A COMPARISON BETWEEN TÜRKİYE'S NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTION AND ROLE PERFORMANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS (2011-2024)

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the alignment between Türkiye's national role conception and its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between 2011 and 2024. Based on Holsti's role theory, it examines how Türkiye's self-defined foreign policy identity was translated into institutional, legal, and foreign policy practices. Methodologically, the study applies a qualitative content analysis of 77 speeches delivered by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, supported by empirical data from national legislation, international reports, and field-based findings of civil society organizations. Five key national role conceptions (Defender of the Faith, Regional Protector, Active Independent, Revisionist, and Developer) are identified and analyzed across three periods. The findings show that Türkiye's national role conception shifted dynamically in response to domestic political shifts, regional conflicts, and global refugee governance. While the first period (March 2011–July 2016) reflects a moderate alignment rooted in moral responsibility and humanitarian rhetoric, the second period (July 2016–March 2020) shows a high degree of alignment with securitized and independent policy actions. Finally, the third period (March 2020–

December 2024) presents a low alignment, characterized by the simultaneous pursuit of humanitarian actions abroad and more restrictive migration policies at home. The study concludes that Türkiye's engagement with the Syrian refugee crisis cannot be understood only through humanitarian or geopolitical lenses, but rather through an adaptive foreign policy identity navigating between normative ambitions and strategic necessities.

Keywords: National Role Conception, Role Performance, Türkiye, Foreign Policy Analysis, Syrian Refugees

ÖZ

SURİYE MÜLTECİ KRİZİ BAĞLAMINDA TÜRKİYE'NİN ULUSAL ROL ANLAYIŞI VE ROL PERFORMANSI ARASINDA BİR KARŞILAŞTIRMA (2011-2024)

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Bu tez, 2011–2024 yılları arasında Suriye mülteci krizi bağlamında Türkiye'nin ulusal rol anlayışı ile bu anlayışa uygun olarak sergilediği rol performansı arasındaki uyumu incelemektedir. Holsti'nin rol kuramından hareketle, Türkiye'nin uluslararası kimliğini nasıl tanımladığı ve bu kimliğin siyasi söylem aracılığıyla nasıl inşa edildiğini ve bu söylemin hukuki, kurumsal ve dış politika düzeyinde nasıl hayata geçirildiği analiz edilmektedir. Çalışmada, Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tarafından yapılan 77 konuşma nitel içerik analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiş; bu veriler, ulusal mevzuat, uluslararası raporlar ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarının saha temelli gözlemleriyle desteklenmiştir. Tez kapsamında beş temel ulusal rol anlayışı tanımlanmıştır (İnanç Savunucusu, Bölgesel Koruyucu, Aktif Bağımsız, Revizyonist ve Kalkınmacı) ve bu roller üç döneme ayrılarak analiz edilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, Türkiye'nin rol anlayışının iç siyasi dönüşümler, bölgesel çatışmalar ve küresel mülteci yönetişimi karşısında dinamik biçimde evrildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Birinci dönem (Mart 2011–Temmuz 2016), insani sorumluluk ve ahlaki söylem bağlamında sınırlı kalan ama anlamlı bir uyum sergilemektedir. İkinci dönem

(Temmuz 2016–Mart 2020), güvenlik merkezli ve bağımsız politika uygulamalarıyla yüksek düzeyde bir uyuma işaret etmektedir. Üçüncü dönem (Mart 2020–Aralık 2024) ise dış politikada insani söylemlerin devam ettiği, ancak iç politikada daha kısıtlayıcı göç politikalarının uygulandığı bir tabloyu yansıtmaktadır. Tezin genel sonucu, Türkiye'nin Suriye mülteci krizine yaklaşımının yalnızca insani ya da jeopolitik perspektiflerle açıklanamayacağı; aksine, normatif hedeflerle stratejik zorunluluklar arasında denge kurmaya çalışan uyarlanabilir bir dış politika kimliğiyle anlaşılabileceğidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulusal Rol Anlayışı, Rol Performansı, Türkiye, Dış Politika Analizi, Suriyeli Mülteciler

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War, which started in 2011, has led to one of the most significant humanitarian crises of the 21st century and created a massive refugee influx into neighboring countries. Among these, Türkiye emerged as a primary host state, receiving the largest number of Syrian refugees and playing a central role in regional and international responses to the crisis. This thesis explores how Türkiye has framed and enacted its national role conception from 2011 to 2024. To address this question, the introduction chapter starts with outlining the background of the research, which includes the Syrian Civil War and Türkiye's evolving approach to it. Later on, the chapter continues with the research question of the thesis, its purpose, and the significance of the study, concepts, the framework of analysis, and the overall thesis plan. In doing so, it lays the foundation by explaining how the Syrian Civil War led to a mass refugee flow and how Türkiye, being one of the most affected countries, has framed its national role both domestically and regionally in response. Therefore, it examines how Türkiye's national role conception has shaped its policies and practices toward the Syrian refugee population.

1.1. Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, the protests against the Syrian regime began after the arrest of fifteen children in the southwest town of Dara'a for writing this sentence on a wall: *"Ash-sha'b yourid isqat al-nithaam"* ("The people want the fall of the regime.") The protests soon spread to other cities, and Syrian people demanded justice from President Bashar al-Assad's regime in a wave of peaceful protests. The demonstrations were part of a larger wave of unrest known as the Arab Uprisings, which emerged in the early 2010s across the Middle East. The uprisings were driven by anger over rising authoritarian

governance, corruption, economic recession, unemployment, and lack of political and social freedoms. The success of revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, combined with the mobilizing power of a digitally engaged youth, encouraged citizens throughout the region to demand political transformation, transparency, and accountability. In Syria, the Assad regime responded to the demonstrations with widespread and increasingly violent force; however, it became unsuccessful in putting an end to the growing rebellion. On the contrary, the oppressive nature of the regime contributed to the growth of the protests and their eventual militarization (Hof & Simon, 2013). Over time, the conflict transformed into a multifaceted civil war that involved various domestic and international actors, ranging from secular opposition groups to religious military forces.

The crisis entered its fourteenth year in March 2024 with devastating and deepening humanitarian consequences. According to the 2024 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), over 16.7 million people needed humanitarian assistance in Syria. This number corresponds to the highest number of citizens in need since the beginning of the war. It also highlights the long-lasting nature of the conflict and the gradual breakdown of certain essential public services, physical infrastructure, and economic means of survival. The country also has almost 7.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and 6.2 million refugees and asylum seekers, which is considered one of the largest displacement crises in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, 2024). Additionally, the 2024 HNO report indicates that many essential services have failed, and Syria's economic and humanitarian indicators are still worsening. Syrian families that have been residing in Lebanon have also been displaced from Lebanon as a result of the conflicts in the region, and the effects of the February 2023 earthquakes have made matters much worse, compounding the existing needs of Syria (UNHCR, 2024). The combination of the challenges, ongoing war, displacement, economic collapse, and natural disaster has created a situation where millions of people face constant insecurity, poverty, and lack of protection.

An offensive came after months of increasing tensions and marked an important turning point in the Syrian conflict. The rebels established control over key cities, including Aleppo, Hama, and Homs, before capturing Damascus. Later, on December

7, they entered Damascus with limited resistance since the regime's military and political structure had already begun to fall apart. Finally, on 8 December 2024, al-Assad's regime collapsed following an immediate offensive by the opposition forces primarily led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). After this defeat, Assad fled the capital and was later granted asylum in Russia. The fall of the regime marked the end of over 60 years of Ba'athist rule under the Assad dynasty, and it opened a new and uncertain phase in Syria's political future. In the aftermath, HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa enacted de facto leadership, establishing a caretaker government in Damascus (Al Jazeera, 2024). Even though HTS has a controversial background, the new government promised to bring political change. On 13 March 2025, a temporary constitution was announced to be in effect for five years. This document includes promises to protect freedom of speech and the press, expand women's rights in social, political, and economic life, and find a balance between civil freedoms and national security (Al Jazeera, 2025). Although the future of this new administration is still uncertain, these first steps represent a clear break from the practices of the Assad regime. The situation is being closely followed by international actors, regional governments, and aid organizations as Syria enters a new and sensitive phase in its history.

1.2. Türkiye's Approach to the Syrian Civil War

Ever since the beginning of the war, Türkiye has adopted an anti-Assad stance, mostly shaped by its national security and humanitarian concerns, and regional strategic interests. One of the important factors that led to this position has been the growing influence of the People's Defense Units (YPG), which is a Kurdish-dominated organization that Türkiye defines as a terrorist organization. In this context, even though the YPG has mainly fought against the militant organization Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), its increasing control in northern Syria was perceived by Türkiye as being tolerated or even indirectly supported by the Assad regime. Thus, Türkiye's anti-YPG stance has been closely linked with its anti-Assad position. The perceived threat posed by the YPG's potential expansion along Türkiye's southern border and the threat against the Turkmen populations in Syria have also reinforced this perception. According to Turkish officials, the YPG's expansion posed a direct security threat to Türkiye's national interests, territorial integrity, and its strategy of

being a determining actor in the region (BBC News Türkçe, 2016). Nevertheless, Türkiye's involvement in the conflict cannot be explained only through the security concerns. From the Turkish government's perspective, the Syrian conflict also had significant humanitarian and ideological dimensions. Türkiye's ruling political elite viewed the Assad regime as a symbol of authoritarian repression, which is incompatible with its vision of regional order and democratic transformation in the Middle East. Especially in the early years of the conflict, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,* AKP) aimed to position Türkiye as the leading voice for democratic change in the region. Consequently, the Turkish government played an active and direct role, and as a neighbor with a 911-kilometer-long land border, it became one of the countries most affected by the civil war.

During the early years of the conflict, Türkiye applied a generous open-door policy and became host to the largest community of Syrians displaced by the conflict throughout the years. Initially, the number of refugees entering Türkiye was smaller. The first influx started in March 2011, and by July 2011, almost 15,000 Syrians were residing in tent cities in Hatay Province. The camps that Syrians initially sheltered in were funded and managed by the Turkish authorities and non-governmental actors. However, after the failure of ceasefire negotiations in 2012, the inflow of Syrians gained momentum and continued to rise until the end of the war (Kirişçi, 2014). Later on, after the inefficient capacity of the camps and the entry barriers to the illegal arrivals, most Syrians started to take shelter in different towns and cities of Türkiye. The Turkish government also provided additional humanitarian assistance to the camps for internally displaced people in need in Syria (İçduygu, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, Türkiye's initial response to the refugee flow was welcoming. It was thought that the crisis would end soon, and Syrians were referred to as "guests" and given "temporary sheltering status." (Bölük & Erdem, 2016) Therefore, the authorities mostly focused on providing aid and assistance to the camps and disregarded any possibility of a long-term stay. Nevertheless, as the number of Syrians increased over time, the Turkish government needed to create a legal grounding for the Syrian refugees. When it comes to the legal framework for Turkish migration policy, it is important to note that Türkiye is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention

and its 1967 Protocol with a geographical limitation. This restriction enables Türkiye to assume entire responsibility for refugees who originate from Europe and to refuse to acknowledge those who originate from other countries as refugees. In addition, there was no Turkish legislation until the 1994 Asylum Regulation. This regulation aimed to adopt the UNHCR's refugee criteria; however, it was quite insufficient. Since defining the concept of refugee has also created a dispute in dealing with the enormous refugee flow, it was very significant that in April 2014, the Turkish Parliament enforced the new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), and later in October of the same year, the Temporary Protection (TP) Regulation came into effect. The LFIP and TP Regulation widened the previous Turkish 1994 Asylum Regulation and created a more comprehensive and effective approach to providing protection and humanitarian assistance (Bölük & Erdem, 2016). The TP Regulation outlined the rights, obligations, and procedures concerning individuals under temporary protection in Türkiye, including Syrians, stateless persons, and Palestinians from Syria (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, PMM, n.d.). This development marked a breakthrough in Turkish migration policy: with the new law and regulation, the Syrians were provided protection against deportation and subjected to temporary protection of certain rights, including access to emergency care, shelter, clean water, housing, the labor market, and social security (Bölük & Erdem, 2016, p. 118; İçduygu, 2015, pp. 8-9). With the enactment of LFIP and TP Regulation, the organizational framework for migration management in Türkiye was developed as well. On the national level, the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), and on the provincial level, the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMMs) and Removal Centers and Coordination Units were established. In general terms, affiliated with the Ministry of Interior, the PMM was created to carry out the work and procedures concerning foreigners' entry and stay in Türkiye, their departure from Türkiye and deportation, international protection, temporary protection, and the protection of human trafficking victims. It also ensures coordination between institutions and organizations involved in these matters (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, PMM, n.d.).

In spite of these developments, the Turkish government suspended its open-border policy in 2016 and adopted a more aggressive approach towards this issue, mostly

driven by both its domestic politics and regional objectives, including preventing ISIS from bombing border cities in Türkiye, such as Kilis and Gaziantep (Bilgin, 2018), and the YPG from uniting the YPG-held lands in the east and the west of the Euphrates River (Yavuz, 2016). As an initial effort, in August 2016, Operation Euphrates Shield was started and lasted until March 2017. The operation aimed to remove the forces of the Islamic State and to take control of the strip between the Euphrates River and Afrin, a border city across Hatay. Subsequently, Operation Olive Branch, from January to March 2018, helped end YPG control of the rural areas in the north of Afrin and eventually also aimed to find a potential destination for relocating the Syrian refugees. Later on, Operation Peace Spring took place in October 2019, which became an important operation not only to prevent any possibility of the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity but also to find another relocation destination for the Syrians. Finally, from February to March 2020, within the framework of Operation Spring Shield, a series of Turkish drone strikes halted the Syrian regime's advances in the opposition's last stronghold, Idlib, and it operated to prevent an influx of refugees into Türkiye (Siccardi, 2021, pp. 4-6) These cross-border military operations were of such significance that the government conditioned the return of the Syrian people to their homes on these operations. The reason behind the shift in Turkish foreign policy from a traditional understanding of no interference to revitalizing military operations also lies within the aim of returning the Syrians to their homes.

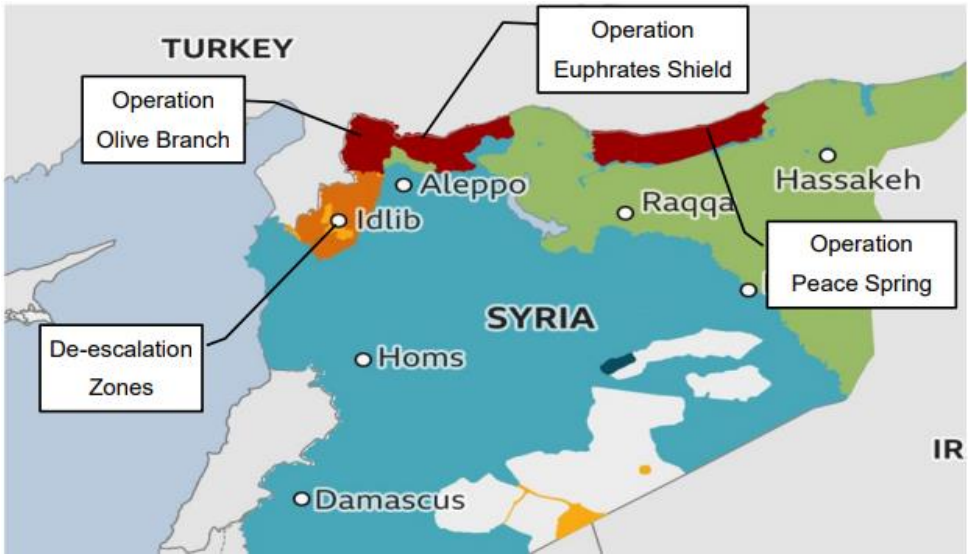


Figure 1. Geographical illustration of Türkiye's cross-border military operations in northern Syria. *Reprinted from Figure 6 in Tunca & Ferah (2022, p. 137).*

To this day, Türkiye continues to host one of the largest Syrian refugee populations in the world. According to UNHCR, as of mid-2024, the number of Syrians under temporary protection is 3.1 million, and about half of them have lived for the majority of their lives in Türkiye, where almost 800,000 were born as well (UNHCR Türkiye, 2024). While the presence of millions of Syrians in Türkiye has increasingly shaped domestic debates and policy priorities, recent political changes in Syria have added a new dimension to the question of return. In the aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024, the political and humanitarian situation regarding the Syrian refugee issue in Türkiye has entered a new phase. The collapse of the Assad regime and the formation of a caretaker government in Damascus under HTS have brought both uncertainty and new possibilities for regional actors. Among these actors, Türkiye occupies a particularly important position due to its long-standing military presence in northwestern Syria and its pragmatic diplomatic engagement with HTS. The Turkish government has established several military settlements throughout the region to prevent the fall of Idlib and possible waves of irregular migration toward Türkiye. These settlements allowed the government to protect its border security objectives and also provided leverage to maintain a degree of stability in the region. From the government's perspective, this securitization could advance the encouragement of the voluntary return of Syrian refugees to their country of origin. Nevertheless, the social and economic integration of Syrians over the past years also makes the extensive return more complex. Therefore, the path to return remains uncertain since questions about the safety, stability, and legitimacy of the new Syrian administration continue.

1.3. Research Question, Concepts, and the Framework of Analysis

The Syrian refugee crisis has created one of the most significant humanitarian and political challenges of the 21st century, particularly for neighboring countries like Türkiye. As millions of Syrians continue to seek refuge and protection, evaluating how these affected states frame their responsibilities is not only a matter of academic interest but also a pressing ethical concern. In this context, understanding how Türkiye perceives and performs its national role is essential to understanding the dynamics of its migration policy. While there is a growing body of literature on Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, few studies have critically analyzed the alignment between

its national role conception and role performance as regards the mass migration flow from Syria to Türkiye because of the civil war. This thesis addresses this gap by asking the question, “To what extent does Türkiye’s national role conception align with its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between 2011 and 2024?”

Before explaining the core theoretical concepts such as national role conception and role performance, it is important to clarify the usage of the term “refugee” throughout this thesis. While various terms such as “refugee,” “migrant,” “asylum seeker,” and “displaced persons” are often used interchangeably in media and public discourse, they carry distinct legal and political meanings. According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence and has a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. In contrast, migrants are generally considered individuals who move voluntarily, primarily for economic reasons. This thesis uses the term refugee deliberately, as the Syrian population that fled to Türkiye after 2011 did so primarily due to armed conflict and state persecution, which aligns with the criteria of refugee status. Although Türkiye does not grant formal refugee status to Syrians due to its geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention, it refers to them under the term “temporary protection beneficiaries.” However, for the sake of conceptual clarity and consistency with international academic literature, the term refugee will be used throughout this study.

With the core terminology now defined, it is important to turn to the theoretical framework. In order to answer the research question properly, understanding the meaning of “role” helps clarify what a national role conception is, and then, to address the second part of the question, it is necessary to define the concept of “role performance.” To begin with, according to Aras and Gorener (2010), a role is a thorough pattern of behavior and attitudes that serves as a coping mechanism for recurring circumstances. In other words, a role helps actors make sense of complex and repetitive situations by offering a set of behavioral guidelines. It reflects how an actor understands its own position, what is expected from it, and how it should act in a given context. It combines the actor's knowledge of appropriate behavior, societal norms, and the specific situation in which the role is performed. The best way to

conceptualize roles is as a roadmap that performers use to navigate a complicated world and impose some degree of order on their environments. Building on this understanding, the concept of "national role conception" emerges when the notion of role is applied to the behavior and identity of states in international politics. In his famous article, which became an introduction to the role theory of foreign policy analysis, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," Holsti defines a national role conception as the policymakers' own definitions of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions that their state should perform in the international system (1970, pp. 245-246). It is their "image" of how their state should be oriented or used in external relations. In addition, Jacques Hymans also claims that "we must drop down the level of national identity as a social fact and instead look at what the leader has adopted as his or her specific interpretation, or 'conception,' of the national identity." (Hymans, 2006, as cited in Aras & Görener, 2010, p. 76). Therefore, national role conceptions can be understood as "the core of a grand policy vision through which policymakers explain the world around them and their state's existence therein" (Aras & Görener, 2010, p. 74).

Holsti (1970) identifies 17 foreign policy roles by conducting a content analysis of statements made by the leaders of all countries between January 1965 and December 1967. He contends that these positions can be used to analyze every state actor in international politics and that defining them enables political scientists to project the foreign policy of a particular actor into the future. Despite Holsti identifying at least 17 roles, this thesis uses only a few of them. These roles will be explained in more detail in Chapter II, and they are as follows: Defender of the Faith role, Active Independent role, Regional Protector role, and Developer role. Additionally, another role from Randall Schweller's work is included: the Revisionist role, which is also explained in detail in the following chapter. This selection of roles is based on the reason that when considering the period between 2011 and 2024, certain roles became more dominant than others. Throughout these years, Türkiye's foreign policy behavior was significantly shaped by the Syrian conflict, large-scale refugee movements, and shifting regional alliances. In this context, certain roles gained more visibility and explanatory power than others. This dominance is primarily due to the official government policies aimed at securitizing the mass flow and regarding this issue as a

concern for national security and sovereignty during this timeframe. Thus, the chosen roles reflect identifiable patterns in Türkiye's foreign policy behavior and also align with Holsti's framework. They offer a structured lens through which to assess Türkiye's engagement with the Syrian crisis, as well as the broader evolution of its role conceptions shaped by domestic changes, leadership rhetoric, and external pressures.

