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## Ideational Factors in Turkey's Alignment with Qatar and Their Impact on Regional Security

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### ABSTRACT

Turkey and Qatar have developed exceptionally cordial relations and aligned their foreign policies on many regional issues. In the 2017 Gulf crisis, despite the risk of incurring material losses and sacrificing relations with blockading countries, Turkey quickly came to the support of Qatar alleviating Doha's physical and political isolation. This highlights how ideational elements and norms play a crucial role in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar, with wider implications for regional security and intra-Sunni disputes. The ideational dimensions of Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar are especially evident when looking at Turkish national role conceptions as reflected in Ankara's official discourse under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

### KEYWORDS

Turkey; Qatar; foreign policy; identity; regional security

“A very grave mistake is being made in Qatar, isolating a nation in all areas is inhumane and against Islamic values”, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said during a parliamentary speech in June 2017, shortly after a blockade was imposed on Qatar by some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members (*BBC* 2017). Turkey emerged as the staunchest supporter of Qatar in the face of a total blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, the so-called Arab Quartet. In addition to diplomatic backing, Ankara extended its economic and military support to Doha with food supplies, Turkish troops and armoured vehicles (*Al Jazeera* 2017). Few might be surprised to observe Turkey's reaction to the Qatar crisis as the two countries developed exceptionally cordial relations and aligned their foreign policies on many regional issues, especially from 2010 onwards.

The existing studies on Turkey's increasing partnership with Qatar mainly focus on geopolitics and the distribution of power since the Arab Uprisings (Pala and Aras 2015; Cafiero and Wagner 2016; Başkan 2019), political developments and, to some extent, economic imperatives (Fitch Solutions 2017) as the underlying factors. It has been argued that, having remained isolated in the region, Turkey subsequently deepened its relations with Qatar, and that Ankara's pro-Qatari response in the Gulf crisis can be explained as path dependence in foreign policymaking (Başkan and Pala 2020). According to Engin Yüksel and Haşim Tekineş (2021, 16), Turkey-Qatar alignment is based on pragmatic reasons given the “absence of ideological and economic drivers”.

There is little literature, instead, on the role of ideational elements in Turkey's relations with Qatar. According to Mustafa Cüneyt Özşahin (2021, 35), domestic developments in both Qatar and Turkey over the last two decades have brought about a converging foreign policy orientation shaped around "shared values and common visions based on their ideas and identities". *The Economist* (2021) inks that "ideology, economics and angry neighbours" brought the two countries together. Also, Turkey's siding with Qatar in the 2017 Gulf crisis arguably demonstrates that values such as the "right thing to do" matter in Ankara's foreign policy as Turkey jeopardised more materially beneficial relationships with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (Bakir 2019).

Despite these works, however, the role of ideational factors in Turkey's alignment with Qatar is yet to be fully understood. To this end, this article examines the ideational dimensions of Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar by analysing Turkish national role conceptions as reflected in Ankara's official discourse under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Given that Turkey-Qatar relations developed substantially since the AKP took power in late 2002 and improved further after the Arab Uprisings, the ideational foundations of Turkey's alliance with Qatar in the last decade need to be analysed alongside with material considerations. Locating ideational elements of Turkey's alignment with Qatar over the last decade in the ever-shifting material landscape of the Middle East complements existing explanations providing a more nuanced perspective. In addition to the existing literature, the analysis in this article is based on semi-structured interviews with experts and the foreign policy statements and practices of the Turkish government, as well as national and international media reports. Turkey's response to the Gulf crisis and Ankara's pro-Qatari stance are evaluated within this framework.

More broadly, bringing ideational conditions to the fore sheds light on the impact of Turkey's alignment with Qatar on peace and stability in the Middle East. The article argues that the ideational and ideological polarity in the region has sharpened threat perceptions between competing blocs, with regional conflicts becoming a zero-sum-game for regional actors. Against this backdrop, the ideational factors in the Turkish-Qatari partnership have both a stabilising and de-stabilising impact depending on the perspective adopted.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section outlines a conceptual framework based on national role conceptions as well as the methodology. The second presents the geopolitical context and contours of Turkey's relations with Qatar since the 2000s. In the third section, the national role conception approach is applied to understand the ideational foundations of Turkey's relationship with Qatar, followed by a conclusion on the implications for regional security dynamics.

