

The Crisis of the Liberal World Order and Turkey's Resistance

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ABSTRACT *With the retreat of liberalism in the Western world and the US withdrawing on many global issues, the international system is undergoing serious changes. Turkey, also caught within the throes of international disorder, has been facing a variety of pressing challenges. In response, Ankara has undertaken the dual task of providing its own security and mobilizing the international community to resolve the problems in the international system. In Turkey's new presidential system, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political and diplomatic skills play a key role in the formulation and implementation of Turkish foreign policy.*

History books will possibly say that 2018 was the year when the “collapse” of the liberal world order was discussed more frequently than any other time before. U.S. President Donald Trump's first two years at the White House raised questions about Washington's global role, and fueled debate on the dissolution of the Atlantic Alliance. Interest in those issues was not limited to the media or the academia. It also made its mark on international summits that brought together heads of states. One such event was the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina. On the agenda of participating leaders, who were preoccupied with implementing reforms to prevent an-

other global economic crisis, were the rise of protectionism, a brewing trade war between the United States and China, the Ukraine crisis, the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and the Iran sanctions. The Buenos Aires summit set the stage for speeches demonstrating the growing prominence of bilateral relations at the expense of multilateralism.

The multidimensional turmoil, which the international order experiences today is primarily fueled by the efforts of the United States to exploit its hegemony and to further its economic interests at the detriment of others' economic growth. Embodied by the campaign slogan, *America First*, the

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In the struggle between liberalism and nationalism, consolidated democracies are increasingly siding with the latter. This trend, in turn, deepens the gap between liberalism and democracy

Trump administration's unilateralism strengthens this trend.

Long gone are the days when political scientists celebrated the "triumph of liberal democracy," and the "end of history." The once-indisputable self-confidence of liberals has since been replaced by fear. Today, experts are trying to answer a new set of questions: Are Western liberal democracies at risk? Will Europe surrender to this authoritarianism? Will the rise of populism and right-wing nationalism spell the death of the European Union? Is democracy dying in the United States?

Alarm bells ring as Chinese economic expansionism gains momentum, Russia's cyber meddling in Western elections continues, authoritarian leaders rise in Eastern Europe, and populism challenges mainstream politics in Western Europe. It becomes easier to fully appreciate the gravity of the situation when one takes into account America's tendency to abdicate its global responsibilities. There is already a sizeable body of literature on "the death of democracies." Books

have been published claiming that young people in consolidated democracies are more inclined than older citizens to support military governments. At the same time, nationalism emerged as a popular subject for American publishers in light of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Liberal thinkers, who assume that norms govern the international order, find this trend very dangerous. To be fair, it never made sense to argue that the liberal world order functioned thanks to a set of norms, which were binding on the United States, and through international organizations. When it came to exercising hard power, the United States repeatedly ignored the United Nations and its allies. Although claims regarding Afghanistan and Iraq proved inaccurate, U.S. interventions in those countries, which meant the death or displacement of millions of people, have never been questioned. The novel developments, however, relate to Washington's change of heart about its own global role and European democracies, fearing immigrants, are being dragged into the maelstrom of populism and Islamophobia.

The West's Slide Away from Liberalism

Washington's unwillingness to uphold the liberal order began during the Obama presidency and has become increasingly salient under the Trump administration. Various experts have advocated this change

on a theoretical level. Realists like Barry Posen and John Mearsheimer, who urge the United States to acknowledge the limits of its power, describe the idea of a liberal order as an “illusion.”¹ Calling on Washington to accept the world as it is, they maintain that the United States must limit its costly commitments in Asia and Europe and gradually withdraw from the Middle East. According to Mearsheimer, who sees China's rise as the most significant challenge to American primacy, even though liberalism was a force for good domestically, “liberal hegemony” has proved unsuccessful for the United States. Criticizing NATO's enlargement at Russia's expense, he argues that Washington must remain in East Asia, Europe, and the Gulf.²

Scholars who oppose the view that the United States must abandon liberal hegemony discuss what ‘the real world’ actually is and warn against the heavy price of American retreat. According to Robert Kagan, who highlights the difficulty of creating a new balance of power, the post-World War II liberal order was an anomaly in the first place.³ It was upheld by the United States, whose national ideology was based on liberal principles. By contrast, Kagan says, the world is turning into a jungle with its own laws once again due to the abdication of its global responsibilities by the United States, which created the current order. In his view, the American violation of a core principle –that it would not use its strategic hegemony to prevent the economic growth of other powers –had undermined the

liberal order.⁴ In other words, it was Trump's move to exploit Washington's hegemonic position to further American economic interests.

