

The impact of the Turkish regional role in the Middle East after the October 7th attacks

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper analyzes Turkey’s post-October 7 foreign policy through the lens of role theory, focusing on its responses to the Israel–Hamas conflict and its shifting relations with major regional actors.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is applying “The Role Theory” to study the Turkish role in the Middle East after the October 7th attacks, through analyzing the role conceptions, role performance and role prescription in the Turkish foreign policy.

Findings – The paper reveals how Turkey’s foreign policy is shaped by the interplay between its domestic identity, regional ambitions and the expectations placed on it by both Allies and adversaries. The analysis finds that Turkey’s foreign policy remains dynamic, driven by the persistent negotiation of conflicting roles, which in turn impacts its ability to position itself as a key actor in the Middle East.

Originality/value – The study tries to explore the evolution of the Turkish–Israeli relations, highlighting the complexities of balancing historical tensions with economic and strategic cooperation.

Keywords Regional role, Regional powers, Middle East, 7th of October attacks

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Turkey has emerged as a key player in Middle Eastern affairs in the twenty-first century, marking a shift from its previous foreign policy approach. Traditionally, Turkey’s foreign policy was primarily shaped by its relations with the West. However, at the turn of the century, changes in the global and regional order led to a transformation in Turkey’s international and regional engagements. In the past, Turkey prioritized security concerns in its approach to the Middle East, maintaining a cautious and non-interventionist stance. However, these systemic changes diminished the emphasis on security in its foreign policy, paving the way for a more proactive Middle Eastern strategy. This shift took place during the prolonged governance of the Justice and Development Party, which lasted for over a decade (Khan, 2015, p. 31).

Since 2021, Turkey has shifted from a confrontational foreign policy toward a more conciliatory approach, aligning with broader regional reconciliation dynamics, including the Abraham Accords, Gulf normalization efforts and Syria’s reintegration into the Arab League. While consistent with regional trends, this shift was also driven by Turkey’s own strategic recalibration following a period of diplomatic isolation. Ankara’s earlier assertive policies had narrowed its regional partnerships – leaving Qatar as its primary ally – and contributed to the formation of an anti-Turkey alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean involving Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel. This isolation was most evident in disputes over maritime boundaries and access to natural gas resources, which underscored the geopolitical costs of sustained confrontation (Çevik, 2024, p. 8).

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Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, Turkey's regional influence has expanded markedly, alongside ambitions to enhance its global standing. AKP leaders have articulated multiple national roles—portraying Turkey as a “natural regional leader”, a “historical elder brother” and a “protector” of Muslim minorities. Drawing on shifting geopolitical conditions, Ankara has sought to advance its status as a rising power by deepening influence in neighboring regions and engaging other emerging global actors (Gürzel, 2014). The government maintains that regional stability depends on cooperation among regional actors, while rejecting a framework dominated exclusively by global powers. It has therefore sought to define Turkey's role autonomously rather than accept one prescribed by Western actors, a vision advanced through Ahmet Davutoğlu's diplomatic outreach to regional states. A more open political system and a strong economy are viewed as essential enablers of Turkey's proactive regional engagement (Karacasulu, 2015, p. 35).

The October 7, 2023 Israel–Hamas conflict erupted as Ankara was prioritizing regional partnerships to enhance stability and reduce isolation. Turkey's recent rapprochement with Israel – driven by economic and security considerations and formalized through restored diplomatic ties in 2022 – was abruptly disrupted by the escalation of violence. Under Erdoğan and the AKP, Turkey's approach to Israel and Palestine reflects both ideological commitments and a historically rooted affinity with Arab populations. The Gaza war heightened regional and global concerns about wider instability, prompting Ankara to reassert itself as a stabilizing regional actor. In this context, Turkey has sought to revive elements of its earlier “zero problems with neighbors” approach, leveraging soft power and mediation – drawing on precedents such as its role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict – to advance its strategic interests (Giannotta and Cubukcuoglu, 2023).

This article argues that Turkey's post–October 7th foreign policy is best understood not as a case of abrupt strategic realignment, but as an effort to manage acute role conflict under conditions of regional polarization. Its central theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how mediation-oriented role conceptions become constrained – and partially undermined – when external role prescriptions diverge sharply and role recognition is denied by key actors. By tracing the interaction between national role conceptions, enacted role performance and externally imposed role expectations, the article shows how the October 7 attacks reconfigured Turkey's ability to sustain a mediator role, revealing the structural limits of middle-power mediation in highly polarized regional conflicts.

Theoretical framework

Role Theory

Role theory first emerged in foreign policy analysis (FPA) during the 1970s when scholars sought to identify consistent behavioral patterns among different categories of states within the bipolar Cold War system, such as “non-aligned” and “Allies”. Since then, an increasing number of role theorists have argued that the range of social roles – such as leader, mediator and initiator – has expanded alongside the evolving structure of international relations. Additionally, counter-roles like follower and aggressor have also been recognized within this framework (Harnisch, 2010, p. 2).

Role theory in foreign policy analysis examines how national role conceptions (NRCs), role performance and role prescriptions shape state behavior. Introduced by Kalevi Holsti, the framework treats states and their leaders as primary actors who define and enact roles that position them within the international system. First, *National Role Conceptions* refer to how policymakers perceive their state's appropriate responsibilities, commitments and functions in regional and global contexts. To systematize these perceptions, Holsti identified 17 national role conceptions, including regional leader, regional protector, mediator-integrator, faithful ally and independent state. A regional leader is characterized by significant political and economic influence over neighboring states and a sense of responsibility for regional order. A regional protector, by contrast, monitors regional developments closely and adapts its policies in response

to perceived regional threats and opportunities (Budak, 2014, pp. 18–19). Second, *role performance*, it refers to the concrete actions and decisions made by actors, reflecting consistent behavioral patterns within particular situational contexts. Third, *role prescriptions*, which refers to the norms and expectations that societies, cultures and institutions associate with specific positions. Holsti argues that these prescriptions serve as guiding parameters for state leaders in understanding international political patterns (Thies and Wehner, 2019). So, role theory emphasizes the evolving relationship between role prescriptions, which represent external expectations, and role performance, which reflects a state's actions. Through this interaction, NRCs develop, influencing how state leaders shape foreign policy decisions by balancing external influences with their own role perceptions (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2016, pp. 490–503).