### **Conceptual framework: national role conceptions**

Sociological role theory and the national role conception approach was adapted to International Relations during the Cold War. Kalevi Jaakko Holsti's (1970) seminal study elaborates on a typology of 17 different national role conceptions that determine national role performances and that are defined as "patterns of attitudes, decisions, particularly to explain how decision makers perceive their nations' orientations and tasks on responses, functions and commitments toward other states" (245). In the

national role conception framework, role conceptions are seen as dependent upon various material and ideational factors such as economic and military resources, geographical location, political culture and national values. Further, according to this framework, states can claim multiple rather than a single role in the international system (Dal and Erşen 2014).

Methodologically, the role conception framework draws on speeches and statements by foreign policy elites to identify certain national role conceptions that a given country attributes to itself and therefore shapes its foreign policy behaviour (Adigbuo 2007). Holsti assumes that national role conceptions “include policymakers’ own definitions of general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems” (Holsti 1970, 245-6). This elite-centric approach still dominates in role theory literature, although it has recently been challenged on the grounds that foreign policy elites cannot stand for an entire country with regard to its role conceptions (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). Furthermore, in recent times, there have been attempts to use role theory as a bridge between foreign policy analysis (FPA) and International Relations, with a particular focus on “explaining and understanding the interaction between agents and structure” (Thies and Breuning 2012, 1).

The national role conception model has also been employed to explain changes and continuities in Turkey’s foreign policy. Under the ruling AKP, Turkish foreign policy changed tremendously and became more influential and active in the Middle East; the so-called ‘shift of axis’ debate in Turkish foreign policy sparked enthusiasm in academic circles to explain material and ideational motives behind this perceived change (Adam 2012; Onis and Yılmaz 2009; Tezcür and Grigorescu 2014; Dalay 2017). Turkey’s increasing activism in the Middle East is attributed to the new roles embraced under the AKP as well as assessments of external factors. According to Şevket Ovalı (2013), Turkey’s foreign policy towards Middle Eastern states can be understood through national role conceptions such as “regional leader”, “regional protector”, “defender of Islam”, “bridge”, “model”, “mediator” and “liberalizer” that represent a rupture in the history of Turkish foreign policy towards the region (ibid.). Similarly, a study on the ideational basis of AKP foreign policy activism in the Middle East through the national role conception framework reiterates that “regional leader”, “protector”, “global player”, “example” and “bridge” roles have informed Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives towards region (Aras and Gorener 2010).

According to Lars Haugom (2019), national sense of greatness and vulnerability *vis-à-vis* great powers have their roots in the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and feed into Turkey’s national role conceptions based on regional power and strategic autonomy. The emphasis on the imperial legacy in Turkey’s recent foreign policy activism also relates to a vision of neo-Ottomanism. According to Ömer Taşpınar (2011), the neo-Ottomanist vision under AKP rule is not an imperial enterprise with territorial ambitions, it rather refers to a regional leader role conception, as neo-Ottomanism considers that “Turkey is a pivotal state which should play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is the ‘centre’” (2).

A *longue durée* approach centred on national role conceptions also offers insights into continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy. Ekrem Başer’s (2015) examination of role conceptions among Turkish foreign policy elites between 1992-2012 highlights the continued relevance of Turkey’s roles as regional leader, regional sub-

system collaborator, active independent and faithful ally. Başer's study also sheds light on the interplay between material factors and ideational elements, as change in material capabilities and economic strength explain Turkey's increasing activism in the region.

In fact, national role conceptions incorporate both ideational and material elements into foreign policymaking. Economic and technical capabilities on the one hand, and national values, doctrines and ideologies on the other, interact to form national role conceptions and foreign policy behaviours. Role theory thus offers a way to go beyond the false dichotomy between ideational and material factors in IR theory (Basu 2019). It also enables researchers to move across different levels of analysis, as both domestic and external environments shape national role conceptions. Domestic political structures and actors come together with structures of the regional/international system; external role prescriptions play a crucial role in establishing national role conceptions.

Equally important, national role conceptions are not static nor frozen in time; they are subject to change and evolve; and new conceptions are likely to emerge. The framework allows to consider how transitions and new directions in the foreign policy of a given country may alter national role conceptions of the ruling elite. In this sense, the recent debates on the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy can be discussed within this framework. A number of global, regional and domestic changes transformed Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from soft-power engagements to assertive initiatives. Intensified security threats emanating from northern Syria since 2016, zero-sum competition between Turkey and the Saudi-UAE axis, domestic security measures and the coalition between the AKP and the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) shifted the way "the AKP political elite has read and understood this new environment, which in turn has reflected its ideological inclinations as well as its transformation" (Altunışık 2020, 4). Furthermore, the AKP leadership made domestic use of foreign policy and the Middle East as an arena with claims of a moral foreign policy siding with the Islamic world that is confronted with injustice and suffering and with the view that Turkey and the Middle East have a common destiny (Gürpınar 2020). Such an amalgam of external, domestic, material and ideational factors fed into Turkey's national role conceptions and Ankara's relations with Doha.