Trade wars, protectionism, efforts to renegotiate multilateral agreements, and the excessive use of economic sanctions represent Washington's disregard for the rules that it established in the first place. At the heart of those violations is American discontent with globalization and the advances in communication technology making new resources available to other powers.

Washington's slide towards an increasingly rigid form of nationalism and the related rise of populism in Europe strengthens the phenomenon of “illiberal democracy” in the Western world. In the struggle between liberalism and nationalism, consolidated democracies are increasingly siding with the latter. This trend, in turn, deepens the gap between liberalism and democracy –which translates into the rise of a majoritarian populism, with no respect for the rights of minorities, in the United States and Europe.

Yascha Mounk, a political scientist at Harvard University, is among the academics highlighting the decoupling of liberalism and democracy. He believes that Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election remains at the heart of this trend. Supporters of military governments are on the rise in the United States as well as Britain, India, Germany, and other consolidated democracies. Accord-

Leaders of Turkey, Russia, and the U.S. chat during the “Climate Change, Environment, and Energy” Session of G20 Summit on June 29, 2019, in Osaka, Japan.

TURKISH PRESIDENCY /
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ing to Mounk, the masses are right to accuse the elites of moving away from working in the interest of the common people –as the wave carrying Trump demonstrates.⁵ Yet the exclusion of minorities, anti-immigrant sentiments, and xenophobia threaten the idea of peaceful coexistence within Western societies.

Among the majority’s populist demands, those related to the economy seem easier to meet. The demands based on Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, on the other hand, cannot be reconciled with the principles of liberal democracy. What is worse is that European movements and leaders with the potential to withstand the majority’s populist demands are becoming weaker and weaker. At this rate, German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to

admit one million Syrian refugees to her country could go down in history as an exception. According to William A. Galston, the populist fire will spread as long as liberals lack the courage to confront the issue of immigration.⁶

Timothy Snyder, another prominent figure in the “death of democracy” literature, blames the crisis of Western democracies on Vladimir Putin’s Russia. He maintains that Putin targets Western democracies to discredit them for the purpose of clinging onto power himself. Snyder adds that Moscow thus promotes nationalist and illiberal politicians in the United States and Europe.⁷ As an exemplary case he mentions how Steve Bannon, the strategist behind Trump’s surprise victory, has been busy mobilizing far-right politicians in Europe.

The UK's Brexit decision, coupled with the strategic vacuum caused by the Atlantic Alliance's weakening and the chaos of trade wars have all deepened the impact of global turmoil on European democracies. The problem is no longer limited to Russia's and China's authoritarianism. The crisis is now in Western countries claiming to be the bedrock of democracy. Global turmoil fuels the crisis of Western democracies, which, in turn, deepens worldwide disorder and the global power struggle. It is also true that democracies are inching towards a new level of consciousness to resist such efforts. Yet this struggle will be no easy task.

Everything President Trump has said and done over the last two years indicates that the U.S. will continue abandoning the world order it created after World War II. As Charles A. Kupchan wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, the President's address to the United Nations General Assembly amounted to a break with Washington's 70-year-old grand strategy. By stating that he would not share American sovereignty with an "unaccountable, unelected global bureaucracy," Trump embraced the pre-World War II strategy of isolationism.⁸ The main difference is that the U.S. has since become a superpower with military bases all over the world and using its currency as a global weapon.

