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TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN SHAPING REGIONAL POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION (OIC) AND THE ASTANA PROCESS

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Abstract

Turkish foreign policy has repositioned itself at various times in response to global and regional developments, particularly in the Middle East. This study argues that Türkiye's diplomatic behaviour reflects a dual orientation: while it employs normative, multilateral, and soft power instruments within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), it adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic approach in the Astana Process. The central hypothesis is that these two cases, taken together, reveal Türkiye's evolution toward a multidimensional and multi-actor strategy that balances value-based diplomacy with hard power imperatives. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, relying on secondary sources, official documents, and statements by government officials to analyse Türkiye's roles, strategies, and limitations across both platforms. By linking the OIC and the Astana Process, this article not only highlights the contrast between institutional multilateralism and crisis diplomacy but also contributes to the Turkish foreign policy literature by demonstrating how Türkiye simultaneously pursues normative legitimacy and security imperatives in its regional engagements.

Keywords

Türkiye, Astana Process, Turkish Foreign Policy, OIC, Multidimensional Strategy.

Resumo

A política externa turca reposicionou-se em vários momentos em resposta aos desenvolvimentos globais e regionais, particularmente no Médio Oriente. Este estudo argumenta que o comportamento diplomático da Turquia reflete uma orientação dupla: enquanto emprega instrumentos normativos, multilaterais e de soft power dentro da Organização da Cooperação Islâmica (OCI), adota uma abordagem mais pragmática e orientada para a segurança no Processo de Astana. A hipótese central é que estes dois casos, considerados em conjunto, revelam a evolução da Turquia para uma estratégia multidimensional e multilateral que equilibra a diplomacia baseada em valores com os imperativos do hard power. Metodologicamente, o estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa e comparativa, baseando-se em fontes secundárias, documentos oficiais e declarações de funcionários governamentais para analisar os papéis, estratégias e limitações da Turquia em ambas as plataformas. Ao ligar a OCI e o Processo de Astana, este artigo não só destaca o contraste entre o multilateralismo institucional e a diplomacia de crise, como também contribui para a literatura sobre a política externa turca, demonstrando como a Turquia

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persegue simultaneamente a legitimidade normativa e os imperativos de segurança nos seus compromissos regionais.

Palavras-chave

Turquia, Processo de Astana, Política Externa Turca, OIC, Estratégia Multidimensional.

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Türkiye's foreign policy approach has begun to shift, moving away from its traditional Western-oriented trajectory toward a more active, multidimensional, and strategically grounded policy in the Middle East. Particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the deepening political instability across the region has compelled Türkiye to develop new policy instruments in the areas of security, economy, and diplomacy. In this context, Türkiye has sought to increase its regional influence through various institutional and political platforms, assuming a significant role in two major diplomatic processes: the OIC and the Astana Process. Existing studies have separately examined Türkiye's Middle East policy (Khan, 2015; Cornell, 2012), its role in multilateral Islamic institutions such as the OIC (İhsanoğlu, 1997; Koç, 2019; Kulaklıkaya, 2025), and its engagement in the Astana Process as part of Syrian crisis diplomacy (Abboud, 2021; Michiels & Kizilkaya, 2022). However, these analyses often treat the two mechanisms in isolation. Building on this literature, this article chooses the OIC and the Astana Process for in-depth examination not only because Türkiye has played visible and active roles in both, but also because they embody two distinct logics of diplomacy: while the OIC reflects institutionalised, multilateral, and norm-based cooperation, the Astana Process represents crisis diplomacy shaped by military realities on the ground. By bringing these two strands of scholarship together, the study demonstrates how Türkiye balances soft power and normative legitimacy in a multilateral framework with hard power and security imperatives in a conflict-driven process.

While the OIC is characterised by a structure grounded in religious, cultural, and multilateral diplomacy, the Astana Process represents a form of crisis diplomacy shaped by military and political realities on the ground. These two distinct frameworks embody different dimensions of Türkiye's multidirectional foreign policy vision. Accordingly, the primary rationale for examining the OIC and the Astana Process together in this study is to reveal how Türkiye simultaneously manages value-based approaches and security-driven interests, and what kind of foreign policy model it adopts in this context. In line with this, the central research question of this study is formulated as follows: "How has Türkiye's foreign policy approach differed between two distinct diplomatic platforms -the OIC and the Astana Process- and what objectives has this comparative engagement

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revealed about the evolution of its regional strategy?" The hypothesis developed based on this question is that, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates a dual orientation: while it emphasises normative, multilateral, and soft power tools within the OIC, it adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic approach in the Astana Process. Taken together, these cases reveal an evolution toward a multidimensional, multi-actor strategy that balances value-based diplomacy with hard power imperatives.