Also, states can hold multiple role conceptions at the same time depending on issues, locations and context. Perhaps most importantly, role theory gives a voice to the regional, the local, the 'other', the non-Western. Holsti's typology includes role conceptions such as regional leader, regional protector and regional/sub-system collaborator that move beyond overemphasised Western/European standards in foreign policy analysis. Through the national role conception framework, the non-West can be treated on its own terms, providing significant insights for post-Western Global IR (Acharya and Buzan 2019). The national role conception model can thus augment existing research traditions on the non-Western world.

With regard to the International Relations of the Middle East (IRME), recent studies have started to highlight inadequacies of existing schools of thought in addressing the complex dynamics of the region. The Middle East has been re-embraced as a fertile ground for bridging the gap between IR theories and Area Studies knowledge (Valbjorn 2004; Teti 2007), bringing together different levels of analysis (domestic, sub-regional, regional, international, transnational and global), different elements (material and ideational) as well as, to some degree, structure and agency.

FPA can provide a contribution in this direction. It combines ideational and material factors in analysing foreign policies of Middle Eastern states. FPA starts at the domestic level, where the agent decision makers' "response to domestic and international environments is subject to a number of factors: psychological, societal, ideational, political, institutional, and material" (Darwich and Kaarbo 2020, 230). May Darwich and Juliet Kaarbo (2020) argue that IRME scholarship tends to adopt various eclectic frameworks without clear causal mechanisms, and propose FPA as a complementary and alternative framework. Particularly, within it, the role theory approach offers an auspicious framework for IRME that takes internal, external, material and ideational dimensions into account.

In this article, the national role conception framework is applied to capture ideational elements in an interrelated fashion with other factors in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar over the last decade. To this end, it examines the speeches and writings of policy-making elites as primary sources, analysed through qualitative content analysis without specific statistical analysis. Speeches in the Turkish media, statements on the official websites of the Presidency of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been categorised and translated for analysis. Two semi-structured interviews were also conducted: one with a high Turkish official and another with an academic who is an expert on both Turkey and Qatar.<sup>1</sup>

## Geopolitical context and intensified Turkish-Qatari relations

The geopolitical context after the Arab Uprisings appears to be a necessary factor in understanding ideational factors that Turkey incorporates into its role in the region and its relations with Qatar. Particularly, ideological multipolarity in the region demarcates the lines of alliances and partnerships as "the states that shape common ideas about appropriate and legitimate principles of governance will tend to group together" (Gause 2017, 673)

Turkish-Qatari relations strengthened after the moderate Islamist AKP won elections in 2002. The ruling AKP adopted a conciliatory foreign policy towards the Muslim world. Turkey expanded its relations with Middle Eastern countries, especially GCC states. Economic imperatives and geopolitical shifts after the Iraq war in 2003 brought Turkey and the GCC states closer together (Harunoğlu 2016). In 2008, Turkey and the GCC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which designated Turkey as the GCC's first strategic partner outside of the Gulf. Even though Turkey initially improved relations with Qatar under the aegis of this strategic partnership with the GCC, following the Arab Uprisings, relations strengthened on a bilateral basis.

Ground-shaking political developments after the popular uprisings across the Middle East in 2010-2011 sharpened threat perceptions in the region and created rifts among regional states. Most notably, both Turkey and Qatar felt immune enough from the outbreak of uprisings (Bakir 2019) to pursue activist foreign policies and consequently put their support behind opposition movements, especially Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliates in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. On the opposite side, Saudi Arabia and the UAE generally adopted a status quo position *vis-à-vis* the popular uprisings and tried to curb the power of the MB and its regional supporters. Since the Arab Spring, the Middle East appears to be a tripolar system in which the Turkish-Qatari alliance represents a moderate resistance bloc alongside a Saudi-

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<sup>1</sup>All interviews were conducted with informed consent. In this article, all interviewees have been anonymised.

led moderate status-quo bloc and an Iran-led resistance axis (Yeşilyurt and Yetim 2020). According to Yeşilyurt and Erim, a moderate bloc in favour of status quo consists of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE, which are known for their pro-US stance and mild attitudes towards Israel in foreign policy. The resistance axis, instead, includes Iran, Iran, Syria, the Lebanese *Hezbollah*, some Iraqi Shiite factions and the Palestinian *Hamas*. Resistance axis members are anti-US and anti-Israeli in their foreign policy orientations (ibid.).