James N. Rosenau conceptualizes “role” as an analytical unit that competes with individual, national and systemic variables traditionally highlighted in International Relations (IR) theories. Steven G. Walker expands on this idea, asserting that roles are not only shaped by interaction but also influenced by cognitive responses. According to this perspective, a role is more than just self-identification; it encompasses a set of behaviors that emerge as cognitive reactions and actions based on external expectations. Role theory serves as a framework for analyzing states as foreign policy actors, recognizing that states do not adhere to a singular role but often navigate multiple overlapping roles (Özdamar *et al.*, 2014, pp. 95–96).

Role theory analyzes how cultural, ideological, geostrategic, political and economic factors shape foreign policy through elite perceptions of the international system. Applied to Turkey, existing scholarship highlights the importance of identity, geography, economic resources, strategic interests and elite preferences, particularly in the post–Cold War era. Prominent role conceptions include Turkey as a “bridge between continents” and “civilizations,” a “trading state” and a “liberal-democratic model” for the Muslim world. Melek Sarıtaş Yanık characterizes Turkey as an exceptional state whose Eastern–Western duality enhances its mediating potential. This hybrid identity, rooted in Ottoman heritage, supports claims to peacemaking and diplomatic brokerage. Analysis of AKP leadership discourse further identifies roles such as regional leader, regional protector, subsystem collaborator, exemplar and bridge (Walker, 2016, pp. 214–230).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in role theory, it would study the Turkish role in the Middle East after the October 7th attacks, through analyzing the role conceptions, role performance and role prescription in the Turkish foreign policy. It also would try to evaluate the role played by Turkey to solve this crisis and its role with other important actors involved directly or in directly in this conflict. This analysis would help in positioning Turkey in the regional power map in the Middle East. To operationalize role theory in a systematic manner, this study adopts a structured analytical framework that distinguishes clearly between *role conception*, *role performance* and *role prescription*. Role conception is examined through official discourse, including presidential speeches, foreign ministry statements and elite signaling that articulate how Turkish decision-makers define Turkey's expected regional role after October 7. Role performance is assessed through observable foreign policy behavior, including diplomatic initiatives, mediation efforts, economic decisions and interactions with regional and international actors. Finally, role prescription is evaluated by analyzing external expectations and constraints imposed on Turkey by key actors such as Israel, Iran, Arab states and Western partners. This tripartite framework allows for a consistent application of role theory across all empirical sections and enables a clearer distinction between rhetorical positioning and actual policy behavior (Özdamar and Erciyas, 2021, pp. 28–50).

Turkey's policy toward the Middle East after October 7th attacks

Over the past two decades, a notable shift in Turkey's Middle East policy has been its growing willingness to act as a mediator in regional conflicts, particularly the Arab–Israeli dispute. This

marks a significant departure from Turkey's long-standing approach of avoiding involvement in such conflicts. Two main factors have driven this change: First, the evolving geo-strategic landscape and rising instability in the region have begun to impact Turkey directly, compelling Ankara to take a more active role in conflict resolution. The persistence of the Arab – Israeli conflict has enabled certain states to leverage the situation to expand their power and influence. For example, Iran has used the Palestinian issue to extend its reach beyond its immediate surroundings, effectively positioning itself as a Mediterranean power. These shifts have disrupted the regional balance, raising concerns for Turkey. Second, the ruling AKP government has shown a particular eagerness to assume a mediating role in the region. The government views Turkey's historical connections to the Middle East as a reason for its responsibility to stay engaged in regional affairs (Altunışık, 2009).

Under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey's stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has diverged significantly from the Kemalist era in two key ways. First, Erdoğan views Hamas as a legitimate Palestinian political entity, a perspective shaped by his ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood. He believes Hamas should be included in the political process. Secondly, the Palestinian cause has become central to Turkey's pursuit of regional leadership, with Erdoğan employing neo-Ottoman rhetoric to appeal to Turkish voters. His political vision is built on the idea of a rising Turkey with a historic duty to defend marginalized Muslim communities, including the Palestinians. This theme of Turkish exceptionalism is a consistent thread in Erdoğan's foreign policy statements and is a core element of his "Century of Turkey" agenda (Aydıntaşbaş and Huggard, 2023).

Aligning with broader regional trends, Turkey's recent strategy regarding the Gulf, the wider Middle East and Israel (before October 7) has centered on normalization and de-escalation. This approach has been largely shaped by economic considerations, the declining security involvement of the United States in the region, a stalemate in regional conflicts and the need to adjust to a shifting geopolitical environment where the rivalries, alliances and ideological movements sparked by the Arab Spring have lost traction. A crucial component of this strategy has been enhancing regional economic integration and connectivity (Dalay, 2022).