The study analyses Türkiye's diplomatic role, interests, instruments, and limitations in the aforementioned two processes from a qualitative perspective. Methodologically, it employs a comparative case study design, examining the OIC and the Astana Process as two distinct but complementary cases of Turkish foreign policy practice. The analysis is based on secondary sources, official documents, statements by government officials, academic literature, and international reports. Theoretically, the study draws on a combination of constructivist and realist perspectives: while constructivism helps explain Türkiye's use of normative and identity-based elements within the OIC, realism sheds light on the security-driven and interest-based calculations that shape its role in the Astana Process. By integrating these perspectives, the article develops a balanced framework that demonstrates how value-based and security-oriented logics coexist in Türkiye's foreign policy. This analysis aims to uncover the diplomatic, military, and humanitarian strategies that Türkiye has adopted both in institutional frameworks (such as multilateral organisations like the OIC) and in field-oriented crisis initiatives (such as the Astana Process).

Türkiye's Foreign Policy Approach in the Middle East

From a historical perspective, it is evident that Türkiye's foreign policy has long placed significant emphasis on its relations with the West. However, developments since the beginning of the 21st century indicate that Turkish foreign policy has increasingly sought to establish closer ties with Middle Eastern countries. The ongoing transformation within the international system has led Türkiye to concentrate more intensively on regional issues. In the past, Türkiye's policy toward the Middle East was shaped predominantly by security concerns and based on a principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of regional states. In recent years, however, Turkish foreign policy has adopted a more proactive stance on Middle Eastern affairs (Khan, 2015: 31). Developments in the Middle East have had a significant impact on Türkiye's policies, extending from security to economic spheres. The traditional non-interventionist approach that characterised Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Middle East became unsustainable in the early 2000s due to changing regional dynamics. Within this framework, Türkiye began to shift its focus toward regional issues and strengthen its relations with neighbouring countries as a means of protecting its national interests and addressing both internal and external challenges. The reflection of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has thus been shaped by objectives such as maintaining regional stability and enhancing economic cooperation (Arı and Pirinççi, 2010: 3).

Following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Türkiye's role in the Arab world underwent a significant transformation. In this context, Türkiye

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launched numerous political initiatives with neighbouring Arab states and signed a series of agreements aimed at enhancing mutual cultural engagement. During this period, Türkiye began to pursue a more active policy within the OIC and gained permanent observer status in the Arab League, allowing it to participate in various activities under its framework (Ennis and Momani, 2013: 1128). As of January 2009, it became evident that the AKP's foreign policy orientation was no longer solely focused on strengthening ties with Western countries or pursuing European Union (EU) membership. Instead, increasing emphasis was placed on Türkiye's policies toward the Middle East (Özdemir, 2010: 274). After the AKP's success in the 2011 general election, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said in his victory speech that cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku, and Nicosia were all "friendly and brotherly" towards Türkiye. He went on to emphasize that Türkiye would pursue an active foreign policy in regions including, but not limited to, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus (Cornell, 2012: 13). In this framework, it was clearly stated that Türkiye sought to assume a more active role in foreign affairs and to strengthen cooperation with both its immediate and more distant neighbors.

The United States (U.S.) activities in the Middle East in 2004 under the rhetoric of freedom caused concern among the region's populations. The U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed that the discourse of freedom did not align with the realities on the ground. In this context, regimes in the Middle East adopted increasingly repressive and authoritarian governance models in response to unfolding events. At the beginning of 2011, uprisings that started in Tunisia and Egypt, driven by demands for democratisation and reform, spread to other Arab countries and triggered developments that would have long-term consequences. During this period, the U.S. asserted that Arab states, in order to successfully implement reform and transformation processes, should follow the practices of a "model" country. Tunisia's opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi emphasised that Türkiye could serve as a model state in terms of political transformation and reform in the Arab world (Kirişçi, 2011: 33-34).

These uprisings in the Middle East came to be known as the "Arab Spring" and were particularly notable for being internally driven movements. The widespread use of social media during the uprisings enabled Arab youth and the disadvantaged middle classes to adopt a political stance and take collective action. Factors such as the global economic crisis, rising food prices, and unjust governance were key contributors to the emergence of the Arab Spring. The fact that the uprisings began in Tunisia and were soon followed by the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya generated a wave of optimism across other Arab nations. In an environment characterised by profound uncertainty surrounding the future direction of political developments in the region, the question of Türkiye's new foreign policy vision became critical, particularly given its recent adoption of a "zero problems with neighbours" (Coşkun, 2015: 187) approach.

