



Framing a Presidential Foreign Policy in a Parliamentary System: Erdoğan and Mukhtars' Meetings

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Abstract

During the period between his election as the Turkish president in August 2014 and the constitutional referendum that introduced a presidential system in Turkey in April 2017, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tried to demonstrate that he would not be a symbolic political figure in Turkish politics as many former Turkish presidents had been. Instead, he would keep shaping the domestic and foreign agenda of the country, as it would happen in a presidential system. One of the main ways he did this was through a series of mukhtars' meetings, which began in January 2015. From that point, until the desired changes to the constitution were approved through public referendum, Erdoğan held thirty-seven mukhtars' meetings. In these meetings he gave speeches about Turkish domestic and foreign policy directly to a group of mukhtars but, more importantly, indirectly to the Turkish public and foreign actors. This article will analyze Erdoğan's foreign policy messages through his discourse in the mukhtars' meetings and try to answer two controversial questions regarding his foreign policy ideology: Whether he is an Islamist and whether he is shifting the foreign policy axis of Turkey.

Keywords: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Mukhtars' Meetings, Turkish Foreign Policy, Presidential System, Eurasianism

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Parlamente Sistemde Başkanlık Dış Politikasını Şekillendirmek: Erdoğan ve Muhtarlar Toplantıları

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Öz

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ağustos 2014’de cumhurbaşkanı olarak seçilmesinden Nisan 2017’de başkanlık sistemini getiren anayasal referanduma kadar, kendisinin daha önceki cumhurbaşkanları gibi sembolik bir siyasi figür olmayacağını göstermeye çalışmıştır. Tam tersine, ülkenin iç ve dış politika gündemini, aynı başkanlık sisteminde görüleceği gibi, şekillendirmeye devam etmiştir. Bunu gerçekleştirdiği araçlardan ilki Ocak 2015’de düzenlenen muhtarlar toplantıları serileri olmuştur. Bu tarihten, arzulanan anayasal değişimlerin halk tarafından onaylandığı referanduma kadar Erdoğan toplam otuz yedi muhtarlar toplantısı düzenlemiştir. Bu toplantılarda doğrudan muhtarlara, ama daha önemlisi dolaylı olarak Türk halkına ve dış aktörlere Türkiye’nin iç ve dış politikası hakkında konuşmalar yapmıştır. Bu çalışma Erdoğan’ın muhtarlar toplantılarındaki söylemleri yoluyla Erdoğan’ın dış politika mesajlarını analiz edecek ve kendisinin dış politika ideolojisi hakkındaki iki tartışmalı soruya cevap arayacaktır: kendisinin İslamcı olup olmadığı ve Türkiye’nin dış politika yöneliminin değişip değişmediği.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, muhtarlar toplantıları, Türk dış politikası, başkanlık sistemi, Avrasyacılık

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1. Introduction

During a public address in 1997, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Mayor of Istanbul from the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (WP), read a poem by Ziya Gökalp, a nationalist-ideologist of the 1920s: “[T]he mosques are our barracks, the domes are our helmets, the minarets are our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers.” In a time when the Turkish military assumed responsibility for protecting the country from the religious parties and politicians, reading this poem earned Erdoğan a ten-month prison sentence for “inciting hatred based on religious differences.”¹ This prison sentence was welcomed by the Turkish media as major newspapers had close relations with the generals. They announced the end of Erdoğan’s political life in large font while one of them, *Hürriyet*, quoted the legal experts who derogatorily stated that Erdoğan “cannot even become a mukhtar,”² the elected head of villages and neighborhoods.

This statement serves as a background story for a recent phenomenon in Turkish politics. In November 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), founded by Erdoğan and others who left the WP, won the national elections in Turkey and Erdoğan served as prime minister until 2014 when he was elected president. Because the office of the president has always been a symbolic post in the Turkish political system, Erdoğan came into the office with the expressed purpose of strengthening his new seat by replacing the parliamentary system with a presidential one. In the process of changing the constitution for this purpose, Erdoğan used several means to show the public that he would not be a symbolic president, but would keep shaping the domestic and foreign agenda of the country, as it would happen in a presidential system. One of the main ways he did this was through a series of mukhtars meetings, which began on January 27, 2015 in the newly-built Presidential House. From that point, until the desired changes to the constitution were approved by public referendum on April 16, 2017, Erdoğan held thirty-seven mukhtars’ meetings. In these meetings, he gave speeches about Turkish domestic and foreign policy directly to a group of mukhtars but, more importantly, indirectly to the Turkish public and foreign actors.

¹ Meltem Müftüleri-Baç, “The New Face of Turkey: The Domestic and Foreign Policy Implications of November 2002 Elections,” *East European Quarterly* 37 (2004): 424.

² “Muhtar Bile Olamaz,” *Hürriyet*, April 22, 1998.