Israel's war on Gaza and the ensuing humanitarian crisis marked a turning point in regional affairs, significantly affecting the trajectory of both normalization and de-escalation efforts. Israel's efforts to integrate into the region – while disregarding or undermining Palestinian interests – have essentially been suspended for the foreseeable future. Frustrated by the West's unwavering support for Israel, Ankara has prioritized regional diplomacy and sought to internationalize the conflict, aiming for greater involvement from non-Western powers and global institutions. Unlike many Western nations that often treat the Palestinian issue as solely an Arab concern, Turkey has been working to build a broader international coalition in support of Palestinian rights and statehood (Dalay, 2023). In pursuit of this goal, Hakan Fidan, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs and a former head of the National Intelligence Organization (MİT), traveled to several regional and international capitals directly after the war began, promoting the concept of a multiparty guarantor system. This proposal envisioned Turkey, alongside several Arab states and international actors, acting as guarantors for a potential settlement. Additionally, Turkey played a key role in supporting an Arab-Islamic summit held in Riyadh in November 2023, which led to the formation of a seven-nation group tasked with spearheading international efforts to push for a ceasefire and bring an end to the conflict (Bryza, 2024).

Turkey's role in response to the October 7th attacks

This section analyzes Turkey's response to the October 7 attacks through the lens of role theory by explicitly linking diplomatic actions and policy decisions to Turkey's evolving role conceptions and external role expectations. Rather than treating these developments as isolated events, the analysis interprets them as manifestations of Turkey's attempt to reconcile

its self-ascribed identity as a mediator and regional leader with the constraints imposed by regional polarization and international skepticism. This approach highlights how role performance both reflected and reshaped Turkey's perceived position within the regional order.

Prior to the October 7 attacks, Turkey was actively repairing political relations with Israel, marked by President Isaac Herzog's 2022 visit to Ankara and a face-to-face meeting between President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly in September 2023. Accordingly, Turkey initially adopted a cautious response to the outbreak of the Hamas–Israel war, seeking to preserve its broader regional and Western reconciliation efforts. Erdoğan also aimed to position Turkey as a mediator, leveraging improved ties with Israel alongside established relations with Hamas, drawing parallels to Ankara's role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict. This balanced approach shifted decisively after the October 17 bombing of the al-Ahli Arab Hospital. Erdoğan sharply escalated his rhetoric, describing the attack as a new phase in the “massacre in Gaza.” The Turkish Parliament issued a unanimous declaration condemning the incident as a “crime against humanity,” and Ankara declared three days of national mourning in solidarity with Palestinians (Tür, 2023). From a role theory perspective, Turkey's initial cautious response reflects a *self-ascribed role conception* centered on mediation and diplomatic brokerage. Ankara perceived itself as uniquely positioned to engage both Israel and Hamas, drawing on recently restored ties with Israel and longstanding channels with Hamas leadership. This mediator role conception was consistent with Turkey's broader foreign policy narrative as a pragmatic middle power capable of facilitating dialogue in polarized conflicts. The decision to initially avoid escalatory rhetoric thus signaled an attempt to preserve role credibility and maximize diplomatic maneuverability rather than an absence of normative positioning.

This shift must also be understood in light of Turkey's broader ambition to assert itself as a central regional actor. Historically, AKP leadership has strongly supported the Palestinian cause and Hamas during previous Gaza conflicts, a stance reflected in Erdoğan's early calls on October 10 for international mediation. Within weeks, however, Erdoğan sharply escalated his rhetoric, declaring on October 25 that he did not consider Hamas a terrorist organization and accusing Israel of being “a terror state” engaged in “state terrorism”. He subsequently canceled a planned visit to Israel, citing personal mistreatment by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Ankara further signaled its policy shift by organizing a mass pro-Palestinian rally in Istanbul on October 28 and recalling its ambassador from Tel Aviv on November 4, 2023. These developments marked the collapse of normalization efforts, consistent with earlier patterns in which Gaza crises have repeatedly undermined Turkish–Israeli relations (Marcou, 2023). On November 28, he urged United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, to ensure that Israel is “held accountable in international courts” for alleged war crimes against Palestinians. The following day, he labeled Netanyahu the “butcher of Gaza,” claiming that his actions were “endangering the security of all Jews worldwide” (Çevik, 2023). As the conflict escalated, Turkey's *role performance* increasingly diverged from its initial mediator-oriented role conception, giving rise to a clear case of *role conflict*. While Ankara continued to express willingness to mediate, Erdoğan's intensified rhetoric, explicit defense of Hamas, and suspension of diplomatic normalization with Israel reflected a competing role conception – that of a moral regional leader and protector of Palestinian interests. This dual role performance illustrates how Turkey sought to balance pragmatic diplomacy with normative leadership, yet the growing salience of domestic public opinion and regional expectations gradually tilted its behavior toward symbolic and rhetorical confrontation rather than neutral mediation.

Erdoğan has made no secret of his desire to be involved in mediation efforts and Gaza's postwar reconstruction and governance. Given Turkey's extensive peacekeeping experience in places like Somalia, Bosnia and Afghanistan, it has the capacity to play a role in Gaza. For Erdoğan, the sight of Turkish flags in Gaza would symbolize the realization of a historic mission. Erdoğan's role as a mediator in the conflict has not only boosted his international

visibility and prestige but also reinforced his image at home as a globally influential leader. Turkey had hoped to assume a similar mediatory role in the ongoing Gaza war, leveraging its strong ties with Hamas and its recent efforts to restore relations with Israel. Turkey initiated a vigorous diplomatic effort, with its foreign minister, Fidan, engaging in extensive discussions with counterparts from the United States, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Lebanon. Additionally, he participated in a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah. Meanwhile, the president conducted talks with leaders such as the Russian President, the German Chancellor and the British Prime Minister. Ankara has persistently urged Israel to de-escalate the conflict and has positioned itself as a mediator, particularly in efforts to secure the release of foreign hostages held by Hamas. Furthermore, Turkey has advocated for a comprehensive resolution based on UN resolutions, emphasizing the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital (Strachota, 2023).