In 2015, Turkey and Qatar signed a cooperation agreement, moving one step closer to a strategic partnership. The agreement included military training, defence industry collaboration, joint drills and the deployment of military forces when necessary (Al-Haj 2015). The special bond between Turkey and Qatar during the AKP era culminated in the decision to establish a Turkish military base in Qatar (Finn 2015). The base gives Turkey a status similar to that of France and the US in Gulf security. An analysis from the Washington Institute asserts:

Turkey's move in Qatar will make Ankara all the more valuable to its Arab partners, and to an American ally seemingly inclined to share the burden of Gulf security. The new base will also reinforce Qatar's autonomy vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. In addition, it could contribute to the security effort for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a major and persistently controversial endeavor for Qatar (Decottignies and Cagaptay 2016).

Qatar was among the very first countries to denounce the 2016 military coup attempt in Turkey, and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was the first leader to make a call of solidarity to President Erdoğan (Girit 2017). This gesture has become a point of reference in Turkey's relations with Qatar. The 2017 GCC Crisis, when the Saudi-led coalition cut their diplomatic relations with Qatar, also intensified relations between Ankara and Doha (Harb 2018). Notably, the crisis erupted less than a year after the coup attempt in Turkey, whose memory was still fresh. On 7 June 2017, the Turkish Parliament approved legislation that authorised the deployment of troops to the Turkish military base in Qatar (Baabood 2018). Turkey's quick military response showed not only its solidarity with Qatar but also how Ankara attaches importance to preserving peace in the region. Turkish forces in Qatar held joint exercises with both the Qatar Emiri Naval Forces (QENF) and the Qatar Emiri Land Forces (QELF) as a precaution against a possible military intervention by the blockading countries (ACW Research Team 2018).

The Turkish response to the blockade was not limited to military cooperation, but included also political and social aspects. When the blockade started, Turkey tried to enhance Qatar's economic security by sending food relief by sea and air cargo and promising the supply of construction materials for ongoing FIFA 2022 World Cup projects (The Peninsula 2017a). At the societal level, support for Qatar was notable. The day after the blockade started, the #TurkeyWithQatar hashtag trended on Twitter (TRT World 2017). Turkish people used the hashtag to show their support whereas Qatari people expressed their appreciation (Küçükaşcı 2019).

The economic and commercial dimension of the bilateral relations has also increased since the blockade, as Qatar reciprocated with economic support to Turkey during the 2018 currency and debt crisis, in which the Turkish lira suffered. On 15 August 2018, the Emir of Qatar visited Turkey and met with President Erdoğan to offer financial help announcing a USD 15 billion investment in support of the Turkish economy (The Guardian 2018). Qatari investment in Turkey has increased over recent years, reaching USD 22 billion in 2019 (Middle East Monitor 2020). In May 2020, the currency-swap arrangements between Qatar

and Turkey were expanded threefold to USD 15 billion (Kucukgocmen and Cosgun 2020), and later in November, the Qatar Investment Authority decided to acquire a 10 per cent share of Borsa Istanbul, Turkey's stock exchange (Altunışık 2021).

While the ties between the two countries will likely continue, it is important to bear in mind that Turkey-Qatar relations are multidimensional, including not only material, but also ideational elements. The next section will focus on the latter.

## **Ideational factors and national role conceptions in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar**

Depending on the level of generalisation and the scope of the research, the number of national role conceptions of a given state can vary. Based on our study, 'regional leader', 'regional protector', 'defender of Islam', 'faithful ally' and 'resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor' are national role conceptions that might reveal ideational elements in Turkey's bilateral relations with Qatar.

### ***Regional leader***

In Holsti's (1970, 261) typology, the role of regional leader refers to "duties or special responsibilities that a government perceives for itself in its relation to states in a particular region". Turkey's reference to its geographical uniqueness, history, imperial legacy, norms, values, domestic factors as well as economic strength, military capabilities and other material resources, all indicate that Turkey perceives itself as a natural regional leader in the Middle East. The Turkish foreign policy elite repeatedly underlines this role conception as former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu reiterates:

Rejecting a reactionary foreign policy approach, Turkey develops its positions on regional and international issues with careful consideration of its own conditions. More than anything else, Turkey's stance reflects its historical depth, geographical positioning and rich legacy in international affairs. [...] Today, Turkey has consolidated its economy and liberalized its political system. [...] No longer driven by fear of internal problems thanks to the expanded scope of basic freedoms, Turkey now is more self-confident about its international position, and is trusted by its neighbours and the international community (Davutoğlu 2012, 1-2).

