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SAUDI-EGYPTIAN RIVALRY FOR MENA LEADERSHIP
DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: A ROLE THEORY
APPROACH

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SAUDI-EGYPTIAN RIVALRY FOR MENA LEADERSHIP DURING THE
SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: A ROLE THEORY APPROACH

A Master's Thesis

by
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Ankara
May 2025

To my family



SAUDI-EGYPTIAN RIVALRY FOR MENA LEADERSHIP
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THEORY APPROACH

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
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by

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I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as
a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations.

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ABSTRACT

SAUDI-EGYPTIAN RIVALRY FOR MENA LEADERSHIP DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: A ROLE THEORY APPROACH

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May 2025

This thesis analyzes how states' conception of the regional leadership role is translated into foreign policy behavior in the Middle East. By taking its theoretical framework from role theory, the thesis hypothesizes that states' national role conceptions can help shape their foreign policy behavior, as they can provide guidelines for long-term patterns of conduct in foreign affairs. Based on this initial hypothesis, the thesis further argues that aspiring states will likely engage in regional conflicts, as they can create opportunities to enact the role of regional leadership. In pursuit of this foreign policy role, states are also expected to implement particular foreign policy decisions that can help reflect the state's influence at the regional level. In order to analyze the relationship between regional leadership roles and their performance by states, the case study method is used in this thesis. The two case studies conducted in this project are on Saudi and Egyptian foreign policy behaviors in the Syrian civil war during the 2011-2016 period, and secondary data on the national role conceptions of these states

during this period are driven by the data collected by Akbaba and Özdamar (2019). The results of this thesis help contribute to the literature on foreign policy analysis and role theory focused on the Middle East, while also having policy-wise implications for foreign policy decision makers.

Keywords: Egypt, Foreign Policy Analysis, Regional Leadership, Role Theory, Saudi Arabia



ÖZET

SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞINDA ORTA DOĞU LİDERLİĞİ VE SUUDİ ARABİSTAN- MISIR REKABETİ: BİR ROL KURAMI YAKLAŞIMI

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Bu çalışma, Orta Doğu'daki devletlerin bölgesel liderlik rolü hedeflerinin dış politika davranışlarına dönüşme sürecini incelemektedir. Teorik çerçevesini rol kuramından alan bu tez, devletlerin rol tasavvurlarının uzun vadeli davranış kalıplarını şekillendirme suretiyle dış politika davranışlarını etkileyebileceğini savunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, bölgesel liderlik hedefinde olan devletlerin rol performansı için fırsatlar yaratabilecek bölgesel çatışmalara dahil olmaları beklenmektedir. Bölgesel liderlik hedefini gerçekleştirmeye çalışan devletlerin bölgesel düzeyde etkilerini arttıracak belirli dış politika kararlarını uygulamaları beklenmektedir. Bu argümanların incelenmesi için vaka analizi yöntemi kullanılmakta, Suudi Arabistan ve Mısır'ın Suriye İç Savaşı'nın 2011-2016 dönemine yönelik dış politika davranışları iki ayrı vakada incelenmektedir. Akbaba ve Özdamar'ın (2019) bu iki devletin dış politika rol tasavvurlarına yönelik topladığı veriler ikincil veri olarak kullanılmaktadır.

Çalışmanın sonuçları dış politika analizi ve rol kuramı teorilerine katkı sağlamakta, dış politika karar vericileri için de önemli çıkarımlar içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bölgesel Liderlik, Dış Politika Analizi, Mısır, Rol Kuramı, Suudi Arabistan



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Defined by many as a turning point for the Middle East, the power vacuum that was born out of the changes and turbulences of the Arab uprisings in 2011 was tried to be filled by many regional actors seeking regional leadership. In pursuit of expanded influence at the regional level, aspiring states sought many avenues, ranging from military intervention to the conflicts that emerged after 2011, to simply expressing their willingness to affirm their significance, all reflecting different understandings of what it means to be a regional leader.

The importance of understanding the policies that states may pursue in their geographical region concerning the particular roles they may attribute to themselves was first articulated by Holsti's (1970) seminal work on role theory. According to him, any portrayal of the international system had to take into account the importance of regional issues and affairs for most states, for failure to do so would result in "empirically deficient and theoretically inadequate" analyses (Holsti, 1970, p. 278) of how role conceptions affected foreign policy behavior. Even though his

work, which integrated role theory into foreign policy analysis, did not specifically focus on the regional level, it opened up new ways of understanding state behavior through foreign policy roles that could be attributed to any level of engagement in international affairs.

Many studies on role theory have expanded over the years, bringing forth theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on various topics, including the role conception of regional leadership. Most of these studies utilized case studies to focus on the regional leader role in different sets of regional affairs across the world (Aras & Gorener, 2010; Krotz & Sperling, 2011; Ovalı, 2013; Sakaki, 2013) or made use of analyzing regional leadership in order to direct attention to different research agendas within role theory (Guimaraes, 2021; Nolte & Schenoni, 2014; Wehner, 2015). However, not enough attention has been paid to the role of regional leadership in the Middle East. The lack of attention generates a peculiar gap in the literature, particularly because of the existence of multiple aspiring states that seek to expand their influence and affirm their leadership in the Middle East. Focusing on this area of research is significant since the existence of varying actors with different material and ideational propensities, perceiving the same role conception for themselves, can allow identifying the different ways this role can be transformed into foreign policy behavior.

Thus, this thesis aims to contribute to this identified gap in the literature by analyzing the research question of how states' role conception of regional leadership is translated into foreign policy behavior in the Middle East. Based on the argument that role conceptions can affect state behavior, the research argues that regional

crises can often create opportunities for new leaders to arise. This thesis also assumes whether and how particular types of behavior are performed in pursuit of regional leadership must be tested, as states' role performance can change depending on their perception and capabilities. Based on these preliminary arguments, six hypotheses are tested in two separate case studies: Saudi and Egyptian foreign policy behaviors in the context of the Syrian civil war from 2011 to 2016. Their well-established influence over regional affairs and willingness to increase their presence in the post-2011 regional environment make them significant cases to be studied.

The findings of this research project show that states' perception of how they should act per their preferred function in foreign affairs affects their foreign policy behavior, as they implement multiple decisions (albeit to varying degrees of success) in establishing such roles for themselves. Moreover, this thesis provides insight into how states' policies can have varying degrees of significance since their perceptions and capabilities can affect which actions they prioritize over others. By conducting the aforementioned case studies, this project shows that efforts to affirm ownership over the same type of role conception can lead to significantly different policies with varying levels of success.

This research paper consists of five chapters, including the introduction. Below is a presentation of the organization and a summary of the following chapters.

The Literature Review chapter provides information on the existing literature on role theory and regional leadership. In the first place, it discusses the introduction and development of role theory within the broader Foreign Policy Analysis field,

providing information on the different research agendas that developed within role theory in due course. Secondly, the literature on regional leadership is introduced as a field of research while also paying attention to the intersection between regional leadership and role theory literature. The third section elaborates on the lack of publications on studying regional leadership through role theory within the Middle East. Following a short introduction to the (under)development of the literature that uses foreign policy analysis tools for studying the Middle East, this section provides information on a select number of publications aimed at understanding regional leadership as a role conception and how it is performed across the region. Finally, a discussion on the implications of the lack of scholarly attention given to this sub-field of research is provided.

The Method chapter builds on the existing literature and presents the research agenda and the theoretical framework of this research project. The main research question of this thesis is how the concept of regional leadership is turned into foreign policy behavior in the Middle East. Following an overview of the case study method and the six hypotheses tested, the secondary source for the data on national role conceptions for the case studies is presented. The final subsection provides information on the two case studies and the selection process.

The Case Study chapter introduces the two case studies conducted for this thesis project, namely the foreign policy behavior of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the Syrian Civil War from 2011 to 2016. Following a brief introduction to the outbreak of the conflict, these states' foreign policy behavior is analyzed in two separate cases. Each case is analyzed separately, and the hypotheses are tested after an overview of their

foreign policy behavior and data on their national role conceptions during this period. The final section discusses the findings of testing these hypotheses and provides information on the observations made regarding the research topic.

The final chapter of this research project summarizes the findings of the empirical case studies while also paying attention to the limitations of this research. Lastly, the chapter presents the potential contribution of this thesis to the existing literature on role theory and regional leadership in the Middle East.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

As this thesis focuses on how regional leadership role conceptions of states are translated into foreign policy behavior, this chapter reviews several relevant areas of study, including the literature on international relations, foreign policy analysis (FPA), role theory, and regional leadership. While aiming to elaborate on the evolution and development of the literature of these research areas, another purpose of this chapter is to highlight where the existing publications lack in providing a deeper understanding of the research agenda of this thesis.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the existing literature on role theory within the umbrella of FPA studies. Following the elaboration on the path-breaking publications such as those of Holsti (1970) and Walker (1987), whose contributions propelled the expansion of role theory for foreign policy analysis, several theoretical conceptualizations and frameworks within the role theory literature are discussed. The second section continues by focusing on the specific scholarly contributions

centered on regional leadership, both as a general area of research for the FPA literature and as its formulation as a role conception with the help of role theory.

The third and final section of the literature review introduces geographical limitations to the role theory literature on regional leadership. Following a short introduction to the (under)development of the literature making use of foreign policy analysis tools focused on the Middle East, this section focuses on a selective number of publications that utilized role theory to understand regional leadership conception and performance across the Middle East, as well as a discussion on the implications of such a lack of scholarly attention given to this sub-field of research in role theory literature. The organization of the literature review in this chapter aims to aid the development of this research project's main arguments and case study in the upcoming chapters.

2.2 Role Theory in the Foreign Policy Analysis Literature

Initially used in sociology and psychology, role theory has been integrated into foreign policy analysis with K. Holsti's (1970) path-breaking article on national role conceptions in studying foreign policy. In this work, he argued that just as the individual behavior of persons, state behavior can reflect patterned behavior in conformity with the values and ideas of the Self (the leader) as well as the expectations of others (Holsti, 1970, p. 236). While identifying national roles, used interchangeably with national role performances, as the patterns of foreign policy behavior of governments toward other states (Holsti, 1970), Holsti's primary focus was on what he termed the national role conceptions (NRC) of states. He defined national role conceptions as the following (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246):

A national role conception includes the policymakers' own definitions of the 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. It is their "image" of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment.

Differentiating between the national role conceptions of the state (the Self) and the expectations of others (the alter), Holsti argued that it was "*primarily* the national role conceptions of states that determined their foreign policy behavior" (Holsti, 1970, p. 243, emphasis in original). By highlighting the importance of the decision makers' perception in defining national role conceptions, Holsti (1970) emphasized the importance of not taking national role conceptions as fixed patterns of behavior related to a particular issue. Instead, how the leaders defined actions suitable to their state meant that the exact role could lead to different role performances. Moreover, he also problematized the lack of scholarly attention given to the possibility that decision-makers could envision multiple roles for their state, each providing different sets of suitable actions for different issue areas or sets of relationships (1970).

In his research, Holsti identified seventeen national role conceptions for eighteen countries, analyzed between 1965 and 1967, as the following: bastion of revolution-liberator, regional leader, regional protector, active independent, liberation supporter, anti-imperialist agent, defender of the faith, mediator-integrator, regional-subsystem collaborator, developer, bridge, faithful ally, independent, example, internal development, isolate, and protectee (1970, pp. 260-270). While analyzing the emergent patterns of national role conceptions as indicators of involvement in international affairs, Holsti also argued that the findings reflected rich diplomatic affairs at the regional level (1970).

The attention Holsti's work brought to the possibility of utilizing role theory for foreign policy analysis and acting as a bridge for the agent-structure question in international relations has led to increasing scholarly contributions focused on different questions. As one of the early works following Holsti's introduction of role theory to foreign policy analysis, Wish (1980) conducted an analysis assessing the correlation between role conceptions of nations and their foreign policy behaviors. While Holsti's analysis only focused on the relationship between national role conceptions and foreign policy behavior at the level of international involvement, Wish (1980) argued that a systematic categorization and analysis of different aspects of foreign policy behavior can enhance the application of role theory. The findings showed a strong correlation between role conceptions and behavior. They showed that the longevity and stability of roles could help explain long-term patterns of foreign policy behavior instead of single decisions (Wish, 1980). Another finding she highlighted was the possibility of comparing the role conceptions professed in different decades to understand the changing relations at the international system level (Wish, 1980).

Another significant publication contributing to utilizing role theory in foreign policy analysis was Walker's (1987) "Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis." Walker's overarching argument focused on role theory's descriptive, organizational, and explanatory values and its ability to assess foreign policy behavior across multiple levels (1979; 1981; 1987). "Laying out the roadmap for future research" (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 11) for role theory, Walker's edited volume problematized the declining interest in role theory and traced the development of descriptive,

organizational, and explanatory contributions it could provide for foreign policy analysis (Thies, 2010). In addition to his 1987 edited work, Walker's publications over the years significantly enhanced the use of role theory across multiple levels and multiple dimensions in the study of foreign policy, such as with his most recent contributions focused on binary role theory and game theoretical models (Walker, 2011).

Following Walker's (1987) problematization of the aforementioned declining interest, the end of the 20th century saw a period of renewed attention given to utilizing role theory for foreign policy analysis. Much of the enrichment of the literature was owed to earlier scholars' differentiation between states' role conceptions, their role behavior, often referred to as role performance or enactment (Holsti, 1970), and the effects of role conceptions on states' foreign policy behavior. Such differentiations and exploring new conceptualizations enriched the field, allowing some scholars to identify significant clarifications missing in earlier contributions. As an example, some scholars focused on the domestic and international sources of role conceptions (Holsti, Siverson & George, 1980; Le Prestre, 1997; Goldmann, 1988; Rosenau, 1981), as is the case with Breuning's cognitive model of agent-structure relationship, in which decision makers' role conceptions are conceptualized to be based on their understanding of their state's identity as well as its place in the international system (Breuning, 2011). Other works included research focused on how state socialization helped role location at the regional and international levels (Thies, 2012) or how role conceptions were translated into foreign policy behavior and their effects on foreign policy change (Chafetz, Abramson, & Grillot, 1996; Grossman, 2005; Hermann, 1990; Müller,

2011).