In the long run, Turkey proposed a guarantor system for Gaza, positioning itself as one of the key guarantors. This arrangement, Turkey believed, would grant it a unique status – allowing it to support Palestine without directly opposing Israel. However, the guarantor proposal has been dismissed by both Israel and the United States, partly because Israel has yet to formulate a concrete post-war strategy for Gaza. Additionally, Erdoğan's efforts to mediate a ceasefire and facilitate hostage releases have not yielded the results he anticipated, leaving Turkey unable to fulfill the role it had envisioned (Çevik, 2023). The failure of Turkey's mediation and guarantor initiatives highlights the importance of *external role prescriptions* and *role recognition* in determining foreign policy outcomes. Despite Ankara's aspiration to act as a guarantor and post-war stakeholder in Gaza, key external actors – most notably Israel and the United States – did not recognize Turkey as an acceptable security guarantor. This mismatch between Turkey's self-ascribed role and externally imposed role expectations resulted in *role contestation*, constraining Ankara's ability to translate diplomatic activism into tangible influence. Consequently, Turkey's role performance remained largely symbolic, reinforcing the gap between ambition and realized authority.

A brief comparison with other regional mediators such as Qatar and Egypt further highlights the distinctiveness of Turkey's proposed "guarantor system". While Qatar has traditionally operated as a facilitator of indirect negotiations – leveraging its ties with non-state actors such as Hamas – Egypt has played a central and institutionalized mediation role grounded in its geographic proximity, control over the Rafah crossing and longstanding security coordination with both Israel and Palestinian factions. Egypt has historically acted as the indispensable broker of ceasefires in Gaza, combining intelligence diplomacy, border management and direct engagement with conflicting parties to enforce de-escalation. As for Turkey, it sought to embed itself within the post-conflict security architecture as a formal guarantor, thereby expanding its role from mediator to stakeholder in enforcement and implementation. This marks a qualitative departure from traditional mediation practices in the region and reflects Turkey's broader ambition to institutionalize its regional leadership role (Hamzawy and Brown, 2025).

As part of Turkey's efforts to address the Gaza crisis, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan framed the conflict as a crime against humanity requiring collective international action, a position he reiterated at the Cairo Summit on October 21. He condemned the suffering of civilians and criticized the international community for failing to tackle the conflict's root causes, while proposing a Turkish-led "guarantee mechanism" to monitor and enforce a just peace. However, the absence of a ceasefire and Turkey's inability to secure a central mediation role limited this initiative. In response, Erdoğan redirected his criticism toward the international community, particularly the UN Security Council and the Western-led global order. This renewed emphasis reinforced his longstanding call for UN reform, encapsulated in the slogan "the world is greater than five" (Yinanç, 2024). On November 21, Erdoğan announced that Foreign Minister Fidan and intelligence chief İbrahim Kalın were coordinating with Qatar to facilitate the release of hostages held by Hamas. These efforts produced tangible results, as Hamas confirmed on November 27 that Turkish mediation contributed to the release of Thai

nationals in Gaza. Turkey's parallel aspiration to act as a "guarantor" for a ceasefire and political settlement may also encourage Egypt and other regional actors to assume stabilizing roles and prevent a power vacuum in Gaza (Bryza, 2024).

On 4th and 5th of December 2023, Erdoğan traveled to Doha to participate in the ninth Turkey–Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee meeting and the 44th Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit. His presence at the GCC summit highlighted Turkey's evolving regional policy in recent years and its stance on the Gaza conflict. Turkey's participation in the summit offered insight into its diplomatic approach to the war in Gaza. Ankara has been actively engaged in diplomatic efforts, advocating for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and the unrestricted flow of humanitarian aid to the region. Additionally, Turkey has emphasized the need to reinstate the Palestinian issue on both regional and international agendas. Since the conflict began, Turkey has sought to support and complement the roles of key Arab nations such as Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia rather than overshadow or compete with them. In essence, Ankara endorses Arab leadership in addressing the Gaza crisis (Dalay, 2024).

Public pressure in Turkey played a significant role in Turkey's stance against Israel. The majority of Turkish citizens strongly oppose Israel's actions in Gaza and in the Middle East in general, especially after the extension of the Israeli attacks against seven Muslim-majority countries – Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Iran. These continuous attacks may make Turkey struggle, given the likelihood of a massive influx of refugees. If Israel's bombing of Lebanon persists and plans for large-scale Palestinian expulsions proceed, Turkey could face an overwhelming refugee crisis. With the country already experiencing severe socioeconomic strain from hosting three million Syrian refugees, Erdoğan will be under immense pressure as more Arab refugees move closer to Turkey's borders (Balboni, 2024).

Importantly, the effectiveness of Turkey's role performance varied significantly across different audiences, highlighting the multi-level nature of role prescriptions emphasized in role theory. At the domestic level, strong public support for the Palestinian cause and the salience of normative and ideological narratives reinforced Ankara's self-ascribed role as a moral regional leader, encouraging confrontational rhetoric and symbolic policy gestures. At the regional level, reactions were more ambivalent: while some actors welcomed Turkey's rhetorical stance, others – particularly Iran – questioned the substantive value of Ankara's engagement, interpreting it as insufficiently aligned with resistance-oriented expectations. At the global level, however, role recognition was decisively shaped by Israel and Western actors, whose skepticism toward Turkey's impartiality and political positioning limited its acceptance as a mediator or potential guarantor. This divergence demonstrates that domestic role validation and regional resonance do not automatically translate into international role effectiveness, and that mediation outcomes ultimately depend on recognition by actors with the capacity to enable or block role realization. Overall, Turkey's response to the October 7 attacks illustrates how role conflict, contested role recognition and structural constraints limited the effectiveness of its foreign policy, despite sustained diplomatic engagement and rhetorical leadership.