Notably, Turkish-Syrian relations, which had remained strained throughout the 1990s, improved significantly in the early 2000s during the tenure of the AKP government. The increasing trade volume between the two countries and the facilitation of visa procedures significantly contributed to the development of positive bilateral relations. However, the uprisings in Syria during the Arab Spring posed serious challenges to Turkish foreign policy. In the initial phase, Türkiye emphasised that the Assad regime should undertake

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reforms. During this period, Türkiye maintained open channels of communication with Syria. Nevertheless, the Assad regime escalated its repressive and authoritarian practices in an effort to suppress domestic opposition groups. Following this development, relations between Türkiye and Syria deteriorated significantly (Öniş, 2012: 47-55; Dalacoura, 2012: 77). Before the Arab Spring, it was widely recognised that Türkiye had been trying to develop closer ties with Arab countries. As a result of its active foreign policy in political and economic spheres, Türkiye's popularity in the region has increased considerably. However, during the Arab Spring process, Türkiye faced significant difficulties in maintaining its previously strong relations with neighbouring states.

Beginning in the 2000s, Türkiye developed a foreign policy approach grounded in soft power, placing greater emphasis on diplomatic negotiations rather than military instruments. Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye had good relations with countries like Syria, Egypt and Libya. During this period, Türkiye aimed to strengthen its ties with Arab states by leveraging mutual economic interdependence. Within this framework, Türkiye signed free trade agreements with several Levant countries, including Syria. As can be observed, the majority of these relations were based on bilateral trade, and Türkiye's political stance following the uprisings had the potential to endanger its economic interests in the region. However, adopting a policy that ignored popular uprisings and supported existing regimes would have significantly undermined Türkiye's aspiration to play a regional leadership role. Faced with such a dilemma, Türkiye ultimately chose to stand by the protesting Arab populations. In doing so, the "Turkish model" emerged as an alternative to the prevailing political authoritarianism and rent-based economic structures dominant in the Middle East (Öniş, 2014: 207-208; Ennis and Momani, 2013: 1129-1130). Between 2002 and 2011, the AKP's Middle East policy was shaped around Ahmet Davutoğlu's principle of "zero problems with neighbours," with a strong emphasis on fostering economic interdependence. During this period, Türkiye maintained close relations with countries in the region. However, the country remained cautious regarding the idea of presenting itself as a model for other states in the region. In this context, Davutoğlu made a clear statement in 2004, declaring that Türkiye did not aspire to serve as a model for anyone. Despite this, the term "Turkish model" continues to be employed in the literature when analysing Türkiye's Middle East policy (D'Alema, 2024: 815).

In the Turkish model, economic gains were prioritized over ideological motives (Göksel, 2018: 44). During the period of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Türkiye's vibrant economy was perceived by Arab societies as a model worthy of emulation (Bengio, 2012: 59). However, considering the structural rigidity of the state-centric economies prevalent in Arab countries, it was argued that replicating Türkiye's developmental trajectory would be difficult for the Arab world (Dede, 2011: 30). Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye had assumed the role of mediator in resolving regional conflicts such as those between Israel and Syria, Israel and Hamas, Syria and Iraq, and even between the U.S. and Iran. However, following the escalation of civil wars in Syria and Libya, Türkiye came to the realisation that it was insufficient in terms of halting regional conflicts (Ehteshami and Elik, 2011: 646-655). In the pre-Arab Spring period, Türkiye had established close ties with Arab countries by prioritising economic cooperation and engaging in active mediation efforts.

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However, following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the new conjuncture that emerged brought about changes in Turkish foreign policy. While struggling with this new reality, Türkiye adopted a security-oriented foreign policy approach. Particularly after 2016, Türkiye's national security came under threat due to regional crises. In Libya, Türkiye supported the Government of National Accord against Haftar's forces, while during the developments following the economic embargo imposed on Qatar, Türkiye sided with the Qatari government against Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the ousting of the legitimately elected Mohamed Morsi government in Egypt through Sisi's coup in 2013, followed by Sisi's rise to power, combined with Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, led to the deterioration of relations between Türkiye and Egypt. In this context, in November 2013, Egypt expelled Türkiye's ambassador in Cairo, and, in line with the principle of reciprocity, Türkiye declared the Egyptian ambassador persona non grata. Following these developments between Egypt and Türkiye, relations between Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates, which supported Sisi, also deteriorated. Although relations between Türkiye and Israel had been strained due to the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, diplomatic ties were restored in 2016. However, following the U.S. decision to relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and the Israeli army's brutal response to Palestinian protests, Türkiye withdrew its ambassador from Israel in 2018. Türkiye's process of diplomatic isolation in the Middle East accelerated as disputes with regional countries over the Eastern Mediterranean deepened, leading to Türkiye's gradual exclusion from regional cooperation initiatives (Yönten and Denemark, 2023: 834-835). This trajectory indicates that Türkiye's foreign policy has, to a considerable extent, been shaped by immediate security concerns and responses to regional crises, which at times limited the scope for pursuing long-term cooperative frameworks. As a result, Ankara faced certain constraints in its diplomatic manoeuvrability and in building multilateral partnerships, which contributed to perceptions of Türkiye as relying more on short-term reactive strategies rather than consistently proactive ones.