Regarding whether and how states' role conceptions are translated into foreign policy behavior, multiple avenues of research were identified by different scholars. An important development was identifying role theory's tendency to black-box the state in determining states' role conceptions. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016) focused on the importance of domestic role contestation by criticizing the assumption of domestic consensus on deciding which foreign policy role to pursue at the national level. Following up on the existing research in foreign policy analysis on domestic contestation, Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) focused on vertical (between elites and masses) and horizontal (among domestic political elites) role contestation. They later developed their arguments in an edited volume in which multiple empirical case studies were utilized to assess their hypothesis on the importance of domestic role contestation for foreign policy processes and behaviors (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016).

Other scholarly contributions related to the unboxing of the state in role theory were focused on the mechanisms of domestic role selection (Brummer & Thies, 2014), the effects of changes in the international system on domestic role contestation (Grossman, Schortgen, & Friedrichs, 2022), the relationship between the marginalization of horizontal role contestation and the enactment of new roles (Özdamar, 2016), and the relationship between domestic role contestation and grand strategy (Demirduzen & Thies, 2022).

Based on the observation that states had more than one role conception for specific issue areas or relations, a significant number of scholars focused on the contradictory

expectations born out of different role conceptions of a state, defined as inter-role conflict (Harnisch, 2011; Brummer & Thies, 2015, p. 279). While some focused on identifying when inter-role conflicts emerged or how they were resolved (Barnett, 1993; Cronin, 2001; Hansel & Möller, 2015), another group of scholars highlighted the persistence of some inter-role conflicts over others.

In their article, Breuning and Pechenina (2020) argued that not all role conflicts attracted the same level of attention despite states' foreign policies often reflecting contradictory roles. Building on the differences between master and auxiliary roles, defined as a state's status and the roles sustaining their master role (Wehner, 2015), the scholars analyzed when states choose to address the conflict between two roles (Breuning & Pechenina, 2020). Their findings, based on a case study of Russia's master (major-power) and auxiliary (sending country in intercountry adoption) roles, revealed that states pragmatically choose to address role conflict when it becomes politically visible and when maintaining auxiliary roles despite their dissonance with master roles no longer provides tangible benefits (Breuning & Pechenina, 2020).

Contributions to role theory also focused on the relational nature of roles, referring to their existence based on interaction processes shaped by states' conceptions and their assessments of others' expectations (Harnisch, 2011, 8; McCourt, 2014, as cited in Breuning & Pechenina, 2020, p. 23). McCourt's (2012) interactionist account of role conceptions focused on the social determinants of foreign policy behavior (identity and norms' relation to roles) and the relationship between role-taking, role-making, and alter-casting. Similarly, Nabers (2011) focused on the relationship between roles and identity as a two-way process, which reflects the reciprocity between agents and

structure and the influence of this process on role change.

Whether based on existing typologies such as those of Holsti (1970) or others, in-depth analysis of different role conceptualizations and their effects on foreign policy behavior proved to be another fruitful area of research for role theory in foreign policy. While much attention has been given to roles at the international level (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1979; Wish, 1980), roles significant at the regional level have attracted the interest of scholars as well. The following section elaborates on the scholarly contributions centered on a particular regional role conception identified in the literature: the role of regional leadership.

2.3 Regional Leadership and Foreign Policy Analysis Literature

When analyzing regional leadership, the literature on international relations and foreign policy analysis often utilizes case studies focused on regional affairs in different parts of the world. Different case studies include works focused on Germany's leadership role conception (Mauß, 2018), the emergence of Poland as a regional leader in the post-9/11 context based on its "instinctive Atlantism" (Zaborowski & Longhurst, 2003), the role enactment of the multiple roles of Indonesia (Karim, 2017), elaboration on China's the sources of China's increasing regional influence (Breslin, 2009), or comparative works highlighting the differences between China or other regional powers, exemplified with Dent's work on the differences of how China and Japan pursued regional leadership (Dent, 2008).

Beyond the attention it attracted in foreign policy analysis and international relations, regional leadership proved to be significant for the contributions of role theory.

Identifying the importance of focusing on issues, relations, and role conceptions at the regional level (Holsti, 1970), Holsti defined the regional leader role as referring to the “duties or special responsibilities that a government perceives for itself in its relation to states in a particular region with which it identifies” (Holsti, 1970, p. 261).

The renewed interest in role theory, which started in the 1990s, increased the publications that utilized role theory for studying regional leadership as a foreign policy role. Much of the contributions to the literature on regional leadership utilized case studies, which enabled scholars to elaborate on how its conception and enactment changed among different actors, issue areas, and regions. Such works included a role theoretic approach to understanding the complexities of American-French relations based on their respective global and regional leadership roles (Krotz & Sperling, 2011), an analysis of Turkey’s changing conception of regional leadership in the Middle East under the AKP (Aras & Gorener, 2010) or the AKP’s role performance of regional leadership and its outcomes (Ovalı, 2013). Other works included case studies on East Asia, such as the publication of Sakaki (2013), which utilized role theory for a comparative analysis focused on the changes in regional foreign policy behavior of Germany and Japan in the post-Cold War era (2013), identified by the scholar as two important regional actors.

At the same time, analyses of regional leadership through case studies proved helpful for scholarly works focused on different aspects of role theory. One significant area of research related to the regional leader role was the relationship between the conceptions of the Self (the state) and the alter’s (other states) expectations. In order to understand the importance of others’ expectations for a regional power’s

conceptualization and enactment of its master (referring to its status in the international system) and auxiliary roles, Wehner (2015) focused on the relationship between regional and secondary powers in South America. Adopting a symbolic interactionist role theory framework, Wehner argued that the role expectations of Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela as secondary powers influenced the enactment of the auxiliary roles of Brazil as a regional power (2015). Moreover, his analysis also focused on how regional actors' conceptual understanding of their region affects their role-based interactions, particularly concerning the acceptance or rejection of regional powers' role enactment (Wehner, 2015).

The publication of Guimaraes (2021) emerged as another scholarly contribution focused on the interaction between the expectations of the Self and the alter. As opposed to over-emphasizing the importance of material asymmetries between small and regional powers (Guimaraes, 2021), the argument proposed in the publication was focused on how secondary powers can change regional powers' role conceptions in favor of the expectations of secondary and other small powers. Utilizing his theory of master role transition for the interactions across three regions (Latin America, Southern Africa, and South Asia), Guimaraes (2021) elaborated on which conditions were necessary for this theory to be efficacious. According to this work, what enabled the promotion of regional powers' role learning through a reversed socialization process was the existence of asymmetrical material interdependence between secondary and regional powers, the utilization of alter-casting by secondary powers, manipulation of regional powers' role conception (Guimaraes, 2021), and the existence of domestic and regional role contestations.

Focusing on the difference between regional power as a status within the international system and regional leadership as a foreign policy role to be achieved and performed, Nolte and Schenoni (2024) further contributed to the literature on role theory. The article problematized the use of the concepts of regional power and leadership interchangeably. While the concept of regional power is based on the capabilities of the state that structurally determine their social standing, this status can lead to the generation of the expectation of regional leadership, which can be pursued as a role (Nolte & Schenoni, 2024). They highlighted the puzzling behavior of regional powers who are reluctant to act as regional leaders, referred to as the phenomenon of regional power detachment (Nolte & Schenoni, 2024). The argument proposed was based on how a combination of structural and domestic factors can prevent the regional leader role from being perceived as a goal (Nolte & Schenoni, 2024).

Despite the proliferation of scholarly interest in the regional leadership role and the subsequent case studies centered on different regions worldwide, the Middle East remained the region attracting the least attention in the role theory literature. The following section briefly highlights the contributions of foreign policy analysis to regional foreign policy behavior across the Middle East, followed by an exploration of the limited number of scholarly publications utilizing role theory to study the role of leadership in the region.

2.4 Regional Leadership in the Middle East and Foreign Policy Analysis

As the literature on foreign policy analysis expanded across different issue areas, case studies within the literature started to cross the boundaries of North America

and later Europe, turning their attention to different regions. These included writings on regional affairs and foreign policies of sub-Saharan Africa (Adar & Ajulu, 2002; Braveboy-Wagner, 2003), Latin America (Ferris & Lincoln, 1981; Giacalone, 2012), or South Asia (Behera, 2008; Muthiah, 2011; Ganguly, 2010). However, when the Middle East and its regional affairs are taken into consideration, it is possible to reflect that even though there are several writings about the foreign policies of states in the Middle East, the scholarly contributions that make use of foreign policy analysis (FPA) tools remains scarce (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 77).

Multiple reasons have been given for such scarcity in the literature, such as the late development of theoretical frameworks applicable to “the Global South” (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 77) or the tendency found within the literature to assess regional affairs in the Middle East through an exceptionalism lens, leading to the assumption that their foreign policy could only be shaped by the regional actors’ culture and religion (Bayat & Herrera, 2021). Nevertheless, despite the persistence of less attention being given to utilizing FPA tools in analyzing the Middle East, it is still possible to identify significant contributions that took into account the distinctive characteristics of foreign policy analysis in the region (Hinnebusch, 2015). While an in-depth exploration of writings focused on foreign policy analysis of the Middle East (Barnett, 1998; Brown, 2001; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002; Telhami & Barnett, 2002) is beyond the scope of this review, it is important to acknowledge two significant publications that helped develop research on foreign policy analysis of the Middle East.

In the first place, initially published in 1984, Korany and Dessouki’s publication

(2008) emerged as a path-breaking work aiming to utilize theoretical frameworks of FPA for foreign policies of Arab states. Problematizing the lack of fieldwork on how Arab states viewed the world and their role in it, this publication provided a context-sensitive framework of foreign policy analysis for nine Arab countries (Korany & Dessouki, 2008). In terms of continuity and change in Arab foreign policies, a growing discrepancy between the Arab states' role conceptions and their role performance was identified (Korany & Dessouki, 2008). The case studies within the publication analyzed how Arab foreign policies were shaped by domestic factors (state formation or domestic structures), systemic constraints, and the geopolitical context at a time when there was increasing global interconnectedness (Korany & Dessouki, 2008). The findings revealed that Arab states' foreign policies were more interested in solving immediate problems than acting following an overall regional vision, which explained the presence of foreign policies of Arab states as opposed to "Arab foreign policies" (Korany & Dessouki, 2008, p. 492).

Another scholarly contribution focused on utilizing FPA tools to study foreign policies in the Middle East was Nonneman's (2005) publication, in which Middle Eastern-European relations were analyzed from the perspective of foreign policies of Middle Eastern and North African states. Studying the foreign policies of MENA states required multi-level, multi-causal, and contextual explanations that could be driven by a complex model of international politics (Nonneman, 2005). Focusing on the dependency of the developing countries of the Middle East on 'core' states, Nonneman's edited volume questioned to what degree the foreign policies of these actors are shaped by their dependency and whether there is room for relative autonomy (2005). The findings revealed that Middle Eastern states' ability to

pragmatically adapt both role conceptions and performance to avoid “mono-dependence” requires a certain degree of autonomy from domestic and regional constraints, which over time could turn into autonomy at all three levels (Nonneman, 2005, p. 15).

These two publications reveal a significant observation on the importance of role theory for studying foreign policies in the Middle East. It must be noted that even though both analyses’ primary focus is on multiple domestic, systemic, and regional factors, they nevertheless highlight the importance of identifying the foreign policy roles of MENA states, shaped by their various and interlinked perceptions (Nonneman, 2005, p. 10). This point reflects the advantages of utilizing role theory to analyze states’ foreign policies in the Middle East, as it allows a deeper understanding of how the possibilities and constraints decision-makers perceive in foreign policymaking are shaped by ideational and material factors.

Contrary to the evidence shown by the findings of such significant works, however, there is a significant gap in the foreign policy analysis literature that specifically utilizes role theory to understand regional leadership in the Middle East. This gap is particularly intriguing since the existing FPA literature on regional leadership has already identified how a state’s pursuit of regional leadership can change based on the region, issue area, or actor. In a region where the lack of an uncontested regional power does not negate the existence of potential regional leaders seeking to expand their influence (Beck, 2014), not enough scholarly attention being paid to regional leadership as a role prevents a deeper understanding of how foreign policy decisions are made and carried out across the Middle East. While it is possible to identify a

selective number of single case studies, such as Özdamar's focus on how the AKP's marginalization of horizontal role contestation in Turkey after 2009 allowed the enactment of the regional leader role in the Middle East (2016, p. 94), studies on regional leadership role remains underdeveloped.

One of the few publications focused on the regional leadership role in the Middle East is Barnett's (1993) work on the relationship between roles, institutions, and role conflict, as well as the consequences of the existence of overlapping international institutions in the Arab Middle East (Barnett, 1993). Highlighting the embeddedness of states in domestic and international institutions, Barnett (1993) focuses on how such institutions help produce and affect the role conceptions of states, particularly when a state exists in different institutions demanding contradictory behavior, leading to role conflict. According to this article, preference roles, which are shaped by leaders' interpretations, are more resilient to role conflict as they allow increased control over how to adjust to contradictory role expectations (Barnett, 1993). On the other hand, position roles determined by standardized expectations of formal institutions are less resilient to the possibility of role conflict despite their decreasing effect on failed expectations (Barnett, 1993). In order to better illustrate this argument, Barnett (1993) identifies the co-existence of pan-Arabism and state sovereignty as a source of regional stability since their existence as institutions creates contradictory role expectations for Arab states. Based on this research, the co-existence of these institutions led to Arab states' foreign policy behavior being affected by two contradictory dynamics: while state sovereignty was crucial for state survival, preserving pan-Arabism allowed a normative justification for their foreign policy behavior, particularly their intervention in the domestic affairs of others

(Barnett, 1997). In addition to how Arab states perceived and defined the roles born out of these institutions, which varied among them, the presence of role conflict in the region negatively affected regional stability (Barnett, 1993).