For these reasons, the new era that Trump ushers in at home and abroad will be significantly different from Washington's pre-World War II policy. Arguably the U.S. has adopted a

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new strategy without giving up the benefits and operational capabilities of its superpower status –but changed the price tag instead. Unilateralism legitimized in the name of sovereignty will compel all players to look out for their own interests. This outcome is not just about their dealing with the chaos engendered by Washington's absence; it also represents the challenge of dealing with the selfish choices of an unkind superpower.

The international system is undergoing changes that raise questions about the meaning of alliances. Trump's critique of NATO, coupled with his moves to threaten allies and adversaries alike with economic sanctions, creates a new kind of politics, diplomacy, and balance of power. Under the new rules, each nation will pursue their own interests as alliances are deprived of their former significance.

Turkey has been aware of this trend since 2013, since it experienced the negative side effects of the Syrian civil war. It witnessed the regional chaos fueled by the Arab revolts in the form of civil war across its borders and the rise of terrorist groups, including ISIS and the PKK. To prevent PKK/YPG

from creating a terror corridor in the north of Syria, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. While Washington's support to the YPG strained Turkey-U.S. relations during this period, Ankara experienced other tensions with Moscow in late 2015 and early 2016, which was then followed by a period of cooperation. In 2018, Turkey encountered challenges stemming from the convergence of regional chaos and the transformation of the international system. While discussing, on the one hand, the maintenance of the Idlib ceasefire, the activation of the Astana process, and the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system with Russia, it on the other hand negotiated a solution to the Andrew Brunson crisis, Fetullah Gülen's extradition, and the YPG's future in the north of Syria with the U.S. Again in 2018, the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi Arabia's consulate in İstanbul captured the world's attention and kept Turkey in the headlines for an extended period of time. All those developments required Turkey to engage in intensive diplomacy including direct talks among leaders.

Turkish Foreign Policy in the New Era: Diplomacy and Humanitarian Values

In 2018, Turkish foreign policy was preoccupied by a variety of issues including changes in the international balance of power, trade wars, the rise of protectionism, the growing popularity of far-right movements, the war

on terror, humanitarian aid, and the fate of refugees. In response to these pressing problems Ankara not only offered its own solutions, but also endeavored to mobilize the international community. Turkey's policies attracted global attention thanks to their practical implications (in conflict zones such as Syria, Palestine, and Somalia) and their emphasis on the humanitarian values of recognition, justice, and cooperation.

More importantly, Turkey was able to manage the simultaneous pursuit of its counter-terrorism, humanitarian aid, development assistance, and refugee integration agendas. In addition to effectively neutralizing terrorist threats against its citizens and shouldering the immense cost of the Syrian civil war, Ankara took diplomatic, military, and humanitarian steps towards a political solution in Syria. Turkey's approach to humanitarian aid was constructive, inclusive towards developmental assistance and exclusive of political interests.

In 2018, Turkey's aforementioned diplomatic activity manifested itself in various situations. Ankara's ability to convince Russia, which was about to launch a comprehensive offensive in Idlib, into ceasefire, its humane response to the Khashoggi murder, and its bringing together of the leaders of Germany, France, and Russia to discuss the Syrian crisis, as well as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's critical and visionary address to the United Nations General Assembly, and his visit to Germany, were all notable moves of strategic importance.

Diplomacy's Moment of Truth: The Sochi Agreement

President Erdoğan successfully negotiated a deal with Vladimir Putin, his Russian counterpart, in Sochi to prevent a military offensive against Idlib. Turkey's effort to stop the displacement of millions of people and to save the lives of thousands reflected its humane foreign policy. The Sochi agreement was the product of cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran within the framework of the Astana process. The Idlib ceasefire facilitated military cooperation between Turkey and Russia to remove Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other radical groups from a designated area. Although there have been occasional problems with implementation, the agreement bridged the gap between the Turkish and Russian visions for Syria's future.⁹

At the same time, the future of YPG-controlled parts of Syria, which remains under U.S. protection, became the center of attention for all stakeholders in the country. The current situation is quite ironic from a historical perspective. Initially eager to facilitate regime change without even engaging in diplomatic negotiations, the Obama administration turned its back on the Syrian conflict in 2013. Ignoring a Turkish offer to set up safe zones and support moderate rebels, the U.S. allowed ISIS and other radical groups to take the initiative.