This transformation is not only a historical background but also reveals the causal mechanisms that explain Türkiye's differentiated strategies across the OIC and the Astana Process. While the pre-Arab Spring era enabled Türkiye to rely on economic interdependence and soft power tools, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of security threats -ranging from refugee flows to the activities of PKK/PYD-affiliated groups- pushed Ankara toward a security-oriented and militarised foreign policy. These dual pressures account for why Türkiye emphasises normative legitimacy and multilateral cooperation in the OIC, whereas in the Astana Process it privileges hard power and pragmatic crisis management. In this way, the historical trajectory outlined above directly connects to the central hypothesis of this article: Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates a dual orientation, combining value-based diplomacy with security-driven imperatives.

The OIC and Türkiye's Role

The OIC was established under the name of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference on 25 September 1969, in Rabat, Morocco, following the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 21 August 1969. The OIC currently has 57 member states, the

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majority of which are Muslim-majority countries. However, several countries, such as Uganda, Benin, Mozambique, Suriname, and Côte d'Ivoire, where Muslims do not form the majority, are also members of the organisation. In addition, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Central African Republic, the Russian Federation, and Thailand hold observer status within the OIC.

According to Joshua S. Goldstein, the use of geography by a state as a power element indicates the concept of geopolitics. Amstutz, on the other hand, argues that the geopolitical factor arises from the relationship between geography, national power, and foreign policy. As a result, geographical location is a fundamental factor in determining the international role of a state or alliance. In this context, an examination of the geographic locations of the OIC member states reveals that they occupy significant geostrategic positions. The OIC represents approximately 2 billion Muslims worldwide and includes member states that host strategic waterways such as the Dardanelles, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, many member states possess sovereignty over hydrocarbon energy resources as well as other key energy sources (Hossain, 2012: 293-294; Hashmat, 2011: 110).

The aims and principles of the OIC are set out in detail in Article 1 of its founding charter, which emphasizes the strengthening of bonds of brotherhood and cooperation among states, the establishment of peaceful and just interstate relations in line with the principle of good neighbourliness, the recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and support for the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, as well as the creation of an Islamic common market with the goal of enhancing the collective economic power of Muslim countries (Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 1974: 4-5). The OIC has actively pursued diplomatic and political efforts on various platforms to support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In this context, it has encouraged cooperation among its member states (Kulaklıkaya, 2025: 40).

The announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump on 6 December 2017, recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, sparked strong reactions across the Muslim world. During this period, Türkiye assumed a leading role by bringing the issue of Jerusalem to the agenda of the OIC, the EU, and global public opinion. Thanks to these efforts, the OIC member states collectively issued strong responses, and the decision was debated at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. At Türkiye's request, the OIC convened an extraordinary summit in Istanbul on 13 December 2017, attended by leaders, foreign ministers, or high-level representatives from all member countries. During this summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that Jerusalem is a red line for Muslims. The final communiqué of the summit condemned the U.S. decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and emphasised that Israel is an occupying power in the region (Kireçci, 2018: 67-71).

The OIC is a prominent organisation within the international community and has pursued an active policy as a mediator in resolving conflicts in the Muslim world since its establishment. Although it has achieved success in ending certain conflicts, its efforts have often failed to produce desired results. Since its foundation, the OIC has taken

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decisions on almost every issue affecting the Muslim world with the aim of alleviating the region's troubles. However, the organisation has faced significant challenges in implementing these decisions. For instance, the Kashmir conflict, which has remained a major issue between India and Pakistan for decades, has been addressed by the OIC. A special working committee was established within the organisation to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, the desired outcome was not achieved. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the OIC attempted to act as a mediator and bring the two countries to the negotiating table, but these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. The OIC has also provided financial assistance to the persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and directly engaged with the Myanmar government to address their grievances. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the U.S., Muslims living in Western countries faced a growing threat of Islamophobia. In this period, Muslims were frequently blamed for acts of terrorism. In response, the OIC began actively combating Islamophobia in Western countries and advocating for the rights of its victims. Additionally, through official channels, the organisation has launched initiatives to counter disinformation campaigns targeting Islam and Muslims under the guise of Islamophobia (Ali and Sultan, 2023: 1-2).

