana process in January 2017, leading to high-level diplomatic meetings and summits that began in Astana and were followed by Moscow, Sochi, Ankara, and Tehran (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2018; Le Monde, 2022).<sup>8</sup> The Turkish government collaborated with Iran and Russia, which would influence the Assad regime for any political solution to the Syrian war (Doğantekin, 2019). Furthermore, they were crucial alternatives to the US, given that the US supported the PYG against the ISIS threat and sought to be less active in the Syrian war.

While Erdoğan conveyed his congratulations on Rohani's re-election as Iranian President on May 19, 2017, he emphasized the importance of regional collaboration between Türkiye and Iran in the Astana talks:

Türkiye is determined to develop its ties with Tehran in all fields...Iran-Türkiye relations are developing, and it is imperative that these ties be further cemented in bilateral and regional fields... (Official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2017).

Similarly, the Iranian government's rhetoric toward Türkiye became moderate and more cooperative due to its growing regional concerns, including the empowerment of the ISIS threat in the region and the closer relations between the PYD and the US (Sinkaya, 2019). For instance, following his meeting with Hulusi Akar, Rouhani stated, "The political, economic, and international relations between Iran and Turkey are in a good position, but we should strive to advance military and defense cooperation consistent with other fields" (New China, 2017).

Under these circumstances, the Turkish government sided with Iran in the face of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal on May 8, 2018. When Rouhani visited Ankara in December 2018, Erdoğan criticized the US government's decision to withdraw from the deal, which would "jeopardize regional security and stability" (Çelikhan, 2018). Rouhani thanked the Turkish government in response and stated, "No power or third country can spoil our neighborly, brotherly, and sincere relations" (Çelikhan, 2018). Furthermore, Erdoğan re-emphasized the rise of regional collaboration between the two countries:

We are pleased that our bilateral security institutions' contacts have recently increased...In this regard, we are fully willing to continue our cooperation with Iran... (Çelikhan, 2018)

Meanwhile, the Kurdish Regional Government's referendum on full independence escalated Türkiye and Iran's threat perceptions about the spread of Kurdish separatism to their territories and encouraged them to cooperate against it. While the Turkish Foreign Ministry regarded the referendum as "null and void," Iran's Foreign Ministry described it as "illegal and illegitimate" (BBC News Türkçe, 2017). The Turkish Daily Sabah regarded this regional cooperation as "two sides are more willing than ever to reach deals in Syria and Iraq" (Paksoy, 2017). Furthermore, the Turkish government harshly criticized the Kirkuk Provincial Assembly's decision to raise the KRG flag in addition to the Iraqi flag in Kirkuk on March 28, 2017. Accordingly, Türkiye perceived it as a "unilateral act" that "will harm reconciliation efforts and destabilize and endanger Iraq" (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; Ali, 2017, p.33). Iran supported Türkiye against the Kirkuk Provincial Assembly's decision (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; Ali, 2017, p.33).

<sup>8</sup> Their cooperation under the Astana process was accompanied by the Syrian summit through 2022.

From this point, Türkiye and Iran intensified their cooperation against the KRG through bilateral contacts. For example, in August 2017, Iranian General Mohammad Bagheri came to Türkiye to talk with then Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar on the KRG referendum plan (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017). Bagheri emphasized the significance of this meeting as follows:

There have been no such visits between the two countries for a long time, but considering regional developments and security issues—border security and the fight against terrorism—there was a need for such a visit (Hafezi & Gümrükçü, 2017).

As another significant regional development, the Libyan civil war, which began in 2014, reached a different stage in 2020 with power sharing between the Government of National Accord (GNA) and General Khalifa Haftar's forces (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). This situation paved the way for a new collaboration field for Türkiye and Iran (Behravesht & Azizi, 2020). Accordingly, to protect its maritime agreement, Türkiye has supported Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) vis-à-vis General Haftar's group (SETAV, 2020). Iran announced its support for the Turkish position in the Libyan civil war against General Haftar's supporters, backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Abbas, 2020; Jacobs, 2020).