From September 2015 on, when the Assad regime was on thin ice, Russia became increasingly influential in the Syrian civil war. Although the

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Obama administration encouraged Moscow to play a more active role in the region, hoping that it would get stuck in the "Syrian quagmire," regional powers began to compete for strengthening their bilateral relations with Russia. Despite its cooperation with Iran and the Assad regime, Russia became a center of diplomacy for America's traditional allies as well.

For Turkey, another leftover cost of the Obama presidency in the Syrian theater was Washington's continued support to the YPG. The U.S. decision to arm the Syrian branch of the PKK, a terrorist organization, undermined the very meaning of its alliance with Turkey. At the same time, Washington demonstrated how a great power could exploit the idea of counter-terrorism even against their 'friends.' In response, Turkey aimed to accomplish a difficult task. In order to protect the moderate rebels and gain the upper hand in the fight against the YPG, it began to cooperate with Russia and Iran, whose interests in Syria were in fact at odds with those of Turkey. Meanwhile Turkey also cracked down on the PKK/YPG's terror corridor by carrying out the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations. In areas liberated from the

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YPG, Turkey enforced the safe zones it had been advocating since the beginning of the civil war. The Idlib ceasefire followed these accomplishments. That Turkey, Russia, and Iran could make the Astana process work despite their differences raised hopes for a peaceful transition in Syria. Going forward, Turkey can play a key role in reconciling the Astana and Geneva processes.

Calling for a Just New World at the United Nations

Erdoğan's address at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly offered insights into how Turkey positioned itself within the international system of the new era. Stressing the injustices of the existing world order, he strongly criticized the U.S. for fueling chaos. Reiterating that "the world is bigger than five," the Turkish president made a proposal for a UN Security Council reform, whereby all 194 member states would take turns as rotating members. Erdoğan also talked about his country's fight against terrorism, response to the refugee crisis, and humanitarian diplomacy. Invoking the "Circle of Justice," a central concept of the Is-

lamic civilization, Erdoğan urged all leaders to build a more just world.¹⁰

The significance of Erdoğan's call becomes clearer if compared to the remarks of U.S. President Trump, who had spoken just before the Turkish leader. Trump stressed his country's sovereignty while rejecting the "ideology of globalization," which was, ironically, an American creation. The "doctrine of patriotism," which the U.S. president praised in his speech, was accompanied by references to protectionism, economic sanctions, and threats against Iran, Venezuela, and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Accordingly Trump called for a radical revision of international organizations and multilateral agreements in line with American interests. Finally, he prescribed sovereignty and independence to member states as if he had not told them that might makes right.¹¹

In response to Washington's arguments, Turkey asked member states to revisit the unfair representation and decision-making mechanisms of the UN Security Council and relied on the General Assembly, where each nation has a single vote, to address pressing problems in the world. In this regard, Turkey led the effort against the Trump administration's unlawful recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital by securing the passage of a resolution.¹²

The Khashoggi Murder

The deplorable murder of Jamal Khashoggi, who became a target of



the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after moving to the opposition side due to divisions within the royal family was far more significant than an ordinary political assassination. Turkey's skillful diplomacy in the wake of Khashoggi's murder showed the world how violent the power struggle of counter-revolutionary administrations in the Arab world really were. Some described what happened as the "downfall of authoritarianism in the Middle East." Obviously, authoritarian regimes in the region remain intact for now. The Khashoggi murder, however, has rekindled the pursuit of justice, freedom, and dignity among the people. It is safe to assume that a new period of instability has begun, and there is no telling which authoritarian regimes will survive the next decade. It is safe to claim that the collective efforts by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Egypt to

design a new regional order are far from bringing peace and stability to the Middle East, and Khashoggi's murder has dragged Saudi Arabia and its supporters into a deep crisis of legitimacy. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed, whom Washington had repackaged as a moderate reformist, emerged as a murder suspect in the eyes of world leaders. His tarnished image raised questions about America's partnerships in the Middle East and the regional agendas of those players. The legitimacy crisis of Mohammed bin Salman, who used to be presented to the Muslim world as a role model, has compelled all regional players to revisit their policies.¹³