While labelling the OIC as an ineffective international organisation would be an unfair criticism, it can be argued that it has fallen short in conducting Islamic policies in a collective manner (Sheikh, 2017: 120). Often referred to as the "UN of Islamic countries," the OIC, as seen above, unfortunately shares the same fate as the UN when it comes to preventing international conflicts. In the case of the UN, the Security Council's veto power is cited as a major obstacle to resolving global issues; in the OIC's case, however, the absence of such a mechanism also hampers effectiveness, albeit for different reasons. Since all member states have equal voting rights and decisions are generally taken by consensus, the organisation struggles to adopt binding and enforceable resolutions. This consensus-based system often dilutes decisions to the lowest common denominator, preventing the OIC from taking strong collective action in times of crisis. Moreover, many OIC member states face not only border disputes but also ethnic and sectarian conflicts. As a result, some OIC countries perceive each other as threats and seek alliances with external powers outside the framework of the organisation (Birdişli and Atawula, 2019: 98-99).

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and Türkiye's subsequent recognition of it negatively affected relations between Türkiye and the Arab countries in the Middle East. However, following the emergence of the Cyprus issue, Türkiye sought to revise its Middle East policy to avoid becoming isolated in the UN. During the conflicts between Arabs and Israel, Türkiye pursued a policy of balance. In 1969, after the arson attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque, Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel stated that the Turkish people were deeply saddened by the tragic incident and that Türkiye would support the other Muslim states. Türkiye was represented at the first OIC summit meeting by Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil.

In the early years of the OIC, Türkiye adopted a cautious approach in its participation due to its relations with Western allies (İhsanoğlu, 1997: 101-102). However, between 1976 and 1990, Türkiye's trade volume with Islamic countries increased significantly. After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye adopted a more active policy toward the Muslim

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world, and in this context, its activities within the OIC expanded. Türkiye used the OIC platform to bring attention to the rights of Turkish minorities living in Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria, as well as the challenges faced by Muslims in Bosnia. Moreover, Türkiye played a leading role in the accession of Muslim states in Central Asia to the OIC. Türkiye plays an active role in the educational and cultural commissions within the OIC. In addition, it became a member of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO), affiliated with the OIC, in 2017. Following the election of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as Secretary-General in 2005, Türkiye made significant contributions to the development of new principles for the OIC (Koç, 2019: 274-275; Ataman, 2009: 49). Strengthening cooperation with Islamic countries is one of Türkiye's key foreign policy priorities. The OIC is regarded as an important international body for promoting regional development. It also holds considerable potential for economic growth (Fidan, 2023: 21). As can be seen, the global uncertainties that followed the end of the Cold War led Türkiye to establish closer ties with the OIC (Aykan, 1993: 129). From the 2000s onward, relations between Türkiye and the OIC have significantly improved. Türkiye's active mediating roles in the cases of Afghanistan, Libya, and the Rohingya issue demonstrate its commitment to promoting peace in the Muslim world. Türkiye has provided aid to Rohingya Muslim refugees who were forced to flee persecution in Myanmar. In this context, Türkiye and the OIC have carried out joint initiatives to defend the rights of Rohingya Muslims on international platforms. Through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), Türkiye has participated in multi-stakeholder cooperation models with the OIC (Kulaklıkaya, 2025: 48-50).

These initiatives highlight that Türkiye's role within the OIC goes beyond symbolic participation and has, at times, translated into agenda-setting power. For example, Türkiye's leadership during the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in December 2017 mobilised a broad consensus against the U.S. decision to recognise the city as Israel's capital, demonstrating Ankara's ability to rally member states around its position. Similarly, Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy regarding the Rohingya crisis has increased its moral authority within the organisation, even though structural limitations of the OIC often constrain collective action. Taken together, such cases reveal that Türkiye's effectiveness within the OIC is not uniform but issue-specific: it is more influential when combining normative legitimacy with practical humanitarian initiatives, which supports the article's central hypothesis regarding the coexistence of value-based diplomacy and pragmatic foreign policy objectives.