Another rare contribution to the literature can be identified as Akbaba and Özdamar's (2019) publication on foreign policy roles of major regional powers (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) who seek political leadership across the region in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings in 2011. In their work, Akbaba and Özdamar's identification of two significant weaknesses of the role theory literature becomes significant: the lack of attention paid to regional role conceptions in the Middle East and the absence of religion as a faith-based ideational source of role conceptions (2019). Applying Breuning's cognitive model of the agent-structure relationship, they expand the ideational factors to include faith-based domestic sources. Additionally, they focus on the relationship between regional states' changing role conceptions and changing domestic and regional dynamics, and how the relationship between religion, identity, and structural concerns affects their position vis-à-vis the civil war in Syria (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). The research findings revealed the changing nature of role conceptions of these four states, highlighting how changes in role conceptions led to foreign behavior change regarding the civil war (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). As these states reoriented their regional role conceptions following the effects of the uprisings, each state utilized faith for their role enactment in different ways (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). Moreover, their analysis of the post-2011 regional context in the Middle East allowed elaboration on how the uprisings created multiple role conflicts for these actors based on contradictions between their conceptions and others' expectations

(Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). An example is the Egyptian case, where Egypt's conception of the regional leader role did not fit the expectations of other actors who did not consider Egypt capable of fulfilling such 'ambitious' roles (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 122).

2.5 Conclusion

The reviewed works within this chapter introduced the existing literature on foreign policy analysis, role theory, and regional leadership. The discussion on the role theory literature illustrated the theoretical background required to effectively utilize the theoretical concepts such as role conceptions, role enactment or performance, inter-role conflict, and the complex dynamics between these concepts. The second section reviewed the existing research on regional leadership in FPA literature and the evolution of its presence as a research agenda within the role theory literature. The final section outlined the limitations of the role theory literature in terms of its contributions to understanding how the regional leadership role is perceived and performed in the Middle East, as well as providing an introduction to the limited publications that have tried to address this gap.

As elaborated in the previous sections, the lack of scholarly attention paid to the importance of regional leadership role conception for foreign policies of multiple actors across the Middle East is an interesting finding of this literature review. Even though FPA literature has acknowledged the importance of identifying the peculiarities of the region and the issue area when analyzing regional leadership, not enough attention has been given to how the conception and performance of this role is carried out in the Middle East, which might reflect significant differences with

other regions. Despite the gradual increase in attention the FPA studies have given to foreign policies of aspiring regional powers across the Middle East, the underdevelopment of regional leadership in the role theory literature focused on the region prevents comprehensive advancements in understanding the particularities and the workings of the foreign policies of the Middle East. By utilizing role theory in a comparative study of the role conceptions and performances of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, this research project aims to address this gap in the role theory literature.



CHAPTER III

METHOD

3.1 Introduction

Based on the existing literature reviewed in the previous chapter, this section provides the research design developed for this thesis project. First, information about the main research question and its position in the role theory literature is highlighted. It is followed by an introduction of the hypotheses developed for the case study analyses in the next chapter. The case study method and case selection are illustrated as a follow-up, and the final sub-section elaborates on the secondary data used for this research project.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This research project focuses on how the role conception of states based on regional leadership is translated into foreign policy behavior. On this topic, the relevant literature on role theory is situated within the umbrella of foreign policy analysis (FPA) literature, as the study of role conceptions requires analyzing the foreign policy decision-making process performed by human beings, pointing to the

necessity of actor-specific and agent-oriented theory (Hudson, 2005).

The existing literature initially focused on regional leadership as one among the many role conceptions first identified by Holsti (1970), and much of the research was focused on its identification across different cases. Over time, the regional leadership role attracted scholarly attention regarding its conceptualization by different actors, its performance, or the relevant factors influencing both. While some focused on the importance of others' expectations and their influence (Guimaraes, 2021; Wehner, 2015), others highlighted the importance of focusing on multiple cases as the role performance of regional leadership was highly influenced by specific actors, issues, and relations at the regional level (Holsti, 1970). This latter argument led to a proliferation of case studies crossing the borders of North America and Europe. However, as the previous literature review has highlighted, contributions focused on regional leadership in the Middle East remain underdeveloped.

The historical persistence of potential regional leaders seeking to expand their influence in a region without uncontested regional power (Beck, 2014, p. 4) can be identified as a fruitful area of research for role theory. More specifically, multiple actors with different material and ideational propensities claiming ownership of leadership in the Middle East allow a researcher to highlight how different actors can conceptualize this role and transform it into foreign policy behavior. As such, shaped by the importance of contributing to this gap in the literature, this project aims to answer how the conception of regional leadership is turned into foreign policy behavior in the Middle East.

3.3 Hypotheses

Defined as policymakers' conceptions of the rules, decisions, and actions suitable for their state that they should perform in regional and international relations (Holsti, 1970), role conceptions offer insights into the decisions made and implemented for foreign policy. The importance of focusing on the role conceptions is implicit in the definition of foreign policy behavior, which can be summarized as the actions of the agents of a government that are intended to influence the behavior of other regional or international actors (Hermann, 1972, as cited in Wish, 1980, p. 540). Based on one of the foundational arguments of FPA, which is the importance of focusing on decision-makers as the agents of foreign policymaking, role conceptions help explain how decision-makers perceive the functions their state should perform. Role conceptions shape long-term patterns of foreign policy behavior as they can provide guidelines and standards for conduct in international affairs (Wish, 1980). As such, for this research project, foreign policy behavior can be used interchangeably with the concept of role performance or enactment, referring to role behavior (Holsti, 1970). Thus, the first hypothesis stipulates that:

H1: Role conceptions can affect states' foreign policy behavior (role performance or enactment).

The influence of role conceptions on foreign policy behavior is also reflected in regional affairs. An aspiring state claiming regional leadership likely shapes its foreign policy behavior based on its conception of the specific responsibilities, duties, and functions it must perform in pursuit of this role. Since the role conception of regional leadership requires perceptions about the specific decisions,

responsibilities, and actions the state must perform¹, it is important to identify which types of behavior must be understood when referring to regional leadership. In the first place, the pursuit of regional leadership through role performance requires active involvement in regional affairs. Particularly, regional crises can create opportunities for new regional actors to arise or for new power dynamics to be established, and an aspiring state can take advantage of regional conflicts to establish its regional leadership. Hence, the second hypothesis argues the following:

H2: The regional leader role conception will likely lead to a state's active engagement in regional conflicts.

In pursuit of regional leadership, involvement in significant conflicts requires performing particular functions and duties that can help reflect a state's visibility and influence at the regional level. The types of behavior to be performed can be shaped by states' material capabilities, inclination toward using hard or soft power, pre-established organizational engagement in regional affairs, and past foreign policy decisions. Based on the existing literature, the types of behavior required to be performed in pursuit of regional leadership for this research project are identified as the following: 1) participation in regional and international organizations, 2) intervention in crises through providing political, economic, or military aid, 3) facilitating communication channels or coordinating peace talks, and 4) leading other regional actors' behavior vis-à-vis the crisis in favor of their preferences. Thus, the

¹ This thesis accepts Nolte and Schenoni's (2024) differentiation between regional power and regional leadership as two concepts that are not interchangeable. While the former refers to the capabilities of a state, the latter is a foreign policy goal that can be pursued by actors who are not necessarily regional powers.

third, fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses argue:

H3: The regional leader role conception of a state is likely to result in participation in regional and international organizations as the coordinator of responses to the conflict.

H4: The regional leader role conception of a state is expected to result in intervention in the conflict through providing political, economic, or military aid.

H5: The regional leader's role conception of a state is expected to lead the state to facilitate communication channels and mediate between different conflict actors.

H6: The regional leader role conception of a state is expected to cause the state to try to dictate other regional actors' responses to the conflict in favor of their preferences.

3.4 Method

In order to determine the causal relationship between regional leadership as a role conception (independent variable) and foreign policy behavior as role performance/enactment (dependent variable), the case study method is used for this thesis. A case refers to "an instance of a class of events" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 38), with the latter referring to the phenomenon a researcher is interested in studying. A case study, consequently, can be described as the detailed study of a well-defined aspect

of a historical episode seeking to develop and apply clear standards for determining whether some explanations can be generalized across the social world (George and Bennett, 2005). Therefore, in conducting a case study, considering the question “What is this a case of?” (Levy, 2008, p. 2) becomes crucial to making connections between the single instance or event of interest and a broader theory (Hancke, 2009, p. 62).

The case study method is generally used for determining the accuracy of a causal relationship for a single case or a small number of cases, as it is more suited for the in-depth analysis (Gerring, 2007) of the outcome of a case or the causal role of a particular independent variable across a small number of cases (George and Bennett, 2005, 108). As the case study method mainly focuses on providing in-depth analysis for within-case variances, it also allows multiple hypotheses to be tested in a few relevant cases (Gerring, 2007). Moreover, the case study method is best used when the scope (population of cases) of the given proposition is limited (Gerring, 2007), as a case study on a European country can provide more insights into arguments about Europe as opposed to the population of states across the world (Gerring, 2007, p. 105). Such characteristics of the case study method are one of the reasons behind its employment in this research project. As the number of cases based on the performance of the regional leadership role in the Middle East is limited, conducting within-case analyses allows more profound insights into the proposed argument.

Based on a pre-constructed research design (identification of the research question, variables, and data requirements), the case study starts with the process of case selection from a clearly defined subclass of cases following the objectives of the

research study. Following the identification of cases, the researcher engages in what is known as “soaking and poking” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 122), in which the researcher tries to gather as much information from the existing literature as they can. The case study analysis commences, where the causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables is established through historical inquiry (George & Bennett, 2005), followed by a discussion of findings.

3.5 Case Selection

Based on the main research question and the relevant hypotheses identified earlier, this research project aims to conduct two case study analyses on Egypt and Saudi Arabia for the 2011-2016 period of the Syrian civil war. What follows is an exploration of the decisions made in case selection processes and determining temporal limitations.

In the first place, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have historically claimed ownership of the role of regional leader in the Middle East based on the persistence of different supra-national identities across the region (Hinnebusch, 2020), such as Egypt’s traditional leading role for the Arab nations and Saudi Arabia’s importance for the umma as the birthplace of Islam (Hinnebusch, 2020; Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). Their presence as two historically significant actors in regional affairs of the Middle East allows profound insights into how different actors can perform the regional leadership role in the same case. Together with the fact that both states were deeply affected by the Arab uprisings and subsequent eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011, their claim of ownership over regional leadership also allows testing the hypotheses based on the types of behavior a state should perform in regional conflicts in pursuit of its role

conception.

The Syrian civil war is significant for this research project as Syria has been among the historically central Arab states for regional affairs (Çiftçi & Tezcür, 2016, as cited in Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 85). The eruption of turmoil in Syria has caused it to become a battleground for regional and international rivalry between many actors (Hinnebusch, 2020). In turn, the Syrian civil war has contributed to the changes within and increasing complexity of the regional order (Phillips, 2020), leading regional states to try to increase their political influence in a region in turmoil in the aftermath of the January 2011 uprisings.

Similarly, the period chosen (2011-2016) holds significance for this research project as case study analyses focused on this period can provide deeper insights into the proposed hypotheses. The significance is because the first five years have constructed the high-intensity period of the conflict, with the post-2016 period reflecting a shift in dynamics and less attention being paid to the conflict by regional actors (Hinnebusch, 2020). As several hypotheses proposed earlier are based on the proposition that states in pursuit of regional leadership actively engage in regional conflicts through performing particular types of foreign policy behavior, focusing on the period from 2011 to 2016 allows a more profound understanding of the causal relationship between regional leadership role and its performance in regional crises that are of significance for multiple actors.

3.6 Data

This research's two case study analyses rely on secondary data retrieved from the

relevant chapters of the publication of Akbaba and Özdamar, titled “Role Theory in the Middle East and North Africa: Politics, Economics and Identity” (2019). The scholars (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019) have identified the role conceptions of four significant regional actors (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) in order to identify and analyze the material and ideational factors shaping their role conceptions, with particular attention given to religion as an ideational source. Collected through latent content analysis, the data for each country includes a list of the foreign policy roles most frequently stated by their executives from January 2011 to December 2016 (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). For this research project, only the data collected on Egypt and Saudi Arabia were taken as secondary data.

There are several reasons behind the decision to use a secondary source for data instead of conducting original data collection. In the first place, Akbaba and Özdamar’s (2019) publication has been among the inspirations behind this research project as it constitutes one of the few scholarly contributions focusing on utilizing role theory for regional leadership in the Middle East. Secondly, the spatial-temporal limitations of the publication regarding data collection on role conceptions fit the period chosen for the Syrian civil war as a case, enabling their usage as secondary data for the research. More significantly, however, the main research topic of this project is the causal relation between regional leadership as a role conception and states’ foreign policy behavior as role performance. Utilizing secondary data, which identifies the presence of this role conception for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, allows more time and resources to be committed to the case study analyses, enabling deeper insights to be gained for the proposed arguments of this research.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the main research question, the theoretical framework and hypotheses, the method and case selection, and the introduction of secondary data. Based on the information provided, the following chapter elaborates on the two case study analyses of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian civil war from 2011 to 2016.



CHAPTER IV

CASE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

Building upon the previous examination of the existing literature and outlining the method to be used in this research project, this chapter provides case study analyses of Saudi and Egyptian foreign policy behavior during the Syrian civil war regarding the pursuit of regional leadership roles. Following brief introductions to the post-2011 foreign policies of both these states from 2011 to 2016, their national role conceptions are presented through the secondary data taken from Akbaba and Özdamar's (2019) publication. Then, the role performances of Saudi Arabia and Egypt vis-à-vis Syria are presented as separate case studies. Through the case study method, the previously identified hypotheses are tested by focusing on the specific actions states take when pursuing regional leadership, which constitutes one of the main contributions of this research project to the literature on foreign policy analysis and role theory. The final section highlights the main conclusions driven by the case studies and observations regarding the relationship between the role of regional leadership and foreign policy behavior.

4.2 Syrian Civil War

Throughout the twentieth and well into the twenty-first century, Syria has been one of the significant states for regional affairs in the Middle East, based on its geographical position and significance as a pillar of Arab nationalism. While its borders with Israel, Iraq, and Lebanon contributed to its significance in regional affairs (Al Tamamy, 2012), particularly in security matters, its historical position as one of the pillars of Arab nationalism along with Egypt (Phillips, 2016) resulted in opportunities and challenges for Syria's regional affairs. The eruption of a civil war in Syria following the uprisings has only contributed to its significance, with many seeing the potential of Assad's fall as an opportunity for their national and regional interests.