The regional leader role conception also applies to Turkey's relations with Qatar. During a speech at Qatar University in 2015, Turkish President Erdoğan placed emphasis on Turkey's regional role and Qatar's security:

With its historical and geographical features Turkey stands at the crossroads of multiple fault lines. We try to stand firm for our friends and brothers in the region alongside with our own security and future. We have never considered and will never consider Qatar's stability and security separate from our own (*Hürriyet* 2015)

On the Qatari side, in an interview in 2014, former Qatari Envoy to Turkey Salem Bin Mubarak Al Shafi said "there is no doubt that Turkey is a leading country in the region and as Qatar we expect that Turkey's role in the region will increase further in the coming years" (Ünal 2014). The envoy's expression hints at Qatar's perception of Turkey's role as a regional leader in their bilateral relations.

### **Regional protector**

The role of regional protector implies “special leadership responsibilities on a regional or issue-area basis, places emphasis on the function of providing protection for adjacent regions” (Holsti 1970, 261-2). Turkey’s role of regional protector in the Middle East manifests itself as a sense of responsibility to protect suffering people, reconsidering the regional order within a normative framework based on shared history and values (Aras and Gorener 2010). This role conception is widely expressed in the Palestinian issue and the Syrian conflict:

Your pain is our pain, your fate is our fate and your future is our future. You must know that the pain of every drop of blood shed is opening deep wounds in the hearts of the 75 million people residing in Anatolia. We will continue to stand by your side until hopefully this occupation is over and Jerusalem is finally liberated (Davutoğlu cit. in *Daily Sabah* 2012).

We are also responsible to protect the rights of the oppressed in Syria, the children starving to death in Yemen, and the orphans in Palestine (Erdoğan cit. in Presidency of the Republic of Turkey , 2018a).

The regional protector role carries important ideational elements that Turkey attributes itself when it comes to its relations with Qatar. The normative frameworks of standing against the oppressors and not refusing requests for help play an important role in Turkey’s relations with Qatar. In the aftermath of the blockade against Qatar, President Erdoğan said: “We will continue to stand by the oppressed. No offense but we will continue to offer all kinds of support to Qatar” (*BBC News Turkce* 2017). In an interview, an expert emphasised that: “In the background of close bilateral relations between Turkey and Qatar, the first step was taken by Doha. Qatar wants to pursue autonomous policies in the Gulf region and considers Turkey as an important ally. Turkey cannot decline this request.”<sup>2</sup>

Turkey sees Qatar as a valuable and important partner in pursuing its regional protector role in the Middle East, especially with regard to their common support for MB affiliates. In fact, Qatar also attributes itself a regional protector role when it comes to supporting MB exiles. In 2017, for example, Qatar’s Emir said that “Qatar will remain as always a safe haven for the oppressed” (Al Jazeera Center for Studies 2017). The Turkish-Qatari support for MB in region *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE revealed the diverging visions among contenders for regional leadership and the role of regional protector. On the issue, Erdoğan reiterates that Turkey and Qatar are coordinating their efforts for region-wide peace and security: “No one should be worried about rapprochement between Turkey and Qatar based on the brotherhood principle. What matters is that all our brothers in the region would live in peace and security. We do not have a purpose beyond that” (*Tarihi* 2017).

### **Defender of Islam**

The third national role conception that Turkey holds in its relations with the Middle East and Qatar is Turkey as the defender of Islam, Islamic values and the Muslim *ummah*. According to Holsti (1970, 264), the role of defender of the faith means that “some

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<sup>2</sup>Author’s interview with a high Turkish official, July 2020.

governments view their foreign policy objectives and commitments in terms of defending value systems (rather than specified territories) from attack”. This role conception sheds light on ideational and ideological elements in Turkey’s foreign policy during the last decade. Since 2011, the ruling AKP put strong emphasis on Turkey’s authentic Muslim identity, adopted an Islamic identity in opposing Western domination in the international arena and embraced an Islamist discourse in foreign policy (Çınar 2018). President Erdoğan’s speeches exemplify how Turkey presents itself as a defender of Islam resisting Western powers:

We must defend al-Quds, which is the Islamic Ummah’s dignity, honor and apple of the eye, at the cost of our lives. We cannot remain indifferent to the problems of our brothers and sisters while taking care of our own troubles. We must be on the ground given the hypocrisy that is displayed when it is the blood and life of the Muslims that is at stake (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey , 2018b).