At this point, it is useful to evaluate TİKA's humanitarian activities in Africa and Türkiye's broader Africa initiative. TİKA, the institution responsible for coordinating Türkiye's foreign aid, began its operations on the continent by opening a coordination office in Ethiopia in 2005. Despite being a relatively new actor in Africa, TİKA has carried out extensive aid programs in the region. These activities are conducted with a human-centred approach and are tailored to the needs and priorities of partner countries. For instance, the hospitals built in Sudan and Somalia are jointly administered by personnel from the Turkish Ministry of Health and local partners, with the aim of providing rapid and on-site solutions to emerging problems (Arpa and Bayar, 2022: 6-8).

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In 2005, Türkiye launched a new foreign policy approach toward Africa, declaring that year as the "Year of Africa." In previous decades, Türkiye had largely neglected the continent, and its relations with African states remained unstable. Earlier periods of engagement were mostly shaped by short-term objectives such as easing international isolation or securing diplomatic support from certain African countries. However, in the early 2000s, the AKP government, bolstered by the support of conservative business circles, began to pursue substantive economic policies to strengthen ties with African states. In doing so, Türkiye gradually incorporated soft power instruments into its Africa policy. Within this framework, humanitarian aid, religious and cultural activities, scholarships, and commercial relations elevated Türkiye's standing on the continent (Tepeciklioğlu, Vreÿ & Baser, 2024: 289-290).

Following the declaration of 2005 as the "Year of Africa," the First Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit was held in Istanbul on 18-21 August 2008, after which the African Union recognised Türkiye as a strategic partner (Öztürk and Duman, 2023: 224). Parallel to the deepening of Türkiye-Africa relations, numerous diplomatic missions were opened, and bilateral trade volumes steadily increased. For example, Türkiye's major investments in Ethiopia have provided employment opportunities for thousands of Ethiopians. Furthermore, Türkiye's launch of post-conflict development programs in countries such as Sudan and Somalia, along with the active engagement of Turkish-origin aid associations, stand out as significant developments that resonate with then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement: *"Africa belongs to Africans; we are not here for your gold"* (Süsler and Alden, 2022: 598).

By emphasising its cultural and religious elements, as well as its technological capabilities, Türkiye can further strengthen its economic relations with Islamic countries. Additionally, leveraging its advantageous geopolitical position, Türkiye should enhance its role as a strategic energy bridge between energy-exporting countries in the East and energy-importing countries in the West. Moreover, cooperation between Türkiye and OIC member states should be increased in areas such as trade, education, science, finance, and technology (Bağış and Yurtseven, 2017: 64-69). By prioritising cooperation with OIC countries, Türkiye can play a vital role among regional states.

Astana Process and Türkiye's Crisis Diplomacy

Following the outbreak of a civilian uprising in Syria in March 2011, triggered by the Arab Spring and subsequently turning into an internal conflict, the Geneva Process -initiated under the leadership of the UN- aimed to end the hostilities and re-establish peace in the region, but ultimately failed. The intensification of the conflict led to humanitarian crises, and the armed struggle between the Syrian regime and the opposition rendered diplomacy ineffective, resulting in a military stalemate. Due to its access to the Mediterranean, Syria held strategic importance for Russia as a key ally. By 2015, in response to the possibility of U.S. intervention in the region and the growing military strength of the opposition, Russia launched a large-scale military intervention in Syria in September 2015. As a result of this intervention, the military capacity of the opposition was significantly weakened. Subsequently, political negotiations to address the conflict in Syria were initiated in January 2017 in Kazakhstan, under the leadership of Russia,

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Iran, and Türkiye. This initiative came to be known in the international community as the "Astana Process." At this point, the Geneva Process was not entirely sidelined but continued in parallel with the Astana Process. The UN attempted to end the conflict through a power-sharing negotiation model between the warring parties, but this effort failed, as both sides entered the process with the goal of achieving a decisive victory (Abboud, 2021: 326-332; Vogel, 2023: 85). Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, Türkiye had adopted a foreign policy aimed at the overthrow of the Assad regime. On the other hand, actors like Iran and Russia provided both military and political support to ensure the unwavering continuation of the Syrian regime. Russia supported the progression of the process without regime change or international intervention, favouring negotiated settlements (Nabiev and Nafikov, 2021: 208).