Protests calling for democracy against the Ba'athist regime of Bashar al-Assad had begun as early as January 2011 in Syria (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017), but it was the arrest of fifteen teenagers who had written anti-regime graffiti in Daraa that led to protests across the country (Al-Mutairi, 2017; Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017). An event titled the Friday of Dignity on March 18 led to the organization of weekly mass protests across the country, with people calling for an end to repression and corruption (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017). The protestors' attack on Ba'ath headquarters in Daraa in early April led to a new wave of repression by security forces (Al-Mutairi, 2017), increasing the use of live ammunition and other military equipment when confronting the protestors. The deterioration of the confrontations between protesters and regime forces resulted in the establishment of anti-regime resistance groups, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed in July

2011 (Al-Mutairi, 2017), dragging the country into a civil war.

The decreasing significance of one of the historically significant Arab states, now in the clutches of a civil war, created a power vacuum, especially when considered within the broader context of the 2011 Uprisings that led to the loss of another historic Arab power, Egypt. Some scholars have referred to the civil war as the region's restructuring (Sunik, 2018), since it created new opportunities for regional and international actors who became increasingly involved in the Syrian conflict, affecting the character and scale of the civil war to a great extent (Phillips, 2016). More importantly, the emergence of this crisis in a region without a hegemon paved the way for aspiring states to try to take advantage of such new power dynamics in pursuit of the establishment of their regional leadership. Referring to a regional actor who can change and affect regional politics in favor of its interests through its material and ideational assets, the regional leadership role continues to be pursued by multiple actors in the Middle East, where regional politics are characterized by the fluidity of power (Ehteshami, 2018). As previously established, moments of crisis allow regional actors to change or adapt to roles they ascribe to themselves through appropriate foreign policy decisions (Breuning, 2012, as cited in Cerioli, 2019, p. 184). Taken together with the historical significance of Syria for regional politics, active involvement in the Syrian civil war, and establishing the capability to dictate the course of events and responses to the conflict, emerges as a fruitful area for states pursuing regional leadership.

4.3 Saudi Arabia

4.3.1 Saudi Foreign Policy and National Role Conceptions (2011-2016)

As the largest and wealthiest state across the Arab Peninsula, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the first half of the twenty-first century has been defined by many as pragmatic, cautious, and even stagnant, as the Kingdom appeared to be far more interested in engaging in regional affairs to preserve its regime security and the stability of the region through maintaining the status-quo (Al Tamamy, 2012; Cerioli, 2019; Ennis & Momani, 2013). However, one of the defining features of the Kingdom's foreign policy after 2011 has been its proactiveness in shaping regional affairs in favor of its interests beyond preserving stability. While Saudi Arabia has historically utilized its financial assets and soft power to maintain its legitimacy, the post-2011 period reflected Riyadh's interest in using its military force (Al Tamamy, 2012), which has been growing steadily in recent decades (Darwich, 2020). What started as sending Saudi troops to Bahrain in 2011 in order to prevent the spread of uprisings across the Gulf transformed into Saudi willingness to actualize regional interests through military power, as was the case with the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015.

Another defining feature of Saudi foreign policy during this period was its increasing independence, particularly from the influence of the United States as its historical ally. While the significant relationship between the two states remains strong to this day, the differences between Riyadh and Washington's preferences over the responses to distinct regional issues date back to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Al-Mutairi, 2017). However, it was Washington's responses to the uprisings not being aligned with the interests of Saudi Arabia and the increasing disengagement of the US in the affairs of the Middle East that led the Kingdom to adopt a more independent and assertive regional foreign policy. The perceived threats from the

increasing influence of Iran or the Islamist groups amid the emergence of a power vacuum in the region were causes of concern for Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the same power vacuum granted opportunities for the Kingdom to develop regional policies that would lead to a “sharper affirmation of Saudi interests” (Darwich, 2020, p. 127) and the realization of its ‘appropriate’ position in regional affairs as the wealthiest Arab state and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.

The Saudi foreign policy role conceptions from 2011 to 2016 should be identified since the orientation of Saudi foreign policy in terms of its self-perceived responsibilities and willingness to shape regional affairs was affected by such roles. In order to highlight the national role conceptions of Saudi Arabia and whether regional leadership is indeed among these self-identified roles, I utilize the findings of Akbaba and Özdamar’s (2019) latent content analysis. By analyzing the statements of Saudi foreign policy executives in office between 2011 and 2016, Akbaba and Özdamar (2019) identified the list and frequency of Saudi national role conceptions.

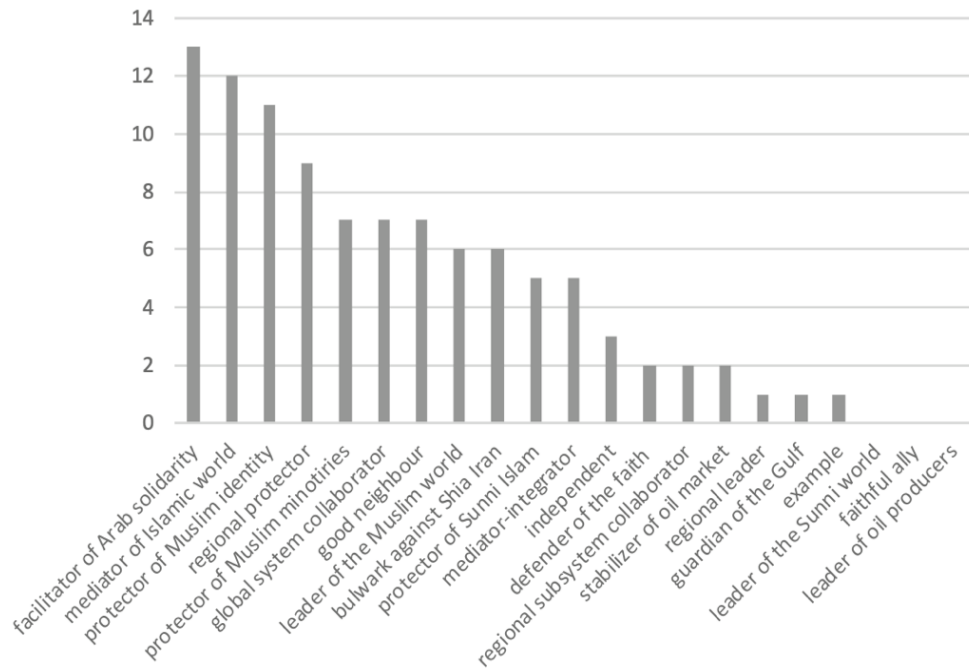
Table 1: Saudi Foreign Policy Executives Included in the Analysis (January 1, 2011- December 31, 2016)

Source: Akbaba and Özdamar (2019, p. 74)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position, Time in Office</i>
King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	Former King (and former Prime Minister) of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Reign: August 2005 – January 2015
King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	King and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Reign: January 2015 – Present
Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir	Minister of Foreign Affairs, April 2015 – Present
Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, March 1975 – April 2015
Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	Crown Prince (and Deputy Prime Minister), First Deputy Prime Minister (April 2015 – June 2017)

Figure 1: Frequency of Saudi Arabia Roles

Source: Akbaba and Özdamar (2019, p. 75)



The findings shown in Figure 1 reveal that although not among the most frequently mentioned role conceptions, regional leadership is one of the twenty-one foreign policy roles Saudi Arabia ascribed to itself during this period. The relatively moderate frequency of the role of the regional leaders is irrelevant to this research project since I am more interested in how a national role conception is turned into foreign policy behavior through its performance. However, it is still important to highlight that several of these roles are related to the perceived influence of the Kingdom, with references to positions of protector, bulwark, defender, guardian, and leader. By accepting the Saudi perception of regional leadership, I test my hypotheses by analyzing Saudi foreign policy behavior in the Syrian civil war.

4.3.2 Saudi Foreign Policy Behavior During the Syrian Civil War (2011-2016)

Table 2: Saudi involvement in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2016)

March 2011	Widespread protests begin in Syria
March 28, 2011	King Abdullah calls Assad
July 2011	The Free Syrian Army is established
August 6, 2011	GCC statement calling for an end to violence
August 8, 2011	King Abdullah withdraws his ambassador from Damascus
January 22, 2012	Saudi Arabia withdraws from the observer mission of the Arab League
	Saudi Arabia starts funding the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)
January 28, 2012	The Observer plan is suspended by the League
February 2012	Saudi Arabia withdraws from the Friends of Syria Group
	Saudi Arabia declares political and material support to the opposition groups
August 14-15 2012	Saudi Arabia hosts the 4 th Extraordinary Session of the OIC
July 2013	Saudi-backed members are elected in the SNC
September 2013	Saudi Arabia calls for an aerial strike against Assad at the UN General Assembly
	Saudi Arabia starts funding the Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam)
October 18, 2013	Saudi Arabia refuses a seat at the UNSC
January 22, 2014	Saudi Arabia convinces the SNC to attend the Geneva II Peace Talks
September 12, 2014	Saudi Arabia joins the US International Coalition against ISIS
January 23, 2015	King Abdullah died and was succeeded by King Salman
December 10-12, 2015	The Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC) is established
December 2015	Saudi Arabia establishes the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT)
February 2016	King Salman persuades the HNC to attend the Geneva Talks

A significant principle of all scholarly contributions made to the literature under the field of Foreign Policy Analysis is to go against the black-boxing of a state and emphasize the significance of decision-making for foreign policy outputs. Those who focused on role conceptions and role theory when conducting foreign policy analyses proved no different when it came to the importance of foreign policy executives, as evident in the significance that Holsti's (1970) seminal work attributed to leaders when it came to a state's role performance in regional or international affairs. However, one point of differentiation was made for regimes where power is personalized or concentrated in the hands of a small circle of elites, as the role performance under such regimes would be heavily influenced by the leader or the head of the state and their values, style, and perceptions (Ehteshami, 2018).

Considering the historical importance of the domestic level changes in the Crown for foreign policy decisions made by the Kingdom (Al Tamamy, 2014; Ehteshami, 2018), Saudi Arabia proves to be such an example where analyzing the policy outputs of the state requires differentiating between different leaders. As such, since the death of King Abdullah in 2015 and the subsequent coming to power of the Salmans proved to be a watershed moment for the Kingdom, I decided to analyze their foreign policy behavior in the Syrian civil war by differentiating between the leadership periods of King Abdullah (2011- January 2015) and King Salman (2015-2016).

4.3.2.1 King Abdullah (2011-2015)

When the nationwide demonstrations across Syria broke out in March 2011, the Saudi responses reflected a cautious approach that relied on encouraging Assad to

make political reforms rather than advocating for his stepping down. Such caution was in line with Saudi Arabia's initial counter-revolutionary position within the context of the Uprisings, as the primary objective of the Kingdom was to prevent the spread of demonstrations across the Gulf and maintain the security of authoritarian states' regimes, primarily its own. Prioritizing regional security through the repression of demonstrations required providing financial and military aid to allied regimes, as they did with Bahrain, while using diplomatic correspondence to convince them to respond to demonstrators' demands (Al-Mutairi, 2017). It is within this context that, for the first month or so of the uprisings in Syria, King Abdullah viewed Syria as part of its domestic and regional concerns (Phillips, 2016). As shown in Table 2, on March 28, King Abdullah called Assad to urge him to make political reforms while offering to cover the costs of policies Assad would choose to implement, even going as far as promising to issue them as grants instead of loans (Al-Mutairi, 2017). However, as the protests became widespread and the regime intensified its use of brutal force against Syrian citizens, it became clear that Assad would not follow through with the demands of either Syrians or Saudi Arabia, leading the Kingdom to start to express its displeasure with the Ba'athist regime.

As the uprisings across Syria changed in character and tensions continued to increase, Saudi Arabia, having eliminated the immediate threats the uprisings posed to its domestic stability (Phillips, 2016), started to consider the turmoil in Syria as an opportunity, as is in line with the second hypothesis (H2) of this project. In addition to King Abdullah's desire to avoid the problems his silence on Syria could create for its regional influence (Phillips, 2016), the Kingdom wanted to take advantage of this seemingly growing crisis in Syria in favor of its regional interests. This line of

thinking conforms with the post-Arab Spring direction of Riyadh's foreign policy behavior, particularly regarding its assertiveness amid power struggles between different regional actors (Al-Mutairi, 2017). Having considered Iran as a source of threat to its role as the leader of the Muslim world and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (Akbaba and Özdamar, 2019; Darwich, 2020), the Kingdom started to regard the fall of Assad, who is one of the most important allies of Iran, as an opportunity to establish its regional leadership, as it could create windows of opportunity for Riyadh in Lebanon and Iraq (Blanga, 2017). By the time the establishment of armed opposition groups descended Syria into a civil war, Saudi Arabia had transformed its initial cautious calls to Assad for moderate political reforms (Blanga, 2017) into one of an anti-regime position and willingness to implement multiple policies to influence events in favor of its regional position (for further chronological information, please refer to Table 2 on page 40).

It was based on these changes of perception that, following the UN Security Council's condemnation of violence in Syria and the GCC statement in August 2011 calling for an immediate end to violence, King Abdullah publicly announced the Saudi displeasure with the Assad government and withdrew the Saudi ambassador from Damascus in protest (Blanga, 2017). Taking on a harsher approach than that of the GCC by referring to the necessity of stopping "the killing machine" in Syria (Nakamura, 2013, p. 2), King Abdullah added the following (Blanga, 2017, p. 51):

Today, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands before its historical responsibility towards her brothers, demanding introduction and activation of reforms that are not entwined with promises, but actually achieved, so that our brothers the citizens in Syria can feel them in their lives as dignity, glory and pride.

As it is also presented in Table 2 (page 40), King Abdullah's decision to announce

Saudi Arabia's anti-regime position shortly after regional and international calls were made against Assad in Syria was reflective of the policies the Kingdom would prioritize for the first two years of the conflict, as one of the first and most significant tools Saudi Arabia utilized in pursuit of its regional leadership was its position in multiple regional and international organizations.