In the aftermath of the Gulf crisis in 2017, Turkey supported Qatar to withstand the ideational and material pressures of the blockade. Furthermore, Turkey harshly criticised the Quartet for gravely violating Islamic values. The strong emphasis on Islamic values in the crisis, especially Turkey’s strong reaction to the violation of these values when the blockade was implemented during the holy month of Ramadan, also reveals that Turkey’s role conception as the defender of Islam is part of Ankara’s relations with Qatar.

A very grave mistake is being made in Qatar, isolating a nation in all areas is inhumane and against Islamic values. It’s as if a death penalty decision has been taken for Qatar. [...] Ankara is trying to involve other actors in order to end the isolation of Qatar as the chair of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (Erdoğan cit. in *Al Jazeera* 2017).

The situation we have been going through in this [holy month of] Ramadan is really an undesired one. There is such a crisis between sister countries and there are some steps that directly affect people. We must absolutely overcome it. We need to overcome it through peace and dialogue (Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu cit. in *Anadolu Agency* 2017).

Since the Arab Uprisings, promoting Islamism in the Middle East is another feature bringing Turkey and Qatar closer together on many fronts. The convergence of the two countries’ visions for the region that has strong ideational foundations as champions of Islamism has become a “glue that holds together the Turkish-Qatari axis” (Erdemir and Koduvayur 2019). Qatar has been supportive of MB figures long before Arab Uprisings. The most prominent example is that of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a well-known preacher and exiled member of the Egyptian Brotherhood, who became a Qatari citizen in 1969, established personal ties with the ruling family, built up educational institutions and reached out to wider Arab public via a TV program called “Sharia and Law” aired on Qatar’s *Al Jazeera* (Warren 2017).

Yet, Turkey’s and Qatar’s support for Islamism and Islamists cannot be explained by ideational factors alone. For both countries, support for Islamism from below through elections and MB is also motivated by geopolitical ambitions and pragmatism. According to David Roberts (2019, 2), Qatar’s support for Islamism stems from “a combination of convenience, pragmatism, and sheer opportunism”. Qatar has placed its bet on Islamists and MB with vast economic resources and media support through *Al Jazeera*. For a small country like Qatar, this was a pragmatic move to carve out

a sphere of influence in the Arab World. Turkey also provided financial and political support to MB in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, in a quest to carve out a leading role in a transforming Middle East.

### **Faithful ally**

Beyond mere rhetoric, the role conception of faithful ally can be taken into consideration when “a government makes a specific commitment to support the policies of another government” (Holsti 1970, 267). From Turkey’s perspective, Qatar has proven to be its foul-weather friend with Doha’s political and economic support following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. In this sense, Erdoğan and his government feel a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to support the ruling elite in Qatar, especially since the 2017 blockade. Turkey considers itself as a faithful ally of Qatar. For example, during a visit to the Turkish military base in Qatar, President Erdoğan responded to the critiques of Turkey’s military presence in the country saying that the base

is not a product of an interest-based hegemonic mindset like other equivalents. Those who demand the shutting down of this base are the ones who still have not realised that our country is the foul-weather friend of Qatar. Throughout our history we have not left our friends alone in the face of threats and perils, and we will never leave them alone (*Ihlas News Agency* 2019).

And speaking at the 4th meeting of the Turkey-Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee, President Erdoğan said:

Turkey and Qatar have repeatedly shown that they are each other’s true friends. The Turkish nation has exerted great efforts to nullify the blockade and sanctions targeting its Qatari brothers. And, Qatar, for its part, has been among the countries which have given our country the strongest support in the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2019).

From Qatar’s perspective, Turkey’s role as a faithful ally was tested and proved to be strong in the immediate aftermath of the embargo. Turkey was quick in sending food supplies to avert blockade-related shortages and swiftly deployed Turkish military personnel to the base in Qatar. During his first address to nationals and residents after the beginning of the blockade in June 2017, the Qatari Emir pointed out: “I would like to commend the important role that Turkey has played in the rapid adoption and direct implementation of our Strategic Cooperation Agreement that had been previously signed, and to thank it for its immediate response to meet the needs of the Qatari market” (*The Peninsula* 2017b). One month later, during Erdoğan’s visit to Qatar, Qatari public praise for his support on Twitter was paramount (*The Peninsula* 2017c).