While national role conceptions reflect how policymakers imagine their state's defined role in the international system, these ideas must be examined alongside how they are translated into performance. The concept of role performance plays a crucial role in understanding the actions and behaviors of states in the international arena. Holsti (1970, p. 245) defines role performance as the "general foreign policy behavior of governments." This broad definition describes governments' national role performance as their overall foreign policy conduct, and also this performance includes the patterns of attitudes, choices, reactions, actions, and commitments a state makes toward other actors on the global stage. Therefore, Holsti's concept goes beyond mere actions. These elements of national role conception create a comprehensive understanding of how a state enacts its self-perceived role within the international system. With this insight, in terms of Türkiye's role performance toward the Syrian refugee crisis, it is not only about the policies it implements but also about the way these practices demonstrate the state's perception of its identity, interests, and responsibilities in this context. In other words, while Türkiye is framing its role in terms of the Syrian refugees based on practical measures, it also transfers its broader values, ethical obligations, and geopolitical strategies toward these measures.

In this thesis, a comparative assessment of institutional practices and policy implementation is conducted, accompanied by a qualitative content analysis of the public speeches of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Firstly, to address the initial sub-question, "What was Erdoğan's approach towards Syrian refugees in Türkiye between 2011 and 2024?" a content analysis of his speeches has been conducted. For reliability purposes, the speeches were collected from the series published by the Department of Corporate Communications of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, as well as the official website of the Presidency. Since Erdoğan made hundreds of speeches

during the time period in question, a selection was necessary. The main criterion for choosing which speeches to include was whether or not they mentioned Syria in any way. Only the speeches that contained at least one reference to Syria were included in the analysis.

In addition, since the speeches were both in English and Turkish, when necessary, unofficial translations of them were made by the author. To carry out this part of the research, 77 selected speeches delivered by President Erdoğan were chosen and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software "MAXQDA." During the analysis, the unit of the coding was sentences and as the result of the coding process, a total of 2,599 sentences were coded. Following the coding process, two further sub-questions were developed: "How did Erdoğan's approach change throughout the years?" and "What were the promises made by the government?" To have a clearer and more detailed understanding of President Erdoğan's role conception of Türkiye in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis, the years between 2011 and 2024 have been divided into three periods. The coding process also guided the creation of this timeline, which is explained in detail below.

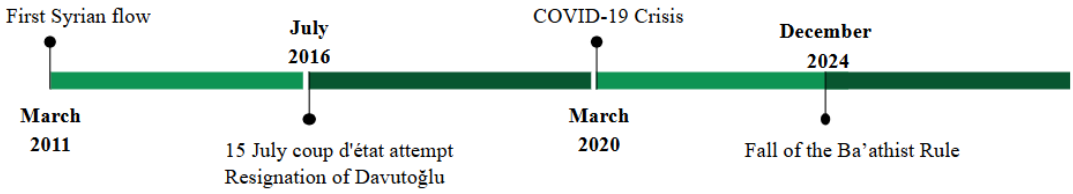


Figure 2. Timeline of Key Turning Points Structuring the Analytical Framework of the Thesis (2011–2024). *Designed by the author.*

The first period starts in March 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the first flow of refugees to Türkiye from Syria, and it ends in July 2016, with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's resignation and the 15th July coup attempt in the aftermath. Davutoglu's resignation is important because he adopted a foreign policy approach that aimed to position Türkiye as a central global and regional actor by leveraging its Ottoman heritage and historical, cultural, and geographical strengths. He is known as "the intellectual architect" of the AKP's foreign policy (Aras & Görener, p. 81) as well as the architect of the open-door policy. Therefore, his

resignation resulted in a significant shift in Türkiye's foreign policy approach, which became more pragmatic, securitized, and focused on national interests. On top of that, with the attempted coup on July 15, military operations became central to both Türkiye's domestic and foreign strategies, and a pervasive prioritization of the fight against terrorism began. Soon after the coup attempt, on August 24, Türkiye launched its first cross-border operation in northern Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield.

The second period begins with the post-Davutoğlu period in foreign policy-making and the coup attempt and ends with the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The reason behind the suggested breakpoint is the economic fluctuations experienced during the pandemic and the resulting increase in public resentment toward refugees. While Turkish people were also suffering from the economic crisis and unemployment, Syrians became scapegoats since they constituted a very large portion of the cheap labor, replacing the Turkish citizens for whom the employers had to pay more. It was no surprise that, in the subsequent period, anti-refugee rhetoric increased with the establishment of the very first Turkish single-issue political party: the Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi,* ZP*).* ZP was established on 26 August 2021 as a far-right, ultranationalist, and anti-immigrant political party, founded by Ümit Özdağ, as a continuation of a nationalistic youth movement, "Star and Crescent Movement" *(Ayyıldız Hareketi).* In its founding manifesto, ZP promises "to work tirelessly until the last Syrian refugee and the last Afghan returns to their country" and claims that

> An overwhelming majority of the Turkish nation, almost 90 percent, wants Syrians to return to Syria, Afghans to Afghanistan, Iraqis to Iraq, and Iranians to Iran. The Turkish nation is aware that our country is being covertly invaded. The Turkish Nation opens its doors to the weak, the helpless, and those in need of help, but will not allow its country to be invaded. The Turkish nation says that 'Türkiye belongs to the Turks,' and no political party in politics has represented the will of our nation in this direction until today. From today on, the will of the Turkish Nation is represented in Turkish politics.[1] (Zafer Partisi, 2021)

The party perceives the migration flow as an urgent national security issue. It even exaggerates the statistics by indicating almost 90 percent of the Turkish people want

[1] The unofficial translation of this part is made by the author.

the foreigners to go, calls this problem an “invasion,” and aims to be the sole political party in the parliament that protects the territories of Türkiye.

Finally, the third period begins with the COVID-19 pandemic and continues until the fall of the Ba’athist rule in December 2024. It was quite significant since the relations with Türkiye and Syria entered a new political period with the fall of Assad, and this transition to a new government in Syria was followed by the voluntary return of the Syrian people to their country of origin and emerged as a possibility for the end of the refugee crisis.

To fulfill the requirements of role performance analysis within the theoretical framework of this study, an additional sub-question is introduced: “What kind of policies have been implemented?” This sub-question is critical for bridging the gap between discourse-level role conceptions and state behavior. Accordingly, a multidimensional comparison is conducted by several sources, including national legislation and policy documents (such as the LFIP and the TP Regulation), statistical data published by the Ministry of Interior’s PMM, as well as field-based observations and reports issued by Turkish civil society organizations, international institutions (e.g., UNHCR, World Bank), and non-governmental stakeholders. This empirical analysis not only allows for a systematic evaluation of Türkiye’s migration governance practices across different periods but also provides insight into the degree of consistency between Türkiye’s projected national role conceptions and the policies that were implemented. It also helps determine whether Türkiye’s foreign policy approach regarding the Syrian refugee crisis has been reflected in institutional action or remained rhetorical. At this point, it is important to understand why Türkiye’s national role conceptions are connected to the practices and policies directed at the Syrian people who migrated to Türkiye following the onset of the Syrian crisis.

1.4. Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into four chapters, each contributing to a detailed analysis of the alignment between Türkiye’s national role conceptions and its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis from 2011 to 2024. The research combines

content analysis and empirical policy evaluation to examine how Türkiye perceives its role and how that perception was translated into policies and practices.

The first chapter introduced the background of the Syrian Civil War and Türkiye's evolving approach toward the conflict. It outlined the political and humanitarian consequences of the war, the scale of displacement it caused, and how Türkiye, as a neighboring country and a central actor, became host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world. The chapter also presented the central research question: "To what extent does Türkiye's national role conception align with its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between 2011 and 2024?" It then defined the key concepts of national role conception and role performance through Holsti's framework and explained the rationality behind dividing the timeline into three periods based on key political and institutional turning points, which are March 2011-July 2016, July 2016-March 2020, and March 2020-December 2024. Furthermore, it described the methodological approach that combines qualitative content analysis of political discourse with institutional and legal document analysis.

The second chapter investigates Türkiye's national role conceptions as expressed in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political rhetoric. To achieve this, by using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, 77 of Erdoğan's speeches that were primarily relevant to the Syrian Civil War and Syrians in Türkiye were coded with the chosen roles, which are Defender of the Faith, Revisionist, Regional Protector, Active Independent, and Developer. At the end of the coding, using these five roles, a total of 2599 sentences were coded. These roles are analyzed across the three periods to determine shifts in Türkiye's self-perception and positioning in relation to the refugee crisis. The chapter frames these shifts within domestic developments such as the resignation of Prime Minister Davutoğlu, the 2016 coup attempt, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, and rising nationalist sentiment. It also links Türkiye's national role conception to broader foreign policy transformations, including military interventions in Syria, migration diplomacy, and criticisms of the international system.

The third chapter analyzes Türkiye's role performance by examining whether and how the state's policies and practices reflect the national role conceptions described in Chapter II. This part of the analysis is based on a broad variety of primary sources, including Turkish migration laws (such as the LFIP and TP Regulation), implementation data from the Ministry of Interior, and reports by international organizations such as UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. It also includes field-based reports from domestic civil society organizations such as the Research Centre on Asylum and Migration (*İltica ve Göç Araştırmaları Merkezi*, IGAM), the Association for Social Development and Aid Mobilization (*Sosyal Gelişim ve Dayanışma Derneği*, SGDD-ASAM), and the Refugee Council of Turkey. By comparing rhetorical commitments with enacted policies, such as legal reforms, labor market integration efforts, humanitarian assistance, cross-border operations, and voluntary return programs, the chapter identifies both points of consistency and contradictions between Türkiye's role conception and its migration governance.

In the final chapter, the key findings are brought together from both the discursive and empirical analyses to evaluate the degree of alignment between Türkiye's national role conception and its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between the years 2011 and 2024. This chapter offers a complete summary of how Türkiye's national role conceptions have evolved over time and to what extent the shifts correspond with the institutional practices. The chapter also highlights the complexities and contradictions in Türkiye's foreign policy identity and its migration governance. In addition to the findings, the chapter provides the contemporary developments that have the potential to create a shift in Türkiye's role in the region. Moreover, it analyzes the possibilities for the voluntary return of the Syrians in the event of the political transition in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime. The chapter also examines whether the potential normalization of relations between Türkiye and the post-Assad Syrian administration could influence Türkiye's border policies and regional strategies. In this context, the conclusion chapter both covers the historical analysis and opens a new discussion for future reflections on Türkiye's engagement with the Syrian refugee crisis.

CHAPTER 2

ANALYZING THE NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS OF TÜRKİYE IN THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

The concept of national role conception is vital in understanding how states frame their policies, obligations, and expectations within the international system. Holsti (1970) suggests that leaders tend to construct specific national role conceptions for their countries that eventually influence their foreign policy-making. These roles are derived from certain ideational and historical positions that guide the states' way of perceiving themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. In terms of the Syrian Civil War and the following refugee crisis, Türkiye has presented a dynamic foreign policy-making that has undergone significant transformations in response to both domestic and regional political developments. The complex nature of the civil war has compelled Türkiye to utilize its political leadership to clearly articulate Türkiye's moral, geopolitical, and strategic obligations and assess its institutional capabilities. As the leader of the ruling party of Türkiye for more than 20 years, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speeches provide a valuable guideline to understand these national role conceptions and make it possible to identify Türkiye's shifting self-perception.

This chapter investigates Türkiye's national role conceptions by applying role theory to Erdoğan's political rhetoric between 2011 and 2024. Across three critical periods, five dominant roles are identified and analyzed, which are Defender of the Faith, Regional Protector, Revisionist, Active Independent, and Developer. Using MAXQDA and qualitative content analysis, the chapter examines how these roles were invoked, justified, and contested in official discourse. The content analysis of President Erdoğan's speeches across three distinct periods reveals a clear transformation in Türkiye's national role conceptions throughout the Syrian refugee

crisis. In the analysis, 77 of Erdoğan's speeches are selected, and there are 2599 sentences coded in total. The goal is not only to identify role conceptions but also to analyze Türkiye's discourse and role conceptions vis-à-vis role performance, particularly concerning its management of the Syrian Civil War and the refugee crisis. In doing so, this chapter presents the frequency and dominance of these roles across time, offers a data-driven perspective on Türkiye's evolving narrative in the international arena, and provides a conceptual foundation for the empirical assessment in the next chapter, where Türkiye's role performance is evaluated against the claims given in this section.

2.1. Overview of Role Distribution Based on MAXQDA Output

Before exploring the discourse and behaviors of Türkiye's foreign policy during the Syrian conflict, this sub-chapter provides a visual overview of the national role conceptions identified in presidential speeches. Based on a systematic content analysis of 77 speeches delivered by President Erdoğan between March 2011 and December 2024, this section presents the distribution of role categories across three time periods. First of all, the total number of texts reviewed and the total number of senteces coded for each period are illustrated in order to make a clearer picture of the frequency of the Syria-related speeches throughout the years. Furthermore, the pie charts below illustrate the relative frequency and salience of each role for each period, which are Defender of the Faith, Regional Protector, Active Independent, Developer, and Revisionist. The related sentences selected from the speeches were coded based on these five roles, using the qualitative content analysis tool MAXQDA. These visualizations serve as an analytical roadmap for the following sub-chapters, offering a comparative lens through which the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy discourse can be better understood. As will be shown, shifts in dominant role conceptions closely align with changes in Türkiye's domestic priorities, regional ambitions, and responses to international developments. In the following sub-chapters, the roles for each period are explained in more detail.

Table 1. The total number of texts and the total number of sentences coded. *Author's own elaboration based on MAXQDA output.*

	First Period	Second Period	Third Period	TOTAL
Total Number of Texts	31	18	28	**77**
Total Number of Sentences Coded	963	964	672	**2599**

Table 1 presents the total number of texts that were reviewed during the coding process, and the total number of sentences coded for each period. It shows that even though the frequence of the reference to the Syrian Civil War and the refugee flow is different, the intensity of topic in the speeches varied. While the first and the second periods contain more references regarding the issue, the third period has relatively less. Additionally, during the third period, there were more texts that needs to be reviewed than the second period. However, second period has much more intensity than the third period with regards to its references about the crisis. Ultimately, the table shows that it does not matter how many times President Erdoğan mentions about the Syrian Civil War in different places or at different times. The intensity of the speeches is more important and valuable.

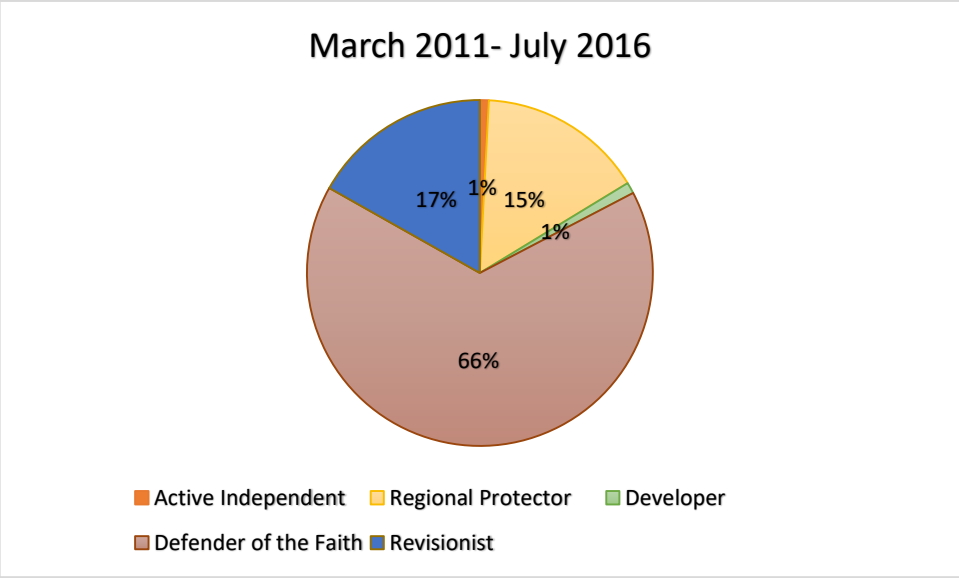


Figure 3. Percentage Breakdown of National Role Conceptions Identified in Erdoğan's Speeches during the First Period (March 2011–July 2016). *Author's own elaboration based on MAXQDA output.*

To begin with the first period, as seen in Figure 1, between March 2011 and July 2016, the most dominant role was Defender of the Faith (66%). It reflects a foreign policy discourse framed around moral responsibility and religious solidarity with the Syrian people in Türkiye. In other words, the government's discourse heavily reflected

solidarity-based perception grounded in shared religious identity and humanitarian principles. During this initial period, Türkiye also emphasized humanitarian diplomacy, Islamic brotherhood, and the moral duty to protect the oppressed people. Moreover, the notable presence of the Revisionist role (17%) in this period suggests an early expression of dissatisfaction with the international system, setting the foundation for Türkiye's later critical stance toward global actors. The Active Independent and Regional Protector roles also appear but in more limited scope, and it may signal Türkiye's gradual detachment from a strictly normative approach toward a more strategic one.

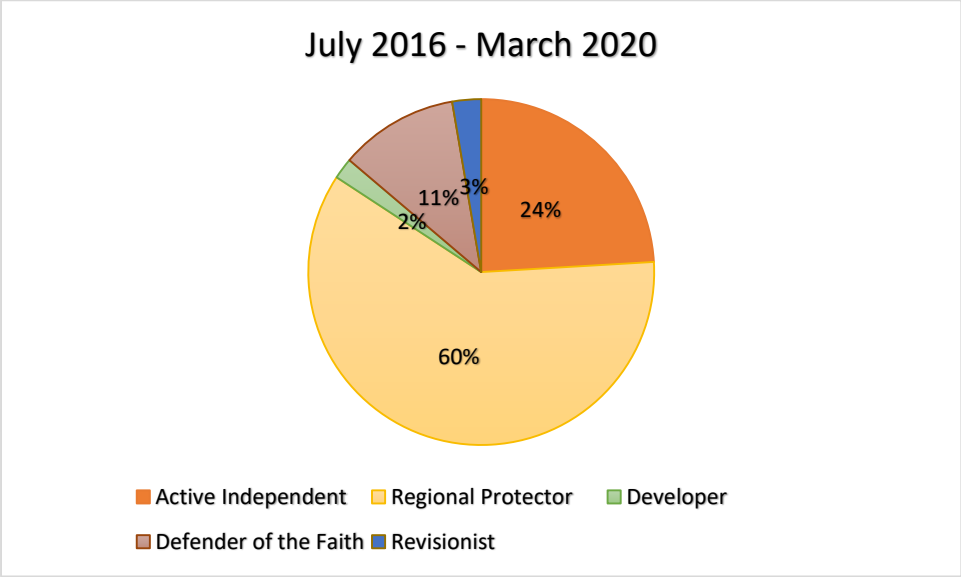


Figure 4. Percentage Breakdown of National Role Conceptions Identified in Erdoğan's Speeches during the Second Period (July 2016–March 2020). *Author's own elaboration based on MAXQDA output.*

Figure 2 presents the second period, and it shows that there is an important shift in Türkiye's national role conceptions covering the time period between July 2016 and March 2020. The Regional Protector role becomes dominant (60%), while Active Independent (24%) follows. This change reflects a securitization of the refugee crisis, escalated by the 2016 coup attempt and cross-border military operations in Syria. In addition, the portion of the Active Independent role increased as a response to deteriorating relations with the EU and the US due to these actors' position during and after the failed coup attempt, and Türkiye's desire to assert its independence vis-à-vis these actors. The rise of this role aligns with Türkiye's increasingly unilateral and

domestically legitimized foreign policy position. The Defender of the Faith role still remains visible but is less emphasized compared to the first period, and it points to a rhetorical shift away from idealist frameworks toward pragmatic regional strategy.

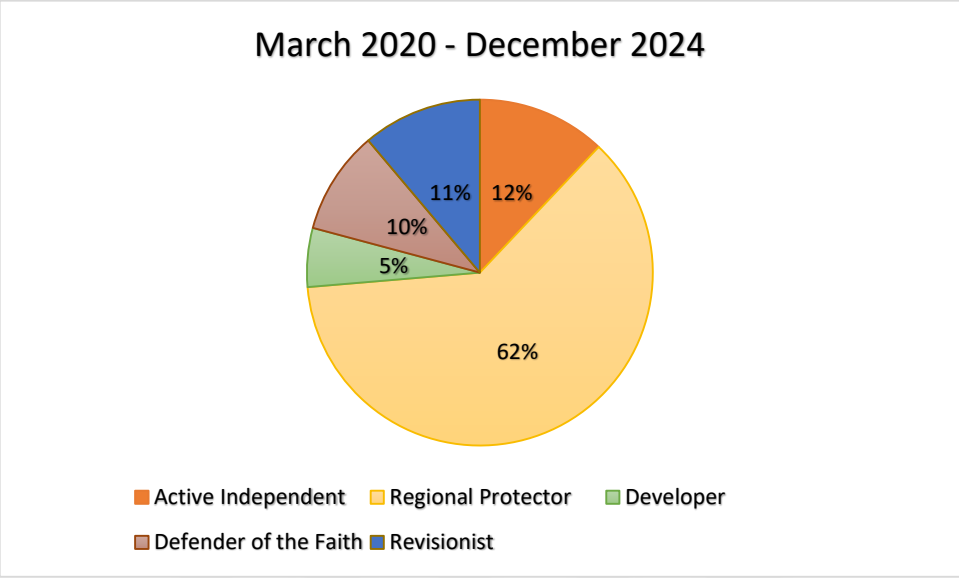


Figure 5. Percentage Breakdown of National Role Conceptions Identified in Erdoğan's Speeches during the Third Period (March 2020–December 2024). *Author's own elaboration based on MAXQDA output.*

Finally, the period from March 2020 to December 2024 maintains the Regional Protector as the most frequently assumed role (62%), confirming Türkiye's sustained emphasis on regional security and influence, as shown in Figure 3. Importantly, the Revisionist (11%) and Defender of the Faith (10%) roles experience a relative rebound, which may be attributed to Türkiye's renewed criticism of Western actors and its continued call for moral superiority, particularly in debates surrounding refugee return and humanitarian aid. The modest presence of the Developer role (5%) also suggests Türkiye's growing focus on post-conflict reconstruction, regional stabilization, and facilitating the voluntary return of refugees. Ultimately, these patterns indicate a gradual evolution from normatively driven roles to assertive, security-centered self-conceptions, with periodic reappearances of moral and system-challenging narratives. These results support the argument that Türkiye's foreign policy identity is both reactive and adaptive to shifting regional and international conditions.