The regional rapprochement was also reflected in Türkiye's intense collaboration with Iran at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, Türkiye has provided various medical supplies to Iran, including diagnostic kits, coveralls, gowns, goggles, N95 masks, and tri-fold masks (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2020). Furthermore, the 6th Meeting of the Türkiye-Iran High-Level Cooperation Council, held via video conference in September 2020, demonstrated the two countries' determination to deepen bilateral relations. Erdoğan stated:

The Türkiye-Iran dialogue has a determining role in the solution of many regional problems. I am of the belief that we will achieve the former level in our cooperation with the alleviation of the pandemic circumstances (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2020).

However, Turkish-Iranian relations were not immune to tensions regarding several regional issues. The YPG/PYD problem has continued to be a divergent point between the two countries. While Türkiye's opposition against PYD/YPG was clear, Iran continued to be "ambivalent" against the federalist order in Syria (Sinkaya, 2017). While Türkiye regarded them as a national threat, Iran's main concern about PYD/YPG was that they would become the US' instrument to be involved in Syria (Azizi, 2019). During this period, Türkiye had cross-border operations in Syria against the Syrian regime and the PYD/YPG, including Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Olive Branch (2018), Operation Peace Spring (2019), Operation Spring Shield (2020), and Operation Claw-Sword (2022), which Iran observed cautiously (Anatolian Agency, 2020; BBC News, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019). Following Operation Peace Spring, Iran proposed mediation between Türkiye, Syrian Kurds, and the Syrian government (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Iran did not consider Turkish military operations in northern Syria a severe national threat until 2020. Operation Spring Shield in the northwestern governorate of Idlib changed this situation since Iran's affiliated forces were also in Idlib to assist the Syrian military against rebel groups. In this sense, they were almost in confrontation with the Turkish army (Azizi & Çevik, 2022). While the Turkish Defense Ministry explained the goal of the operation as

“prevention of the Syrian regime’s spread” and “preserving the security of Turkish troops and local people,” the Iranian government was against Turkish military involvement in the region (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, n.d.). Accordingly, Zarif stated in 2021, “We reject the Turkish military presence in Syria and Iraq, and we consider Ankara’s policies towards Damascus and Baghdad to be wrong” (Middle East Monitor, 2021).

The PUK has remained another dissenting issue between Türkiye and Iran during this period. Due to its cooperation with the PKK, Türkiye continued to regard Iraq’s PUK party as “a national security threat to Türkiye” (TRT World, 2024). On the other hand, Iran has had a strategic relationship with the PUK since they have historically shared the goal of balancing against the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which has intimate links with Israel and the US (Henkins, 2012).<sup>9</sup> The more recent convergence between Iran and the PUK has been derived from the latter’s mediation between Iran and the YPG in Syria and its contribution to Iran’s balancing efforts against the US influence on the YPG (Daily Sabah, 2024). However, the PUK’s permission for the YPG to be deployed in Sulaymaniyah has increased Türkiye’s threat perceptions and led to Türkiye’s cross-border operations in Sulaymaniyah, increasing Iran’s concerns about its sphere of influence (Anatolian Agency, 2024; Bianet, 2024; Uygur, 2024). In this sense, there has been unresolved tension between Türkiye and Iran regarding their approaches toward the PUK in Iraq (VOA News, 2024).

Furthermore, the 2020 “trilateral agreement” between Türkiye, Baghdad, and the KRG in Erbil to remove the PKK from Sinjar triggered Iran’s concerns about its exclusion from security structures in northern Iraq (Azizi, 2022). Hence, pro-Iranian Shiite groups have started to accuse Türkiye of interfering in issues in Iraq, alerting that they might militarily respond to Türkiye (Azizi, 2022). In addition, Türkiye’s military campaigns toward Sinjar, aiming to oust the PKK and its local allied groups backed by Iran, have heightened the tensivity in the field (al-Salhly, 2022).<sup>10</sup> Following one cross-border Turkish military operation in 2021, Iraj Masjedi, the then Iranian ambassador to Iraq, said, “We reject military intervention in Iraq, and Turkish forces should not pose a threat or violate Iraqi soil.” In return, the then Turkish ambassador to Iraq replied, “The Ambassador of Iran would be the last person to lecture Turkey about respecting the borders of Iraq” (Daily Sabah, 2021a). The foreign policy patterns of the two countries toward Iraq have remained unchanged until recently.