Having entered secret negotiations with the Trump administration on Iran's containment and pursued the establishment of an "Arab NATO," Saudi Arabia developed a destructive approach to regional affairs. The

Cargo aircraft carrying components of Russian S-400 Long Range Air and Missile Defense Systems lands at Murted Air Base in Ankara, Turkey on July 16, 2019.
DOĞUKAN KESKİNKİLİÇ / AA Photo

At a time when global and regional uncertainties converge, Turkey on the one hand seeks to protect its interests and promotes a value-based discourse with an emphasis on justice and sharing on the other

Saudi involvement in the Yemen war threatened millions of people with starvation. The Khashoggi murder, in turn, raised questions about covert operations conducted by the Kingdom, which works closely with the United Arab Emirates. The polarization that Iran and Saudi Arabia fuel in the Middle East highlight Turkey's position as an island of stability.

By preventing a cover-up of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, Turkey appealed to the sense of justice among ordinary people and pursued a regional policy of rebalancing and stabilization. The country brings together an autonomous foreign policy and a firm commitment to global integration. In this sense, the Turkish case is about the merits of genuine experience as opposed to some romantic "model".

The İstanbul Summit and Syria's Future

In 2018, Turkey hosted a four-nation summit – a proud moment for Turkish diplomacy. Having experienced the Syrian conflict's spillover more severely than any other country, it welcomed millions of refugees, and as

a part of the Astana process, brought Russia, France, and Germany to the negotiating table as active supporters of a political solution. The İstanbul summit imposed a political solution on the Assad regime and reaffirmed Turkey's main arguments, i.e., Syria's territorial integrity, and the need to combat terrorism, in its final communiqué. The emphasis on separatist groups strengthened Turkey's hand in its efforts to crack down on YPG militants.¹⁴

The summit also raised awareness about the situation in the east of the Euphrates river. Erdoğan's announcement that his country had completed all preparations to take action suggested that the north of Syria could set the stage for new developments soon. The İstanbul summit, which brought Russia and two major European powers together, was a major diplomatic accomplishment by Turkey, which sets a model for mitigating the uncertainty of the emerging world system.

Washington's absence in the İstanbul summit reaffirmed that the United States was no longer a key player in the Syrian theater. America's reduction to a secondary stakeholder would indeed cripple ongoing efforts to contain Iran's influence. More engagement, however, would be at odds with the Trump administration's position on Washington's global role. In this sense, the United States needs a new, low-cost partner – possibly a former strategic partner – to deal with the Syrian conflict. Seeking to play a more active role in the Geneva pro-

cess, America has no choice but to work more closely with Turkey. That rapprochement requires the United States to revisit and reverse the Obama administration's YPG policy. The Khashoggi murder and the most recent developments in Syria have established that Turkey is the most important counterpart of the U.S. in the region.

Erdoğan's Diplomacy

As global and regional turbulence becomes more severe, President Erdoğan's leader-to-leader diplomacy plays a more prominent role in Turkish foreign policy. The pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's vocal criticism of global injustice, and the investigation into the Khashoggi murder all indicate that Erdoğan's political and diplomatic style has changed the making and implementation of Turkish foreign policy. These differences will bring advantages to Turkey in countering future risks and seizing new opportunities. It is possible to identify ten distinguishing features of Erdoğan's diplomacy, which has been crystallized by Turkey's transition to the presidential system of government:

1. Building on years of experience in politics and foreign policy, Erdoğan is in a position to realistically analyze political actors and their interests. At the same time, he can accurately predict trends in the international arena and take proactive steps in due time. This ability is closely related to the fact that Turkey experiences all forms of uncertainty and turbulence before many other

nations, due to its strategic location.