The following sub-chapters examine each of the national roles in more depth across the three periods of the Syrian conflict. Here, the goal is to identify how Türkiye's national role conceptions were reflected in foreign policy actions and to understand why certain roles became more prominent during specific periods. In doing so, these sections explore how Türkiye's role preferences were shaped by the political, social, and security dynamics of each period. By linking discourse to domestic and regional developments, the analysis highlights how changing conditions influenced both the roles that were emphasized and the motivations behind them.

2.2. First Period: March 2011-July 2016

After the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, an important shift in Türkiye's foreign policy has been marked, especially toward its southern border. As the war grew more intense, Türkiye implemented an open-door policy, presented itself as a "Defender of the Faith," and highlighted its moral and historical obligations to offer safety and sanctuary to those fleeing from violence. Holsti (1970) defines the national role of the "Defender of the Faith" as governments' perceptions of their foreign policy agendas in a way that they adopt to safeguard certain value systems from attack, rather than their territories. States that adopt the Defender of the Faith national role conception also take responsibility for special obligations to secure ideological purity for other states.

The best way to understand this "value system" of Türkiye during this period is to analyze the foreign policy perception of Davutoğlu, also known as the "intellectual architect" of AKP's foreign policy (Aras & Görener, p. 81). He was in office between 2009 and 2014 as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and was the Prime Minister between 2014 and 2016. He formulated his perspective on Türkiye's past experiences, resources, and "historical depth, geographical positioning, and rich legacy in international affairs" (Davutoğlu, 2012). He constantly emphasized the importance of the flow of the history and taking a position accordingly. He believed that, otherwise, countries would drift away from their intended political trajectory with the pace of events in the contemporary world. Davutoğlu also highlighted the significance of certain norms, such as democracy, good governance, transparency, and the rule of law,

and claimed that Türkiye would eventually become the “firm defender of universal values.” (Davutoğlu, 2012, p. 3). While he was giving importance to extending Türkiye’s assistance to the people who demand justice and equality, he also claimed that there should be a balance between promoting such values and defending Türkiye’s national interests (Davutoğlu, 2012). Furthermore, being the “good neighbor” was one of the initial aims of the period, strongly desiring to have a “zero problems with neighbors” policy. (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 98) Davutoğlu (2012, p. 2) framed this policy as the strength of Turkish foreign policy, and he believed that Türkiye should reconnect with the Middle East since it shared a common history and was “poised to have a common destiny.” Additionally, Davutoğlu (2012, p. 2) argued, "We will not take steps that will alienate us from the hearts and minds of our region’s people for short-term political calculations.” The whole mentality that Davutoğlu provides is supporting the role of the Defender of the Faith, since it establishes a mindset of a total value system that includes democratic norms, an emphasis on historical legacy, and the special obligation from this historical legacy to protect the people in need in the region.

What is more, Davutoğlu used the term “humanitarian diplomacy” for the first time in Turkish foreign policy to describe it as the central theme. According to Meliha Altunışık (2023), Türkiye’s humanitarian diplomacy is twofold: on one hand, Türkiye adopts a similar perception to the traditional model of liberal peace and state-building donors; on the other hand, it differentiates itself from these traditional Western donors. It accuses the West of not caring enough or not caring at all and also not engaging with the beneficiaries on equal terms. This takes the issue to another point, which is Türkiye’s other dominant role during the period from the first flow of the Syrians in 2011 to the resignation of Davutoğlu in 2016: the Revisionist role. Nicholas Taylor (2007, p. 30) indicates that “Revisionism is often linked to a state's ‘satisfaction’ or ‘dissatisfaction’ with the international order.” Additionally, Steve Chan (2004, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 30) claims that a satisfied state is “one that accepts the existing ordering principles of the international system.” Whereas, as Randall Schweller (1998, p. 17) argues, a Revisionist state tends to “undermine the established order for the purpose of increasing their power and prestige in the system.” In light of these explanations, Türkiye can also be considered a “Revisionist” state during this period,

since disappointment with unfulfilled promises from the international community also emerged as a common theme, especially from the EU.

These abovementioned roles are observable very clearly in the speeches of Erdoğan as well. To begin with, at the beginning of the crisis, the Syrian refugees were referred to as "guests." This was initially because it was believed that Syria would reach its stability sooner, and the Syrians would stay in Türkiye for a much shorter period of time. In addition, even though Türkiye is a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, it has ratified the convention with a geographical restriction by using its right of choice for the place laid down as a condition in Article 1 of the Convention. This restriction allows Türkiye to create a "conditional refugee" status that includes the persons who fled to Türkiye as a result of events occurring outside European countries, and these persons are only allowed to reside temporarily until they are resettled to a third country (Republic of Türkiye, Directorate General of Migration Management, n.d.). Thus, the first wave of Syrian immigrants had no special legal status, and this resulted in an emergent need to create a systematic framework for the Syrians in the following period. What is more crucial about the "guest" concept is that the phrase also became a tool to highlight Türkiye's hospitality as well as to invoke the Ottoman Empire's historical legacy to have a unique responsibility due to the shared historical ties. By emphasizing these historical and cultural ties, Erdoğan not only emphasized the *sui generis* obligation of Türkiye but also justified Türkiye's leadership in the crisis. It can be seen very clearly in the speech that Erdoğan made on 7 February 2012 in a parliamentary group meeting:

> Syria is not just an ordinary neighbor to us, and the Syrian people are not just any people. At every kilometer, you see the traces of our shared brotherhood, our common history, and our shared civilization. From the Crusades to the War of Independence, for a thousand years, we lived on these lands together, in solidarity and harmony, and defended them side by side. The Syrian people are our brothers and sisters. This bond of brotherhood is written into history with blood. We cannot and will not remain silent about what is happening in Syria. We cannot and will not turn our backs on the Syrian people. (AKP Parliamentary Group Meeting, Ankara, February 7, 2012)

While consistently mentioning the Syrians as the Turkish people's "brothers and sisters," it is important to note that Erdoğan also highlighted the temporary nature of

the presence of the Syrians and rejected the notion of any formal integration. In one of his speeches to Syrian refugees at the Öncüpınar Temporary Accommodation Center in Kilis, he said:

> God willing, until security is established in Syria, and until you voluntarily wish to return, we will host you; just as a brother hosts his brother, we will host you to the best of our ability. (Address to Syrian Refugees at Öncüpınar Temporary Accommodation Center, Kilis, May 6, 2012)

Constantly emphasizing the Islamic concept of "*Ansar-Muhājir*," Türkiye began to frame its assistance to Syrian refugees as a religious, historical, and cultural duty. This analogy refers to the *Ansar* of Medina, who sheltered Prophet Mohammed and his followers, and the *Muhajirun* of Mecca after their "*hijrah*" to Medina. Within this context, the word "*hijrah*" refers to "the migration of Muhammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina in 622," the word "*Ansar*" means "people of Medina who supported Muhammad after the *hijrah*," and the word "*Muhājir*" refers to "emigrant." ("The Oxford Dictionary of Islam," 2003) On 20 July 2014, in a meeting in Hatay, President Erdoğan explained the analogy:

> Hatay, the city of brotherhood; Hatay, the city of solidarity; Hatay, which has been the *Ansar* to its Syrian migrant brothers... Sooner or later, our Syrian guests will return to their homes. And when that day comes, what will remain with us is the pride of having been their *Ansar*. (Speech in Hatay, Hatay, July 20, 2014)

The words and phrases Erdoğan consistently used in his speeches created a pattern that brings out the government's guardianship of the Syrian people, based on the past connections originating from the Ottoman Empire and the brotherhood derived from Islam, and being part of the same *Ummah*. With this perspective, Türkiye claims a type of transnational Islamic community as an upper identity. The government tried to highlight the unity and solidarity that had historically existed between the peoples of Anatolia and the Levant, portraying its response as a continuation of this shared legacy. Therefore, this guardianship distinctly interprets historical and religious ties as a whole value system, which was one of the cornerstones of Davutoğlu's foreign policy agenda during his period.

Furthermore, Türkiye also adopted a “Revisionist” approach in its foreign policy, blaming the international system and international organizations for their inadequate response to the Syrian crisis and not caring enough about the Syrians. In many of his speeches, President Erdoğan directly criticized the international system, and he reminded the responsibility of “ending the massacre” in Syria to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Erdoğan frequently underlined the permanent members' insufficiency and failure to act decisively in the face of increasing violence in Syria. Erdoğan argued that in these circumstances, the international community would have no choice but to support the Syrian people’s right to self-defense.

> I must state that, unless the Syrian regime demonstrates the necessary cooperation, it will become an unavoidable necessity for the United Nations Security Council to assume its responsibility and to put an end to the massacre in Syria. Should the Security Council once again refrain from fulfilling this historic responsibility, the international community will be left with no choice but to support the Syrian people's legitimate right to self-defense. (Friends of the Syrian People Group—Second Conference, April 1, 2012, p. 3)

In another speech, Erdoğan condemned the indifference of the international organizations, particularly the UNSC, and highlighted their failure to contribute to the humanitarian crisis.

> Unfortunately, the massacres in Syria continue to escalate, fueled by the indifference of the international community, most notably the United Nations Security Council. (AKP Parliamentary Group Extended Meeting, September 5, 2012, p. 6)

Türkiye’s dissatisfaction with the system supports Schweller’s argument, which proposes that Revisionist states tend to use their discontent to escalate their power and prestige. In line with this, in addition to accusations of not being sufficient, Erdoğan also complains about the unfair burden-sharing. He condemns the level of humanitarian aid contribution of the wealthy countries and the United Nations (UN) and complains about Türkiye as having been left to bear a disproportionate share of the refugee crisis on its own.

> My country currently hosts 2 million refugees from Iraq and Syria. We are meeting all of their needs, from food to clothing, healthcare, and education. In

> addition to the humanitarian aid, we have provided so far, we spent 5.5 billion dollars on Syrian refugees. What is the amount of financial aid we received from the United Nations in this respect? Only 250 million dollars, whereas we spent 5.5 billion dollars. Where are those rich countries? Where is the United Nations? Where is the United Nations Security Council? Turkey is struggling alone. (2015.02.12 Conference at Mexico Matias Romero Institute, p. 3)

At the same time, as a Revisionist actor dissatisfied with the existing international system, the Turkish government demanded a reform to solve the problems caused by the global community's failure to deliver on promised burden-sharing. Erdoğan often referred to his now-famous phrase "The world is bigger than five," questioning the legitimacy of a system where five permanent members could dominate international decisions, while large parts of the world, including the Muslim world, were excluded from meaningful representation.

> I would like to say right here and now that the world is bigger than five. Is there a single Muslim country among these five? No. When we look at this in terms of continents, we see that Europe, Asia, and America are represented there. Are there representatives from other continents? No. So, is the fate of the whole world in the hands of these five members? What kind of justice is that? The world is no longer as it was after World War II; we live in a different world now. A politician must always adjust himself to current conditions. If you cannot adjust to the current situation, you cannot be a politician, and you cannot achieve success for your country. So, it is essential that the UN Security Council be reformed. (2015.01.21 10th Conference of the Parliamentary Union of the PUIC, p. 6)

These examples illustrate Türkiye's Revisionist foreign policy identity, and it is driven not only by frustration with certain policy failures but also by a deeper dissatisfaction with structural inequalities in the international system. Türkiye's discourse during this period aimed to emphasize the injustice and to position itself as the vocal advocate for systemic change and moral leadership.

Ultimately, Türkiye's first approach to the Syrian Civil War illustrates the development of a unique set of values consistent with Holsti's explanation of the conception of the "Defender of the Faith" national role. Instead of concentrating only on territorial issues, this position entails defending and advancing particular ideological, cultural, or moral ideals. Türkiye's self-perception as a guardian of shared values and traditions

is emphasized by its open-door policy, constant focus on the Islamic idea of *Ansar-Muhajir*, historical brotherhood, and Ottoman legacy. Emphasizing these components, Türkiye presented its actions as carrying out a moral obligation to protect ideological and cultural purity, not just for its own citizens but also for those who have historical and religious ties to it. This value system allowed Türkiye to project itself as a protector of a broader moral and cultural framework for foreign policy. In addition, as a Revisionist actor, the Turkish government intensified its demand for "fair burden-sharing," with Erdoğan regularly using the mantra "The world is bigger than five" to criticize the international system and request a more equitable allocation of responsibilities. This frustration was combined with efforts to redefine Türkiye's role in global governance and the constant emphasis on the need for a change in the international system.

2.3. Second Period: July 2016-March 2020

With the resignation of Davutoğlu and the attempted coup on July 15, both in 2016, a period of securitization in Türkiye's foreign policy has started. The policy implemented on the Syrian refugees has begun to be increasingly framed through a lens of national security and geopolitical strategy. The government abandoned the approach that Davutoğlu framed during its time in office. Rather than developing a humanitarian diplomacy, Turkish foreign policy became more protectionist and independent during this period, prioritizing national interests over international obligations that it had previously undertaken. Türkiye was still adopting a special responsibility to protect the Syrians; however, its approach was more aggressive and assertive during this period. It developed a more strategic protectionist attitude that ensures the physical security of the Syrian people.

According to Holsti (1970), a state that adopts the "Regional Protector" national role conception emphasizes the responsibility of protecting neighboring regions, even if it may imply special leadership obligations on a regional or issue-area basis. When it came to the Turkish case, the government began to frame the refugee problem as a national security issue, especially after 2015, when the number of Syrians entering the country increased sharply (PMM, n.d.) and attacks along the border intensified. For

example, in January 2016, the southeastern city of Kilis was struck by rockets fired from ISIS-held areas in northern Syria, killing and injuring civilians (BBC News, 2016). These attacks created widespread fear and drew attention to the vulnerability of border towns. As public anxiety increased, the government began to treat border security as an urgent matter. In response, Türkiye launched military operations into Syria to push back these threats and wanted to make sure to secure its borders and its citizens living in the region. In addition, these operations aimed to completely eliminate the presence of terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and YPG, while simultaneously supporting the Free Syrian Army in their efforts to preserve Syria's territorial integrity. Another key objective was to prevent civilians from being harmed by terrorist activities and to restore basic stability in the affected areas. However, beyond these immediate concerns, the long-term goal of these interventions was to create the necessary conditions for the voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees currently residing in Türkiye.

In parallel with this security-oriented transformation, a second national role conception emerged more visibly in the Turkish government's foreign policy discourse. The securitization also caused a discourse that Türkiye does not receive any support from its allies, and they are even threatening them by giving financial support to the terrorists. This perception leads to another national role of Türkiye during this period: being an "Active Independent" country. Holsti (1970) defines the "Active Independent" as a national orientation in which a state shapes its foreign policy based primarily on its own national interests, without necessarily aligning with the agendas or expectations of global powers or long-standing alliances. In other words, it is making foreign policy decisions to serve national interests rather than the interests of others. In Türkiye's case, this role emphasized the Turkish government's ability to act determinedly and unilaterally when necessary and pursue its national interests without deference to traditional allies or global institutions. Concerning NATO, Türkiye blames the allies, especially the US, for not properly complying with the spirit of the alliance and for supporting the terrorist organizations.

In addition, Türkiye signed the EU-Türkiye Deal on 18 March 2016 with great enthusiasm because of the project-based financial aid for the refugees in Türkiye and

expected visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The deal mainly aimed to manage the irregular migration across the Aegean Sea. As part of this cooperation framework, Türkiye agreed to the readmission of irregular migrants arriving on the Greek islands, while the EU committed to resettling an equivalent number of Syrian refugees directly from Türkiye under a "one-for-one" formula. The arrangement was not only designed to fight human smuggling and irregular crossings but also aimed to replace these patterns with an orderly, humane, and legal resettlement mechanism. Initial implementation began on 4 April 2016, when Türkiye accepted the return of 325 irregular migrants, while 78 Syrians were resettled to Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland. These measures were framed as evidence of Türkiye's commitment to regional cooperation and burden-sharing in migration governance. At the same time, Türkiye continued to uphold its open-door policy and non-refoulement principle, providing shelter, healthcare, education, and legal protection to over 2.7 million Syrians on its territory. Syrians returned from the Greek islands were granted temporary protection, and asylum applications from non-Syrian nationals were processed under Turkish domestic and international legal frameworks, maintaining the country's emphasis on humanitarian responsibility and rule-of-law compliance (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Nevertheless, after a while, Türkiye started to blame the EU as well, stating that the EU did not keep its promises and did not give adequate support to the Syrians within the EU borders, leaving Türkiye alone. Since Türkiye and the EU have a long history that includes their ongoing economic relations and Türkiye's application to become an EU member state, this criticism can also be viewed as a condemnation of not relying on the spirit of their alliance.

During this period, the most dominant role of being a "Regional Protector" is quite visible and repetitive in President Erdoğan's speeches. To begin with, the AKP government presented itself as the protector and pioneer of the oppressed and victimized. Rather than safeguarding the suggested value system of the Ottoman legacy and historical obligations of Türkiye, the government shifted its focus to protecting Türkiye's borders. Türkiye addressed the perceived threats posed by terrorist organizations like the PKK and its Syrian offshoot, the YPG. During this period, military operations such as Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch

(2018), and Peace Spring (2019) were launched, and this was a sign of a more aggressive and protectionist stance on territorial security. For example, on 7th October 2017, in the AKP's 26th Consultation and Assessment Meeting Opening Speech, Erdoğan said:

> We are continuing our discussions, initiatives, and operations aimed at resolving the security crisis and humanitarian tragedies in Syria. Despite all efforts to exclude our country, we persist in exploring every avenue and trying every approach, fully aware that this issue is closely linked to our national security. With the space we carved out for ourselves in the region through the Euphrates Shield Operation, we are now working to take this further with a new step aimed at ensuring the security of Idlib. (AKP's 26th Consultation and Assessment Meeting Opening Speech, Afyonkarahisar, October 7, 2017)

This framing demonstrates Türkiye's determination to act independently as a stabilizing force in northern Syria, particularly in areas perceived as critical to national security. Erdoğan's speech also addresses both humanitarian and security concerns regarding the nature of these interventions. In a later statement, he further elaborated on the reasoning behind Türkiye's continued military presence in Syria:

> Due to the oppression inflicted on the local population by the PKK-YPG, none of the Syrians in our country are able to return to their homes. Our goal is to ensure that this region is handed back to the governance of its own people as soon as possible. (AKP Parliamentary Group Meeting, Ankara, February 5, 2019)

With this in mind, the operations were not only aimed at fighting terrorism but were also aimed at establishing safe zones in northern Syria. The Turkish government claimed that the existence of terrorist organizations delayed the safe return of Syrian refugees, in addition to endangering Türkiye's territorial integrity. In his remarks, President Erdoğan often emphasized this link, claiming that Türkiye's military actions in northern Syria were essential to achieving the two simultaneous objectives, which are combating terrorism and assisting in the return of refugees.