Recent regional developments in the South Caucasus and the second Nagorno-Karabakh war (September-November 2020) breaking out between Azerbaijan and Armenia have impacted Türkiye-Iran relations. Following the end of the war, Erdoğan had a cooperation plan that included the 3+3 format for peace in the Caucasus, comprising three Caucasian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) and three neighboring countries (Russia, Türkiye, and Iran), indicating the ongoing collaboration between Iran and Türkiye (Daily Sabah, 2021b). On the other hand, the two countries supported different parties during the war and had diverging concerns in South Caucasia. Accordingly, while Türkiye supported Azerbaijan politically and militarily, Tehran sought to maintain a “delicate balance” between the two sides of the war (Patrick, 2020; Basar, 2020; Motamedi, 2020).

Türkiye’s active role in the war and the comparative advantage of Azerbaijan as a result of the war has led to Iran’s concerns about Türkiye’s increasing economic and energy links

<sup>9</sup> The diverse attitudes of Türkiye and Iran towards the PUK are not a new phenomenon since such attitudes were also revealed in the Iraqi-Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s when Türkiye supported the KDP and Iran assisted the PUK.

<sup>10</sup> This situation was mainly derived from the incapacity of the Iraqi government and the US to halt the mutual assaults.



with Azerbaijan and Georgia, perceiving it as a “pan-Turkist” strategy in the South Caucasus (Azizi & Çevik, 2024). Iran perceives the planned Zangezur Corridor that links Türkiye with Azerbaijan as an effort to detach Iran from Armenia (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024). During their meeting in 2022, Khamenei told Erdoğan that “any plan that could block Iran’s historical border with Armenia is unacceptable” (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024; News, 2022). This makes it clear that even though the countries have learned to deal with their divergent policies, their competition in the South Caucasus has been growing and deepening.

Nevertheless, despite their tensions, the two countries’ efforts for cooperation demonstrate their determination to maintain their relations. For instance, they signed an agreement at the 15th Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Summit to develop bilateral relations (Daily Sabah, 2021c). Erdoğan’s visit to the former Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi,<sup>11</sup> on 19 July 2022 for the Seventh Turkish-Iranian High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) meeting was another indicator of their efforts to sustain political and economic ties. The two countries agreed to renew their 25-year gas supply contract with a \$30 billion trade target (Mehdi, 2022). In addition, they underlined their “bilateral ties,” including terrorism and the defense industry, and how to improve them (TRT World, 2023).

The Russia-Ukraine war also indirectly affected the Middle Eastern security complex due to the sharp increase in energy prices and the “food crisis” (Liu & Shu, 2023, p.2). Türkiye and Iran’s foreign policy attitudes towards the war showed a difference. On the one hand, Türkiye has sought to find an opportunity to demonstrate its regional power by applying a “balanced foreign policy” between Ukraine and Russia, NATO and Russia, and Russia and Europe (Liu & Shu, 2023, p.2; Üstün, 2022). Conversely, Iran furthered its “strategic cooperation” with Russia by deepening its collaboration in several fields (Liu & Shu, 2023, p.2; Üstün, 2022). Despite this divergence, the two countries’ “agree-to-disagree” strategy in post-war Syrian politics has pushed them to maintain their relations (Sinkaya, 2012; Caner, 2021; Çevik, 2023).

In this context, newly appointed Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan’s visit to Iran’s former Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, was regarded as an “act of goodwill gesture” to normalize further relations regarding regional issues, including Syria, Iraq, Palestine, the South Caucasus, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, and Ukraine (Shahbazov, 2023; Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2023). During the meeting, the two countries continued conveying the message of fostering regional collaboration. Fidan underlined Türkiye and Iran’s responsibility to “ensure peace and stability” in the region (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2023). From the Iranian side, Amir-Abdollahian emphasized the implementation of “a comprehensive plan for bilateral cooperation” and the possibility of constructing a “free trade zone” between the two countries (Anatolian Agency, 2023).