The importance that Saudi Arabia has attributed to utilizing its soft power through regional and international multilateral organizations is not new (Ennis and Momani, 2013). The Kingdom's recent move "from vague to solid institutionalism" (Al Tamamy, 2012, p. 147) has allowed it to pursue its active foreign policy by positioning itself as a significant actor within such institutions. As some of these institutions are relatively weak regarding the clear responsibilities they enforce on their members, they allow Saudi Arabia to pursue its regional leadership by mobilizing states through rhetoric that serves its interests (Al Tamamy, 2012; 2014) and advocating for policies in Saudi Arabia's favor. This behavior conforms to my third hypothesis (H3), which stipulates that the performance of regional leadership as a role conception would require participation in regional and international organizations as the coordinator of responses. The examples of the Kingdom's actions, which I highlight below, indicate that Saudi Arabia considered these institutions a significant part of its leadership performance.

When it came to pursuing regional leadership within the context of the Syrian civil war, Saudi Arabia's first step was to actively engage in regional diplomacy by advocating policies based on its interests through regional institutions. Among these organizations, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been particularly significant

for Saudi Arabia, as its establishment in 1981 was considered to be one of the most important regional policy achievements of the Kingdom (Richter, 2014). Following the Saudi shift in position vis-à-vis Syria in August 2011 (please refer to Table 2 on page 40), Saudi Arabia has actively tried to enforce anti-regime policies within the GCC, as exemplified by King Abdullah's decision to repeat the GCC condemnation of the regime forces before removing its ambassador from Damascus (Sunik, 2018). The fact that Saudi Arabia has acted as the de facto leader of the GCC for a long time has allowed the Kingdom to use this position for active engagement in other multilateral organizations. The anti-regime statements Saudi Arabia issued at the General Assembly of the UN as the representative of the GCC (Nakamura, 2013), taking the issue to the General Assembly, and helping pass a resolution condemning the violence and calling on Arab initiatives (Küçükkeleş, 2012) can be given as examples of such incidents where the Kingdom utilized its influential position within the GCC in favor of its regional interests.

Another significant organization Saudi Arabia actively engaged in for regional leadership was the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), of which the Kingdom has been a member for over fifty years. The organization's reliance on Saudi funding has allowed Riyadh to pursue its policies within the institution and exert significant influence (Akbarzadeh & Ahmed, 2018). In August 2012, Riyadh hosted the fourth extraordinary summit of the OIC in Mecca, where it advocated for a strict agenda against Assad in Syria and was successful in pushing for the suspension of Syria's membership in the organization (Akbarzadeh & Ahmed, 2018). King Abdullah's advocating of a dialogue center among the different sects of Islam, where King Abdullah invited Iranian President Ahmadinejad, also reflected Saudi

success in “formalizing a consensus among most of the Muslim states” (Nakamura, 2013, p. 20) as part of its role as the regional leader (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019).

Saudi Arabia has also regarded the Arab League as a vehicle to utilize after the descent of historically prominent Arab states (such as Egypt and Syria) into political chaos, which led to a power vacuum across the Arab peninsula. In addition, the Kingdom has viewed the League as an opportunity to counter the increasing influence of Iran across the region (Sukkar, 2022). Under the leading influence of Saudi Arabia and the support of Qatar, the Arab League has moved away from its traditional non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states in favor of adopting “global, universal values of human rights” (Beck, 2014, p. 16), as was evident in their early decisions. In October 2011, the League delegates visited Assad to convey the decisions regarding the Arab League Action Plan, with Syria formally signing its agreement in November (Küçükkeleş, 2012). However, once it became clear that Assad had no intentions of conforming to the plan, the League followed through with its threats and suspended Syria’s membership on November 16 (Phillips, 2016). Saudi Arabia further prompted the League to implement economic sanctions in coordination with European sanctions so that the regime’s access to economic resources would be restricted (Hinnebusch, 2020).

One of the stronger indicators of Saudi Arabia’s attempts to exert its regional leadership through the Arab League was its withdrawal from the observer mission of the League in January 2012. Having signed a protocol with Syria in December 2011, the Arab League had conveyed a plan to send a delegation of observers into Syria, as highlighted in the table on page 40 titled Saudi involvement in the Syrian civil war.

As Syria's protocol violation and the initiative's failure to restore order became clear, King Abdullah withdrew his representatives from the observer force in January 2012 (Blanga, 2017). The GCC states following through with the Saudi withdrawal and the League's decision to suspend its observer mission in the same month (Nakamura, 2013) were other indicators of Riyadh's political influence across the region. Following this decision, King Abdullah called on the League to take more decisive actions against Syria. He enabled passing a resolution to provide political and material support to the opposition (Blanga, 2017).

It was around this period that Saudi Arabia started to advocate for the internationalization of the conflict, reasoning that utilizing regional diplomacy tools was not enough to achieve its aim of taking down Assad's leadership. Having criticized the lack of League action against Assad, Saudi Arabia started advocating for the military intervention of the UN in Damascus (Nakamura, 2013). Following the vetoing of a peace plan by Russia and China, which refused to address Assad as the only responsible actor for violence, the US proposal of the Friends of Syria initiative was supported by the Arab world and accepted (Küçükkeleş, 2012). However, as the initiative's final declaration did not refer to the League's proposal for the presence of keepers in Syria under their supervision, Saudi Arabia accused the Friends of Syria group of inactivity and withdrew from the initiative (Küçükkeleş, 2012).

Saudi efforts to call on the international community for military intervention in Syria intensified in 2013 when the Assad leadership was accused of using chemical weapons against its citizens. In September 2013, the Kingdom proposed a motion to

the General Assembly to endorse an aerial strike and volunteered its air force to counter any possible retaliation, a motion that Russia would veto at the Security Council (Phillips, 2016). It is important to note that, when proposing this motion, Saudi Arabia did not refer to the safety of Sunni Muslims or the threat Iran posed and instead focused on portraying the conflict as a humanitarian crisis while pushing the international community into taking action under the humanitarian assistance framework (Nakamura, 2013).

As regional and international multilateral attempts at initiating military action failed, Saudi Arabia implemented the policy of providing military, economic, and political assistance to armed opposition groups in Syria. As indicated in Table 2, even though it took until 2013 for Saudi Arabia to officially announce its support to certain rebel groups, starting with the call Assad made to militias from Iran and Hezbollah to fight in early 2012 (Al-Mutairi, 2017), the Kingdom had decided to provide military, economic and political support to opposition groups in Syria. While continuing regional and international attempts at initiating military intervention, Riyadh also focused on implementing new policies in line with its post-Arab uprisings foreign policy behavior centered around the increased use of its hard power.

Starting with 2012, Saudi Arabia became one of the most vocal supporters of anti-regime forces in Syria (Richter, 2014), with the economic and military support it showed to such groups taking center stage in Saudi policies vis-à-vis the Assad government. This support was one of the most important indicators of the Kingdom's willingness to exert its influence across the region according to its preferences and solidify its leadership, as the willingness to use hard power was the product of the

changes that 2011 onwards brought to Saudi foreign policy behavior. Moreover, such willingness supports the fourth hypothesis (H4) on the importance of a state's active involvement in the conflict by aiding its chosen actor. Initially, most of this support was to the Free Syrian Army and affiliated organizations, as the Kingdom's primary objective in supporting armed groups was to overthrow Assad (Al-Mutairi, 2017) in favor of the emergence of a new government in line with Saudi preferences. Saudi engagement in armed opposition involved providing military equipment, economic resources (including paying the salaries of FSA members to encourage defections from regime forces), and intelligence services (Al-Mutairi, 2017; Blanga, 2017).

Saudi opposition to arming radical Islamist groups was influenced by two concerns: their animosity toward the Muslim Brotherhood, which was supported mainly by Qatar, and the threat the increasing power of radical Islamist groups could pose to one of the cornerstones of Riyadh's regional leadership, that is its position as the leader of the Muslim world (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). These concerns led to policies based on covertly supporting selected groups viewed as nationalists and seculars (Khatib, 2019) rather than concentrating their aid on a single front (Phillips, 2016). By 2013, however, as it became clear that neither the Free Syrian Army nor Qatar-backed groups were making headway, particularly against the emerging threat of the jihadist groups, Saudi Arabia decided to take the lead in supporting the opposition. In order to counter groups such as Fatah al-Islam or ISIS, Saudi Arabia decided to create and fund Islamist forces that could be loyal to the Saudi regime (Khatib, 2019). Decisions such as the establishment of the Army of Islam, which could substitute for Salafi jihadist groups by acting as an umbrella organization with an Islamist ideology, collaborating with countries such as Jordan, Turkey, and

Lebanon to assist such groups, and pushing the United States to provide better arms to opposition forces were based on King Abdullah's decision to take the lead (Blanga, 2017; Hassan, 2013). Other policies based on active engagement in supporting opposition groups and countering actors that could threaten Saudi regional interests involved providing financial support to the Syrian National Coalition, whose elected candidates in 2013 consisted of Saudi-backed members (Khatib, 2019) and taking part in the US-led International Coalition in 2014 against ISIS (Ragab, 2017).

Saudi Arabia has a long history of promoting its role as a regional coordinator and mediator, as it considers active engagement through mediation a significant tool in pursuing its influence across the Middle East (Ennis & Momani, 2013). Based on the importance the Kingdom has attributed to maintaining open lines of communication with different regional actors (Kamrava, 2013), Saudi Arabia attempted to organize different channels of communication, as exemplified by its insistence that the Syrian National Council take part in the Geneva II peace talks in 2014 (Phillips, 2016).

Through these policies, I find support for the fifth hypothesis (H5), which argues that a state that pursues regional leadership would try to facilitate talks between different actors. However, Saudi Arabia reveals an additional finding for this hypothesis since Riyadh's active engagement in supporting the opposition forces prevented the Kingdom from fully realizing its role as a mediator in the Syrian conflict. This finding shows that if the role enactment of regional leadership involves the provision of aid to different parties involved in a conflict, it can have repercussions for the simultaneous pursuit of the mediator role. Moreover, the significance of the outcomes of the Syrian conflict for Saudi regional leadership meant a deviation from

the Saudi history of leveraging diplomatic tools as part of coordination and mediation processes and avoiding long-term involvement in the disputes they try to mediate (Kamrava, 2013).

All the foreign policies I have outlined so far can be given as examples of Saudi attempts to influence different actors' responses to the Syrian conflict, generating support for the sixth hypothesis (H6). However, it is important to note that the Kingdom's highest chance of success in dictating responses in favor of its regional leadership and foreign policy interests is through maneuvers within multilateral organizations, as they allow the utilization of soft and hard power tools to affect others' behaviors. One of the clearest examples of this was the Saudi policy of refusing membership to the UN Security Council in 2013. Following the 2011 uprisings, the US's reluctance to support decisive action against Assad in Syria (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017) has been a point of contention between Riyadh and Washington. The failure of the Obama administration in leading any intervening against Assad in 2013 following the use of chemical weapons created an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to announce its displeasure with the US and the lack of international response to the crossing of a "red line" as determined by Obama in August 2012 (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017, p. 79). In October 2013, to attract international attention to Syria, the Kingdom surprisingly refused a seat at the United Nations Security Council, protesting the organization's failure to carry out its responsibilities and urging states to take decisive action (Ehteshami, 2018).

Regarding dictating the responses of regional actors, Saudi Arabia was especially willing to use its influential position within the GCC to coordinate anti-Assad

responses among member states. However, growing tensions with Qatar, which was deploying its assets against Assad in pursuit of regional influence, prevented the full realization of Riyadh's influence over other actors (Hokayem, 2014). Qatar's financial and military support to the Muslim Brotherhood increased intra-GCC tensions, leading to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain withdrawing their ambassadors from Doha in early 2014 (Phillips, 2016). In addition to the fracturing among GCC members derailing Saudi attempts at dictating regional responses, such tensions undermined Riyadh's and Doha's efforts to strengthen the opposition forces against Assad (Blanga, 2017). This result reflected that while the fall of Assad was crucial for Saudi pursuit of regional leadership, it was more significant for King Abdullah to prevent the increasing influence of Doha, whose alliance with other regional threats to Saudi leadership (such as Turkey or the MB) created further concerns for the Kingdom.

4.3.2.2 King Salman (2015-2016)

The death of King Abdullah in January 2015 and the succession of his brother Salman brought forth a new wave of foreign policy behavior for the Kingdom, particularly under what some considered as the 'dual leadership' (Dazi-Heni, 2021) of King Salman and Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), the Deputy Crown Prince. From 2015 onwards, Saudi regional foreign policy under King Salman was characterized as more aggressive than that of his predecessor, King Abdullah, with the Crown Prince holding a significant position in the enactment of this more active foreign policy. The increased centralization of power, particularly in the hands of Mohammed bin Salman, led to more efficient decision-making processes in foreign policymaking (Felsch, 2020). Such centralization, in turn, enabled further efforts to

be put into supporting the opposition groups and diplomatic efforts against the government of Assad in Syria, reflecting the continued interest Saudi Arabia had in pursuing its regional leadership.

When it comes to active involvement in organizing regional and international responses to the Syrian civil war, the policies of King Salman once again generated support for the third hypothesis (H3), as Saudi Arabia was particularly successful in swaying the decisions of the Arab League Summits in favor of the Kingdom's regional interests. From 2015 onwards, Saudi Arabia has increased its institutional power by persuading all members of the League to put more pressure on Iran and its allies, leading to further repercussions for Syria and the isolation of the Assad government (Felsch, 2020) (For a summary of the chronological steps Saudi Arabia has taken through institutions, please refer to the relevant table on page 40).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia reinvigorated its mediation and coordination efforts by upholding the importance of mediation efforts for Saudi regional leadership. One of the most successful policies of Riyadh in this regard was the conference (Riyadh II) that the Kingdom held in December 2015 to bring together multiple external actors and “moderate” opposition groups for further coordination (Phillips, 2016, p. 226). The outcome of this conference, which Saudi Arabia organized in coordination with the United Nations, was the establishment of the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC), which consisted of over thirty members (Phillips, 2016; Sukkar, 2022). Later, in February 2016, King Salman persuaded the HNC to attend the Geneva talks by working with the United States (Phillips, 2016). Even though the talks were suspended not long after, they reflected Saudi Arabia's interest in

pursuing its coordination efforts. Such interest is in line with my earlier stipulation in the fourth hypothesis (H4) since the performance of regional leadership is expected to cause a state to engage in communication between different actors involved.