> We know that Türkiye cannot be secure without Syria being secure. We are aware that we cannot be at peace while the Syrian people cannot look to their future with confidence. So far, nearly 100,000 Syrian migrants have returned to their homes in the Euphrates Shield Operation area and have begun living

> normal lives thanks to the opportunities provided by our country. (AKP Kütahya Provincial Congress, Kütahya, January 20, 2018)

The government also constantly offered a set of developing infrastructure and urbanization plans in those safe zones, which were promoted as essential for facilitating the voluntary return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye:

> In areas like Jarabulus, Al-Bab, and Azaz, and with the establishment of security in Afrin, we are not merely expelling terrorists. We are also making these regions livable for their rightful owners, our Syrian brothers and sisters. From electricity to water, roads to hospitals, schools to housing, we are rebuilding all settlements from the ground up and returning them to their owners. Additionally, we are establishing institutional structures to manage the region, from security to municipal services. We did not go there to occupy but to liberate our Syrian brothers and sisters from oppression and help them build a secure future for themselves. (AKP Provincial Congress, Erzurum, March 16, 2018)

In addition to using the success of military operations in Syria as a pretext for the return of Syrian refugees, government officials were also comparing these campaigns to the bravery shown during the July 15 coup attempt. The Turkish leadership made a symbolic link between its aggressive behavior in Syria and its domestic resistance during the July 15 coup attempt. Erdoğan frequently compared the fight against the Gulenists, who are accused by the AKP government of plotting the failed coup détat to the fight against external threats like ISIS and the PKK/YPG. This story reaffirmed that Türkiye's ability to address security threats inside and outside its borders was essential to its continued existence as a country. The public responded strongly to the portrayal of these military actions as a continuation of the spirit of July 15, which showed Türkiye as a country under continual attack but one that can overcome hardship by remaining united and determined: “This nation took to the streets on July 15 for a reason, and today, Türkiye is in Syria for the very same reason.” (AKP Ankara Provincial Consultation Assembly Meeting, Ankara, March 2, 2020)

In addition, Türkiye’s discourse during this period frequently emphasized a growing sense of abandonment by its NATO allies, particularly the US. Since Türkiye defines YPG as a Syrian extension of the PKK and considers it a terrorist organization, Erdoğan consistently argued that the US’ actions directly undermined Türkiye’s

national security and territorial integrity and contradicted the core principles of the alliance. As an Active Independent actor, there are also evident speeches in Erdoğan's condemnation toward the US, claiming that it is complicit in terrorist activities due to the financial and military support provided to the YPG. He indicates that if the US continues not to act accordingly, Türkiye will do whatever it has to do to protect its borders and the region:

> We are fully aware of the scenario that the United States is trying to implement through these organizations, as it simultaneously undermines Türkiye's operations against both ISIS and the PYD. Being allies is one thing; engaging in acts that do not befit such an alliance is another. Just because we are together in NATO, does that mean we must remain silent in the face of wrongdoing? I'm sorry, but we will speak up. (AKP Provincial Chairs Meeting, November 17, 2017, p. 5)

The Active Independent stance became even more obvious as Türkiye positioned itself as a regional power that would take any necessary action without waiting for international approvals. Erdoğan's speeches often carried a clear message that Türkiye had the capacity and the legitimacy to protect its borders and intervene in regional affairs, regardless of the positions of its allies:

> That is why those who once directed ISIS are now unleashing the PYD and YPG—the Syrian offshoot of the PKK—against us. Where do PYD and YPG members receive their salaries from? From the United States. As you know, the U.S. budget has been announced, and the funds allocated to these terrorist organizations have been officially included in it. Moreover, military aid of all kinds continues. So, how are we supposed to call this a partnership? How do you explain this? (Opening Ceremony of the 18th Term of AKP Political Academy, March 9, 2018, p. 5)

This independent posture is not only limited to security and military discourse. The Turkish government also adopted a critical approach toward the EU, particularly regarding the EU-Türkiye Deal signed in 2016. The agreement was initially welcomed by the government since it promised visa liberalization and project-based financial aid; however, it later became a symbol of disappointment. Türkiye accused the EU of failing to deliver on its promises and of shifting the burden onto itself. As the dissatisfaction increased, the Turkish government began to use a more assertive stance.

In an outstanding example, Erdoğan warned the European countries about the possibility of opening the gates and allowing Syrians to cross the borders.

> Following the increase in attacks against our soldiers, we decided not to prevent refugees who wish to go to Europe from doing so. This is not a forced action; they want to leave. Have we provided for them—fed them, clothed them, and met their needs—for the past nine years? Yes, we have. Now, they want to go to Europe, and we are not forcibly blocking their way. Months ago, I warned the West: 'If you do not approach fair burden-sharing, we will open the gates.' They thought I was joking. And we opened the gates. Now, our guests are leaving. We have never had an obligation to force anyone to stay in our country. (AKP Parliamentary Group Meeting, Ankara, March 11, 2020)

It becomes evident that Türkiye's Active Independent national role went beyond rhetoric to practice. In other words, it translated into policy actions aimed at influencing regional dynamics and negotiating power balances with traditional partners, the US and the EU.

Türkiye's self-perception between July 2016 and March 2020 reflects its national role as both a Regional Protector and an Active Independent state, as outlined by Holsti. Türkiye underlined its responsibilities as a regional guardian to protect its borders and surrounding areas, especially by launching military operations to counter terrorist threats like the PKK/YPG and create safe zones for displaced people. This proactive approach also established that Türkiye is a leading actor in addressing regional instability, as seen by its military operations, which serve to both strengthen Türkiye's security and set the groundwork for the return of Syrian refugees. Simultaneously, as an Active Independent state, Türkiye prioritized its national interest over international obligations, as evident in Türkiye's discourse against the US and the EU, claiming their decisions do not comply with their partnership with Türkiye. The Active Independent role reflects Türkiye's shift from multilateral cooperation toward a more sovereignty-centered and pragmatic foreign policy, especially in the context of the Syrian crisis. It demonstrates how Türkiye's foreign policy identity evolved from alliance-based dependence toward strategic autonomy, shaped by both perceived betrayal and geopolitical necessity.

2.4. Third Period: March 2020-December 2024

New challenges were introduced in March 2020 with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures that resulted from the pandemic prevented the government from allowing refugees to leave for Europe. In addition, the pandemic also worsened economic instability and increased public intolerance toward refugees. However, Türkiye's position of "Regional Protector" remained the same as in the previous period. It is worth highlighting that Türkiye did not change its dominant discourse since 2016 and continued up until Assad's fall in December 2024. It is also important to note that the roles that Türkiye adopts during this period vary. While it dominantly continues to be a Regional Protector state, the discourse almost equally includes Active Independent, Revisionist, and Defender of the Faith roles.

Although it is relatively less, the "Developer" role also becomes evident during this period. Holsti claims that when a state is a "Developer" state, its national role conception points to a unique responsibility to support developing nations. It is common to find references to specialized abilities or benefits for performing such ongoing duties. Türkiye demonstrated the characteristics of a "Developer" national role conception by investing significantly in northern Syria's infrastructure reconstruction and governance formation. It showed its dedication to promoting peace and growth in the area by establishing livable conditions and assisting the refugees' voluntary return.

In addition to Türkiye's transforming national role conceptions, domestic economic problems, and rising anti-immigrant sentiment in public also significantly shaped the political rhetoric and refugee discourse during the period from March 2020 to December 2024. Importantly, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with significant shifts in Türkiye's monetary and fiscal policies. In line with President Erdoğan's unorthodox economic vision of "low interest, low inflation," the Central Bank of Türkiye began a series of aggressive interest rate cuts in 2021 under the leadership of Şahap Kavcıoğlu, despite rising global inflationary pressures (T24, 2021). This policy approach led to a sharp depreciation of the Turkish lira and resulted in increasing inflation rates and a significant rise in the cost of living. Subsequently, in December 2021 "Currency-Protected Deposit Scheme (*Kur Korumalı Mevduat*,

KKM) was introduced by the Turkish Ministry of Treasury and Finance and the Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Merkez Bankası*, TCMB), with the aim of protecting the Turkish lira against exchange rate fluctuations and supporting financial stability. KKM encourages savers to prefer the Turkish lira over foreign currencies and guarantees compensation from public authorities. While it was designed to enhance the attractiveness of the Turkish lira, the potential fiscal burden it may impose has made it a significant point of debate in the context of Turkish economic policymaking (TCMB, 2022). Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati publicly defended the government's controversial financial instrument, calling it "the invention of the century" (T24, 2023), despite ongoing criticisms that it disproportionately benefited large investors while failing to address structural inequalities. As a result, living costs increased, and access to basic needs, particularly housing and stable employment, became increasingly difficult for many citizens. These structural strains intensified existing frustrations, and the refugee population was increasingly framed as a contributing factor to Türkiye's economic difficulties.



Figure 6. Türkiye's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Trend (2013–2023) *Source: Trading Economics, based on World Bank data (https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/gdp).*

As Figure 6 illustrates, there was a significant decline around 2020 in Türkiye's GDP in USD billions. This decline corresponds to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a sharp rise in the subsequent years. Accordingly, as purchasing power declined, housing shortages worsened, and employment insecurity spread across middle- and low-income groups, the public narrative began to shift. Syrians were increasingly portrayed not as vulnerable populations but as competitors in a strained

economy. Anti-immigrant sentiment intensified, becoming politically institutionalized through the rise of the Victory Party (ZP), led by Ümit Özdağ. Özdağ publicly called for mass deportations and accused the government of ignoring its own population in favor of refugees through aggressive statements and targeted media campaigns. The party's portrayal of refugees as the leading cause of Türkiye's economic and social issues gained momentum, especially in urban areas where informal labor and rent inflation are widespread. This discourse intensified as a growing portion of the population experienced housing shortages, wage competition, and increased unemployment problems, which were also worsened by the government's currency protection program and the economic crisis in 2023.

During this period, Türkiye was maintaining its national role as a Regional Protector and humanitarian actor by investing in voluntary return infrastructure and reconstruction projects in northern Syria. However, at the same time, the domestic discourse became increasingly securitized and defensive, emphasizing border control, demographic preservation, and national unity. The Turkish government attempted to strike a balance between external commitments to voluntary and dignified return mechanisms and internal demands for strict migration control. In other words, internationally, Türkiye continued to emphasize its investment in northern Syria's reconstruction and refugee return infrastructure; domestically, it reinforced a stricter stance on migration management, occasionally using migration as a lever in diplomatic negotiations with the EU. As a result, during this period, Türkiye's foreign policy identity provided both a continuation of its strategic regional roles and a growing assertiveness in the face of domestic pressures that were rooted in economic fragility and nationalist mobilization.

Similar to the second period, although humanitarian projects and voluntary return initiatives have continued, the government has started to discuss the refugee problem in terms of its implications for domestic stability and security rather than as part of Türkiye's moral or humanitarian obligations. While military operations against the PKK/YPG remained, national security concerns took precedence over efforts for the return of refugees. Economic challenges and the emergence of nationalist discourse from political parties like ZP contributed to the growth of anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye. The government responded by framing racism, Islamophobia, and anti-

immigrant attitudes as threats to national unity and focusing on integration initiatives. The President argued that:

> One of the repercussions of the migration crisis is the rise in hate speech. The increasing racism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment on a global scale are gradually turning into a national security issue. Southeast Europe is also significantly affected by these threats and challenges. In this regard, it is of great importance that we focus on projects that enable our citizens to better understand and appreciate each other's cultures. (Speech delivered at the South-East European Cooperation Summit, 17 June 2021)

Moreover, the construction of brick housing units in northern Syria, especially those supported by Qatari funding and coordinated with Turkish civil society organizations, emerged as a cornerstone of Türkiye's migration management strategy during this period (AFAD, 2024). While the voluntary return of Syrian refugees remained a formal and strategic objective, the government increasingly framed these infrastructure projects as both a humanitarian necessity and a geopolitical instrument to reduce domestic tensions and increase regional influence. These initiatives were presented as a concrete response to intensified public pressure for the return of Syrians while also signaling Türkiye's long-term commitment to the post-conflict stabilization of Syria's northern regions. By investing in housing, schools, healthcare facilities, and municipal-style administrative services in areas under Turkish military influence, the government aimed to reconstruct safe zones as possible destinations for return. In his 2023 speech, President Erdoğan emphasized the voluntary and dignified nature of these returns, highlighting that the state's efforts were not grounded in coercion or forced displacement:

> We have built brick houses in northern Syria, not only as a government but also in collaboration with our civil society organizations. Additionally, efforts are ongoing to construct housing in Syria, supported by Qatar, with the capacity to accommodate 1 million refugees. Just yesterday, my Interior Minister initiated the groundbreaking ceremony for this project. Alongside this, we have established and are continuing to establish the infrastructure to enable the voluntary return of Syrians from Türkiye to these areas. Let me emphasize, this is not being done by expelling them or through force or deceit, but through voluntary and dignified means. (Speech Delivered at the 'Strong Industry, Strong Türkiye' Istanbul Meeting Program, 25 May 2023)

The statement reflects the government's attempt to maintain a balance between presenting return policies as humane and rights-based to international audiences while responding to strong domestic demands for demographic transformation and enhanced border control. In this sense, brick housing projects became more than humanitarian gestures; they evolved into a hybrid policy tool that aimed at reconciling Türkiye's normative aspirations with its internal political realities and regional strategic goals.

Another important aspect of this period is that Türkiye's migration diplomacy transformed into a more assertive and strategic direction. One of the most significant demonstrations of this shift was President Erdoğan's growing emphasis on burden-sharing and the limits of Türkiye's capacity to manage the refugee crisis without meaningful international support. In his speech, President Erdoğan warned that Türkiye would no longer act as a "buffer zone" for Europe without adequate support and criticized the EU for failing to fully deliver the €6 billion promised.

> The €6 billion promised to us under the March 18 Agreement has still not been fully delivered, even after all this time. Even international media outlets are starting to recognize and acknowledge this reality. According to a recent report published in the international press, Türkiye is the only country that has truly taken responsibility for Syrian refugees. (Speech at Dokuz Eylül University International Conference, Migration: Projections for the Next Twenty Years and Beyond Program, İzmir, February 22, 2021)

This attitude also shows Türkiye's effort to reposition itself in global migration governance as a central actor. The discourse began to frame Türkiye as a humanitarian host as well as a global stakeholder whose efforts must be matched with international solidarity. As suggested by Schweller (1998), adopting the Revisionist role, Türkiye also started to use its refugee burden as a trump card against the international community and tried to highlight this as a part of its prestige in the global system.

> The phrase we voiced at the United Nations, 'the world is bigger than five,' has been expanded into a thesis that a fairer world is possible, reflecting humanity's shared aspirations. With this perspective, Türkiye stands with the oppressed, the victimized, and the advocates of justice and truth across a vast geography—from the Balkans to the Caucasus, and from Africa to South Asia. Undoubtedly, such an honorable and principled stance comes with a cost. Together with our nation, we have never shied away from paying that cost when necessary, and we never will.

> At the same time, one of the most significant factors behind Türkiye's rise as a regional and global power is the ripple effect of this dignified stance. Wherever we go in the world, we see the manifestations of this positive atmosphere in the eyes of people who look at us with love and hope. Those who view the presence of 3.6 million Syrians and a total of 5 million foreign nationals in Türkiye as a burden should consider this reality from this broader perspective." (Speech Following the Cabinet Meeting, October 11, 2021)

In his speech, Erdoğan links Türkiye's refugee policy with a broader moral mission, framing the country as both a moral leader and a regional power committed to justice. However, this noble portrayal is paired with an implicit message to the international community: if Türkiye is to continue fulfilling such a demanding role, it requires more than symbolic praise; therefore, it needs structural support and recognition. The Turkish government's strategy aims to promote its moral legitimacy in the international arena and to justify its demands for fairer migration governance globally.

Furthermore, Türkiye's cross-border operations were increasingly represented as essential to preventing internal instability. The government stated that these operations demonstrated its commitment to protecting its territorial integrity and also rejecting attempts to weaponize refugee flows to destabilize Türkiye. In official discourse, the operations were no longer framed only as counterterrorism efforts, but they were also linked to the prevention of irregular migration. By stabilizing regions in northern Syria through its military presence and reconstruction efforts, Türkiye aimed to eliminate the push factors that trigger secondary displacement into its territory. President Erdoğan stated:

> "Our cross-border operations have thwarted attempts to destabilize Türkiye through irregular migration waves aimed at causing internal turmoil. More than 620,000 Syrians, who were in our country under temporary protection status, have returned to the secure areas liberated from terrorism." (Speech Delivered Following the Cabinet Meeting, 16 January 2024)

This declaration highlights how Türkiye's foreign policy actions regarding military interventions were increasingly justified through their domestic implications. The claim that over 620,000 Syrians had returned to post-conflict areas emphasizes the government's efforts to position itself as a Regional Protector and as a sovereign actor capable of addressing migration-related security risks without relying on any

international actors. In this context, cross-border operations in Syria are not represented as reactive security measures but as proactive governance strategies. They were designed to reshape regional dynamics while simultaneously managing internal pressures. The emphasis on the liberated areas from terrorism and voluntary returns was presented to highlight Türkiye's moral legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and to reinforce a securitized and autonomous migration discourse domestically.

The period between March 2020 and December 2024 provides the consolidation of Türkiye's identity as a Regional Protector, and also reflects the increasing influence of domestic pressures on its foreign policy discourse. This role was increasingly accompanied by a multidimensional discourse that invoked Active Independent, Revisionist, and Developer roles as well. Although Türkiye continued to present a humanitarian and stabilizing role internationally, which was supported by reconstruction efforts and return-oriented infrastructure in northern Syria, the internal discourse shifted toward a more securitized and reactive posture. The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising economic instability, inflation, housing shortages, and nationalist political mobilization, particularly under the influence of parties like ZP, reconstructed the refugee discourse into a matter of domestic security and political dispute. This situation resulted in a foreign policy agenda that fluctuates between Türkiye's humanitarian norms and regional strategies. Being consistent with Holsti's Developer role, Türkiye continued its commitments by investing heavily in the reconstruction of northern Syria during this period. Consequently, these investments were presented as a part of the humanitarian diplomacy and a regional strategy that aimed to stabilize the borders and to enable voluntary returns. Furthermore, Türkiye continued to emphasize its national sovereignty, and its dissatisfaction with the global burden-sharing regime has reinforced its Revisionist stance in the international system.

Ultimately, this sub-chapter shows that both long-term regional ambitions and short-term domestic challenges significantly affected Türkiye's foreign policy approach during the third period. Even though Türkiye continued its national role as a Regional Protector, its approach became more flexible and reactive regarding economic difficulties and rising public pressure. During this period, Türkiye adopted a combination of roles that shifted over time. This may demonstrate an adaptive strategy,

as national role conceptions were continually reshaped by changing international dynamics and internal political and economic realities.

The following chapter examines the extent to which these national role conceptions were revealed in Türkiye's role performance in managing the Syrian refugee crisis, which covers its foreign policy actions, legal regulations, and institutional practices.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYZING THE ROLE PERFORMANCE OF TÜRKİYE IN THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

This chapter aims to evaluate how Türkiye's role performance, policies, regulations, and institutional response align with the national role conceptions identified in the previous chapter. While Chapter II examined the discursive construction of Türkiye's identity in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, this chapter discusses a systematic analysis of whether and to what extent these commitments were translated into practices. In order to achieve this, the chapter applies Holsti's concept of role performance, which is interpreted as a more comprehensive pattern of behavior framing attitudes, choices, and institutional decisions made toward other actors in the international system rather than just the fulfillment of foreign policy acts (Holsti, 1970, p. 245). This analytical lens helps to assess the degree to which Türkiye's foreign policy roles were implemented in practice. This chapter assesses Türkiye's migration policies through three periods, and it builds upon the same periodization used in the analysis of role conceptions: (1) March 2011–July 2016, (2) July 2016–March 2020, and (3) March 2020–December 2024. For each period, the chapter analyzes official laws and regulations, statistical data from the Turkish Ministry of Interior, reports by international organizations such as UNHCR and Human Rights Watch, as well as documents and field assessments published by domestic NGOs and civil society actors in Türkiye.

In doing so, the chapter identifies key factors that have caused Türkiye's role performance to either substantiate or diverge from the roles it claimed during these years. These factors include Syrian refugees' legal status and rights, institutional development for migration management, border control and security operations, humanitarian assistance, voluntary return and reconstruction projects, and

international burden-sharing initiatives. This chapter highlights consistency, contradiction, and change in Türkiye's migration governance starting with the first Syrian refugee flow in March 2011 and the fall of Assad in December 2024 by comparing these performance indicators with the role conceptions examined in Chapter II, which are Defender of the Faith, Revisionist, Regional Protector, Active Independent, and Developer. Ultimately, this chapter aims to answer the central research question of the thesis from an empirical standpoint: To what extent did Türkiye's national role conception, as expressed in speeches, translate into role performance during the Syrian refugee crisis?

3.1. First Period: March 2011-July 2016

Türkiye's initial response to the Syrian refugee crisis was shaped by a humanitarian approach and a set of moral imperatives grounded in religious and historical ties, as discussed in Chapter II. In this period, Türkiye adopted an open-door policy, refused to return Syrians to their country in conflict, and quickly established temporary shelters. However, the early response was mostly reactive and based on short-term expectations. The absence of a legal framework for dealing with such a quite significant and long-term displacement paved the way to certain inconsistencies between Türkiye's normative discourse and its institutional readiness.

One of the significant indicators of this gap was the terminology used to describe the Syrian arrivals. At the beginning of the crisis, Türkiye did not formally recognize Syrians as "refugees" due to the geographical limitation it maintains under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Instead, Syrians were referred to as guests, a term that signaled moral responsibility rooted in hospitality, but unfortunately, lacked legal grounding. This approach postponed the implementation of long-term protection measures toward the Syrian refugees and also revealed the assumption that they would eventually return to their homes. Nevertheless, over time, Türkiye acknowledged the need for a more structured and sustainable response and took essential steps toward legal reform and institutional development. The most significant advancement regarding the establishment of a legal grounding for Syrians was the enactment of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in April 2014, followed by the Temporary Protection (TP) Regulation in October of the same year.

For the first time, these regulations created a comprehensive framework that defines the rights and responsibilities of Syrians under temporary protection.