Turkey's relation with major states in the Middle East after October 7th attacks

Turkish–Israeli relations

Turkey and Israel, two of the region's three non-Arab states, have historically maintained a relationship marked by both cooperation and tension. Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel in 1949 and pursued a cautious, balanced approach throughout the Cold War while sustaining economic and strategic ties. Relations deteriorated after Erdoğan assumed office in 2002, alongside a marked improvement in Turkey's ties with Hamas. This shift was symbolized by the 2006 visit of Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal to Ankara, despite Hamas's terrorist designation by Israel, the US and the EU. The first major rupture followed Erdoğan's 2009 walkout at the Davos World Economic Forum after a

confrontation with Israeli President Shimon Peres over Gaza ([Demirtaş-Bagdonas, 2016](#), pp. 401–422). Turkey and Israel restored their strained relationship only last year, but within months of both nations reinstating their ambassadors, war broke out. In response, Turkey recalled its ambassador, while Israel's envoy left due to security concerns ([Goksedef, 2024](#)).

The relationship between Turkey and Israel has withstood numerous crises over the years, primarily because both nations have prioritized mutual interests despite their differences. These shared interests are largely bilateral, particularly in the realms of trade and energy. Although their ties have faced significant disputes in the past decade, these conflicts have not severely impacted economic cooperation. Trade between the two nations expanded from \$500 million in the mid-1980s to \$1.3 billion in 2002, reaching \$4 billion in 2007, \$6.2 billion in 2018 and \$7.5 billion in 2021 ([Marcou, 2023](#)). From a role theory perspective, the persistence of substantial Turkish–Israeli trade relations despite severe political tensions underscores the constraining effect of economic interdependence on role performance. While Turkey's rhetorical positioning after October 7 emphasized moral leadership and solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the absence of a comprehensive economic rupture suggests a deliberate effort to avoid irreversible role escalation. In comparative terms, Turkey's approach contrasts with cases where states fully aligned normative discourse with economic disengagement, indicating that Ankara prioritized strategic flexibility over role consistency. This selective decoupling reflects a calculated balancing strategy in which economic ties functioned as a moderating variable, limiting the extent to which normative role conceptions translated into coercive foreign policy behavior. Consequently, economic interdependence did not merely coexist with Turkey's diplomatic stance but actively shaped the boundaries of its role performance vis-à-vis Israel.

Beyond external role prescriptions, Turkey's role performance has also been constrained by domestic material conditions, particularly its fragile economic landscape. Persistent inflation, currency volatility and pressures on foreign reserves have limited Ankara's capacity to sustain costly foreign policy commitments or escalate economic confrontation with key partners ([Duzgit, 2025](#)). From a role theory perspective, these domestic economic constraints function as structural boundaries that shape the translation of national role conceptions into actual policy behavior. While Turkey's leadership articulated ambitious roles as a regional leader and protector of Palestinian interests, economic vulnerabilities necessitated a calibrated approach – evident in the delayed and selective use of trade restrictions against Israel. This highlights that role performance is not solely a function of ideological positioning or external expectations but also of material capacity, reinforcing the interaction between domestic constraints and international role-taking.

Turkey and Israel maintain extensive economic ties across sectors such as energy, chemicals, automotive, high-tech and tourism, alongside periodic strategic cooperation. Both oppose the Assad regime in Syria, and although Turkey does not view Iran as its primary adversary, it remains cautious of Iranian influence and has engaged in intelligence coordination with Israel, including thwarting an Iranian plot against Israeli tourists in Turkey in 2022. Israel's close partnership with Azerbaijan – regarded by Turkey as a “brotherly nation” – has further aligned their strategic interests, particularly in supporting Baku's efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Turkish–Israeli rapprochement prior to October 7 was part of a broader regional realignment. This shift was reinforced by the Abraham Accords, which normalized Israel's relations with several Arab states ([Marcou, 2023](#)).

After coming to power, Erdoğan initially maintained a cautious stance on the Arab–Israeli conflict, though Turkey's relations with Israel deteriorated earlier than its ties with other regional actors. The first major rupture occurred with the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, when Israeli forces intercepted a Turkish-led aid flotilla to Gaza, killing nine Turkish citizens and triggering a breakdown in diplomatic relations until a 2013 reconciliation agreement. Despite this, normalization remained incomplete due to Turkey's strong support for the Palestinian cause and Islamist movements. A second crisis followed in 2018 after Israeli forces killed Palestinian protesters in Gaza, prompting mutual expulsions of ambassadors. Diplomatic

engagement later resumed at the intelligence level, including cooperation to counter Iranian threats, and Ankara exercised restraint during subsequent flare-ups in 2022–2023. Full diplomatic relations were restored in August 2022 as part of Turkey's broader effort to reduce isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean and improve relations with Western partners (Çevik, 2024, pp. 18–19).

If Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7 and the subsequent Israeli military operations in Gaza had not occurred, Netanyahu was set to visit Turkey, highlighting Israel's intention to advance the reconciliation process. However, after October 7, diplomatic ties between the two nations deteriorated to an unprecedented extent (Salaheldin, 2024). A closer look at Erdoğan's reaction to the conflict and the shifts in his stance since that date indicates that he actively sought to prevent this decline. Essentially, Erdoğan has worked to maintain reconciliation efforts while ensuring he is not seen as completely forsaking the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, the prolonged and severe nature of Israel's military actions in Gaza has made it impossible for him to sustain this fragile equilibrium. By May 2024, Turkey decided to halt all international trade with Israel as a means of pressuring it to agree to a ceasefire and facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza (Uğur *et al.*, 2024).