Beyond diplomatic maneuvers, Saudi Arabia continued supporting opposition groups through economic and military assistance, in conformity with the fifth hypothesis (H5). However, a significant distinction from the policies of King Abdullah emerged when the new throne decided to extend support to forces it had opposed in the past (Blanga, 2017), with the most striking examples being the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathizers, bringing forth further cooperation with Qatar and Turkey in terms of joint operations (Blanga, 2017; Dazi-Heni, 2021). Additionally, following the rise of ISIS and the establishment of the US International Coalition in 2014, Saudi Arabia accelerated its multinational coalition-building efforts in order to counter the jihadist groups in Syria. The most striking success Riyadh had in line with such efforts was forming the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) in December 2015 by taking advantage of upholding Saudi Arabia's importance as the regional protector and bringing together Islamic countries (Ragab, 2017).

Regardless of these developments, it is important to note that the attention the Crown Prince devoted to Yemen and the increased military involvement of Russia in favor of the Assad regime (Darwich, 2020) decreased the military involvement of Saudi Arabia in the conflict. More than anything else, how IMAFT appeared to focus more on disrupting the funding of radical organizations than conducting military operations (Lawson, 2021) was evidence of the direction Saudi foreign policies had taken in terms of trying to convince others to take action and avoiding direct military

involvement (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019).

Regarding dictating the responses of different actors, King Salman and the Deputy Crown Prince put more effort into facilitating cooperation through diplomatic maneuvers between external actors and opposition forces. Nevertheless, King Salman showed an interest in overcoming the constraints GCC members put on achieving Saudi interests across the region (Miller and Cardaun, 2020). However, although 2013 onwards reflected the replacement of Qatar with Saudi Arabia in influencing opposition forces, Saudi Arabia continued to struggle with inter-GCC tensions. For example, the Saudi attempts to encourage greater security cooperation and establish a joint military command within the GCC were only accepted by Bahrain (Miller & Cardaun, 2020). These struggles indicated that, while it is still possible to find support for the sixth hypothesis (H6), Saudi performance, through dictating others' responses, is limited by the existence of other actors in pursuit of a similar role, such as Qatar.

4.4 Egypt

4.4.1 Egyptian Foreign Policy and National Role Conceptions (2011-2016)

Similar to the previous case study, prior to providing extensive information on how Egypt pursued regional leadership through foreign policy decisions in the Syrian civil war, it is important to provide an overview of the general Egyptian foreign policy in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. However, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to pinpoint a coherent orientation for Egyptian foreign policy.

Unsurprisingly, the difficulty of finding cohesion among Cairo's diverse foreign

policy decisions during this period is primarily a result of the political instability within the country. The power transitions that emerged between Mubarak, the caretaker government, President Morsi, the Egyptian armed forces, and President al-Sisi have all negatively affected the already precarious domestic conditions. In addition to the influence of multiple actors with varying stances on foreign policy issues, material limitations and financial struggles have further forced Egypt into a position where it was difficult to pursue long-term foreign policy goals coherently (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019; Bahi, 2016). Regardless, it is possible to talk about a reorientation of Egyptian foreign policy under the leadership of Sisi, who was focused on preserving regional stability just as Mubarak was (Selim, 2022). Regarding using hard power in foreign policy, the Egyptian military has been a substantive source, as Egypt has “long possessed the most powerful military in the Arab world” (Bahi, 2016, p. 158). However, the financial and material struggles Cairo faced after 2011 led to the selective use of one of the largest militaries in the Middle East, with most of the attention being paid to counterterrorism policies in the Sinai region or later in other Arab states due to the presence of armed Islamist groups such as ISIS (Bahi, 2016). Meanwhile, although limited in the immediate aftermath of Mubarak’s fall in 2011, the use of soft power preserved its significance in Egyptian foreign policy. This significance is not surprising since Egypt’s regional policy, particularly under Mubarak’s regime, has focused on the importance of diplomatic efforts that ranged from maintaining good relations with allies such as the US or Saudi Arabia to the importance of mediation in Arab-Israeli talks (Bahi, 2016; Monier & Ranko, 2014).

Throughout this period, Egypt also maintained its perceived significance in the

Middle East as the “gift of the Nile and the gift of Egyptians to humanity” (Bahi, 2016, p. 155), as proclaimed in the country’s 2014 constitution. As one of the historical promoters of Arab nationalism, particularly under Nasser’s period, Egypt has long regarded itself as a central Arab state in regional affairs. While the aforementioned domestic struggles forced the state into what some considered a hesitant foreign policy during this period, Egypt continued to claim a physical and historical centrality in regional affairs under the leadership of both Morsi and Sisi (Monier and Ranko, 2014). Within this context, identifying the foreign policy roles Egypt perceived for its foreign affairs becomes crucial to understanding how they helped shape Egyptian foreign policy behavior. In order to identify the list of foreign policy roles and whether the role of regional leadership as the primary focus of this research is among such a list, I utilize the findings of Akbaba and Özdamar’s (2019) latent content analysis, which is based on the speeches and statements of Egyptian foreign policy executives who served in office between the years of 2011 and 2016.

Table 3: Egyptian Foreign Policy Executives Included in the Analysis (January 1, 2011- December 31, 2016)

Source: Akbaba and Özdamar (2019, p. 38)

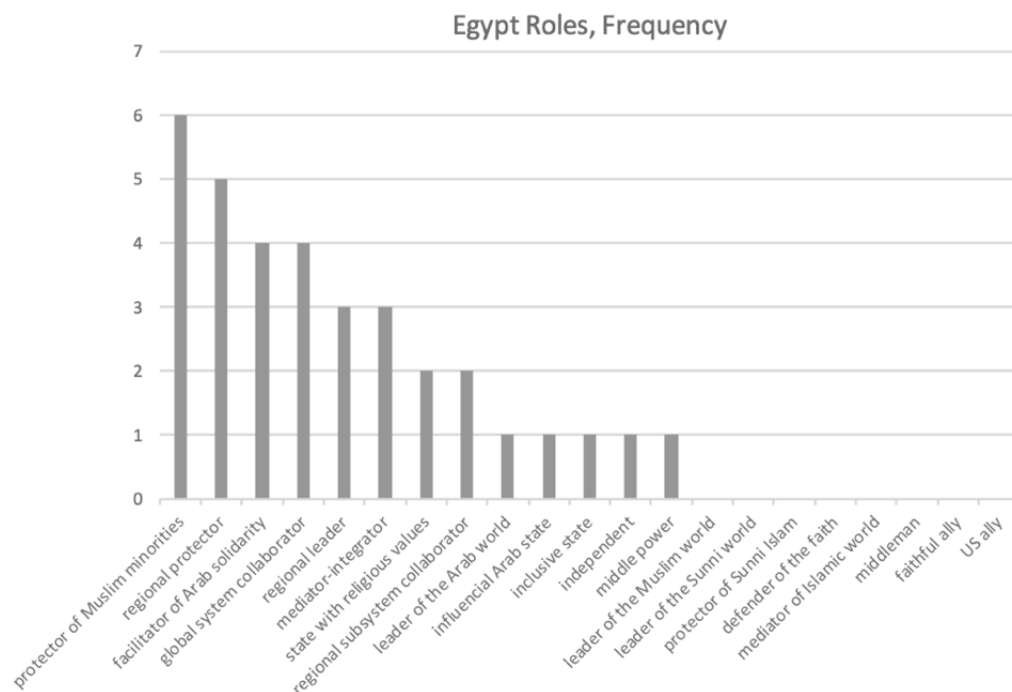
<i>Name</i>	<i>Position, Time in Office</i>
Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	President: June 2014 – present. Minister of defense: August 2012 – March 2014 Deputy prime minister: July 2013 – March 2014
Adly Mansour	President: July 2013 – June 2014
Mohamed Morsi	President: June 2012 – July 2013
Supreme Council of Armed Forces	Interim Military Government: February 2011 – June 2012
Hosni Mubarak	President: October 1981 – February 2011
Sherif Ismail	Prime Minister: September 2015 – present.
Ibrahim Mahlab	Prime Minister: February/March 2014 – September 2015
Hazem El Beblawi	Prime Minister: July 2013 – February 2014

Table 3 (cont'd)

Hesham Qandil	Prime Minister: July 2012 – July 2013
Kamal Ganzouri	Prime Minister: December 2011 – July 2012
Essam Sharaf	Prime Minister: March 2011 – December 2011
Ahmed Shafik	Prime Minister: January 2011 – March 2011
Ahmed Nazif	Prime Minister: July 2004 – January 2011
Sameh Shoukry	Minister of Foreign Affairs: June 2014 – present.
Nabil Fahmy	Minister of Foreign Affairs: July 2013 to June 2014,
Mohamed Kamel Amr	Minister of Foreign Affairs: July 2011 – July 2013
Mohamed El-Orabi	Minister of Foreign Affairs: June 2011 – July 2011
Nabil Elaraby	Minister of Foreign Affairs: March 2011 – June 2011
Ahmed Aboul Gheit	Minister of Foreign Affairs: July 2004 – March 2011

Figure 2: Frequency of Egypt Roles

Source: Akbaba and Özdamar (2019, p. 41)



The data shown in Figure 2 reveals that, among the thirteen most frequent ones in the Egyptian role conceptions, regional leadership is the fifth most frequent foreign policy role identified by the state. While the scope of this research is limited to the role of regional leadership, I find it significant to highlight that most of these roles

reference the significance of Egypt in regional affairs, as several of them consist of responsibilities under the mantles of protector, facilitator, or leader. That said, following identifying the regional leader role, the following section analyzes Egyptian role performance from 2011 to 2016.

4.4.2 Egyptian Foreign Policy Behavior During the Syrian Civil War (2011-2016)

Table 4: Egyptian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2016)

January 2011	Protests begin in Syria
February 11, 2011	Mubarak resigns, and the SCAF comes to power
November 2011	SCAF convinces the Arab League to reject Western involvement in the conflict
March 2012	Saad El-Katatni declares Egyptian cooperation with the Syrian opposition
June 30, 2012	Morsi is elected as the President
August 2012	Egypt suggests a regional contact group at the OIC
September 2012	Egypt supports Qatar's proposal for an Arab military intervention against Syria at the UN General Assembly
June 2013	Morsi severs diplomatic relations with Syria, calls for Assad's resignation
June 30, 2012	The Second Revolution begins
July 3, 2013	The coup d'état led by General Sisi overthrows Morsi
	The interim government under Mansour takes over power
July 7, 2013	Egypt reopens the Syrian consulate
December 23, 2013	The MB is declared a terrorist organization
June 8, 2014	Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is elected as the President
March 28-29, 2015	Egypt hosts the 26 th Arab League Summit
	Egypt's proposal for a pan-Arab force to deal with regional crises has been accepted

Table 4 (cont'd)

October 15, 2015	Egypt is selected as a non-permanent member of the UNSC (for the following year)
August 2016	Sisi calls for the unity of the Syrian territory to be respected
September 2016	Sisi calls for negotiations for a ceasefire
October 8, 2016	Egypt votes in favor of both France's and Russia's proposals at the UNSC
November 2016	Sisi meets with the head of the Syrian National Security Service

Dating back to the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian foreign policymaking has traditionally relied on the president and a small circle of foreign policy executives, leading to centralized and personalized foreign policy decisions and their implementation (Piazza, 2018). Considering that crises can lead to further centralization of decision-making processes (Ehteshami, 2018), analyzing Egyptian foreign policy in the aftermath of 2011 requires differentiating between foreign policy executives and the policies they implemented. This necessity is further highlighted by the fact that, although to varying degrees, domestic politics have traditionally played a significant role in shaping the direction of Egyptian foreign policy in both regional and international relations (Juneau, Lobell, Ripsman, & Rubin, 2019). Considering that turbulence in domestic affairs not only resulted in radical leadership changes but significantly affected foreign policy behavior under these leaders who had vastly different perceptions and interests, I will analyze Egyptian policies vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war by differentiating between the periods of President Morsi and President al-Sisi.

4.4.2.1 SCAF and President Morsi (2011-2013)

In February 2011, following the nationwide protests that had been going on for over

two weeks, Hosni Mubarak's resignation ended his thirty-year-long presidency. After a year had passed under the power of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), in July 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi as their president, a politician affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had become a significant political actor through the Freedom and Justice Party (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019). The year-long presidency of Morsi did not prioritize Egyptian foreign policy, as political and economic instability and the existence of multiple influential actors who had different perceptions and leverage over domestic and foreign affairs (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019) forced the Muslim Brotherhood to focus on domestic concerns. However, Morsi nevertheless promised the pursuit of an independent foreign policy (Juneau et al., 2019) since overcoming the 'penetration' of external factors would bring Egypt back to its 'natural' role as the leader of the region (Monier & Ranko, 2014, p. 64). The importance the Muslim Brotherhood attached to Egypt's regional leadership was also influenced by their desire to keep up the hope for the revolution by highlighting what was possible for Egypt in its future (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019).

The fact that Mubarak had already stepped down in Egypt by the time nationwide protests erupted in Syria, as shown in Table 4 on page 59, meant that neither the SCAF nor Morsi could afford to give as much attention as it would have liked to this regional crisis. Prior to Morsi's election in 2012, most of the Egyptian responses to the Syrian civil war took place within the framework of the Arab League, even though it was not able to take up its role as one of the conductors of the League's responses due to its domestic struggles. Under the interim government's leadership, Egypt had called for a political solution, opposed any military intervention, and

supported the League's observer mission as part of a political initiative (Middle East Monitor, 2015). Through general statements and policies, the caretaker government had regarded policies vis-à-vis Syria as a way to reassert Egypt's presence and significance in regional affairs (Middle East Monitor, 2015).