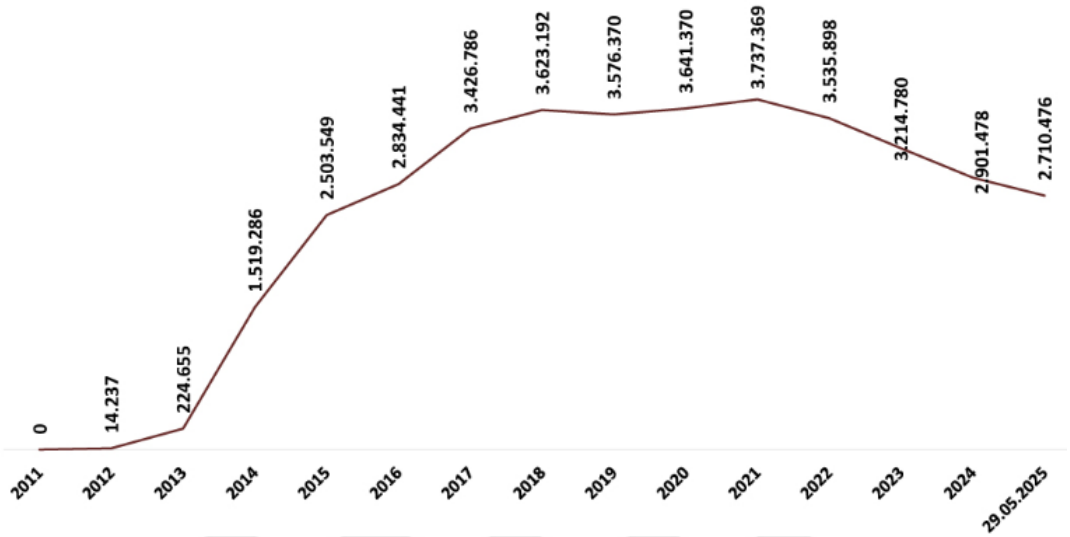


Figure 7. Distribution of Syrians under Temporary Protection in Türkiye by year. This figure presents the annual change in the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye. It reflects trends in refugee inflows and policy responses over time. *Source: Presidency of Migration Management (n.d.)*

Among the key provisions were non-refoulement guarantees, access to health services, shelter, education, and entry to the labor market (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, PMM, 2014). Furthermore, it was significant that during this period, the institutionalization of migration governance occurred through the establishment of the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) and its provincial institutions. PMM was initially founded as the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) under the LFIP No. 6458, which came into force on April 11, 2013. Following constitutional amendments, the legal basis for its establishment was updated through Presidential Decree No. 4 (July 15, 2018), which redefined the institution's structure, duties, and authority. Later, Presidential Decree No. 85 (October 29, 2021) changed the status of the institution from a directorate to a presidency. According to Article 158 of Presidential Decree No. 4, the PMM was placed under the Ministry of Interior and tasked with coordinating national migration policy, regulating the entry, stay, and removal of foreigners, and managing international and temporary protection procedures. PMM also holds responsibilities in combating irregular migration,

protecting victims of human trafficking, identifying stateless individuals, and overseeing harmonization processes. Additionally, it plays a central role in policy implementation, institutional capacity-building, and project development in alignment with national and international standards (Ministry of Interior, PMM, n.d.).

As provided below, the organizational framework of PMM is quite detailed and comprehensive, and this was a significant step in aligning Türkiye's legal framework with its humanitarian discourse.

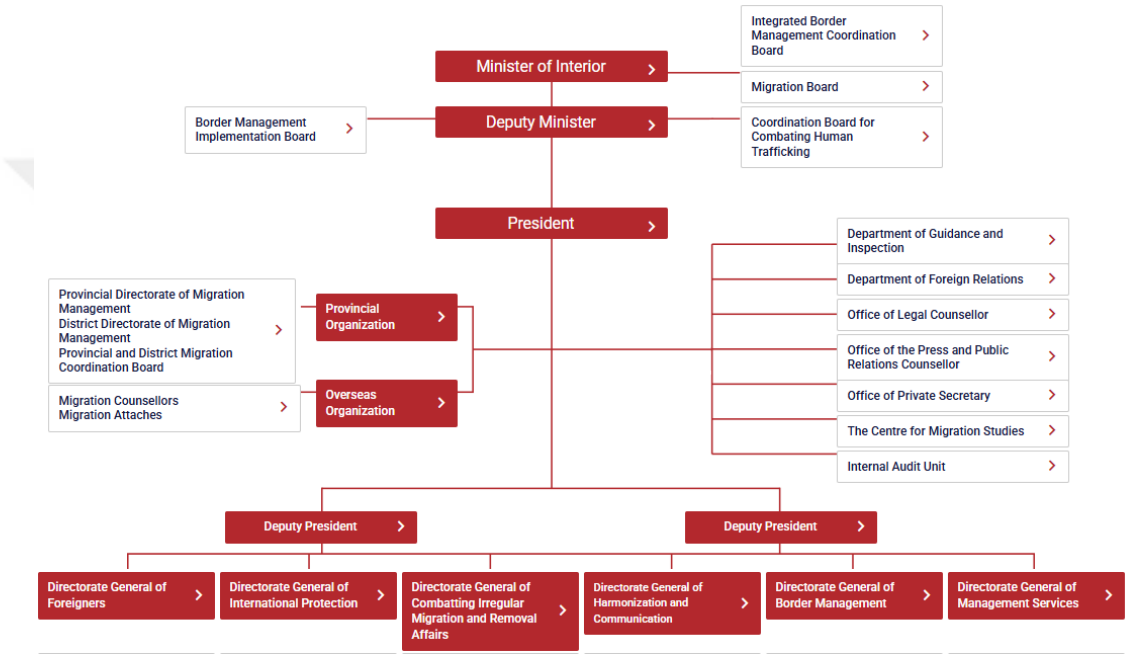


Figure 8. Organizational structure of the Presidency of Migration Management *(Republic of Türkiye, PMM, n.d.).*

Although Türkiye's policies toward Syrian refugees have been legitimized through religious and moral foundations in official discourse through metaphors such as "brotherhood" and the *Ansar–Muhajir* analogy, the practical application remained more limited in scope; these discourses have not completely translated into structural policies and have sometimes been overshadowed by discriminatory practices. Even though the TP Identification Document grants the right to stay in Türkiye, access to employment, permanent residency, and citizenship remains inadequate or largely restricted. The TP Identification Document also does not provide the holder the ability to apply for permanent residency or citizenship (İçduygu & Millet, 2016). In addition,

the influx led to overcrowded camps and overstretched local resources, particularly in border provinces such as Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep. Although the Turkish government managed to deliver immediate aid, long-term integration strategies were largely absent, and it reflects a gap between discourse and institutional planning (Bölük & Erdem, 2016) In addition, Türkiye's classification of Syrians as persons under temporary protection, in turn, has restricted both access to rights and prospects for integration (Şimşek & Çorabatır, 2016). For example, the TP Regulation formally provides the right to work; however, due to narrow implementation and the need for ministerial approvals, until December 2015, only 6,858 work permits had been issued by the end of the reporting period (World Bank, 2015).

While the "Defender of the Faith" role is rhetorically performed through strong moral ownership, significant inequalities and implementation gaps persist in fundamental areas such as municipal services, education, healthcare, and the labor market. The report prepared by the Refugees Association in 2024, "Observations Through the Field," underlines that the religiously framed "guest" status coincides with deep systemic deficiencies in practice. For example, undocumented Syrians cannot access essential services such as health and education, and newborn children who cannot receive identity documents are registered as stateless, thereby experiencing legal exclusion from the outset. Furthermore, women's participation in the labor market is also exceptionally low: while 85% of Syrian women are unemployed, only 5% are engaged in irregular or seasonal work. Gender-based job segmentation, lack of Turkish proficiency, and limited access to free language courses further exacerbate barriers to employment. Moreover, women who are survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) often remain unable to seek assistance due to language obstacles and gaps within judicial structures (Refugee Council of Turkey, 2020). In practice, this created a legal vacuum that left refugees dependent on ad hoc measures and humanitarian assistance rather than institutionalized rights (Bölük & Erdem, 2016).

UNHCR's January 2016 monthly update indicates that in the field of education, significant efforts were made: 310,000 children were enrolled in schools, 10 new schools were built, 2,525 individuals attended Turkish language courses, and 9,550 volunteer teachers were mobilized. Nonetheless, only $1.6 million of the $117.4 million education fund projected for 2016 was secured. Additionally, there are also

Turkish language courses and scholarship programs supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB), and the PMM has been among the few mid-term efforts aimed at structural integration. For instance, within the scholarship program "Türkiye Scholarships," 1,275 Syrian students in higher education received support from the Turkish government in 2016 (PMM, 2017). On the other hand, Syrian children who are not officially registered face significant challenges in accessing schools. For families that relocate, children often remain registered in their previous province, leading to their exclusion from the education system. Although legal rights are formally recognized, the inadequacy of legal aid, especially in border regions, reveals a notable gap between normative discourse and institutional capacity (Refugee Council of Turkey, 2022).

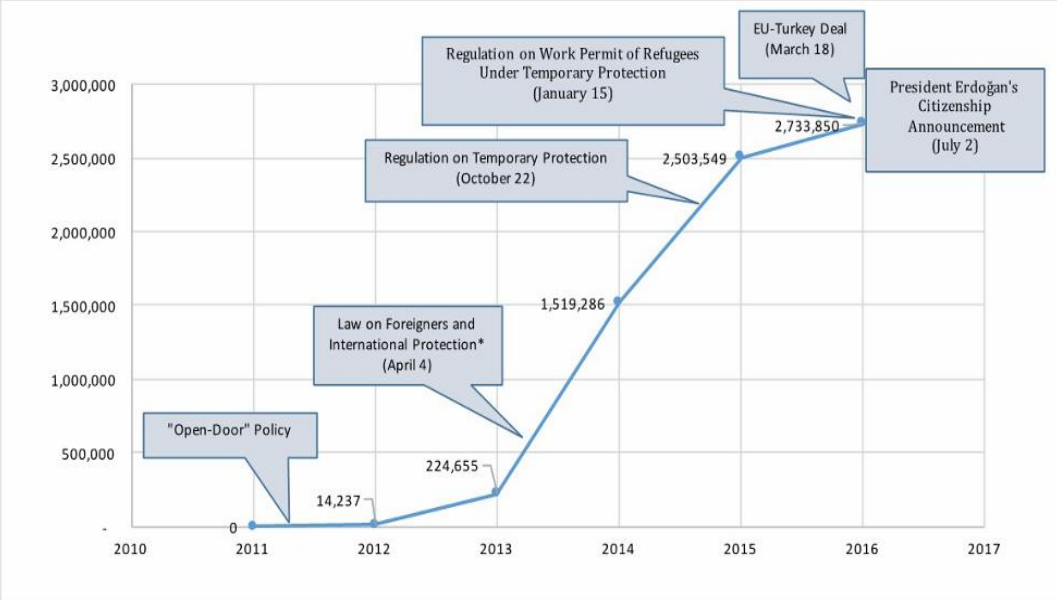


Figure 9. Trends of the Syrian Refugee Flow and Timeline of Legislative Process in Türkiye (2011–2016). This figure illustrates the increase in the number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection and the concurrent legislative developments between 2011 and 2016. *Reproduced from İçduygu, A., & Millet, E. (2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey: Insecure lives in an environment of pseudo-integration (Working Paper 13). Global Turkey in Europe. Istituto Affari Internazionali.*

Furthermore, in higher education, new regulations providing that violations of LFIP or passport laws may result in the termination of scholarships have led to additional rights deprivations for refugee students. The TP Identification Document provides the right to remain in Türkiye but does not entail permanent residency or citizenship, thereby confirming the temporal and limited nature of the rights granted (Refugee

Council of Turkey, 2022). Additionally, according to the Access to Education Report prepared by the Refugee Council of Turkey (2022), Temporary Education Centers (*Geçici Eğitim Merkezleri*, GEM) and Turkish Red Crescent Community Centers provided language support, early childhood education, counseling, and psychological services, with supplementary materials distributed to support child development. However, support for children lacking Turkish language proficiency remained limited, and reported cases of discrimination further undermined school attendance. Risks such as child labor and child marriage became increasingly prominent. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of access to remote learning infrastructure further disrupted refugee children's education. In provinces like Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, and Kilis, where the refugee population density is high, municipal services came under immense strain, leaving hundreds of thousands of children out of school (IGAM, 2013).

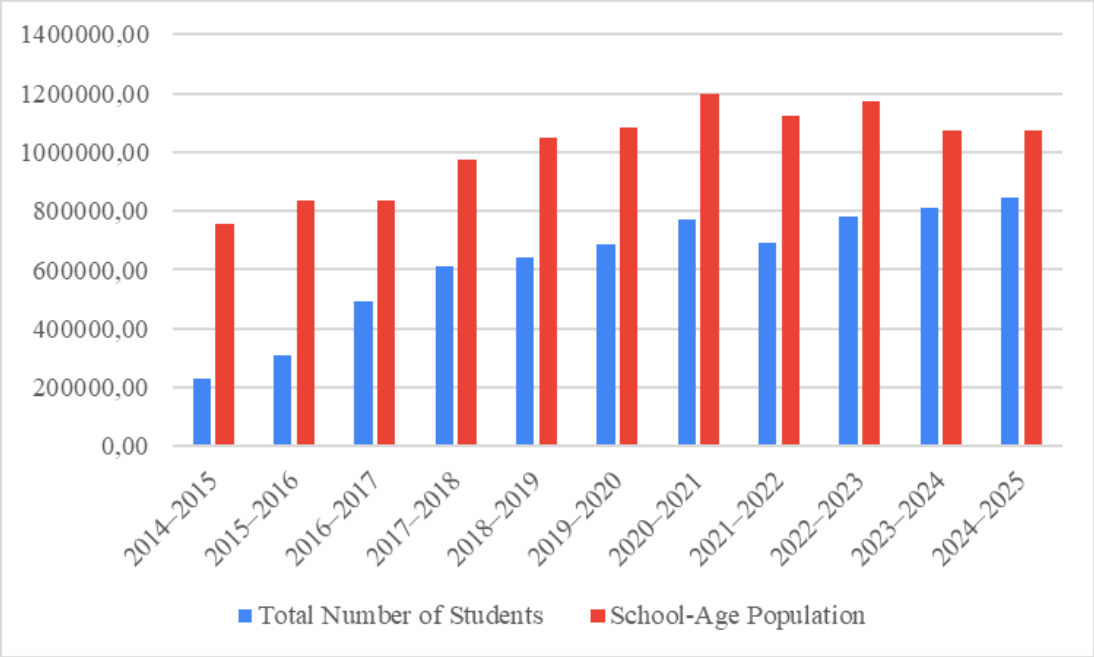


Figure 10. Schooling Data of Syrian Students Under Temporary Protection in Türkiye by Academic Year (2014–2025). *Prepared by the author based on data from the Directorate General for Lifelong Learning (MoNE, 2025).*

Türkiye's humanitarian aid policies toward Syrian refugees initially relied on a high-standard service model delivered through the Ministry of Interior-affiliated Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (*Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı*, AFAD)-managed camps, which provided shelter, healthcare, education, and access to

basic needs. Nevertheless, the sustainability of this system has been constrained by structural limitations and insufficient international support. The 25 camps operated by AFAD were described by UNHCR as delivering high standards and were presented as examples with their clean and secure infrastructure and educational accessibility. Still, in contrast to the traditional UN camp model, Türkiye adopted a "non-camp" strategy, shouldering the financial burden independently while also positioning this model as a critique of international response systems. While the implementation of electronic food vouchers (e-vouchers) within camps resulted in a food consumption score of 97%, which is a notably high performance, nearly 2.9 million refugees living outside camps were largely left to the goodwill of civil society (UNHCR & UNDP, 2016). Public support mechanisms targeting this population were inconsistent and inadequate, and assistance was mainly channeled through local NGOs and faith-based organizations such as IHH (IGAM, 2013). However, these volunteer-driven efforts lacked institutional sustainability. Although the PMM claims that it aimed to determine common areas of work with NGOs in the formation of policies in the social integration process and to encourage NGOs to cooperate among themselves on the social integration processes of foreigners, and despite their critical contributions, NGOs played a limited role in policymaking processes (PMM, n.d.; UNHCR & UNDP, 2016). After 2016, regulatory changes severely restricted field access, including protocol requirements and the need for provincial approval. As a result, while service-oriented NGOs were accommodated, rights-based organizations faced increasing constraints (IGAM, 2013).

In order to strengthen a moral-religious sense of care, hygiene, wound care, and physical therapy services were provided to elderly individuals, bedridden people, and unaccompanied minors. However, psychosocial support remained limited, especially outside the camps, and NGOs only partially filled these gaps. Structural deficiencies in healthcare and nutrition services were evident, with stunting rates among children at 17.5%, underweight at 7.8%, and wasting at 3.8% (SGDD, 2021). These figures persisted even among households with higher income levels. The lack of access to dietitian services, and the fact that nearly 50% of nutritional supplements fall outside the national health insurance coverage has made malnutrition a persistent threat (Refugees Association, 2024).

While Türkiye's refugee policy from 2011 to 2016 was initially rooted in humanitarian motivations, the country increasingly voiced strong criticism against the UNSC and the EU for failing to share responsibility. President Erdoğan's speeches positioned Türkiye as a "Revisionist" actor challenging the status quo of the international system. However, this rhetorical stance did not translate into transformative leverage over global refugee governance; thus, the Revisionist role's performance remained largely symbolic. Although Türkiye spent over $5 billion on refugee-related expenditures by 2015, it received only around $300 million in international aid. Moreover, of the 928,800 individuals targeted for support by 2016, only 324,680 were reached in the first quarter of that year (UNHCR & UNDP, 2016). Similarly, of the €3 billion fund pledged under the EU-Türkiye agreement, only €677 million had been disbursed by the end of 2016 (Şimşek & Çorabatır, 2016).

These figures highlight the gap between Türkiye's expectations and the level of international commitment delivered. This difference strengthened Türkiye's burden-sharing critique and reinforced its perception of being left alone to manage the crisis. Humanitarian aid programs reached only about 150,000 out of nearly 3 million urban refugees, revealing that international assistance failed to address the real magnitude of the challenge on the ground. As of 2024, only 41% of the $1.779 billion requested by UNHCR for Syria-related operations had been funded, indicating that Türkiye's longstanding criticisms of the international aid system remain valid and that its Revisionist discourse continues to lack substantial material support (UNHCR, 2024).

Local municipalities were left with insufficient financial and administrative resources, further limiting the operationalization of structural reform narratives (UNHCR, 2024). Although there were significant successes in camp-based services, international support for urban refugees remained limited. This gap, while reinforcing Türkiye's self-reliant rhetoric, also highlighted its failure to develop sustainable, long-term solutions. The extended restriction of access to camps for international NGOs and UNHCR further exemplifies a strategy of resisting external intervention, thereby reinforcing Türkiye's critical position within the global refugee regime. Lastly, the resettlement of only 9309 individuals to EU countries by 2016 clearly shows the disconnect between Türkiye's expectations and the international community's actions,

and it also provides evidence of its discontent and justifies its Revisionist stance (IOM, 2017).

To summarize, during this period, Türkiye's role performance revealed both normative ambition and institutional limitation. It is important to note that the enactment of the LFIP and TP Regulation indicated a turning point in establishing a legal framework for the Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Moreover, the establishment of the PMM and the increasing institutional capacity of migration management also demonstrated a willingness to institutionalize the response to the crisis. However, the gap between the postponed legal and infrastructure responses and the morally grounded Defender of the Faith role rhetoric emphasizes the difficulties in coordinating national role conceptions with sustainable role performance. Similarly, the Revisionist role's criticism of the international system gained rhetorical importance but little practical reciprocity.

3.2. Second Period: July 2016-March 2020

After 2016, there was a significant shift in Türkiye's foreign policy toward Syrian refugees. The resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the failed coup attempt of July 15 significantly influenced Türkiye's security paradigm and led to a shift in foreign policy discourse from a narrative of humanitarian responsibility to one focused on regional security (Lüleci-Sula and Sula, 2021). During this period, Türkiye's national role conceptions increasingly aligned with Holsti's typologies of the "Regional Protector" and the "Active Independent." As previously discussed in Chapter II, these roles not only redefined Türkiye's image in the Syrian refugee inflow context but also shaped its role performance across multiple policy areas.

The most visible reflection of the Regional Protector role in Türkiye's role performance was the initiation and consolidation of cross-border military operations. Starting with Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016, followed by Operation Olive Branch in 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces expanded their engagement in northern Syria with a dual objective: to secure the border region from the perceived threat of the PKK/YPG and ISIS and to create "safe zones" that could facilitate the voluntary return of Syrian refugees.