### **Resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor**

The last national role conception that provides a foundation for Turkey’s relations with Qatar is the ‘resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor’. This role conception does not appear either in Holsti’s typology or in the literature on national role conceptions of

Turkey. Yet, after an analysis of Turkey's official discourse under the AKP rule, the resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor role can be identified in Turkey's response to global and regional developments over the last decade. Seeking autonomy *vis-à-vis* great powers (that is, *resisting*), *rejecting* the current power structure in International Relations and supporting groups in their political demands in the Middle East (that is, *reconstituting*) appear to be some characteristics of this role conception. Erdoğan's famous claim that "the world is bigger than five" in criticising the United Nations (UN) Security Council's structure as the only binding authority is a clear expression of Turkey's resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor role conception:

Countries and societies, almost held to ransom by means of overt and covert threats, are being forced to finance this crooked system. As Turkey, we voice our objection to this injustice, unlawfulness and tyranny at every platform. Our motto 'the world is bigger than 5' is the biggest-ever objection against global injustice. We will maintain this objection of ours, which draws larger support each passing day, until a more just global order of government is established (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey , 2018a).

The resisting-rejecting-reconstituting role is a useful conceptualisation to understand the ideational elements in Turkish-Qatari relations as there is a convergence on this role conception between the two countries. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into Qatar's national role conceptions, but the Qatari leadership raised similar issues on the need for a reconstituted global and regional order. During his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2016, the Qatari Emir stated:

The international community is facing grave challenges of some unresolved regional and international crises that have become a hindrance to regional and international development and stability, and some countries pursue an approach of action beyond the framework of international legitimacy against the backdrop of an international negligence of implementing Security Council resolutions. It is no longer possible to ignore the weakness of the United Nations' legal and institutional system and its inability in many cases to apply standards of justice and fairness to the mechanisms of its functioning (State of Qatar, Government Communication Office 2016).

Furthermore, over the last decade, Qatar has ambitiously tried to resist Saudi Arabia's hegemony in the Gulf, rejected bandwagoning with Riyadh and capitalised "on the unprecedented regional upheaval of the Arab Spring to back the efforts of a whole array of dissidents then engaged in overthrowing the existing order" (Miller and Verhoeven 2019, 3). Rejection and resistance in Qatar's stance were the most obvious during the blockade and Sheikh Tamim's speech at the UN General Assembly in 2017. The Qatari Emir said: "We have refused to yield to dictations by pressure and siege, and our people was not satisfied by less than that" (State of Qatar Government Communication Office 2017).

These overlapping role conceptions and visions for the regional order of both countries play an important role in their bilateral relations, also shedding light on the stated ideational foundations of this partnership:

Both countries share a set of principles that shape their vision of the region and cement their bilateral relations including the right of peoples to resist coups, tyranny and injustice. The right of peoples to express their free will and live in peace and prosperity. These ideational factors brought the two states closer to each other amid the Arab revolutions because they

believe that these factors can create a genuine stability in the Middle East that allows states and peoples of the region to thrive. Both states tend to stress also traits such as credibility and reliability in their bilateral relations. This generates trust and allows the relation to go beyond material interests and overcome common obstacles and challenges.<sup>3</sup>

To conclude, role theory and the national role conception framework appear to be a practical, useful and coherent approach to delve into ideational factors in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar in the last decade. Role conceptions such as regional leader, regional protector, defender of Islam, faithful ally and resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor help explain how ideational elements interplay with material capabilities depending on domestic and regional developments in shaping Turkey's alignment with Qatar. It is not plausible to isolate one dimension in this process. Yet, by focusing on ideational elements, this article tries to highlight what often remains at the margins in explaining this partnership and implications for regional order in the post-Arab Uprisings Middle East.

## Conclusion

In this article, the national role conception framework was employed to understand the ideational elements in Turkey's foreign policy towards Qatar. This appears to be a fruitful framework that allows to locate ideational elements alongside material ones. Equally important, role theory can act as a bridge between agent-centred approaches and structure-oriented frameworks. Furthermore, the ideational factors that Turkey incorporates into its role in the region and relations with Qatar have important implications for regional security and order.

Since national role conceptions are dependent on many factors (ideational and material; domestic and regional), they tend to survive unless there is a significant change in those elements. Turkey's alignment with Qatar in the GCC crisis threatened Turkey's material interests in the Gulf when considering the scope of economic relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which demonstrates that ideational elements matter. Turkey's roles as regional leader, regional protector, defender of Islam, faithful ally and rejecting-resisting-reconstituting actor in its alignment with Qatar and regional affairs are thus likely to continue in an ideologically multipolar Middle East. This has both stabilising and de-stabilising effects on the region.