Under the leadership of Morsi, Egypt increased its engagement in regional and international affairs in order to implement its foreign policies on the Syrian civil war. At the regional level, Morsi utilized Egypt's Organization of Islamic Conference membership to propose forming a contact group in August 2012. Proposed to be composed of regional powers, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, this commission was formulated by Egypt as a replacement for Kofi Annan's six-point peace initiative (Nakamura, 2013). Beyond this OIC initiative, however, Morsi continued the caretaker government's orientation in supporting or opposing institutional responses without necessarily initiating them. In September 2012, in the opposite effect of its August proposal, Morsi supported Qatar's proposition at the UN General Assembly about an Arab military intervention against Assad and the declaration of a no-fly zone over Syria (Selim, 2022). These decisions reflect a lack of support for the third hypothesis (H3), as it is not possible to talk about an Egyptian role performance based on acting as the conductor of responses within such institutions, except for the OIC initiative. Instead, it appears that Egyptian understanding at the time, which was heavily influenced by domestic concerns, regarded participation through supporting other initiatives as symbolic of Egypt's significance in regional affairs.

Morsi's support for a proposed military intervention can be explained within the

context of the engagement the Muslim Brotherhood pursued in Syria in favor of armed opposition groups. The Brotherhood's belief that unleashing the people's will and overcoming the influence of external actors and their allied regimes would be the solution (Monier & Ranko, 2014) resulted in Morsi's involvement in the conflict against Assad's presidency. Initially, Egyptian policies favoring the opposition groups were based on diplomatic means. For example, in his March 2012 statement to the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union as the Speaker of the People's Assembly, Saad El-Katatni revealed that the House of Representatives of Egypt was coordinating with representatives of the Syrian opposition (Middle East Monitor, 2015). However, by the end of June 2013, Morsi severed diplomatic relations with Damascus and repeated his calls for Assad's resignation (Gevorgyan, 2024) (for further chronological information, please refer to Table 4 on page 59). In a decision that would not please the Egyptian military forces, Morsi encouraged Egyptian fighters to fight alongside the armed opposition groups in Syria while also reasserting his calls for a no-fly zone over the country (Mourad 2014, as cited in Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 45). It has been argued that Morsi's calls for Syrian intervention and the displeasure it created within the Egyptian army contributed to the circumstances surrounding Morsi's downfall later in the same month. However, for role performance, these examples revealed support for the fourth hypothesis (H4) with an emphasis on political involvement rather than economic or military aid provision, as the domestic concerns of Egypt at the time only allowed the former to be implemented.

Generally attributed to its presence in the talks between Palestinians and the Israelis, mediation has been one of the significant pillars of Egyptian foreign policy in the

Middle East (Bahi, 2016). Throughout his presidency, Morsi upheld this long-standing tradition of Egyptian foreign policy and took some initiative in coordinating talks for the Syrian civil war, which is an expected behavior in line with the fifth hypothesis (H5). For example, the OIC initiative to establish a regional contact group was based on an interest in resuming Egypt's diplomatic influence in regional affairs (Nakamura, 2013). It was argued that Morsi's connections to Hamas through the Muslim Brotherhood could initiate negotiations since Hamas had deep ties with parts of the Syrian opposition groups (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Mr. Ali, the spokesperson for Morsi, stated that the new government intended to change the diplomatic stagnation of Egypt, as their "hearts were open for everyone, and hands were extended to everyone" (Kirkpatrick, 2012, p. 3). However, while Morsi considered Iran a part of the solution, Saudi rejection of working with Tehran and Egypt's decision to cut diplomatic relations with Syria under pressure revealed the death of the initiative (El-Labbad, 2014). A further attempt by Egypt to coordinate talks was through encouraging a covert dialogue between the Syrian and Saudi leaderships, but this too was rejected as the Kingdom refused direct talks with Assad at the time (Partrick, 2016).

As established, it is possible to identify multiple attempts by Egyptian governments that were aimed at re-establishing Egyptian significance in regional affairs; however, most of these policies were considered by scholars to be "symbolic" (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, pp. 35-36). While this period was marked by an Egyptian insistence over the rightful claim it had over regional leadership and the promises of an independent foreign policy, there were not many initiatives aimed at steering other actors' responses in favor of Egyptian interests, leading to no substantive support for

the sixth hypothesis (H6). The two exceptions were the SCAF government's insistence on preventing Western involvement in the Syrian conflict at the Arab League summit in November 2011 (Nakamura, 2013) and Morsi's initiative for a regional contact commission composed of regional powers. While the caretaker government's proposal was accepted at the summit and led to establishing an independent monitoring commission (Nakamura, 2013), Morsi's initiative did not yield any results. These reasserted the arguments that this period was marked by short-term foreign policy gains (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019) instead of being based on long-term regional interests.

4.4.2.2 President Sisi (2013-2016)

Following the increasing displeasure with the Muslim Brotherhood and the leadership of Morsi, the 'second revolution' on June 30, 2013, led to the overthrow of Morsi's leadership in a coup d'état on July 3, marking another turning point for Egyptian domestic politics. After another year had passed under Mansour's leadership as the interim government's head, on June 8, 2014, the presidential elections were won by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who previously led the July coup d'état. Although not a priority, failures in foreign policy, particularly in establishing independence and regional significance, have contributed to negative perceptions regarding the Brotherhood (Monier & Ranko, 2014). These failures were contrasted by Sisi's foreign policy, whose decisions would mark more significant changes to Egyptian foreign policy (Selim, 2022) than Morsi's period, especially in asserting the independence of Egyptian foreign policy in regional affairs. His Egypt-First doctrine was marked by goals aimed at reasserting Egypt's room for maneuver in regional affairs, seeking balanced relations with regional and international actors, and

respecting the sovereignty of Arab states (Selim, 2022) as the regional protector of stability in the Arab peninsula (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019).

In employing Egyptian foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war, Sisi continued taking advantage of Egypt's membership in different regional and international organizations, as highlighted in the relevant table on page 59. Most of the initiatives Egypt proposed or actively supported were mainly influenced by Egyptian interests in pursuing anti-terrorist, anti-Islamist, and anti-militancy policies in regional affairs (Bahi, 2016). The declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and the threats the Islamist groups operating in Syria posed to the stability of the Egyptian state and the rest of the Arab world affected the importance Sisi attached to dealing with Islamist groups. At the regional level, in the 2015 Summit of the Arab League in Cairo, Egypt managed to utilize its membership to propose the creation of a pan-Arab force that would deal with regional crises and counter Islamist organizations that were declared by Egypt as terrorist organizations (Bahi, 2016; Ragab, 2017).

Beyond the existence of Islamist armed groups in Syria, which Egypt perceived to necessitate solutions through military means, Egypt's foreign policy approach vis-à-vis Syria was to seek political solutions to end the civil war. Rather than its participation in regional organizations, what proved to be significant in pursuit of both diplomatic and military means in favor of Egyptian interests was Cairo's status as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2016. In his September 2016 speech, Sisi proposed that the solution for Syria could only be political and that arriving at a comprehensive solution through negotiations required

a ceasefire (Mozes, 2016). In line with this statement, Sisi voted in favor of French and Russian proposals for a ceasefire a month later, although the contents of these proposals were in contrast. While the proposal drafted by France asked for the declaration of a no-fly zone over Aleppo and was backed by Egypt's Western and Gulf allies, including Saudi Arabia, Russia's motion did not mandate an end to the aerial bombardments Syrian and Russian forces were conducting against armed opposition groups in Aleppo (Kaldas, 2021; Selim, 2022). Although they generated conflicting responses from Egyptian allies, particularly from Saudi Arabia, the support Sisi showed to both of these submissions was an indicator of his willingness to preserve Egyptian room for maneuver when pursuing its interests at the regional level without deviating from the "Arab position" vis-à-vis the crisis (Mozes, 2016, p. 10). Regardless of their contradictory nature, Egyptian foreign policies within the UNSC reasserted Egypt's post-2011 tendency to avoid acting as the coordinator of such initiatives and instead focus on showing its significance through supporting plans per its regional interests. While Sisi's actions in the 2015 League Summit can be shown as evidence supporting the third hypothesis (H3), the Egyptian policies within the UNSC reveal a more limited result.

In contrast to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's support for armed opposition groups, Sisi defended the sovereignty of Syria under Assad's leadership and chose to engage in the conflict in favor of the Ba'athist regime (Kaldas, 2021). Primarily influenced by the Egyptian desire to preserve regional stability and counter any threats posed by armed Islamist groups, Sisi offered sympathy to the Syrian regime in order to preserve the territorial integrity and the state institutions of Syria against the threats posed by such groups (Selim, 2022). Until 2016, Sisi cautioned against

officially declaring his support to Assad (please refer to the table on page 59 for further information), as it would create a deviation from the approaches of other Arab states and Saudi Arabia in particular, whose leverage over Egypt in terms of the financial aid it provided prevented Egypt from implementing more decisive policies (Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019; Bahi, 2016). Instead, through policies such as reopening the Syrian consulate in 2013 and referring to Syria as a strategic partner of Egypt in their fight against terrorism in 2014 (Kaldas, 2021), Sisi combined its regional interest in preventing the influence of the Islamist groups in Syria from spreading and preserving Syrian sovereignty under the Assad regime. By engaging in and supporting Syrian and later Russian operations aimed at defeating the opposition groups in Syria and supporting the US-led coalition against ISIS (Piazza, 2018), Egypt aimed to pursue its regional leadership by re-establishing itself as a key reference in the fight against terrorism and radical Islam in the Middle East (Bahi, 2016).

A year later, in August 2016, Sisi openly declared Egypt's position in the Syrian civil war by referring to the respect for the unity of Syrian territory (Selim, 2022) and the necessity of including Assad as part of the political solutions to the conflict.

Following the Egyptian decision to vote in favor of Russia's resolution at the UNSC in October 2016, Sisi voiced support for the national armies of Arab states (Barnard, 2016, as cited in Akbaba & Özdamar, 2019, p. 46). Acting as substantive evidence for the arguments made in the fourth hypothesis (H4), these decisions once again reflect an Egyptian prioritization of political support over military or economic aid in its role performance.

Sisi's stance on the Assad government in Syria affected how Egyptian foreign policy utilized its role as a mediator at a time when significant precedence was given to Egyptian national and regional interests over those of his allies (Selim, 2022). In pursuit of balanced relations with great powers and regional allies in the context of the Syrian civil war, Egypt focused on building regional alliances and acting as the coordinator of talks. Positioning itself as a key regional reference, Egypt, which understood that it could not shoulder the financial and economic burdens of acting independently, expressed its willingness to be a part of the political solutions to the Syrian conflict (El-Labbad, 2014). Following the rapprochement between Egypt and Syria after Sisi met with the head of the Syrian National Security Service (Gevorgyan, 2024), Egypt started to focus on launching mediation initiatives in the Arab world to restore relations with Damascus, even though most of these decisions would pick up after 2016. While this means that the particularities of these initiatives are beyond the scope of this analysis, they nevertheless allow me to identify supporting evidence for my fifth hypothesis (H5) regarding the persisting importance of acting as a facilitator of talks to pursue regional leadership.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings of the case studies have important implications for the hypotheses I tested in this chapter. In the first place, the foreign policy behavior of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, regardless of the leader in charge at the time of analysis, showed significant support for my initial hypothesis (H1), stipulating that a state's role conception can affect role performance. The congruence between the secondary data and the findings of my analyses reveals that, although their perception of what it means to be a regional leader may differ, the leadership role they assign to

themselves directly impacts their foreign policy behavior, hence why it can also be defined as their role performance.

I also find support for the proposition of the second hypothesis (H2) on regional conflicts creating moments of opportunity for states to pursue regional leadership. The case studies reveal that both states were involved in the Syrian civil war, although their degree of engagement was affected by domestic and regional circumstances. While the economic and political problems Egypt faced during the Syrian conflict's outbreak prevented it from asserting its presence early on, these constraints on Egypt allowed Saudi Arabia more room for its pursuit of regional leadership by signaling its significance for the conflict starting in 2011.

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses were related to the specific types of behavior I expected to find in a state's role performance of regional leadership in the context of a regional conflict. Through case studies, I find support for the argument that foreign policies based on these patterns of behavior (engagement in multilateral organizations, provision of support, mediation, and overall attempts to influence other regional actors) appear frequently in a state's pursuit of regional leadership. However, additional remarks should be made about these hypotheses, as they had different implications for different cases.

When it comes to policies based on coordinating the responses within regional and international organizations (H3), the results suggest that while acting as the initiator of plans within institutional frameworks is significant for the role enactment of regional leadership, domestic constraints can cause the state to settle for showing its

presence by supporting others' propositions as long as they are in favor of their interests. This conclusion is best expressed in the Egyptian case study, where the evidence for the third hypothesis was far from substantive, except for Morsi's OIC initiative and Sisi's actions at the 2015 Arab League Summit. Even though domestic concerns forced Morsi and Sisi to prioritize internal affairs, they took advantage of Egypt's historical significance in multiple organizations by supporting resolutions that would be in their favor. Moreover, as the crucial voting decisions Egypt made as a non-permanent member of the UNSC revealed, the membership status of the state appeared to be just as significant as the state's agency. Even though Sisi did not propose initiatives at the Security Council vis-à-vis Syria, the Egyptian decisions, particularly in favor of Russia's draft resolution, had significant implications for Egypt's position in regional affairs.

The findings also reveal mixed results for the fourth hypothesis (H4) regarding the restrictions domestic or regional constraints can place on the type of aid the state can provide to different parties involved in the conflict. The results show that states' economic and financial struggles can prevent them from going beyond providing political support, and their economic reliance on external actors can also affect their political engagement. In multiple instances, the support Qatar provided to the Muslim Brotherhood and the financial reliance of Sisi on Saudi funds have become points of consideration for Egyptian policies. Moreover, domestic actors with varying degrees of leverage can also affect role performance, as exemplified by Morsi's encouraging Egyptian fighters to join the armed opposition groups, leading to tense relations with the military.