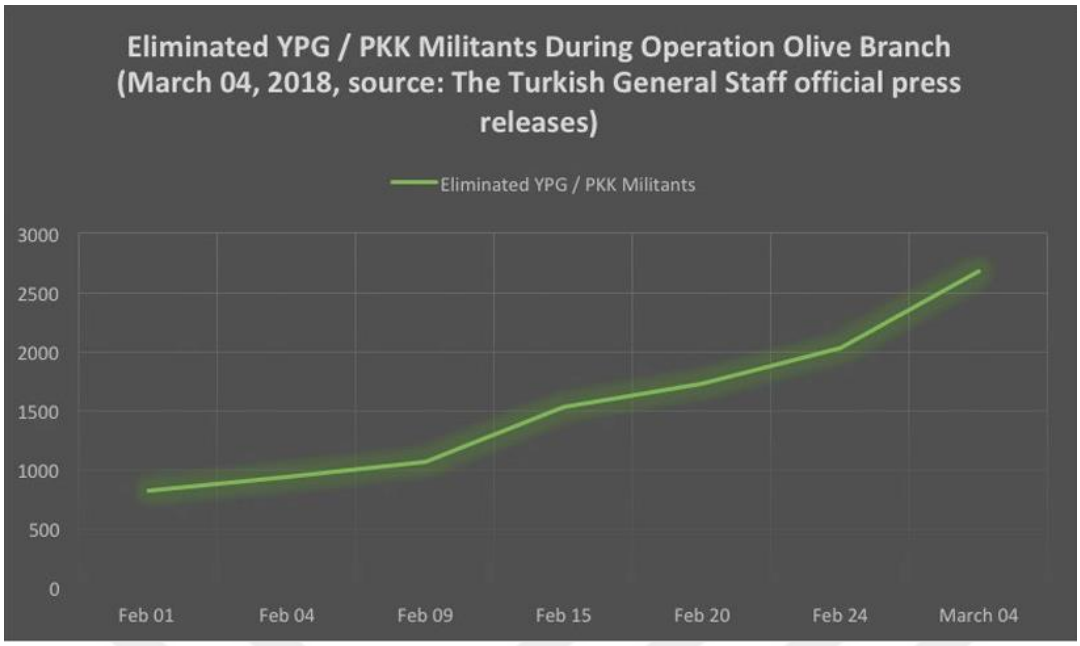


Figure 11. Number of YPG/PKK Militants Eliminated during Operation Olive Branch (February 1 – March 4, 2018) *Source: Turkish General Staff official press releases, as cited in Kasapoğlu & Ülgen (2018).*

According to official figures from the Directorate of Communications Office (2025), these operations led to the creation of de facto buffer zones in areas such as Jarabulus, Afrin, and Tel Abyad, which were later equipped with basic infrastructure, including housing, hospitals, and schools. Furthermore, the securitization of migration governance was not limited to foreign operations. Domestically, Türkiye's discourse shifted from humanitarian assistance to border protection, demographic management, and national unity. This change was also evident in the internal restructuring of migration-related institutions. The Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), formerly DGMM, expanded its operational scope by increasing the number of Removal Centers (*Geri Gönderme Merkezleri*) and enhancing border control mechanisms, particularly at the southeastern frontier. The language of "voluntary return" became more prominent, though critics argued that the distinction between voluntary and coerced return remained blurred in practice (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

In parallel, the rise of the Active Independent role became evident in Türkiye's increasingly assertive stance toward traditional allies, particularly the US and the EU. President Erdoğan's speeches during this period frequently criticized the US for

supporting the YPG, which was labeled by Ankara as the Syrian branch of the PKK, and condemned the EU for failing to fulfill its financial commitments under the EU-Türkiye Statement of March 2016. While the agreement promised €6 billion in aid and visa liberalization in exchange for Türkiye's role in preventing irregular migration to Europe, Turkish officials repeatedly claimed that the EU was not respecting the spirit of the deal. During this period, Türkiye's position within the EU-Türkiye migration regime also became increasingly disputed, especially in the debate about designating Türkiye as a "safe third country." In this context, according to the European Commission (n.d.), a safe third country refers to non-EU states that treat persons under protection by international standards, which include protecting their lives and liberties without discrimination based on their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Despite the March 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement's proposal for burden-sharing cooperation, the actual implementation revealed considerable imbalances in expectations and obligations. According to İçduygu and Millet (2016), the assumption that Türkiye could provide sustainable protection to all categories of asylum seekers was institutionally premature and politically motivated. They claimed that this statement is aimed at externalizing EU border control rather than addressing the structural issues of refugee integration. Moreover, labeling Türkiye as a safe third country contradicted its migration discourse, which still emphasized the temporariness of protection for Syrians under the TP regime. Even though Türkiye offers fundamental rights to Syrians under temporary protection, the lack of integration mechanisms, citizenship pathways, and legal certainty renders the safe third country description problematic. Legal experts have also pointed out the differences in terms of reports about arbitrary detentions, deportations, and gaps in legal remedies between EU standards of protection and Türkiye's implementation practices, especially (Amnesty International, 2020). Consequently, the safe third country concept appeared to be more of a political tool rather than a reflection of actual protection standards. This conflict made Türkiye's role as a central gatekeeper in EU external migration policy and a state that deals with its internal refugee crisis even more complicated.

Despite these grievances, Türkiye continued to shoulder the largest refugee population in the world during this period. According to UNHCR's 2019 statistics, the number of

Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye exceeded 3.6 million. Although the number of refugees arriving in Türkiye started to decline between 2016 and 2020, the problem of integrating such a sizable population, the majority of whom had now been in the country for more than five years, persisted. Access to formal employment was expanded via work permit regulations issued in 2016; however, bureaucratic barriers and high employer costs limited widespread implementation. Most Syrians continued to work informally in agriculture, construction, and textile sectors, often under exploitative conditions (İçduygu & Millet, 2016). At the same time, efforts toward social cohesion were increasingly dominated by growing public resentment and political instrumentalization. Anti-refugee sentiment began to be voiced more openly, particularly in urban centers where competition over housing and labor intensified. Local municipalities, especially in Istanbul and Ankara, began to introduce restrictions on the residency of Syrians and demanded clearer central policies on integration and return. Although these local measures were not always aligned with the national strategy, they revealed the pressure on the central government to navigate the fine line between domestic discontent and international obligations.

In conclusion, there was a remarkable alignment between Türkiye's changing national role conceptions and its role performance during the second period. Türkiye employed direct interventionist actions as a Regional Protector. It adopted an active stance in addressing both the refugee crisis and the security framework of the border regions. Moreover, as an Active Independent actor, Türkiye has progressively prioritized its own security and geopolitical goals over the unity of its alliances, particularly in its confrontational diplomacy with the EU and NATO. Although institutional progress was shown by legal and infrastructure measures like the PMM's expansion and the implementation of work permit regulations, the rise in securitized rhetoric and conflicting return policies points to a conflict between Türkiye's protectionist stance and its commitments to integrate refugees and uphold their rights.

3.3. Third Period: March 2020–December 2024

The final period, from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, represents a phase of intensifying contradictions in Türkiye’s role performance. In this period, the dominant national role conception

remained as the Regional Protector, however, this period also experienced the revitalization of Revisionist and Defender of the Faith roles, alongside the gradual emergence of a Developer role. These roles were reflected in Türkiye's foreign policy and migration governance in both rhetorical and operational terms. The alignment between Türkiye's national role conceptions and role performance became more inconsistent as the country's economic difficulties, anti-immigrant sentiment, and nationalist pressures increased. During this period, economic challenges, growing unemployment, and inflation intensified public frustration, and eventually, the Syrians were increasingly portrayed as scapegoats. Most significantly, the ZP gained the highest visibility with its anti-immigrant stance. The party centered its political discourse almost entirely around the perceived threat of Syrians, and it framed their presence as a national security issue and a burden on the welfare system. Slogans such as *"Suriyeliler gidecek"* ("Syrians will go") became part of mainstream political debates, and the party's growing popularity pushed the refugee crisis to the top of the national agenda (Euronews, 2023).

It is worth noting that even though Türkiye's role performance was relatively less assertive in this period compared to the previous one, the Regional Protector role continued to shape Türkiye's migration and security policies. In contrast to the second period, which was characterized by aggressive cross-border military operations and a rapid expansion of safe zones, the third period focused more on establishing control over previously secured areas rather than on initiating new operations. While the government has continued to maintain a military presence in northern Syria, the pace of operations has slowed, and focus has moved to efforts at stability and rehabilitation. As a result, the performance of the Regional Protector role transformed from demonstrating military dominance to sustaining long-term support through stability and infrastructural developments. In addition to strengthening the overlap with its emerging Developer position, this more restrained but calculated stance allowed Türkiye to concentrate on governance, reconstruction, and voluntary return policies.

The most visible outcome of Türkiye's Developer performance during this period was the continuation and expansion of reconstruction efforts in northern Syria. Building upon the military control established in previous operations, Türkiye invested in infrastructure projects, including the construction of brick housing units in partnership

with civil society organizations and Qatari funding. By the end of 2024, 116,731 brick houses had been completed and delivered to Syrian residents in the region as part of Türkiye's strategy to facilitate voluntary return through improved living conditions (AFAD, 2024, p. 85). These efforts were supported by civil society partnerships and international collaboration, particularly with Qatar, as noted in official statements (Anadolu Ajansı, 2023). The reconstruction initiative was framed by the Turkish government as both a humanitarian responsibility and a strategic contribution to regional stability. In addition to housing projects, 110,000 tons of flour and 145,000 food packages were also shipped to meet the basic needs of the population in these territories (AFAD, 2024, p. 85). These initiatives align with Türkiye's long-term policy goal of supporting post-conflict recovery while strengthening its presence and influence in northern Syria. Furthermore, according to a recent publication about Erdoğan's peace diplomacy regarding Syria (2025), these projects aimed to accommodate up to one million Syrians in newly developed settlements. This effort was framed not only as a humanitarian mission but also as a precondition for securing Türkiye's borders and stabilizing the region.

Türkiye began to propose its involvement in northern Syria as a long-term commitment to post-conflict reconstruction and institutional development, which extended beyond security concerns. In controlled areas, municipal-style administrative systems were implemented, with local councils controlling education and law enforcement supported by the Turkish government. Holsti's concept of the Developer role, which refers to a state that assumes the responsibility of assisting weaker actors in their political and economic recovery, is enhanced by these measures.

Furthermore, Türkiye emphasized the principle of voluntary and dignified return, and President Erdoğan constantly stated that Türkiye would never pursue forced deportation. Instead, the government would promote return through infrastructure, safety, and the restoration of essential services in areas like Jarabulus, Tal Abyad, and Afrin. According to the reports of the Turkish Ministry of Interior (2024), between 2020 and 2024, over 620,000 Syrians returned to northern Syria under voluntary repatriation programs. Nevertheless, some of the international organizations raised concerns regarding the voluntariness of these returns. They highlight the instances of

possible pressure, arbitrary detention, and lack of transparency in repatriation procedures (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

During this period, with a deepened dissatisfaction regarding the international system, Türkiye's Revisionist role became visible. The government went on to blame Western actors for their failure to fulfill their burden-sharing obligations. Although the EU-Türkiye Statement included financial aid promises, Turkish officials claimed that they did not receive all the funds, and Türkiye carried a disproportionate share of the refugee burden. In addition, Türkiye began to utilize its migration diplomacy as a form of leverage and warned the international community that if Türkiye does not receive adequate support, it would no longer act as a buffer zone for Europe. This ultimatum was not only limited to Türkiye's bilateral relations but also became an essential theme in its international relations. As a result, Türkiye's Revisionist role has extended from a discursive criticism to an active strategy that aims to renegotiate its role within global migration governance. On the other hand, domestically, Türkiye's approach toward the Syrian refugee crisis became securitized and reactive. The anti-immigrant sentiment intensified by the economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly high inflation, housing shortages, and unemployment. The establishment of ZP as a far-right, anti-immigrant political party also institutionalized this resentment and framed the Syrian refugees' presence as a threat to national sovereignty and economic stability. As a result, Türkiye started to implement stricter measures on mobility, residency permits, and labor market access for Syrians within its territory. Even though these actions were sometimes justified as administrative necessities, they proposed a shift toward a more restrictive and surveillance-oriented migration management.

Another critical point is that Türkiye's Defender of the Faith national role reemerged and took a new form. The role previously was shaped by references to the Ottoman legacy, Islamic brotherhood, and shared cultural heritage. Nevertheless, during this period, President Erdoğan directly emphasized the protection of Muslims in the face of rising Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia. His speeches also underscore the importance of intercultural understanding and warn the international community against discrimination against the refugee populations based on their religious or ethnic identity. At international conferences, Türkiye presented itself as the moral

defender of the oppressed Muslim communities and the promoter of cultural diplomacy and humanitarian aid. However, sometimes the image of the foreign policy is contradicted by the anti-immigrant sentiment in the country since the Syrian refugee crisis became increasingly politicized. Consequently, during this period, the Defender of the Faith role was defined relatively narrowly, and its practice was also inconsistent.

Ultimately, the third period proposes a multi-layered and damaged role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. On the one hand, Türkiye continued to pursue its strategic interests in northern Syria. It signaled the Developer role's responsibility for post-conflict governance and operationalized its Regional Protector role through military efforts. On the other hand, domestic economic challenges and rising anti-immigrant sentiment prompted the Turkish government to adopt more exclusionary practices. This two-track approach highlights Türkiye's increasing capacity to adapt its role performance in line with different and changing conditions, and it also points out the structural challenges between its normative approach and regional strategies.

3.4. Periodical Comparison of Role Performance

This chapter presented a comparative and chronological analysis of Türkiye's role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between 2011 and 2024. It aimed to understand to what extent Türkiye's foreign policy actions affected its national role conceptions. To achieve this, a variety of indicators are used, including legal regulations, implemented policies, institutional developments, and cross-border strategic operations. The analysis showed that Türkiye's role performance is not static or consistent. Instead, it tends to transform in response to shifting regional dynamics, domestic politics, and ideological narratives rooted in national identity and moral responsibility.

In both international and domestic policymaking, Türkiye's national role conceptions help shape expectations for behavior and serve as a guiding framework. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrated that the performance of these roles varied across three periods. On highly strategic occasions or during crisis responses, the role performance aligns more closely with the discourse. However, on other occasions, significant gaps

become visible between the discourse and performance. These fluctuations highlight the difficulties arising from the country's institutional capacity, its regional and international alliances, and domestic pressures. To comprehend this variation more systematically, Table 2 presents a comparative overview of Türkiye's role conceptions, expected implementations and policies, and the degree of alignment across the three time periods.

This study provides a three-tier categorization to describe the degree of alignment in evaluating the relationship between discourse and performance. A moderate alignment refers to cases where national role conceptions were only partially displaced in practice due to institutional or contextual limitations. A high alignment indicates a strong and coherent consistency between Türkiye's discursive commitments and its implemented policies. Finally, a low alignment refers to the simultaneous pursuit of multiple national roles, which may result in inconsistencies or internal contradictions in practice. In other words, when Türkiye adopts different policies not based on the definitions of its multiple roles but on its benefits, a low alignment emerged. The difference that seperates this type of alignment from the moderate alignment is that moderate alignment contains partiality and a framed policy implementing based the role that the state adopted. However, low alignment refers to the times when multiple roles a state adopted do not fully correspond to its policies and practices and the state tends to adopt mixed and contradictory policies according to its interests.

Table 2. Comparative Summary of Türkiye's Role Conceptions and Role Performance Across Three Periods (2011–2024). *Author's own elaboration based on legal, institutional, and policy data.*

Period	**Role Conceptions**	**Expected Implementation**	**Implemented Policies**	**Degree of Alignment**
March 2011–July 2016	Defender of the Faith, Revisionist	Open-door policy, historical responsibility, critique of the West	TP Regulation, camp-based model, rhetorical pressure on the EU	Moderate

July 2016–March 2020	Regional Protector, Active Independent	Military intervention, safe zones, unilateral strategy	Cross-border operations, criticism of EU and US	High
March 2020–Dec 2024	Regional Protector, Developer, Revisionist Defender of the Faith	Return infrastructure, economic burden-sharing discourse, prestige signaling	Brick housing projects, integration, justice dilemma, increasing domestic restrictions	Low

During the first period, Türkiye's actions were shaped mainly by humanitarian concerns and religious values. The government adopted an open-door policy and described Syrians as "guests," which promotes its moral and historical responsibility and aligns with the Defender of the Faith role. At the same time, Türkiye also showed signs of a Revisionist approach and criticized the West for being inadequate and insufficient. Nevertheless, since there was no strong legal or institutional framework in place initially, many of these goals could not be fully implemented. The introduction of the LFIP and the TP Regulation in 2014 marked a critical turning point; however, it did not fully close the gap. Therefore, this period demonstrates a moderate level of alignment between Türkiye's national role conceptions and its role performance.

The second period presented a shift from Defender of the Faith toward Regional Protector and Active Independent roles. This shift was complemented by cross-border military operations, the creation of buffer zones, and a self-dependent approach to migration management. During this period, Türkiye prioritized national security and sovereignty over humanitarian diplomacy and also started to challenge the commitments of its traditional allies and international partners. With this insight, it can be claimed that this period was a relatively more apparent confirmation and presents a high degree of alignment between Türkiye's national role conceptions and its role performance.

Lastly, the third period demonstrated a complex and layered role performance of Türkiye. First of all, even though the Regional Protector continued to be the most

dominant role, the cross-border military operations slowed down. Instead, they were replaced by reconstruction efforts and support for voluntary returns. Secondly, the Developer role became more apparent through infrastructure projects, such as the brick house project in northern Syria. Furthermore, Türkiye also reemerged in its Revisionist and Defender of the Faith roles by criticizing the international system for not being sufficient and speaking out against Islamophobia and discrimination toward refugees. In other words, on one hand, Türkiye deepened its engagement in northern Syria through reconstruction efforts, supported the voluntary return of Syrians, and maintained its protectionist approach toward the region. On the other hand, challenges in domestic politics arising from the economic fragilities and the rise of anti-immigrant nationalist sentiment led to exclusionary practices and a securitized approach toward migration policies. As a result, Türkiye's role performance during this period can be best described as low aligned, since the implementation of multiple roles sometimes overlapped but was not always consistent.

Ultimately, from the beginning of the Syrian Civil War to the fall of the Assad regime, Türkiye’s role performance has displayed a dynamic approach that includes strategic and geopolitical ambitions, normative obligations derived from historical and ideational narratives, and challenges posed by its domestic politics. The level of alignment between Türkiye’s national role conceptions and role performance fluctuates throughout the periods and is shaped by this dynamic approach. Although Türkiye frequently attempts to change its position in the international system by making ambitious rhetorical claims, its implementation of policies appears to be inconsistent, selective, and reactionary at times.

The following chapter synthesizes and finalizes the results obtained from the previous chapters and offers a comprehensive reflection on the degree of alignment between Türkiye’s national role conceptions and its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. In addition, it also discusses contemporary debates on voluntary return and the transforming dynamics of Türkiye’s relations with the post-Assad Syrian administration.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This final chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the thesis by synthesizing the results from both the discursive and empirical analyses of the level of alignment between Türkiye's national role conception and its role performance during the Syrian refugee crisis from 2011 to 2024. The chapter begins with the main research question, and it evaluates to what extent Türkiye's self-defined roles have been translated into practices and affected its approach to migration policies across three periods. The chapter then outlines the recent developments following the collapse of the Assad regime and the emergence of a new political order in Syria. It also examines the contemporary debates surrounding the voluntary return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Finally, the chapter concludes with theoretical reflections on this thesis and its potential contributions to the literature, particularly in terms of its methodology and debates in foreign policy analysis.

4.1. General Findings and Synthesis

This sub-chapter synthesizes the key findings of the thesis by comparing the discursive and empirical analyses presented in the previous chapters to answer the main research question: "To what extent does Türkiye's national role conception align with its role performance in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis between 2011 and 2024?" Therefore, it evaluates the degree of alignment between Türkiye's national role conceptions and its role performance across three critical periods of the Syrian refugee crisis: March 2011 to July 2016, July 2016 to March 2020, and March 2020 to December 2024.

The findings indicate that Türkiye's national role conceptions evolved in response to shifting domestic, regional, and global contexts. During the first period, from March

2011 to July 2016, Türkiye's self-definition as a Defender of the Faith and a Revisionist actor was rooted in a strong moral discourse and emphasized religious solidarity, historical brotherhood, and dissatisfaction with the international community's inaction. However, while its humanitarian rhetoric, historical references to the Ottoman legacy, and open-door policy correspond to its Defender of the Faith role, Türkiye lacked a coherent legal and institutional framework in the early years of the crisis. On the one hand, foundational laws like the LFIP and TP Regulation eventually addressed legal gaps; on the other hand, the delay in institutional capacity-building and the informal status of refugees limited full implementation. Furthermore, Türkiye also openly expressed its dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate support from the international community, which reflected a Revisionist position. Türkiye constantly challenged the fairness and effectiveness of the global refugee governance system. However, these criticisms mostly took the form of political statements rather than policy changes. Therefore, this resulted in a moderate level of alignment between discourse and practice.

In the second period, from July 2016 to March 2020, a significant shift occurred. Particularly following the failed coup attempt on 15th July and growing concerns about border security, Türkiye's foreign policy became more securitized and autonomous. The Regional Protector and Active Independent roles became more dominant, and it resulted in cross-border military operations, the establishment of buffer zones, and an assertive tone toward the EU and the US. This period demonstrated a strong consistency between how it defined its role and how it acted in practice, and it showed a high degree of alignment.

The third period, from March 2020 to December 2024, brought increased complexity. While the Regional Protector role continued through ongoing control over northern Syrian territories, Türkiye increasingly acted as a Developer state through reconstruction projects and voluntary return initiatives. At the same time, the Revisionist and Defender of the Faith roles have reemerged, particularly in Türkiye's religious solidarity claims and its critiques of international burden-sharing. However, domestic economic pressures, rising anti-refugee sentiment, and nationalist political mobilization caused Türkiye to implement restrictive migration policies. Consequently, it made its humanitarian image less coherent. As such, this period is

best described as having a low alignment, where multiple and sometimes contradictory roles were performed in parallel.