2. Erdoğan has successfully overcome a number of challenges that would have removed other politicians from power. He manages crises with a combination of courage, decisiveness, consistency, and determination. Having consolidated his power by turning to the ballot box to end crises, the Turkish president did not allow such developments to force his hand in the international arena.
3. Erdoğan prefers leader-to-leader diplomacy to trouble-shoot bilateral relations. His personal dialogue with Putin and Trump immediately come to mind. Erdoğan can be very persistent if necessary. His lengthy negotiations with Trump on the status of the YPG attest to this fact. Erdoğan can also revisit issues when necessary – which helped him overcome the jet crisis with Putin.
4. In difficult times, Erdoğan refuses to shut down and isolate himself. Instead, he looks for ways to diversify his channels of communication. His critique of the U.S. and the European Union, for example, never got in the way of diplomacy when Turkey experiences tensions with those actors.
5. Erdoğan has been able to use alternative challenges without contradictions in the multi-faceted and complex world of diplomacy. He has conducted multidimensional, flexible, and dynamic diplomacy with the U.S., Russia, the EU, and Iran at the same time.
6. He offers a synthesis between realism and values in Turkey's response to hot issues in foreign policy and international affairs. Erdoğan's criticism against regimes in Israel, Egypt, and Syria, along with his principled stance on the Khashoggi murder and challenge to the Trump

administration on Jerusalem immediately come to mind.

7. Refusing to limit himself to negotiations with foreign leaders, Erdoğan has successfully reached out to people around the world and won over public support abroad. His vocal criticism of the international system's unfairness, in particular, attracted vast attention from the non-Western world. The Erdoğan effect in the Muslim world and the Middle East is a concept worth examining more closely.
8. Erdoğan has been distinguished for his ability to withstand the media's smear campaigns. He has been able to separate the Western media's charges of "dictatorship" from diplomatic negotiations with those countries. Nor did he stop explaining himself and his position to those audiences.
9. Erdoğan manages the various, often contradicting, items on Turkey's foreign policy agenda in a coordinated manner. He has proven capable of negotiating the Idlib ceasefire and the procurement of the S-400 missile defense system with Russia, as he talked about purchasing the Patriot system and making a reset in bilateral relations with the U.S. This approach requires Turkey to keep tensions with allies and adversaries under control, and facilitates issue-based agreements.
10. Erdoğan seeks to reconcile short-term diplomatic negotiations with his country's long-term strategic interests.¹⁵

Going forward, Turkey's biggest advantage will be that it will respond to global and regional risks under Erdoğan's leadership. The Turkish pres-

ident's experience is key to the new regional strategic rebalancing and the presidential system's consolidation.

Conclusion

The crisis of the liberal world order, which erupted in Barack Obama's second term and deepened under Donald Trump's presidency, not only redefines America's global role but also encourages global and regional powers to revisit their grand strategies. Located in a highly turbulent region, Turkey's foreign policy, too, undergoes a transformation. The reversal of the highly anticipated wave of democratization, which the Arab revolts promised to trigger, by status quo states created a serious challenge for Turkish foreign policy. The Syrian civil war's negative consequences, including the threat of terrorism by ISIS and the PKK/YPG, compelled Ankara to resort to the use of hard power. At the same time, Turkey's relations with the U.S., Russia, the EU, Iran, and Saudi Arabia came to be characterized as a perpetual pendulum between tensions and cooperation.

Turkey has been facing a number of issues, such as FETÖ, the YPG, the refugee crisis, the Jerusalem decision, and the Khashoggi murder, all resulting from the erosion of norms in the international system's norms. At a time when global and regional uncertainties converge, Turkey on the one hand seeks to protect its interests and promotes a value-based discourse with an emphasis on justice and sharing on the other. The coun-

try lives up to universal norms by investing in humanitarian assistance and hosting millions of refugees. Erdoğan's leader-to-leader diplomacy allows Turkey to make significant moves in these issues. While looking for ways to address problems caused by the liberal order's crisis, Turkey at the same time demonstrates strong resolve to ensure its own security and protect its own national interests. The challenges, limits, and opportunities associated with Turkey's preferences within this dilemma will determine the performance of Turkish foreign policy in the near future. ■

Endnotes

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