This article will analyze Erdoğan's foreign policy messages through his discourse in the mukhtars' meetings.³ Although Turkish foreign policy has been a popular subject in the literature in recent years as the AKP has brought new dimensions to the traditional foreign policy practices,⁴ so far the issue was mainly analyzed through Ahmet Davutoğlu - former foreign policy adviser to Erdoğan (2003-2009), Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014), Prime Minister of Turkey (2014-2016), and author of the well-quoted book *Strategic Depth*.⁵ After Davutoğlu resigned from the office of Prime Minister in May 2016, and was intentionally replaced by a less influential politician, Binali Yıldırım, in order to open more political space to the President, Erdoğan became the leading figure in directing Turkish foreign policy; however, few studies have so far focused on his foreign policy preferences.⁶

By analyzing Erdoğan's foreign policy rhetoric through the mukhtars' meetings, therefore, this article will explore two controversial questions regarding his foreign policy preferences: (i) what is the ideology behind Erdoğan's foreign policy: Islamic or nationalist? (ii) what is the direction of this policy: Western-oriented or not? Another objective of the article is to show the importance of the mukhtars' meetings as an institution that President Erdoğan invented in order to shape the public discourse, in which the presidency had been a symbolic post, and the president faced constitutional limits in expressing power. Despite this important role of

³ Except the 37th meeting, the transcripts – Turkish – of all speeches can be accessed on the official page of the Presidency of Turkey, "Konuşmalar," accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/receptayyiperdogan/konusmalar/>.

⁴ Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40 (2009); Cüneyt Yenigün and Ertan Efegil, eds., *Türkiye'nin Değişen Dış Politikası* (Ankara: Nobel Yayıncılık, 2010); Ayata Bilgin, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing Arab World: Rise and Fall of a Regional Actor," *Journal of European Integration* 37 (2015).

⁵ Bülent Aras, "The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 11 (2009); Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 2014); Matthew S. Cohen, "Ahmet Davutoglu's Academic and Professional Articles: Understanding the World View of Turkey's Former Prime Minister," *Turkish Studies* 17 (2016).

⁶ On this issue, an exceptional article is written by Görener and Ucal who analyzed the effects of Erdoğan's personality and leadership style on Turkish foreign policy. See Aylin Ş. Görener and Meltem Ş. Ucal, "The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," *Turkish Studies* 12 (2011).

the mukhtars' meetings, this unorthodox institution has not yet become the subject of academic attention.

In terms of theoretical approach, this study will adopt an actor-based foreign policy analysis rather than focusing on institutional and system-level variables. As Byman and Pollack argue, international relations scholars have traditionally ignored the role of individuals in foreign-policy-making despite the fact that "the goals, abilities, and foibles of individuals are crucial to the intentions, capabilities, and strategies of the state."⁷ This argument sounds more reasonable when a "strong man" was at the apex of the governance system. Indeed, when one follows Hermann and Hermann's formula in finding the "ultimate decision unit" in the Turkish political system,⁸ the result is that the type of "predominant leader," in which "a single individual has the power to make the choice for the government,"⁹ becomes apparent. As many analysts argue, Erdoğan and the Turkish decision-making process fits this description,¹⁰ which makes it important to understand Erdoğan's foreign policy messages in the mukhtars' meetings.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I will outline what mukhtars do in Turkish politics, and how mukhtars' meetings as an institution were invented during Erdoğan's presidency. Then, I will analyze the controversial domestic aspects of this institution at a time when polarization in Turkish politics reached its zenith. The second section will analyze Erdoğan's foreign policy preferences through his speeches in the mukhtars' meetings, and try to answer two controversial questions regarding his foreign policy ideology: whether he is an Islamist and

⁷ Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25 (2001): 109.

⁸ Margaret G. Hermann and Charles F. Hermann, "Who Makes Foreign Policy Decisions and How: An Empirical Inquiry," *International Studies Quarterly* 33 (1989): 370-71.

⁹ Hermann and Hermann, "Who Makes Policy Decisions and How," 365.

¹⁰ Shadi Hamid, "How Much Can One Strongman Change a Country" *The Atlantic*, June 26, 2017, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/erdogan-turkey-islamist/531609/>; Ian Bremmer, "The 'Strongmen Era' is Here. Here's What It Means for You," *Time*, May 3, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://time.com/5264170/the-strongmen-era-is-here-heres-what-it-means-for-you/>; Amanda Sloat, "When Strongmen Fight: The US and Turkey Need Diplomats to Resolve Their Leaders' Dispute" *Brookings*, September 18, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/18/when-strongmen-fight-the-us-and-turkey-need-diplomats-to-resolve-their-conflict/>.

whether he is shifting the foreign policy axis of Turkey. The third part aims at bringing a theoretical perspective by explaining his foreign policy preferences through Eurasianist ideology. The concluding section will sum up the findings of this research.