Given the complicated nature of the Middle East, this period has been a mixture of tension and cooperation between the two countries. The diversity of actors, including extra-regional powers, non-state actors, and other regional powers, has led to a roller-coaster relationship between Türkiye and Iran. Despite several divergent issues and discursive tension between them, Türkiye still has rational reasons to maintain manageable relations with its neighboring regional power, Iran, and vice versa.

<sup>11</sup> Raisi was pronounced dead on 19 May 2024 following the helicopter crash in Iran’s East Azerbaijan region. He was succeeded by Masoud Pezeshkian, who has called Türkiye “a friendly and brotherly nation” and intends to visit Türkiye soon (Asmar, 2024).

## 6. Conclusion

The regional level of analysis and the concept of local security externalities have been understudied, particularly regarding regional powers' bilateral policies. Accordingly, drawing on Buzan and Wæver's RSCT and Lake and Morgan's theory of regional orders, this article aimed to fill this gap in the use of regionalist theories to explain Türkiye-Iran relations over the last decade. The article highlighted the critical effect of this RSC's local security externalities on Türkiye's fluctuating relations with Iran between 2002 and 2023. As two regional powers, their relations have been greatly affected by the changing regional environment and the involvement of extra-regional powers.

The main question of this article is, "What are the underlying causes of Türkiye's foreign policy changes toward Iran between 2002 and 2023?" To explain such a change, it was found that the local security externalities of the regional level have been the most significant factors affecting Turkish foreign policy attitudes and discourses toward Iran between 2002 and 2023. Accordingly, it demonstrates that Türkiye's relations with Iran improved between 2002 and 2011 because of the regional environment after the post-Iraq War. Shared concerns, such as maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity, the PKK/PJAK threat, and the US's political and military presence, forced them to increase regional cooperation. On the other hand, the regional power dynamics between 2011 and 2016, including the Arab uprisings, Syria's civil war, the reduced role of the US, the rise of PYD/YPG and ISIS, and Russia's active involvement in Syria's civil war, deteriorated Türkiye's relations with Iran. Finally, the post-2016 regional context has led to a mixture of cooperation and conflict between the two countries. On the one hand, Turkish foreign policy discourses have underlined the significance of regional cooperation with Iran; on the other hand, Turkish foreign policy elites did not refrain from criticizing Iran's regional policies (the same applies to Iran). Regional developments such as the increasing power of the Assad regime, the assertive role of Russia in the Syrian civil war, the growing threats of the YPG and ISIS against Turkish security, and Türkiye's deteriorated relations with Arab neighbors have pushed Türkiye to cooperate with Iran. On the other hand, their divergent strategies toward PYD/YPG, PUK in Iraq, Turkish cross-border operations, and the crisis in South Caucasia have differentiated the regional strategies of Türkiye and Iran, reflecting Türkiye's foreign policy elites' discourses and speech acts toward Iran, and vice versa.

In this respect, this study makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it combines the assumptions of the two theoretical perspectives, RSCT and the theory of regional orders, to explain the unique characteristics of Middle Eastern politics. Accordingly, it updates Buzan and Wæver's RSCT to escape its exclusionary assumptions for regional membership and analyze the role of Türkiye and extra-regional powers (the US and Russia) in the Middle Eastern regional security complex. Empirically, this study provides insight into Turkish foreign policy elites' discourses and speech acts toward Iran in the last two decades without neglecting the Iranian government's agency. Hence, it demonstrates the evolution of Turkish foreign policy discourses and practices toward Iran. Furthermore, studying Turkish foreign policy from the regional level of analysis offers a rich understanding of both the global and unit levels of analysis, which can assist in further studies to elaborate on the foreign policy acts of regional actors.

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