While Türkiye opposed the Assad regime, the activities of PKK/PYD-affiliated groups along the Syrian border posed a serious threat to Türkiye's national security. In response to attacks by the PKK/PYD, Türkiye carried out military operations in northern Syria. During this period, Türkiye also continued its diplomatic efforts as a politically influential actor within the Astana Process (Philips, 2022: 375). Throughout the Astana Process, the guarantor states established four different "de-escalation zones" in Syria. The first zone included the city of Idlib, the northeastern part of Latakia, the western areas of Aleppo, and the northern settlements in Hama. The second zone consisted of the Rastan and Talbiseh areas north of the city of Homs. The third zone referred to Eastern Ghouta, located north of Damascus. Finally, the fourth zone covered the southern areas along the Jordanian border, including the cities of Daraa and Quneitra. Initially, there was a noticeable decrease in violence in these designated zones (Talukdar and Anas, 2018). However, in 2018 and 2019, the Syrian regime resumed hostilities in these regions, undermining the de-escalation efforts. As a result of the regime's actions, millions of Syrian refugees fled toward the Turkish border. In the face of these developments, both the Moscow and Tehran administrations continued to provide all forms of support to the Assad regime (Mohamad, 2023). Within this context, Türkiye played a significant role in ensuring border security and managing the humanitarian burden. Violations committed by the regime in the de-escalation zones further complicated Türkiye's military and diplomatic policy toward the region. Moreover, through its role as a guarantor in the Astana Process, Türkiye continued its efforts not only as a military actor but also as a diplomatic player in the search for a resolution.

Türkiye opposed the de facto situation that the PKK/PYD was attempting to establish in Syria. In this context, the negotiations in Astana intensified (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 17). Moreover, Russia refused to recognise the PKK/PYD as a terrorist organisation, and the relations between Russia and the PKK/PYD continued within this framework. However, this relationship appeared to come to an end when Türkiye captured Afrin in January 2018. Additionally, although forces affiliated with the Syrian regime attempted to enter Afrin in February 2018, they were repelled by Turkish artillery following an agreement reached with Iranian and Russian officials (Hale, 2019: 31-32). Iran had successfully established a presence in the Syrian army and other security structures through its militias. After achieving military success, Iran shifted its focus to economic and socio-cultural issues (Vogel, 2023: 81). In the Astana talks, since Russian, Turkish, and Iranian forces were present on the ground in Syria, they had the capacity to limit

the use of force by the conflicting parties (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 3). While Türkiye, Iran, and Russia carried out military interventions in Syria, they also conducted diplomatic negotiations as guarantor states. While Russia and Iran sought to gain military and political advantages in the region, Türkiye acted with the aim of neutralising elements that posed a threat to its national security.

Unlike Iran and Russia, Türkiye was more affected economically and in terms of security by the conflicts in Syria due to both the influx of refugees and the terrorist attacks carried out by the PKK/PYD. As seen, one of the main reasons for Türkiye's involvement in the Astana Process was to protect its national security and minimise the negative material impacts caused by the conflict in Syria. Türkiye's initial approach to the political crisis in Syria was shaped around the overthrow of Assad. However, the Astana talks revealed that Türkiye's priorities were to emphasise humanitarian issues, resolve the refugee problem, and bring an end to violence as soon as possible. While Russia fought politically to keep the regime in power during the Astana talks, Türkiye acted as a guarantor for the participation of opposition groups in the negotiations. Iran, on the other hand, was to assume a mediator role if the talks were interrupted. Thanks to the Astana talks, the conflicting parties in Syria came to the negotiation table. At this point, all parties made significant contributions to the process (Cengiz, 2020: 10-11). Thanks to this process, Türkiye was able to intervene directly in developments that threatened its border security, while maintaining its military presence on the ground within the framework of international legitimacy.

Since Türkiye's first intervention into Syrian territory in August 2016, it has been included in the Astana Process because it was responsible for the political and military organisation of the Syrian opposition. Türkiye's presence at the negotiation table in Astana was welcomed by both the Syrian regime and various opposition groups involved in the process. These groups included Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. The guarantor states did not consider including DEASH or al-Nusra in the Astana Process a topic for discussion. However, the situation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has close ties with al-Nusra, was critical. At this point, Türkiye took on the responsibility of reducing the influence of radical elements within HTS who did not want to participate in the Astana talks. The positive aspect of Astana was that three countries with different objectives in Syria came together at the negotiation table. The Astana Process has shown that mediation efforts, even if not entirely successful, can lead to positive outcomes (Michiels and Kizilkaya, 2022: 17-29). In this context, the most striking feature of the Astana talks is that actors on different fronts in the conflict zone were able to find common ground through diplomatic channels. Türkiye's influence over the Syrian opposition increased Ankara's role on the Astana platform.