As the conflict continues, President Erdoğan has accused Israel of targeting civilians in Gaza, canceled a scheduled visit to Israel and expressed support for Hamas. In another statement, he likened Netanyahu to Hitler, saying, "Netanyahu is no different than Hitler". This strong rhetoric has been accompanied by diplomatic tensions, with both Turkey and Israel recalling their ambassadors. Additionally, in April 2024, Israel denied Turkey's request to air-drop humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, prompting Turkey to retaliate by imposing trade restrictions on 54 items exchanged with Israel. Erdoğan declared that "Israel's war crimes will be exposed on the international stage" and blamed the West for the crisis in Gaza due to their steadfast support for Israel. He expressed disbelief over the differing responses to humanitarian crises in Ukraine and Gaza. This shift in Turkey's stance was particularly striking, especially when Erdoğan suggested that the West might be engaged in "a new Crusade of the Cross against the Crescent" (Aran, 2025).

Despite deteriorating diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel, Erdogan has been cautious about fully severing economic ties with Israel, given their long-standing trade connections in sectors such as energy, textiles and technology. Israel is also facing economic struggles, especially after more than a year into the Gaza conflict, the country is dealing with rising inflation, slower economic growth and increasing public dissatisfaction with the rising cost of living. Key industries, including tourism and exports, have been negatively impacted, while growing defense expenditures have put additional pressure on social services, deepening political divisions. These economic challenges likely explain why both Turkey and Israel have been hesitant to take more extreme economic measures despite their escalating rhetoric (Can and Güneş, 2024). Criticism of Turkey's trade ties with Israel was a central issue in the New Welfare Party's (YRP) campaign leading up to the nationwide local elections on 31 March 2024. In these elections, President Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) faced a significant defeat. YRP leader, Fatih Erbakan, strongly condemned the government for maintaining economic relations with Israel. Despite being a minor Islamist party, the YRP gained parliamentary representation through its alliance with the AKP in the previous year's general elections (Yadav, 2024).

The assassination of Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, could mark a significant shift in Turkey's relationship with Israel. For nearly two decades, Ankara has maintained ties with Hamas, and President Erdoğan had a personal connection with Haniyeh, treating him as a close associate. Erdoğan had invited Haniyeh to speak before the Turkish parliament shortly before his death, amplifying the shock and embarrassment over his sudden killing. In response, Turkey took its first retaliatory step by joining South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice on August 7, 2024, accusing the country of genocide in Gaza. While Ankara's ICJ submission reportedly stopped short of accepting the court's ruling as

binding, the move signals potential further actions by Turkey, likely affecting both US policy and Israel–Turkey relations (Cagaptay, 2024).

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish research program at the Washington Institute, noted that Ankara believed Netanyahu – who is facing fraud, breach of trust and bribery charges – would eventually be removed from office through elections. Cagaptay said that Erdoğan's criticism was primarily directed at Netanyahu rather than Israel, this would have given Erdoğan the opportunity to reset Turkish–Israeli relations under a new Israeli prime minister. One of the main factors that is influencing the Turkish–Israeli relations is Turkey's exclusion from post-war reconstruction efforts in Gaza. Turkish officials had shown interest in acting as a guarantor for a ceasefire and had publicly voiced their readiness to play a major role in Gaza's reconstruction. However, it seems that the Israeli government has no plans to permit Erdoğan's administration to participate in post-ceasefire Gaza beyond offering humanitarian assistance (Soylu, 2024).

Turkish–Egyptian relations

Egypt and Turkey are major regional powers in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, occupying strategic positions at the intersection of Africa, Asia and Europe. Their bilateral relations deteriorated sharply after the 2013 military coup in Egypt but entered a normalization process beginning in 2021 and concluding by mid-2023. The initial rupture was largely ideological, as Erdoğan strongly opposed the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohamed Morsi and refused to recognize Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's legitimacy. Beyond ideology, the collapse of Turkey's key regional ally undermined Ankara's broader ambitions for regional leadership. Despite unresolved disagreements, reconciliation began in early 2021 through discreet diplomatic and intelligence contacts. These efforts culminated in a landmark Erdoğan–Sisi meeting on 20 November 2022, facilitated by Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (Çevik, 2024).

The Gaza war that began on October 7, 2023 acted as a catalyst for closer cooperation between Turkey and Egypt, compelling both to balance domestic pro-Palestinian sentiment with longstanding security and intelligence ties with Israel. Erdoğan and Sisi issued strong public condemnations of Israel's actions, though this rhetoric often contrasted with their broader diplomatic caution. The resulting inconsistency generated domestic frustration and verbal tensions with Israel. To clarify their positions, both states jointly called for a ceasefire and expanded humanitarian assistance to Gaza (Donelli, 2025). Turkey–Egypt coordination during the Gaza war reached an unprecedented level, particularly in diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. Within a week of the conflict's outbreak, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited Cairo to meet his Egyptian counterpart and President el-Sisi, later returning for the Cairo Summit on Palestine. Erdoğan and el-Sisi also met at the Joint Arab League Summit in Riyadh, jointly calling for an immediate ceasefire. Both leaders publicly emphasized their cooperation on addressing Gaza's humanitarian crisis, while Turkish officials confirmed the delivery of thousands of tons of aid to Gaza in coordination with Egyptian authorities and the Red Crescent (Saad, 2024, p. 71).

According to Behlül Özkan, a political scientist at Marmara University, the aftermath of October 7 prompted regional actors to acknowledge the importance of dialogue. He noted that this awareness has naturally opened a channel for communication, accelerating the normalization process between the two countries. Andrea Dentice, a senior analyst at the NATO Defense College, also asserted that, along with other factors, the Gaza crisis has helped in returning discussions between Turkey and Egypt. However, Özkan emphasized that despite these advancements, Cairo and Ankara remain wary of each other. He pointed out that a deep-rooted trust crisis has developed over the past decade, though both sides are making efforts to overcome it. In an attempt to rebuild confidence, Turkey has agreed to provide Egypt with defense industry equipment and technological assistance (Inanc, 2024).