According to the empirical results of this thesis, Turkish foreign policy identity has been quite flexible; however, pragmatic considerations have also sometimes limited its scope. While Türkiye's national role conceptions consistently emphasized moral responsibility, regional leadership, and system-level critique, the degree of implementation has varied significantly based on its institutional capacity, domestic political challenges, and external diplomatic constraints. Therefore, Türkiye's engagement with the Syrian refugee crisis can be best understood as a dynamic negotiation between ideational narratives and political realities.

4.2. Contemporary Reflections: Syrians' Voluntary Return and Türkiye–Syria Relations

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 was a turning point not only for Syria's internal political trajectory but also for Türkiye's long-standing Syrian refugee crisis. After the regime change, as a neighboring country with a significant military presence in northern Syria and host to over three million Syrian refugees, Türkiye has found itself at the center of changing regional dynamics. The collapse of the Ba'athist rule and the rise of a caretaker government under HTS created a new political landscape in Damascus; however, the implications for Türkiye remain uncertain and multifaceted. The fall of the Assad regime has indeed generated cautious optimism for the potential return of millions of displaced Syrians. According to UNHCR 2025 data, more than 302,000 Syrian refugees returned between December 2024 and March 2025, alongside over 885,000 IDPs who made their way back home. While these numbers suggest the beginning of a possible transition, they conceal deeper questions: Are returns truly safe? What awaits those who return? Is Syria genuinely ready to receive them after years of destruction? Building upon the periodical synthesis of Türkiye's role conception and role performance, this sub-chapter turns to contemporary developments that have the potential to reshape Türkiye's migration strategy in light of the recent regime change in Syria and the evolving discourse on voluntary return.

Since December 2024, Türkiye has further intensified its emphasis on voluntary return as a central pillar of its migration diplomacy. Official statements indicate that the country views this new phase in Syria's political landscape as a potential turning point for advancing long-standing return objectives. According to Turkish Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, as of mid-2025, over one million Syrians have returned to their homeland under voluntary return schemes coordinated by Turkish authorities, particularly to regions in northern Syria that have been stabilized through military operations and infrastructure projects (PMM, 2025). Türkiye continues to describe these returns as voluntary, safe, and dignified. The government aims to distinguish its policy from forced deportation practices and tries to align it with its commitment to international norms. This approach also has drawn international recognition. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, recently stated that "there is much to learn from Türkiye regarding its approach to voluntary return," particularly in relation to its field-based coordination, infrastructure efforts, and emphasis on informed choice and humanitarian principles (PMM, 2025). These developments present Türkiye's desire to centralize its role as a regional security actor in post-conflict stabilization and a humanitarian leader in global migration governance. However, the sustainability of this approach remains uncertain due to the changing security situation in Syria and the extent to which the safe zones offer long-term safety, legal guarantees, and socioeconomic reintegration.

One of the most essential questions about post-Assad Syria has been the feasibility of massive voluntary returns. Under international law, the right to return is a fundamental human right. However, the application of this right depends on specific conditions. As of December 16, 2024, UNHCR indicated that returns should be voluntary, safe, and dignified. It also emphasized that refugees should only return after having accurate and complete information about the situation in their areas of origin. According to UNHCR's latest assessment, these criteria have not yet been fully met in Syria. Despite the fall of the regime, large portions of the population remain in need of humanitarian assistance, infrastructure is still damaged, and shelter and safety conditions remain unstable.

For more than a decade, Türkiye's perspective toward the return of Syrians has been a strategic and moral objective that aligns with its national security interests and regional

political demands. The government has consistently emphasized that voluntary return would only occur under safe, dignified, and voluntary conditions. Nevertheless, the definition of what constitutes "voluntary" remains uncertain. According to international humanitarian organizations, returns often take place in conditions of economic insecurity, legal ambiguity, and social pressure. These conditions consequently blur the line between voluntariness and coercion (Al-Khalili & Gatter, 2025). For example, despite Türkiye's official framing of returns as voluntary, legal rulings also suggest that this discourse is not always supported by practice. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), in its landmark Akkad v. Türkiye case dated 21 June 2022. The Court ruled that the return of a Syrian national under temporary protection was a violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The applicant, Muhammad Fawzi Akkad, was detained in 2018 and allegedly forced to sign documents authorizing his return to Syria under the label of "voluntary return." The Court found that Akkad was not adequately informed about the risks in his country of origin and was not given a genuine opportunity to challenge his removal. Moreover, the Court emphasized that even the possibility of ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, or inhuman conditions in Syria was enough to constitute a violation of the Convention. The judgment further clarified that unless returns are based on informed consent, carried out with full transparency, and subject to effective legal oversight, they risk amounting to constructive refoulement (Bayraktaroğlu Özçelik, 2024). This case thus raises significant concerns about the credibility and voluntariness of Türkiye's return procedures, particularly when Syrians are under administrative detention or face pressure from provincial authorities.

Beyond the legal and procedural concerns surrounding the voluntariness of return, the broader socio-economic conditions in Syria also pose significant obstacles to sustainable reintegration. Economically, Syria remains fragile. Nearly 90% of the population lives below the poverty line, and 70% is in need of immediate humanitarian assistance. In such a context, sending families back could result in significant challenges while they are rebuilding their lives. Even though some regions show a level of economic recovery, the Western sanctions continue to restrict broader stabilization efforts. Infrastructural devastation remains another major problem as well. Housing, transportation, and healthcare and education services are either mostly

damaged or non-functional. Access to clean water, electricity, and medical care is limited in many areas. The decision by US President Donald Trump in early 2025 to suspend humanitarian aid had a spillover effect and disabled around 90% of the operations supporting Syrians both in and outside of Syria. In the education sector, the situation is also particularly alarming. A generation of children has been deprived of formal schooling, and thousands of schools remain in ruins. On the other hand, encouragingly, the new administration in Damascus has included an educational reform process in the new constitution. This reform aims to ensure gender equity and include religious education in a more pluralistic and inclusive framework. However, these reforms are still in their early stages and far from meeting the current scale of needs. Although security has relatively improved since the regime change, fragmented armed control and continuing Israeli military operations contribute to a fragile environment. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has raised these concerns and warned that Syria is not yet ready to receive large-scale returns safely (Al-Khalili & Gatter, 2025).

Türkiye's role in facilitating return has been especially visible through the development of infrastructure in northern Syria. The construction of over 100,000 brick housing units, supported by Turkish civil society organizations and international donors such as Qatar, represents an ambitious effort to create conditions favorable for return. The brick house settlements are presented as humanitarian projects and tools of migration diplomacy. Therefore, it offers Türkiye leverage in both the domestic and international arenas. At the same time, these efforts have raised questions regarding the long-term demographic, political, and legal status of these Turkish-influenced zones. Furthermore, the nature of Türkiye's relations with the new administration is another important aspect. Although HTS appears to be a controversial actor due to its Islamist background, Türkiye has engaged with its leadership pragmatically. However, whether this engagement can be translated into formal diplomatic recognition or institutional cooperation remains uncertain. In this context, Türkiye's presence in Syria has shifted from reactive military campaigns to a more strategic effort to become an essential actor in the region's post-conflict governance. Moreover, domestically, the possibility of the voluntary return of the Syrians has gained momentum due to rising anti-immigrant sentiment, economic challenges, and electoral pressures. Political

parties such as ZP have built their agendas almost entirely around anti-refugee rhetoric, and this sentiment has influenced mainstream discourse. With this insight, Türkiye's commitment to voluntary return has become more of a domestic political imperative than just a foreign policy agenda. Balancing international legal obligations with domestic expectations will likely continue to be one of the Turkish government's most significant challenges in the coming years.

The voluntary return of the Syrian refugees is not simply a physical crossing of borders; it is also a multidimensional process of reintegration into a society that has undergone deep trauma. For a country emerging from five decades of authoritarian rule and over a decade of war, reconstruction requires time, trust, and inclusive governance. Therefore, host countries must avoid coercion and uphold the right of the Syrians to free movement. Voluntary return should not be politically instrumentalized; rather, it should be a pathway to dignity, not danger. In this light, Syria's reconstruction is not only a national responsibility but an international one. It is essential for the international community to provide political, economic, and moral support to ensure the return process aligns with human dignity. In addition, Israel's ongoing military actions must also be recognized as obstacles to stabilization. Without accountability for such interventions, long-term peace will remain elusive. The fall of the Assad regime is indeed a turning point. Nevertheless, it must not be misread as an immediate green light for forced or premature return. Returns will only be meaningful and lasting when the conditions in Syria truly support voluntary, safe, and dignified return. The desire of Syrians to return home should be matched with a serious international commitment to rebuild lives, restore rights, and provide hope. Only then can this new chapter be a beginning, not a repetition of past suffering.

Ultimately, the future of Türkiye-Syria relations and of refugee return will depend on several unpredictable factors: the stability and legitimacy of the new Syrian administration, the evolution of Türkiye's political landscape, and the degree of support provided by international actors. Türkiye's national role conceptions as a protector, a moral actor, a regional power, and a challenger to global actors will continue to shape its actions. However, the effectiveness of these roles in the new era will depend on both the discourse and the country's ability to translate them into coherent and sustainable policies in the region.

4.3 Theoretical Reflections

The findings of this thesis contribute to further debates in foreign policy analysis by demonstrating how national role conceptions are both discursively constructed and strategically performed. The thesis has applied Holsti's role theory as a conceptual lens to understand the alignment between Türkiye's foreign policy-making and its practices and policies regarding the Syrian refugee crisis. With the help of categorizing Türkiye's foreign policy identity through national role conception, the results reinforce Holsti's claim that national role conception and role performance do not always align, and this difference sometimes derives from institutional, political, or systemic pressures. For example, during the first period, Türkiye presented its role as Defender of the Faith and emphasized its moral and historical obligations toward Syrians, as well as its commitment to religious solidarity. However, this position was not fully supported by long-term planning or a defined legal framework. In contrast, during the second period, when national security concerns were more dominant, Türkiye's actions were more consistent with its discourse. These differences demonstrate that a state's behavior does not always follow a single path, and it may change depending on its resources, capabilities, political needs, and international and regional conditions. Finally, this thesis also demonstrates that role theory can be quite helpful in understanding and connecting two key aspects of foreign policy: how a country perceives its own identity and how it presents its role in practice. This research brings these two sides together by analyzing leader speeches, laws and regulations, and military operations under one single framework. This approach provides a clearer understanding of how Türkiye balances its humanitarian diplomacy with its regional strategic interests.

This thesis also contributes to the foreign policy analysis literature methodologically by combining qualitative discourse analysis with empirical policy evaluation. The thesis analyzes 77 speeches delivered by President Erdoğan and compares them with legislative, institutional, and field-based data derived from international and civil society organizations. In this context, it demonstrates how a mixed-methods approach can provide a more layered understanding of state behavior, particularly in complex, multi-actor policy realms such as migration governance. At the same time, the study presents the limitations of role theory in explaining contradictions between discourse

and performance. Even though the theory offers a helpful guideline for understanding how states perceive and perform their roles, it provides limited insight into how these roles shift under institutional incapabilities, public pressure, or international inaction. Therefore, future studies may benefit from integrating role theory with complementary approaches, such as domestic politics or political economy models, to better explain policy implementation gaps.

In conclusion, the Syrian refugee crisis has not only challenged Türkiye's migration policies but also transformed its foreign policy identity and regional position. As the situation in Syria enters a new chapter after the fall of the Assad regime, Türkiye's next steps will likely involve an approach of balancing internal demands for the return of the Syrian refugees with expectations of humanitarian leadership. Whether Türkiye can sustain a sustainable role in this changing landscape will depend on its ability to adjust discourse with durable, inclusive, and rights-based policy outcomes. In this sense, the case of Türkiye illustrates a lesson for studies of foreign policy analysis: that states do not simply perform the roles they claim; they navigate them among competing pressures, evolving interests, and institutional limitations.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

1. Giriş

2011 yılında başlayan Suriye iç savaşı, 21. yüzyılın en büyük insani krizlerinden birine dönüşmüş ve milyonlarca kişinin yerinden edilmesine yol açmıştır. Bu süreçte en fazla etkilenen ülkelerin başında Türkiye gelmiş, yaklaşık 3,6 milyondan fazla Suriyeliye ev sahipliği yaparak dünyanın en büyük mülteci nüfusunu barındıran ülke konumuna yükselmiştir. Türkiye'nin bu krize verdiği tepki, yalnızca insani bir mesele değil; aynı zamanda dış politika kimliği, ulusal güvenlik algısı ve uluslararası sistemdeki konumunu yeniden tanımlayan bir süreç olmuştur.

Bu tezin temel amacı, 2011–2024 yılları arasında Türkiye'nin ulusal rol anlayışı *(national role conception)* ile rol performansı *(role performance)* arasındaki uyumu incelemektir. Başka bir ifadeyle, Türkiye'nin kendisini uluslararası sistemde nasıl konumlandırdığı ve bu konumlandırmayı dış politika pratiklerine ne ölçüde yansıttığı araştırılmaktadır. Bu analiz için Holsti'nin (1970) geliştirdiği Rol Kuramı kavramsal çerçeve olarak kullanılmıştır. Rol kuramı, devletlerin uluslararası sistemdeki davranışlarını yalnızca çıkar odaklı değil; aynı zamanda kendilerini nasıl tanımladıkları, hangi sorumlulukları üstlendikleri ve hangi değerleri korumayı amaçladıkları üzerinden de incelemeyi mümkün kılar.

Çalışmada şu araştırma sorusu merkeze alınmıştır: "Türkiye'nin ulusal rol anlayışı, Suriye mülteci krizi bağlamında 2011–2024 yılları arasında sergilediği rol performansı ile ne ölçüde örtüşmektedir?" Bu soruya yanıt ararken, kavramsal olarak "ulusal rol anlayışı" karar alıcıların devletlerinin uluslararası sistemde hangi rolleri oynaması gerektiğine dair tanımlarını ifade ederken; "rol performansı" ise bu rollerin fiili politika, kurum ve uygulamalara nasıl yansıdığını göstermektedir. Türkiye özelinde

bu ayrım, söylemsel düzeyde sergilenen "kardeşlik, insani sorumluluk, tarihi miras" vurgularının gerçekten yasal düzenlemelere, göç yönetimi kurumlarına ve sınır ötesi operasyonlara ne kadar dönüştüğünü anlamak açısından kritik bir önem taşımaktadır. Ayrıca, Türkiye üzerine yapılmış pek çok çalışma mülteci krizini güvenlik veya entegrasyon perspektifinden ele almıştır. Ancak bu tez, rol kuramı ekseninde söylem–performans ilişkisine odaklanarak literatürdeki boşluğu doldurmayı hedeflemektedir.

Tezin yöntemi iki ana bileşene dayanmaktadır. İlk olarak, Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın 2011–2024 yılları arasında yaptığı ve Suriye'ye doğrudan atıfta bulunan 77 konuşma nitel içerik analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. MAXQDA programı kullanılarak 2599 cümle kodlanmış ve bu söylemlerden öne çıkan ulusal rol anlayışları kategorize edilmiştir. İkinci olarak ise bu söylemler, hukuki düzenlemeler, ulusal mevzuat, uluslararası raporlar ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarının saha bulguları ile karşılaştırılarak ampirik düzeydeki rol performansı değerlendirilmiştir. Analiz kapsamında Türkiye'nin beş temel rol anlayışı belirlenmiştir:

1. İnanç Savunucusu *(Defender of the Faith)*: Dini ve ahlaki değerler üzerinden insani sorumluluğun vurgulanması.
2. Bölgesel Koruyucu *(Regional Protector)*: Sınır güvenliği ve bölgesel istikrara öncelik verilmesi.
3. Aktif Bağımsız *(Active Independent)*: Uluslararası aktörlerden bağımsız ve özerk bir dış politika yürütülmesi.
4. Revizyonist *(Revisionist)*: Uluslararası sistemin adaletsizliğine karşı eleştirel bir tutum geliştirilmesi.
5. Kalkınmacı *(Developer)*: Özellikle Suriye'nin kuzeyinde yeniden inşa ve gönüllü geri dönüş projeleriyle kalkınmaya destek olunması.

Bu roller, üç döneme ayrılarak incelenmiştir:

- Birinci Dönem (Mart 2011–Temmuz 2016): Suriyelilerin Türkiye'ye yaptığı ilk göç akınıyla başlayan; açık kapı politikası, insani diplomasi ve dini referansların ön planda olduğu ancak kurumsal altyapının sınırlı kaldığı dönem.

- İkinci Dönem (Temmuz 2016–Mart 2020): 15 Temmuz darbe girişimi ve Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun istifasıyla başlayan; güvenlik odaklı, askeri operasyonlarla desteklenen ve özerklik vurgusunun arttığı dönem.
- Üçüncü Dönem (Mart 2020–Aralık 2024): Pandemi dönemiyle başlayıp Başar Esad rejiminin çöküşüne kadar süren; ekonomik kriz, artan mülteci karşıtı söylem ve Suriyelilerin gönüllü geri dönüşü tartışmalarıyla şekillenen dönem.

Dolayısıyla giriş bölümünde ortaya konulduğu üzere, bu tez yalnızca Türkiye'nin Suriyeli mültecilere yaklaşımını değil; aynı zamanda dış politika kimliğinin dönüşümünü ve ulusal rol algısının iç ve dış politikadaki yansımalarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Türkiye'nin bu süreçte sergilediği söylem ve uygulamalar, insani diplomasi ile güvenlikçi stratejiler arasında sürekli bir denge arayışı olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

2. Türkiye'nin Suriye Mülteci Krizi Bağlamında Ulusal Rol Anlayışı

Bu bölüm, Türkiye'nin 2011–2024 yılları arasında Suriye mülteci krizi bağlamında benimsediği ulusal rol anlayışını söylem üzerinden incelemektedir. Holsti'nin rol kuramına dayanarak yapılan analizde, Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın mülteci krizine dair yaptığı 77 konuşma kodlanmış, toplamda 2599 cümle beş temel rol kategorisine ayrılmıştır: İnanç Savunucusu, Bölgesel Koruyucu, Aktif Bağımsız, Revizyonist ve Kalkınmacı. MAXQDA programında yapılan içerik analizi, her bir konuşmanın tematik kodlara ayrılmasıyla yürütülmüştür. Bu yöntem, söylemlerin yalnızca niceliksel yoğunluğunu değil, aynı zamanda dönemsel bağlamını da ortaya koymuştur. Böylece, Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliğinin zaman içinde nasıl evrildiği ve hangi bağlamlarda hangi rol anlayışlarının öne çıktığı ortaya konulmuştur.

2.1. Rol Dağılımının Genel Çerçevesi

Kodlama çıktıları, üç dönem arasında anlamlı farklılıklar göstermektedir. İlk dönemde (2011–2016) İnanç Savunucusu rolü baskınken (%66), ikinci dönemde (2016–2020) Bölgesel Koruyucu (%60) ve Aktif Bağımsız (%24) rolleri öne çıkmıştır. Üçüncü dönemde (2020–2024) ise Bölgesel Koruyucu rolü devam etmiş (%62), buna ek olarak Revizyonist (%11), İnanç Savunucusu (%10) ve Kalkınmacı (%5) rollerinin yeniden

güç kazandığı görülmüştür. Bu dağılım, Türkiye'nin söylemsel kimliğinin hem iç politikadaki kırılmalar hem de bölgesel ve uluslararası gelişmelerle birlikte sürekli yeniden şekillendiğini göstermektedir.

2.2. Birinci Dönem (Mart 2011–Temmuz 2016)

Suriye iç savaşının ilk yıllarında Türkiye, açık kapı politikasıyla Suriyelileri "misafir" olarak kabul etmiş ve dini ve ahlaki referanslara dayalı bir söylem geliştirmiştir. Erdoğan sık sık "Ensar-Muhacir" analojisini kullanmış, Osmanlı mirasına ve kardeşlik bağlarına vurgu yapmıştır. Bu dönemde İnanç Savunucusu rolü, insani sorumluluk ve dini dayanışma temelinde öne çıkmıştır. Bununla birlikte, uluslararası sistemin yetersizliğine duyulan tepki de Revizyonist rolün gelişmesine yol açmıştır. Erdoğan, Birleşmiş Milletler Güvenlik Konseyi'ni (BMGK) pasiflik ve adaletsizlikle suçlamış, "Dünya beşten büyüktür" söylemi bu dönemde sıkça kullanılmıştır. Türkiye, Avrupa Birliği'ni (AB) de yeterli destek vermemekle itham etmiş ve yük paylaşımı taleplerini sürekli yinelemiştir. Ancak bu eleştiriler söylemsel düzeyde kalmış, yapısal bir uluslararası değişime yol açmamıştır.

2.3. İkinci Dönem (Temmuz 2016–Mart 2020)

2016'da Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun istifası ve 15 Temmuz darbe girişimi sonrası Türkiye'nin güvenlik paradigması köklü biçimde değişmiştir. Bu dönemde söylem, insani sorumluluklardan ziyade sınır güvenliği ve terörle mücadeleye odaklanmıştır.