This development illustrates Türkiye's shift toward a more flexible and context-specific foreign policy. In contrast to its participation in the OIC -where Ankara sought to build legitimacy through multilateral diplomacy, symbolic leadership, and humanitarian initiatives- its involvement in the Astana Process was shaped by urgent security imperatives, such as border protection, refugee management, and direct military engagement. The difference between these two platforms demonstrates that Türkiye no longer relies solely on normative and cooperative instruments but rather pursues a dual-

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track strategy in which value-based diplomacy coexists with pragmatic, security-oriented action.

Comparative Analysis: Türkiye's Engagement in the OIC and the Astana Process

A direct comparison of Türkiye's involvement in the OIC and the Astana Process allows for a clearer evaluation of the central argument. Within the OIC, Ankara's influence became evident during critical turning points such as the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in December 2017, when it succeeded in rallying member states against Washington's recognition of the city as Israel's capital. Türkiye's humanitarian engagement in the Rohingya issue likewise enhanced its credibility and normative standing, illustrating how Ankara leveraged soft power, coalition-building, and symbolic authority in multilateral settings.

By contrast, Türkiye's involvement in the Astana Process was largely driven by urgent security concerns, primarily the proximity of PKK/PYD groups to its border and the significant influx of refugees from Syria. Rather than relying on consensus politics, Ankara asserted its position through its military deployments, its capacity to shape the stance of Syrian opposition groups, and its tactical bargaining with Russia and Iran. In this arena, diplomacy was more transactional and directly tied to hard power instruments.

Viewed together, the two cases underscore both convergence and divergence. In both contexts, Türkiye aimed to portray itself as an indispensable regional actor: in the OIC through normative advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy, and in Astana through security-oriented negotiations and on-the-ground involvement. The key distinction lies in the nature of the tools and outcomes: while participation in the OIC bolstered Türkiye's international legitimacy and visibility, involvement in Astana produced more concrete security advantages and strategic leverage in the Syrian conflict. This comparison substantiates the article's central claim that Türkiye's foreign policy blends value-based approaches with pragmatic, security-driven strategies, adapting its instruments to the institutional framework at hand.

Conclusion

The political transformations in the Middle East over the past twenty years have led to significant changes in Türkiye's foreign policy stance, and during this process, Türkiye has taken serious steps toward becoming a more active and multifaceted regional actor. In this context, Türkiye's roles in the OIC and the Astana Process reflect the country's effort to simultaneously manage both its diplomatic priorities and security concerns. By employing a comparative case study method, this article has demonstrated how Türkiye adapts its strategies to two distinct diplomatic frameworks -one grounded in institutionalised multilateralism and the other in crisis diplomacy- thus providing analytical leverage for testing the central hypothesis.

Within the OIC, Türkiye pursues a multilateral foreign policy based on normative values, aiming at cultural and political rapprochement in the Muslim world. Concrete cases such

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as the extraordinary summit on Jerusalem in 2017 and Türkiye's leadership on the Rohingya issue illustrate its capacity to set the agenda and enhance its normative legitimacy. At the same time, the consensus-based decision-making procedures and lack of enforcement mechanisms within the OIC -documented in the literature as recurring institutional limitations- have restricted the degree to which Türkiye's initiatives could translate into binding outcomes. Nevertheless, Türkiye's leadership in symbolic and humanitarian issues has increased its visibility and moral authority within the OIC.

In contrast, the Astana Process is significant as it demonstrates Türkiye's development of a more concrete and security-centred diplomatic approach that also involves hard power elements. During this process, Türkiye has become a decisive actor thanks to both its military presence on the ground and its influence over Syrian opposition groups. Additionally, Türkiye has effectively used the Astana platform to address national security priorities such as neutralising threats along its Syrian border and controlling refugee flows.

The comparative analysis highlights that Türkiye's impact varies depending on the issue and setting: within the OIC, its effectiveness stems from blending normative leadership with humanitarian engagement, whereas in the Astana framework, it derives influence through direct security involvement and tactical bargaining. This supports the argument that Türkiye's foreign policy follows a dual-track orientation rather than a single, uniform approach.

In conclusion, Türkiye's position in the OIC and Astana platforms confirms the hypothesis of a dual orientation in its foreign policy: while pursuing normative, multilateral, and soft power tools in the OIC, Türkiye simultaneously adopts a more security-driven and pragmatic stance in the Astana Process. Taken together, these findings validate the comparative framework of this study and highlight that Türkiye's evolution toward a multidimensional and multi-actor strategy can only be fully understood by analysing both its normative ambitions and its security imperatives within distinct institutional settings.

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