Turkey coordinated closely with Egypt to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza during the conflict. Although President Erdoğan's planned visit to the Rafah crossing in February 2024 was canceled due to ongoing hostilities, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited the crossing in August 2024 as part of preparations for a bilateral summit. The Egyptian–Turkish summit held in Ankara on September 4, 2024 marked the culmination of over three years of normalization efforts. Internationally, both states adopted a unified position condemning Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank as violations of international law. Turkey and Egypt also jointly supported Palestinian claims before the International Court of Justice during its July 2024 advisory proceedings ([Salaheldin, 2024](#)).

Egypt joined a Turkish-led initiative, backed by dozens of states, urging the United Nations to suspend arms transfers to Israel amid concerns over violations of international and humanitarian law during its military operations in Gaza and Lebanon. Cairo framed its participation as part of broader international efforts to pressure Israel to halt civilian harm and prevent further violations against Palestinians. Israel's UN ambassador accused Turkey of acting with "malice" after Ankara submitted a letter co-signed by 52 countries calling for an arms embargo. The letter condemned Israel's military campaign in Gaza following the October 7 attacks. Turkey's foreign ministry confirmed the letter's formal submission, with signatories including members of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation ([Egypt joins Turkey's call to UN for arms embargo on Israel, 2024](#)). All these joint actions between Turkey and Egypt to condemn the Israeli actions in Palestine since the start of the Gaza war on 7th of October 2023, enhanced the relations between both countries and made it reach an unprecedented level of strength after long years of tensions.

Turkish–Iranian relations

Iran is considered a key regional power in the Middle East. It maintains strong ties with Hamas. Together with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Lebanon's Hezbollah, these actors form the so-called "Axis of Resistance" against Israel – a core element of Iran's Middle East foreign policy. During the Shah's reign, Iran and Turkey enjoyed stable relations ([Mounir, 2023](#)). The 1979 Iranian Revolution introduced new complexities into Turkish–Iranian relations, with tensions in the 1990s revolving around the PKK, Islamist movements, Nagorno-Karabakh and competition in post-Soviet Central Asia. The rise of the AKP marked a shift toward a more multidimensional approach under the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, integrating security, economic and strategic considerations. Economic ties expanded significantly, particularly through Turkish imports of Iranian natural gas and growing bilateral trade. Turkey also assumed an active diplomatic role in debates over Iran's nuclear program. Unlike the United States' sanctions-based approach, Ankara has favored engagement and mediation, maintaining a policy of balanced diplomacy with Tehran ([Khan, 2015](#), pp. 41–42). This shows that the Turkish–Iranian relations is characterized by being moderate, in which there are periods of cooperation and periods of conflict. This means that they are neither Allies nor enemies.

Ankara and Tehran share a critical view of the evolving global order, perceiving a decline in Western strategic leadership and a shift toward a more multipolar, non-Western system. Turkish and Iranian leaders alike question the legitimacy of Western-led institutions, with Ankara's critique of the UN Security Council – summarized in the slogan "the world is bigger than five" – mirroring Tehran's broader rejection of US dominance. The post-October 7 context has reinforced these perceptions and created new strategic opportunities for both states. Israel's perceived military and intelligence superiority has been challenged, while US-backed Arab–Israeli normalization efforts have stalled. At the same time, growing disillusionment in the Global South with Western support for Israel has further underscored this shared outlook ([Adar and Azizi, 2023](#)).

As Israel's military campaign in Gaza continued, Iran increasingly criticized Turkey's position, reflecting underlying regional rivalry. Despite Erdoğan's strong rhetorical support

for the Palestinian cause and condemnation of Israel, Tehran viewed Ankara's stance as largely symbolic rather than substantive. Erdoğan reportedly urged Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to adopt a unified position against Israel, yet Raisi's planned visit to Turkey was subsequently canceled. Iranian media portrayed the cancellation as pressure on Ankara to sever political and economic ties with Israel and take more concrete action. The Iranian Foreign Ministry later attributed the postponement to logistical issues related to US visa delays, partially softening earlier criticism (Sari, 2024).

After being postponed twice, the meeting of the presidents of Iran and Turkey was held in Ankara, on January 24, amid growing instability in the Middle East. The meeting addressed a broad spectrum of bilateral issues, the ongoing Gaza conflict and regional unrest which dominated the context. Both countries reaffirmed their support for the Palestinian cause and shared a desire to prevent a broader regional war. While Iran takes a more aggressive stance toward Israel, it shares Turkey's interest in avoiding a full-scale regional confrontation. Tehran has been cautious about becoming directly involved in the Gaza war, repeatedly stressing that the groups it supports – Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis – act independently and are not under its direct control. Despite notable disagreements on various regional matters, both Tehran and Ankara remain committed to containing the fallout from the Gaza war (Kaleji, 2024).

Both countries had reached a consensus on the need to work toward a just and lasting peace in the region, emphasizing the importance of avoiding actions that could further undermine regional security and stability. The two neighboring nations agreed to maintain their cooperation in combating cross-border militant threats. Turkey and Iran have historically had a complex relationship, often finding themselves on opposing sides of major regional issues – most notably the Syrian civil war. Ankara has supported opposition forces seeking to remove President Bashar al-Assad and has launched multiple military operations in northern Syria targeting militant groups. In contrast, Tehran has remained a firm backer of Assad's regime. However, Turkey has recently begun efforts to restore diplomatic ties with Damascus ("Turkey, Iran agree on need to avoid escalating Mideast tensions", 2024). Despite these complexities, both governments are likely to manage their differences pragmatically to preserve bilateral ties and reduce the risk of a wider regional escalation specially in the light of the Gaza war.