To be sure, Turkey's reliance on hard power capabilities in the region appears to be a rupture with its previous soft power emphasis when dealing with disputes in the Middle East. The Turkish base in Qatar is Turkey's first military deployment in the Middle East and is indicative of Ankara's power projection posture in the region and its quest for strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* traditional Western allies (Al-Haj 2015). In the Gulf context, however, the military base also serves to protect Qatar from military, political and ideological isolation, and brings Turkey's role of external balancer in the Gulf crisis to the fore (Al Jazeera Center for Studies 2017). In fact, some reports indicated that Saudi Arabia and the UAE considered a military invasion of Qatar (Emmons 2018). Thus, according to an expert, "Turkey's role in the 2017 Gulf crisis in particular was crucial for

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<sup>3</sup>Author's interview with an academic based in Doha, August 2020.

the stability and the security of the region as it prevented the military escalation of the crisis”.<sup>4</sup> The regional protector and faithful ally role conceptions in Turkey’s foreign policy towards Qatar can therefore be highlighted as a stabilising factor in the region.

The ideological foundations of the Turkish-Qatari bloc in the new constellation of regional power enable this moderate resistance axis to adopt a more pragmatic, flexible and issue-based perspective in their relations with the two other regional blocs (the Saudi-led status-quo group and the Iran-led revisionist camp) and extra-regional states such as Russia (Kinninmont 2019; Yeşilyurt and Yetim 2020). The flexibility of the Turkish-Qatari bloc reflects the multiple role conceptions that both states share. The resisting-rejecting-reconstituting role conception especially enables both Turkey and Qatar to engage in dialogue and cooperation with different actors in order to carve out an autonomous sphere of influence through mediation and proactive diplomacy. Frictions and competition among Sunni states carry the debates about the current Middle Eastern political landscape beyond the Sunni-Shia divide that had been the dominant explanatory perspective since 2003. Although ideological multipolarity is claimed to result in “underbalancing” Iranian influence (Gause 2017), the flexibility of the Turkish-Qatari axis may contribute to a normalisation of cross-bloc relations by keeping communication and cooperation channels open, especially in fighting radicalism and terrorism. The ideational foundations of the Turkish-Qatari alliance can eventually contribute to de-sectarianisation of regional politics as well. If sectarianisation is a social construction and a political process of “mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers” (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 3), this process can be reversed through supporting the rule of law, recognising political rights and building trust between Iranian and Saudi-led blocs (Mabon 2019). Though not sudden, a gradual de-sectarianisation of Middle East geopolitics would need both mediation and trust-building efforts by the Turkey-Qatar bloc as it has managed to keep communication channels open with the two other blocs. Restoration of stability and order in the region also necessitates Turkey’s participation and partnership in this process (Keyman 2016). In this sense, the material capabilities and ideational foundations of the Turkey-Qatar partnership can be of value.

Neither Turkey’s role conceptions nor its foreign policy in the Middle East, including relations with Qatar, have taken place in a vacuum. There are always interaction, reaction, resistance and interplay between Turkey’s own role conceptions and other actors in the region. For example, Turkey’s challenge of Saudi Arabia’s primacy in the faith domain and Ankara’s own national role conception as defender of Islam face strong resistance from Riyadh. Turkey’s quest for religious leadership poses an ideational threat to Saudi Arabia and touches on Saudi sensitivity (Lippman 2019). The role conception of defender of Islam is likely to continue being a destabilising factor in regional affairs.

Following the Arab Uprisings, but especially since the ousting of MB from government in Egypt, the Middle East has been dragged into disorder (Beck and Richter 2020) where threat perceptions are sharpened. The fiercest competition has taken place between Sunni blocs, that is, between the Saudi-Emirati bloc and the Turkish-Qatari axis. While Turkey and Qatar managed to navigate their disagreements with the Saudis and the Emiratis over Iraq and Syria, differences over Islamism and the MB role in the region led Turkey and

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<sup>4</sup>Author’s interview with an academic based in Doha, August 2020.

Qatar to adopt a zero-sum-game with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia (Altunışık 2020). The Turkish-Qatari bloc's support for Islamism from below (after MB and AKP models) is at odds with "Islamism from above symbolized by the Saudi Arabian monarchy" (Ayoob 2018). From this perspective, the national role conception as defender of Islam that Turkey attributes to itself in Middle East politics and the ideational foundations of the Turkish-Qatari partnership did little to alleviate already intensified threat perceptions among regional states and to ensure peace and stability in the region.

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## Notes on contributor

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