This conclusion is also effective for the results of the fifth hypothesis (H5) since the same domestic and regional constraints can affect the degree of outreach the state can have when trying to facilitate communication channels, which can also be affected by the state's other foreign policy decisions. The Saudi inability to fully realize its aims as the coordinator of peace talks reveals this effect, as the results showed that its activities in providing active support to opposition groups prevented Riyadh from fully engaging in mediation attempts. An additional finding for the fifth hypothesis reveals a strong relationship between the role conceptions of regional leadership and regional mediator. If the perceptions of a state regarding its roles in foreign affairs include the mediator role prior to the state's engagement in a regional conflict through mediation policies, the established position of the increases the chances of role enactment for regional leadership, as was evident in both Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Regarding the sixth hypothesis (H6) and the overall influence the states may try to exert over other actors' responses to the conflict, I find that the case study for Egypt does not yield strong support for this proposition, mainly because previously mentioned restrictions on Egyptian role performance constrained Egypt's broader influence on other actors. On the other hand, while the case study's findings for Saudi Arabia support the relevant hypothesis, the existence of multiple actors in pursuit of regional leadership has further implications. The tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council framework, reveal the limitations on a state's pursuit of influence over regional actors. In cases where multiple actors pursue regional leadership through opposing policies, the effectiveness of the foreign policies in convincing regional actors in favor of the

aspiring state's interests can be constrained.

Beyond the testing of these hypotheses, there are some overall conclusions I was able to infer from the findings of the two case studies. In the first place, similar to how they affect the types of policies they implement in foreign affairs, differences in states' perceptions of what it means to be a regional leader can affect their level of commitment to different types of policies they pursue. The findings of this research project reveal that, although it is possible to identify the hypothesized types of actions for both cases, the variance in their implementation by Saudi Arabia and Egypt has much to do with their different perceptions of the same role conception.

As the second case study reveals, Egypt's understanding of regional leadership is focused on the independence of the Arab state system and the preservation of Arab states' sovereignty. Particularly during Sisi's presidency, the emphasis on regional stability prioritized providing political support over other types of aid. In contrast, the case study results for Saudi Arabia show an inclination to implement policies to shape regional affairs in favor of Riyadh's interests in pursuing regional leadership. This different perception, which was found under both King Abdullah and King Salman's leadership, explains Saudi Arabia's prioritization of providing military aid and its attempts to dictate other regional actors' responses vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war. Considering that both states were pursuing the same foreign policy role during the period of analysis, the conclusions of these case studies point to the necessity of understanding how actors from the same region can try to actualize their foreign policy goals through different ways.

A second general implication I identified is related to the effect of the multiple domestic, regional, and international actors' leverage over foreign policymaking and implementation. The role theory literature on domestic role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; 2016) highlights how the different role conceptions of domestic political actors can engage with the foreign policymaking process, leading to vertical or horizontal role contestation. The findings of this research project confirm this argument while revealing similar observations for regional and international actors. The case study results reveal that, beyond deciding which foreign policy role to pursue regionally, these actors' influence can generate problems for a state's role enactment. While asserting a state's influence over regional affairs requires a decisive foreign policymaking mechanism, the influence of other actors through political and economic leverage can create inconsistencies in a state's foreign policy behavior.

In the Saudi case, the unwillingness of the US to intervene in the post-2011 developments in the Middle East allowed the Kingdom to pursue more assertive regional policies independent of the US influence, as evident in their extensive support to armed opposition groups in Syria. In contrast, the leverage of multiple domestic and regional actors (including the Egyptian military, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) over Egyptian foreign policy restricted Cairo's role performance. Based on these actors' varying interests and perceptions, Egypt's inconsistent foreign policymaking prevented the country from implementing long-term policies or forced it to abandon such decisions early. Since pursuing regional leadership is a long-term goal, a lack of coherence in foreign policymaking can force a state to focus on short-term foreign policy gains, leading to a lack of continuity.

Finally, the findings of these case studies have significant implications for the ideational sources of national role conceptions and their performance. As multiple scholarly contributions to the literature have reflected, the Middle East is a region where supranational identities based on pan-Arabism or Islamism have significance for foreign affairs, as the expected behaviors identified by these identities can help shape, enable, or even hinder the pursuit of a state's interests (Hinnebusch, 2020). Such significance means that norms of Arabism or Islamism can be among the ideational sources of national role conceptions, as exemplified by Saudi Arabia's 'leader of the Muslim world' and Egypt's 'leader of the Arab world' conceptions. However, this does not mean the same ideational sources shape all national role conceptions of a state or how they are performed. The case studies reveal that even though Saudi Arabia and Egypt perceive some of their roles based on such supranational identities, allowing them a certain level of influence over the region, their conceptions of regional leadership are not shaped by the same ideational sources. The Saudi decision to propose international military intervention in Syria by utilizing the humanitarian crisis framework instead of attempting to evoke sympathy for Sunni Muslims, as would have been expected from a pan-Islamist perspective, is reflective of this argument.

Instead, I support the argument that states can justify their policies to pursue regional leadership by adopting a rhetoric based on these supranational identities. Under Sisi's leadership, most of the policies Egypt implemented in favor of Assad were justified through norms associated with pan-Arabism, particularly the importance of preserving Arab sovereignty and upholding non-interference. Rather than acting as

ideational sources, norms associated with supranational identities justify policies more aligned with states' national interests in pursuing regional leadership.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided information on the case study analyses conducted to identify how the regional leadership role is translated into foreign policy behavior within the contexts of Saudi Arabia and Egypt vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war. Following a brief introduction to the Syrian civil war that emerged in 2011, Saudi Arabia was presented as the first case study. The six hypotheses introduced in earlier chapters were tested following the information on Saudi foreign policy and its national role conceptions. The conclusions reflected the transformation of Riyadh's willingness to shape regional affairs and pursue regional leadership into concrete foreign policy decisions that ranged from organizing responses within multilateral institutions to providing economic and political support to different actors involved in the conflict, with different levels of attention given to different patterns of behavior throughout the analyzed period. Later, a case study of the same structure was conducted for Egyptian foreign policy from 2011 to 2016. The case study results were more mixed for Egypt; even though all hypotheses appear supported, most of the evidence was either rhetorical (i.e., never translated into action) or superficial actions based on short-term goals. The final section compared the findings and introduced observations from these case studies.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This research project aimed to analyze how the regional leadership role a state perceives for itself is transformed into its foreign policy behavior at the regional level. Based on the earlier scholarship on role theory, this thesis aimed to study the role performance of states through the implementation of foreign policy decisions based on their intent to affirm their role as regional leaders. It proposed that in due process, states can decide to implement policies based on particular types of actions, as their self-perceived role as a regional leader may attribute specific types of responsibilities and duties they must perform in their foreign relations.

The relationship between foreign policy behavior and the perceptions of the agents of foreign policy is significant, as the policies a state implements depend on its perception regarding the functions the state should perform. Referring to the responsibilities, commitments, duties, and actions a state considers suitable to its image in international relations, role conceptions provide guidelines for long-term patterns of foreign policy behavior. Following this theoretical argument, at the

regional level, a state that finds the role of regional leadership suitable is expected to perform specific functions in pursuit of this role conception. Therefore, the main argument tested throughout this research project is that the regional leadership role conception perceived by a state can affect its foreign policy behavior. In trying to understand the transformation of the regional leadership role into state behavior, a further argument this thesis proposes is that aspiring states can often choose to actively engage in regional crises, as these conflicts can generate opportunities to affirm leadership, particularly if they lead to power vacuums at the regional level. Following the existing literature, the research also identifies the actions states are expected to perform in pursuit of leadership and tests whether and how states implement policies in the context of regional crises.

The hypotheses based on these theoretical explanations were tested in two case studies on Saudi and Egyptian foreign policy behavior in the Syrian civil war from 2011 to 2016. The Syrian civil war was chosen as some described it as a development that led to the region's restructuring (Sunik, 2018). It created new opportunities for multiple regional (and international) actors who wanted to shape regional developments in their favor by becoming increasingly involved in the conflict (Philips, 2016). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were chosen due to their significance in regional affairs and desire to increase their influence in the post-2011 environment. While secondary data from Akbaba and Özdamar's (2019) publication was used to identify the role conceptions of these states during this period, the case study methodology was utilized to conduct analyses of their foreign policies within the context of the Syrian conflict.

The results showed that the functions that states found suitable for themselves directly impacted their foreign policy behavior since states often decided to go through specific policies to affirm these roles. The findings also provided insight into how an aspiring state can regard regional crises as moments of opportunity to shape regional affairs in its favor. It was also found that the particular patterns of behavior outlined above appear frequently in states' pursuit of regional leadership, even though a state's prioritization of one over the other and their level of engagement in the same type of behavior can vary depending on multiple factors beyond the material conditions of the state.

While mixed evidence was found for all six hypotheses for the cases of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the findings reflected a much more assertive Saudi foreign policy behavior in pursuit of regional leadership. Considering that Egypt has repeatedly expressed its willingness to take back its 'natural' role as the leader in the region (Monier & Ranko, 2014, p. 64), it is important to identify which factor may have affected this result. This thesis showed that pursuing regional leadership through implementing particular regional policies requires coherence in foreign policymaking. The existence of domestic actors who can dictate the orientation of a state's foreign policy can prevent coherent foreign policymaking, since these actors' varying stances on issues can lead to contrasting decisions. Meanwhile, a state's reliance on external actors for political or economic stability can prevent it from affirming its position as a regional leader, as the same external actors might prevent their attempts. This reliance was most evident in Egypt's economic reliance on external actors, where Qatar or Saudi Arabia's leverage over Morsi and Sisi significantly diminished Cairo's ability to affirm its independence and assertiveness.

The findings were also helpful in highlighting the complications that multiple regional actors in pursuit of the same role can create for role performance. The Saudi struggle to shape the responses within the GCC according to its interests can be given as an example, as Qatar's pursuit of the same foreign policy role had adverse effects on Saudi policies. Moreover, this research project provided insights into how states can employ specific forms of rhetoric to justify their policies at the regional level. In contrast to the assumption that foreign policy decisions of states across the Middle East are made by taking the supranational identities as ideational sources, states made use of the norms associated with these identities as justifications for their attempts to increase their regional influence.

Concerning these results, some of the limitations of this research must be identified. While the period was chosen to help focus on the high-intensity period of the Syrian conflict, as the post-2016 period reflected less attention being paid to the civil war by regional actors (Hinnebusch, 2020), extending the period of analysis could help better understand the foreign policies of these states that are more long-term goal oriented in terms of establishing leadership. This limitation was most evident in the Egyptian case, as Sisi's attempts to be more influential in the Syrian civil war became much more prominent starting in 2015.

Another limitation was found regarding the fourth hypothesis, which is based on the type of aid states can be willing to give to different parties involved in the conflict. The degree of support found for political, economic, and military aid provision was not the same for all three types, as state policies on aid provision changed depending

on the type, the leader in charge, or whether these were intended to support the armed opposition groups or the Assad regime. While providing an in-depth analysis for each of these types is beyond the scope of this thesis, further studies can help provide deeper insights into their significance.

This research project contributed to the foreign policy analysis literature by utilizing the case study method to introduce new empirical cases in which two Middle Eastern states' foreign policy decision-making and implementation processes were analyzed. Following the previously identified necessity of further research on foreign policy decisions across the Middle East, this thesis can be regarded as a step in filling this gap in the FPA literature. Moreover, it also helped expand the existing literature by focusing on the importance of regional crises on foreign policymaking for different states.

This research project also contributed to the role theory literature in several ways. In the first place, it problematized the lack of attention the existing works on role theory paid to the states in the Middle East. It aimed to help fill this gap by introducing two new cases on Saudi Arabia and Egypt during the Syrian civil war. As both these states are historically significant for regional affairs, attempts to understand their foreign policy behavior through role theory can offer deeper insights into regional politics in the Middle East. More importantly, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of a particular national role conception through the case study method to understand the transformation of regional leadership role conception into foreign policy behavior. Since multiple actors with different material and ideational propensities claim ownership over regional leadership in the Middle East,

understanding the changes and commonalities between these states' foreign policy behavior aimed at asserting such an influence is significant.

Identifying the particular types of decisions states are expected to implement in their role enactment is one of the main contributions of this thesis, as it helps clarify which foreign policy decisions are more relevant for the pursuit of regional leadership. This project makes further contributions by highlighting states' varying levels of commitment to these expected functions, revealing that states' different interpretations of the same foreign policy role can influence which decisions they prioritize over others. Even though this project's scope is limited to a small number of expected functions, further studies on a broader range of relevant decisions for the regional leadership role and other national role conceptions can provide deeper insight into states' foreign policy behavior. Additionally, identifying regional crises such as the Syrian civil war as windows of opportunity for aspiring states is another contribution made by this research project. Beyond understanding these crises as events that disrupt the status quo, it is shown that understanding the opportunities and challenges born out of them can help better understand how they can affect states' role performances.

The observations inferred from this research project can also have specific implications for regional affairs in the Middle East. First, this thesis helps to understand better the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings and the regional implications of the civil war that emerged in Syria during this period. While it has often been described as a monumental event for regional affairs, the findings of this thesis reveal that developments born out of the conflict implied many opportunities

and hardships for other actors wishing to increase their regional influence. The lack of a regional hegemon has often characterized the Middle East despite multiple aspiring states. This research project's findings shed light on this lack by elaborating on the difficulties of achieving regional leadership when others also pursue the same foreign policy role. Furthermore, the thesis contributes to the literature by challenging the assumption that supranational identities such as pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism are often the sources of regional actors' foreign policy decisions. Instead, this research project helps consider these identities as sources used by regional actors as justifications for states' foreign policy decisions, particularly by those states with strong historical ties to these identities.

Finally, the results of this thesis are as relevant to scholars of foreign policy analysis and role theory as they are to foreign policy decision makers and state leaders who consider regional leadership to be a suitable role in their states' foreign affairs.

Foreign policy makers considering pursuing leadership at the regional level can find it beneficial to consider which functions they might be expected to perform, and which actions should be prioritized over others. For example, it may be helpful for decision makers to give priority to active engagement in regional and international affairs, as the results of the case studies show that they can often be used as platforms in which other functions, such as mediation, can also be performed. The thesis results may also suggest caution against simultaneously implementing some of these functions, particularly if performed in a regional crisis. For example, it is observed that providing aid to any particular actor involved in the conflict can prevent states from realizing their roles as mediators, as external actors can question their objectivity. The findings of this thesis reveal the significance of understanding

the role enactment of regional leadership as a complex process, particularly in regions defined by the existence of different actors in pursuit of the same foreign policy role.



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