From a role theory perspective, Iranian criticism of Turkey's Gaza stance reflects a case of *role contestation*, whereby Tehran challenges Ankara's attempt to perform a mediator role while maintaining strategic autonomy from the so-called Axis of Resistance. Iran's expectation that Turkey align more explicitly with resistance actors clashes with Turkey's self-conception as a pragmatic regional power capable of engaging multiple sides. This tension illustrates how incompatible role prescriptions can constrain role performance and generate diplomatic friction, even among states that share rhetorical opposition to Israeli policies.

To clarify the operationalization of role theory and guide the empirical analysis, Table 1 summarizes the key roles examined in this study, their corresponding national role conceptions and the main foreign policy actions undertaken by Turkey following the October 7th attacks.

Conclusion

This study examined Turkey's post-October 7 foreign policy through the lens of role theory, focusing on how Ankara navigated competing role conceptions as mediator, regional leader and protector of Palestinian interests within a rapidly polarized regional environment. The analysis demonstrates that Turkey's behavior was not driven by abrupt strategic realignment but by a sustained attempt to reconcile overlapping and, at times, contradictory roles. At the level of National Role Conceptions (NRCs), Turkey initially articulated a mediator identity grounded in diplomatic engagement, humanitarian initiatives and de-escalatory rhetoric. However, its actual role performance – observable through policy actions and diplomatic behavior – revealed increasing divergence from this conception as the conflict intensified.

Table 1. The key roles

Role	National role conception (NRC)	Role performance	Role prescription
Mediator	Turkey as a pragmatic diplomatic actor capable of engaging conflicting parties and facilitating dialogue	Shuttle diplomacy with regional actors; hosting Hamas representatives; engagement with Qatar and Egypt on ceasefire efforts; humanitarian diplomacy	Limited recognition by Israel and Western actors due to concerns over impartiality; partial acceptance by Hamas and some regional actors, but insufficient to enable effective mediation
Regional leader	Turkey as a central regional power with moral authority and political influence in Middle Eastern crises	Strong rhetorical condemnation of Israeli actions; leadership discourse on Gaza; positioning Turkey as a voice for regional public opinion	Positive resonance among regional publics and some Middle Eastern actors; skepticism from rival regional powers and limited acknowledgment by global actors of Turkey's leadership claim
Protector of Palestinians	Turkey as a normative actor defending Palestinian rights and humanitarian principles	Public advocacy for Gaza; humanitarian aid delivery; suspension of high-level political engagement with Israel	Strong validation by domestic audiences and Palestinian actors; limited endorsement by Western governments, which prioritized de-escalation and humanitarian access over normative alignment
Strategic balancer	Turkey as an autonomous middle power avoiding full alignment with competing regional blocs	Maintaining economic ties with Israel; avoiding military escalation; distancing from the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" while sustaining dialogue	Conditional acceptance by Western actors; cautious regional recognition amid uncertainty over Turkey's strategic orientation
Guarantor (aspirational)	Turkey as a potential security guarantor in post-conflict arrangements	Proposals for international protection mechanisms; calls for multilateral guarantees for Gaza (limited role recognition)	Minimal recognition from key international actors; lack of institutional and great-power support constrained role realization

The findings further show that Turkey's foreign policy outcomes were significantly shaped by external role prescriptions and the limits of role recognition. While Ankara actively performed mediation and proposed aspirational roles such as a post-conflict guarantor, these initiatives were constrained by skepticism from Israel and Western actors, as well as by contested expectations from regional powers such as Iran. These dynamics produced selective cooperation rather than full alignment, particularly evident in Turkey's calibrated approach toward Israel, where economic interdependence functioned as a structural constraint on coercive role performance. Rather than resolving role conflict, Turkey managed it through strategic ambiguity, allowing confrontational rhetoric and continued material engagement to coexist while preserving diplomatic flexibility. This divergence between articulated NRCs and observable role performance underscores the analytical value of role theory in distinguishing between aspirational identity claims and materially constrained foreign policy behavior.

Last but not least, this study contributes to role theory by illustrating how middle powers manage role conflict under conditions of high regional polarization and limited role recognition. The Turkish case demonstrates that role conflict does not necessarily lead to role abandonment or foreign policy paralysis; instead, it can generate strategies of strategic ambiguity and differentiated role performance. By emphasizing the interaction between

self-ascribed roles, external prescriptions and material constraints, the analysis advances understanding of how role dynamics operate during acute regional crises. Future research could build on these findings through comparative analysis of other middle powers facing similar role tensions, thereby further refining role theory's explanatory reach in contemporary conflict settings.

Prospectively, the sustainability of Turkey's regional posture will depend on evolving international and regional dynamics. One possible trajectory is a prolonged stalemate in Gaza, which may further entrench regional polarization, reduce the effectiveness of mediation-oriented roles and push Turkey toward a more normative and rhetorical leadership posture. A second scenario involves a transition to a post-conflict reconstruction phase, which could create opportunities for Ankara to advance its proposed guarantor role, particularly within a multilateral framework that accommodates broader regional participation. A third scenario entails a wider regional escalation involving additional state or non-state actors, which could constrain Turkey's strategic flexibility and compel it to recalibrate its role from mediator to a more security-oriented or alliance-driven posture. Taken together, these scenarios suggest that Turkey's future role performance will remain contingent on external structural developments as well as its capacity to reconcile competing role conceptions under conditions of uncertainty.

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