Bölgesel Koruyucu rolü, Türkiye'nin hem kendi sınırlarını hem de çevresini koruma sorumluluğunu üstlendiğini göstermiştir. Erdoğan'ın konuşmalarında Fırat Kalkanı (2016), Zeytin Dalı (2018) ve Barış Pınarı (2019) operasyonları, yalnızca terör örgütlerine karşı değil, aynı zamanda Suriyelilerin güvenli geri dönüşlerini sağlamak için gerekli adımlar olarak sunulmuştur. Aynı zamanda, Türkiye bu dönemde Aktif Bağımsız rolünü daha açık biçimde benimsemiştir. ABD'nin YPG'ye verdiği destek ve AB'nin taahhütlerini yerine getirmemesi, Türkiye'nin müttefiklerine karşı sertleşen söylemlerine yansımıştır. Erdoğan sık sık, "Türkiye kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda tek başına hareket etmekten çekinmez" mesajı vermiştir. 2016'daki Türkiye–AB Mutabakatı başlangıçta olumlu karşılanmış, fakat daha sonra Türkiye AB'yi

yükümlülüklerini yerine getirmemekle suçlamış ve hatta mültecilerin Avrupa'ya geçişini "kapıları açarız" tehdidiyle bir pazarlık aracı olarak kullanmıştır.

Bu dönem, söylem ile eylem arasındaki en güçlü örtüşmenin yaşandığı dönem olarak görülmektedir. Söylemdeki güvenlik ve özerklik vurgusu, askeri operasyonlar ve bağımsız diplomatik tavırlarla pekiştirilmiştir.

2.4. Üçüncü Dönem (Mart 2020–Aralık 2024)

COVID-19 pandemisi ve ardından gelen ekonomik kriz, Türkiye'nin mülteci politikalarını ve söylemlerini doğrudan etkilemiştir. Halk arasında artan mülteci karşıtlığı, Zafer Partisi gibi siyasi aktörlerin yükselişiyle kurumsallaşmıştır. Bu ortamda, hükümet hem Bölgesel Koruyucu rolünü sürdürmüş hem de yeni tonlar eklemiştir.

Bir yandan, kuzey Suriye'de güvenli bölgelerin korunması ve istikrarın sağlanması üzerinden Bölgesel Koruyucu rolü devam etmiştir. Öte yandan, Türkiye bu bölgelerde altyapı projeleri, özellikle "tuğla ev" konut projeleri ile öne çıkarak Kalkınmacı rolünü üstlenmiştir. Erdoğan, bu projeleri hem insani sorumluluk hem de Suriyelilerin gönüllü geri dönüşü için temel bir araç olarak sunmuştur. Aynı zamanda, Revizyonist rol yeniden güç kazanmıştır. Türkiye, uluslararası toplumun yük paylaşımında yetersiz kaldığını vurgulamış, "AB vaat ettiği fonları ödemedi, Türkiye yalnız bırakıldı" söylemi sıkça dile getirilmiştir. Bu söylemler, göç krizini uluslararası pazarlıklarda bir koz olarak kullanma eğilimini göstermiştir. Son olarak, İnanç Savunucusu rolü de yeniden canlanmıştır; ancak bu kez Osmanlı mirasından ziyade, küresel ölçekte yükselen İslamofobi ve yabancı düşmanlığına karşı Türkiye'nin moral liderliği ön plana çıkarılmıştır. Erdoğan, Türkiye'yi "mazlumların sesi" olarak konumlandırmış, ancak iç politikadaki mülteci karşıtı uygulamalar bu söylemle çelişkili bir tablo yaratmıştır.

2.5. Genel Değerlendirme

Bu bölümün temel bulgusu, Türkiye'nin ulusal rol anlayışlarının dinamik ve uyarlanabilir nitelikte olduğudur. Bu bağlamda, birinci dönemde dini ve ahlaki söylemler baskınken, kurumsal ve hukuki altyapı eksik kalmıştır. İkinci dönemde

güvenlik merkezli ve bağımsız politika anlayışı söylemle eylem arasında yüksek bir örtüşme yaratmıştır. Üçüncü dönemde ise farklı rollerin aynı anda benimsenmesi, söylemde çeşitlilik ama pratikte çelişki üretmiştir.

Dolayısıyla Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliği, yalnızca tek bir role indirgenememekte; aksine iç politikadaki gelişmeler, bölgesel güvenlik kaygıları ve uluslararası yük paylaşımı tartışmalarına bağlı olarak rol setleri arasında geçişkenlik göstermektedir. Bu geçişkenlik, Türkiye'nin Suriye mülteci krizine yönelik dış politika söyleminin hem esnek hem de pragmatik bir nitelik taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır.

3. Türkiye'nin Suriye Mülteci Krizi Bağlamında Rol Performansı

Bu bölüm, Türkiye'nin Suriye mülteci krizi bağlamında sergilediği rol performansını incelemekte ve söylemsel düzeydeki rol anlayışlarının ne ölçüde fiili politikalara dönüştüğünü değerlendirmektedir. Holsti'nin tanımına göre rol performansı, yalnızca devletin dış politika eylemlerini değil, aynı zamanda genel davranış kalıplarını, kurumlarını ve uygulamalarını da kapsar. Bu nedenle analiz, Türkiye'nin üç döneme ayrılan politikalarını hukuki düzenlemeler, kurumsal yapı, uluslararası raporlar, saha çalışmaları ve resmi istatistikler üzerinden değerlendirmektedir.

3.1. Birinci Dönem (Mart 2011–Temmuz 2016)

Suriye'den ilk göç dalgası başladığında Türkiye, açık kapı politikası uygulamış ve Suriyelileri "misafir" statüsüyle kabul etmiştir. Bu insani yaklaşım, "Ensar–Muhacir" analojisi ve dini-moral söylemlerle desteklenmiştir. Ancak başlangıçta bu yaklaşımın hukuki dayanağı eksikti. Suriyeliler, 1951 Cenevre Sözleşmesi'ne konulan coğrafi sınırlama nedeniyle "mülteci" olarak tanınmamış, "geçici misafir" statüsüyle geçici çözümlere tabi tutulmuştur. Bu boşluğu gidermek üzere 2014'te Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu (YUKK) kabul edilmiş, ardından Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği yürürlüğe girmiştir. Böylece Suriyelilere geri gönderme yasağı *(non-refoulement),* sağlık, eğitim ve sınırlı çalışma hakkı gibi bazı temel haklar tanınmıştır. Ayrıca bu dönemde Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü (daha sonra Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı) kurulmuş, göç yönetiminde kurumsal bir çerçeve oluşturulmuştur. Buna rağmen uygulamada ciddi sorunlar yaşanmıştır. Suriyelilerin büyük çoğunluğu kamplar dışında yaşamış, belediyeler yeterli mali desteğe sahip olmadığı için hizmetlerde

yetersizlikler oluşmuştur. Kadınlar ve çocukların eğitim ve istihdama erişiminde ciddi engeller bulunmuş, sahada kayıtdışı çalıştırılma ve ayrımcılık vakaları artmıştır. Uluslararası kuruluşlar bu dönemde Türkiye'nin yüksek standartlı kamplarını övse de, şehirlerde yaşayan milyonlarca Suriyelinin yeterli korumadan mahrum kaldığını vurgulamıştır. Dolayısıyla bu dönem, söylemde güçlü bir insani sorumluluk vurgusu (İnanç Savunucusu) içerirken, performans açısından sınırlı uyum göstermiştir.

3.2. İkinci Dönem (Temmuz 2016–Mart 2020)

2016'daki darbe girişimi ve artan terör saldırıları, Türkiye'nin mülteci politikasını güvenlik eksenli bir çerçeveye taşımıştır. Bu dönemde Türkiye, Bölgesel Koruyucu rolünü en görünür şekilde performansa dönüştürmüştür.

Bu bağlamda, Fırat Kalkanı (2016–2017), Zeytin Dalı (2018) ve Barış Pınarı (2019) harekâtlarıyla Türkiye, hem YPG/PKK ve IŞİD'e karşı mücadele etmiş hem de kuzey Suriye'de "güvenli bölgeler" oluşturarak Suriyelilerin geri dönüşünü teşvik etmeye çalışmıştır. Bu operasyonlarla yüzbinlerce Suriyeli'nin dönüş yaptığı resmi söylemlerde vurgulanmıştır. Ayrıca 2016'daki Türkiye–AB Mutabakatı, düzensiz göçü kontrol altına almak için önemli bir araç olmuştur. Türkiye, bu anlaşma sayesinde AB'den mali destek almayı hedeflemiş; ancak AB'nin taahhütlerini tam olarak yerine getirmediğini ileri sürerek eleştirel bir tutum sergilemiştir. Ek olarak, Türkiye'nin ABD ile ilişkileri YPG'ye verilen destek nedeniyle gerilmiş, Erdoğan sık sık NATO müttefiklerini yükümlülüklerini yerine getirmemekle suçlamıştır. "Kapıları açarız" söylemi, göç yönetimini uluslararası pazarlık aracı olarak kullandığını göstermiştir. Son olarak, Suriyelilere çalışma izni verilmesi yönünde hukuki düzenlemeler yapılmış olsa da, yüksek maliyetler ve bürokratik engeller nedeniyle bu izinler sınırlı sayıda kalmıştır. Suriyelilerin büyük çoğunluğu kayıt dışı, düşük ücretli işlerde istihdam edilmiştir.

Bu dönemin genelinde söylem ile performans arasında yüksek düzeyde uyum vardır. Güvenlik merkezli, bağımsız ve sert söylemler, sınır ötesi operasyonlar ve uluslararası pazarlıklara doğrudan yansımıştır.

3.3. Üçüncü Dönem (Mart 2020–Aralık 2024)

COVID-19 pandemisi ve ardından gelen ekonomik kriz, Suriyelilere yönelik toplumsal tepkileri artırmış, Zafer Partisi gibi aktörlerin söylemleri mülteci karşıtlığını güçlendirmiştir. Bu koşullar altında Türkiye'nin rol performansı çok boyutlu ve çelişkili bir hal almıştır.

İlk olarak, Bölgesel Koruyucu rolü çerçevesinde Türkiye, Kuzey Suriye'deki askerî varlığını sürdürmüş ve sınır güvenliğini korumaya devam etmiştir. Ancak operasyonların yoğunluğu azalmış, odak noktası istikrarın korunması ve mevcut bölgelerin yönetimi olmuştur. Ek olarak, Kalkınmacı rolü bağlamında en dikkat çekici performans, tuğla ev projeleri olmuştur. AFAD ve sivil toplum kuruluşları işbirliğiyle yüz bini aşkın konut inşa edilmiş, 1 milyon Suriyelinin dönüşüne imkân sağlayacak altyapı hazırlanmıştır. Bu projeler, gönüllü dönüş söylemiyle meşrulaştırılmış, aynı zamanda Türkiye'nin bölgede kalıcı etkisini artıran bir stratejiye dönüşmüştür. Ayrıca Revizyonist rolü benimseyen Türkiye, AB'nin vaat ettiği fonları tam olarak ödemediğini ve uluslararası toplumun yük paylaşımında başarısız olduğunu sık sık dile getirmiştir. "Türkiye tampon bölge değildir" söylemi bu dönemde öne çıkmıştır. Son olarak, İnanç Savunucusu bağlamında Erdoğan, küresel ölçekte artan İslamofobi ve yabancı düşmanlığına karşı Türkiye'yi moral lider olarak konumlandırmıştır. Ancak bu söylem, iç politikadaki mülteci karşıtı uygulamalarla çelişkili bir tablo ortaya çıkarmıştır.

Bu dönemin en belirgin özelliği, söylem ile performans arasında düşük ve çelişkili bir uyum olmasıdır. Dış politikada gönüllü geri dönüş projeleri ve insani liderlik iddiası sürerken, iç politikada artan kısıtlamalar ve mülteci karşıtlığı söylemi öne çıkmıştır.

3.4. Genel Değerlendirme

Rol performansı analizi, Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliğinin esnek ve pragmatik bir karakter taşıdığını göstermektedir. İlk dönemde insani diplomasi ve dini dayanışma söylemleri güçlü olmasına rağmen uygulamada yetersizlikler görülmüştür. İkinci dönemde güvenlik ve bağımsızlık odaklı bir söylem, doğrudan askeri ve diplomatik adımlarla örtüşmüştür. Üçüncü dönemde ise hem insani sorumluluk hem de güvenlikçi stratejiler aynı anda yürütülmeye çalışılmış, bu durum söylem-performans arasında çelişkiler doğurmuştur. Bu bulgular, yalnızca akademik literatür açısından değil, aynı

zamanda politika yapıcılar için de önemlidir. Türkiye'nin rol anlayışı ile performansı arasındaki uyumsuzlukların, hem mülteci yönetiminde hem de uluslararası işbirliğinde sürdürülebilir çözümler geliştirilmesine engel oluşturduğu görülmektedir.

4. Sonuç

Bu bölüm, tezin genel bulgularını sentezlemekte, Türkiye'nin 2011–2024 yılları arasındaki Suriye mülteci krizine yaklaşımını üç dönem üzerinden karşılaştırmakta ve güncel tartışmalara ışık tutmaktadır. Ayrıca, çalışmanın kuramsal katkıları ve metodolojik sınırlılıkları da ele alınmaktadır.

4.1. Genel Bulgular ve Sentez

Bu çalışmanın merkezinde şu soru yer almaktadır: "Türkiye'nin ulusal rol anlayışı, 2011–2024 yılları arasında Suriye mülteci krizi bağlamında sergilediği rol performansı ile ne ölçüde örtüşmektedir?"

Analiz, üç dönem boyunca söylem (rol anlayışı) ile eylem (rol performansı) arasındaki uyumun farklı düzeylerde gerçekleştiğini göstermiştir. Bu bağlamda birinci dönemde (2011–2016) Türkiye kendini "İnanç Savunucusu" ve kısmen "Revizyonist" olarak tanımlamış, dini ve ahlaki sorumluluk söylemleriyle açık kapı politikası uygulamıştır. Ancak yasal ve kurumsal altyapı eksikliği ve pratik sınırlılıklar nedeniyle söylem-performans uyumu orta düzeyde kalmıştır. İkinci dönemde (2016–2020) 15 Temmuz darbe girişimi sonrası güvenlik merkezli bir paradigma oluşmuş, Türkiye "Bölgesel Koruyucu" ve "Aktif Bağımsız" rollerini benimsemiştir. Sınır ötesi operasyonlar, güvenli bölge politikaları ve bağımsız diplomatik tutum, söylem ile performans arasında yüksek uyum sağlamıştır. Üçüncü dönemde ise (2020–2024) pandemi ve ekonomik krizle artan mülteci karşıtlığı, Zafer Partisi gibi aktörlerin yükselişiyle birleşmiş; Türkiye aynı anda "Bölgesel Koruyucu, Kalkınmacı, Revizyonist ve İnanç Savunucusu" rollerini üstlenmiştir. Kuzey Suriye'de tuğla ev projeleri ve geri dönüş altyapısı Kalkınmacı rolü yansıtırken, AB ve BM'ye yönelik yük paylaşımı eleştirileri Revizyonist rolün yeniden öne çıkmasına yol açmıştır. Ancak iç politikada kısıtlayıcı ve güvenlikçi uygulamalar, dışarıya yansıtılan insani liderlik söylemiyle çelişmiştir. Bu nedenle uyum düşük düzeyde kalmıştır.

Genel olarak, Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliği esnek ve uyarlanabilir bir nitelik göstermiştir. Söylemsel düzeyde insani diplomasi ve ahlaki sorumluluk vurguları öne çıkarken, pratikte güvenlik ve stratejik çıkarların belirleyici olduğu görülmüştür.

4.2. Güncel Yansımalar: Gönüllü Geri Dönüş ve Türkiye–Suriye İlişkileri

2024 sonunda Beşar Esad rejiminin çökmesi, mülteci meselesine dair yeni tartışmalar başlatmıştır. Türkiye, HTŞ önderliğinde kurulan geçici hükümetle pragmatik ilişkiler yürütmüş; kuzey Suriye'deki askerî varlığı ve inşa projeleriyle geri dönüş sürecinde merkezi aktör haline gelmiştir.

Türkiye, resmi söyleminde "gönüllü, güvenli ve onurlu dönüş" vurgusunu öne çıkarmaktadır. 2025 itibarıyla bir milyondan fazla Suriyelinin geri döndüğü açıklansa da, uluslararası raporlar bu dönüşlerin her zaman gönüllülük esasına dayanmadığını ve geri gönderme merkezlerinde baskı unsurlarının olabileceğini belirtmektedir. Akkad/Türkiye davasında AİHM'in Türkiye aleyhine verdiği karar, gönüllü geri dönüş süreçlerinin şeffaflığına dair ciddi soru işaretleri doğurmuştur. Ayrıca, Suriye'nin ekonomik çöküşü, altyapı yıkımı ve eğitim-sağlık hizmetlerindeki yetersizlik, geri dönen Suriyelilerin kalıcı entegrasyonunu zorlaştırmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, Türkiye'nin gönüllü dönüş politikası, hem uluslararası meşruiyet hem de pratik uygulanabilirlik açısından karmaşık bir tablo ortaya koymaktadır.

Türkiye'nin "bölgesel koruyucu" ve "kalkınmacı" rolleri, Suriye'nin yeniden inşasına yönelik yatırımlarla güçlenmiştir. Ancak, bu durum aynı zamanda uzun vadede Türkiye'nin Suriye'nin kuzeyinde kalıcı nüfuz alanları oluşturma çabası olarak da okunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye–Suriye ilişkilerinin geleceği, hem yeni Şam yönetiminin meşruiyetine hem de uluslararası desteğin düzeyine bağlı olacaktır.

4.3. Kuramsal Yansımalar

Tez, rol kuramının dış politika analizine sunduğu katkıları da göstermektedir. Holsti'nin yaklaşımına göre devletlerin ulusal rol anlayışları her zaman rol performansına tam olarak yansımaz. Türkiye örneğinde bu durum net biçimde gözlenmiştir. Birinci dönemde söylem-performans boşluğu, kurumsal kapasite eksikliğinden kaynaklanmıştır. İkinci dönemde yüksek uyum, güvenlik odaklı tehdit

algısının politika ve söylemi aynı doğrultuda şekillendirmesiyle mümkün olmuştur. Üçüncü dönemde ise çoklu rol üstlenimi, iç politika baskıları ve uluslararası sistemdeki belirsizlikler nedeniyle çelişkili bir performans üretmiştir.

Ayrıca çalışma, karma yöntem yaklaşımı ile (söylem analizi ve ampirik veri) rol kuramının pratik politika analizine nasıl uygulanabileceğini göstermektedir. Ancak kuramın sınırları da ortaya çıkmıştır: Rol anlayışlarının değişimi yalnızca uluslararası faktörlerle değil, ekonomik krizler, kamuoyu baskısı ve iç siyasal dinamiklerle de doğrudan şekillenmektedir. Bu nedenle, gelecekte rol kuramının iç siyaset ve ekonomi modelleriyle birlikte ele alınması faydalı olacaktır.

4.4. Sonuç

Sonuç olarak, Türkiye'nin Suriye mülteci krizine yaklaşımı tek boyutlu bir insani sorumluluk veya jeopolitik çıkar politikası olarak tanımlanamaz. Aksine, Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliği bu süreçte sürekli değişen normatif hedefler ile stratejik zorunluluklar arasında salınmıştır. 2011'den 2024'e uzanan dönemde Türkiye, insani söylemlerle meşruiyet arayışını sürdürürken, güvenlik kaygıları ve iç politik baskılarla sertleşen uygulamalara da başvurmuştur. Bu çelişkili ama uyarlanabilir dış politika kimliği, Türkiye'nin uluslararası sistemde kendini yeniden tanımlama çabalarının önemli bir göstergesidir.

5. Kapanış

Bu tez, 2011–2024 yılları arasında Türkiye'nin Suriye mülteci krizine yaklaşımını, ulusal rol anlayışı ve rol performansı arasındaki uyum üzerinden analiz etmiştir. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin dış politika kimliğinin sabit değil; aksine iç politik dinamikler, bölgesel güvenlik kaygıları ve uluslararası sistemdeki gelişmeler doğrultusunda sürekli yeniden şekillendiğini göstermektedir.

İlk dönemde Türkiye, dini ve ahlaki sorumluluk söylemleriyle insani liderlik iddiası taşımış, ancak kurumsal ve hukuki altyapı eksiklikleri nedeniyle performans sınırlı kalmıştır. İkinci dönemde güvenlik merkezli paradigma öne çıkmış; sınır ötesi operasyonlar ve bağımsız diplomatik tavır, söylem ile performans arasında yüksek bir örtüşme yaratmıştır. Üçüncü dönemde ise gönüllü geri dönüş ve yeniden inşa projeleri

kalkınmacı bir vizyon ortaya koyarken, ekonomik kriz ve artan toplumsal baskılar söylem ile uygulama arasındaki çelişkileri derinleştirmiştir.

Dolayısıyla Türkiye'nin Suriyeli mülteci krizine yaklaşımı, yalnızca insani diplomasi ya da jeopolitik çıkarlarla açıklanamaz. Bu yaklaşım, normatif hedefler ile stratejik zorunluluklar arasında denge arayan uyarlanabilir bir dış politika kimliği olarak tanımlanabilir. Çalışma, bu yönüyle hem rol kuramına ampirik katkı sunmakta hem de Türkiye'nin uluslararası sistemde kendisini yeniden konumlandırma çabalarına ışık tutmaktadır.

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