2. Mukhtars and Mukhtars' Meetings

The office of mukhtar - "chosen" in Arabic - was first established during the Ottoman period, in 1829, in three neighborhoods of Istanbul. At that time, the duty of mukhtars was to be a channel between the local people and the government as they dealt mainly with the small business of government such as keeping local registration records about birth, death, marriage, divorce, resettlement and other governance tasks previously assumed by imams - religious officers - of the neighborhood. In 1883, the first office of mukhtar outside Istanbul was formed in the municipality of Kastamonu and then it spread to the villages and neighborhoods throughout the country.¹¹ Established in 1923, the Republic of Turkey inherited this institution that was helpful to manage the problems of neighborhoods.

According to the numbers given by the Turkish Confederation of Mukhtars, today there are 50,249 mukhtars in 31,912 neighborhoods and 18,337 villages in Turkey. Chosen by the inhabitants of their neighborhoods for five-year terms, mukhtars' duties are to prepare residency documents when needed, issue voter registrations during elections, notify government institutions about epidemics, inform the police about suspected people in the neighborhood, and other tasks.¹² An important point is that mukhtars are not permitted to stand as a candidate from a political party, as this would separate them from other elected members of the governance system such as parliamentarians and mayors. Mukhtars are generally chosen from among senior or well-known figures of the neighborhood, yet their prominence does not go beyond the neighborhood. Mukhtars earn a meager salary as the main benefits of the job are a little local prestige and an opportunity to employ oneself at something.

¹¹ Mehmet Göküş, Erdal Bayrakçı and Hakan Alptürker, "Mahalle Yönetimi ve Mahalle Muhtarlarının Vatandaşlar Tarafından Değerlendirilmesi," *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 18 (2013): 33-4.

¹² Seyit Koçberber, "Yeni Belediye Yasası ve Mahalle Yönetimi," *Sayıştay Dergisi* 56 (2005): 103-4.

Having been neglected members of the governance system for years, the mukhtars were suddenly thrust into spotlight when Erdoğan started holding unprecedented meetings with them. On January 27, 2015, in the newly-built Presidential House, Erdoğan gave a speech in front of 409 mukhtars from seventeen districts. Soon these meetings turned into a tradition, and Erdoğan was holding up to 2-3 meetings a month with the aim of meeting all 50,000 mukhtars before the end of his presidential term. What is noteworthy in these meetings is that although the mukhtars have been the audience, the subjects of Erdoğan's speeches were barely mukhtars' occupations or local problems but rather important domestic and foreign policy issues such as terrorism, interparty competition, and relations with big powers.

2.1. The Functions of Mukhtars' Meetings

Given the disparity between the audience and the talking points, it is necessary to understand why Erdoğan initiated these mukhtars' meetings. Until the 2017 presidential referendum, the Turkish constitution did not allow the president to have any link with a political party, and the president had to be impartial when fulfilling his duties. As the founder of the AKP, this was something Erdoğan wanted to rule out; for example, in spite of the constitution Erdoğan called for support for the AKP before the general elections of June 2015.¹³ Still, the constitution prevented Erdoğan from directly leading the party; for example, he couldn't participate in intra-party meetings or give speeches to AKP parliamentarians in the assembly. His inability to give direct messages to the AKP parliamentarians was problematic as if not controlled, they may have taken decisions in contrary to Erdoğan's preferences.¹⁴ Moreover, as traditionally a symbolic post, the presidency offered Erdoğan less media and public attention, which

¹³ "Tarihi Mitingde Konaşan Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan:" *Milliyet*, February 6, 2015, accessed October 18, 2018, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/tarihi-mitingde-konusan-cumhurbaskani-bursa-yerelhaber-608728/>.

¹⁴ An example of this most famously happened in March 2003 when the Turkish Assembly did not allow American troops to deploy in Turkish territory before the Iraq War. When the proposal was discussed in the Assembly, March 1, Erdoğan, who supported the proposal, was not officially prime minister because of his ban from public service. The ambiguity of the leadership was one of the reasons explaining the divergence among the AKP parliamentarians, as some of them voted down the proposal.

he desperately needed especially when he was determined to institute a presidential system.

Mukhtars' meetings turned into an ultimate solution to these needs. Starting with the last point, mukhtars' meetings brought significant media - both domestic and international - and public attention to Erdoğan's speeches. In these meetings, Erdoğan talked about important subjects including the Kurdish question, Turkey's fight against terrorist organizations, and relations with the West. His speeches have been broadcasted on TV, and when he made noteworthy remarks, his words easily became headlines in the domestic and international press. Indeed, following the New Year's attack in Istanbul on December 31, 2016, Erdoğan's speech in the 33rd mukhtars' meeting was broadcasted live by US-based CNN International for thirteen minutes to inform the world of his reaction to the attack. Today, both domestic and international media follow Erdoğan's speeches in the mukhtars' meetings with the consideration that what he says is crucially important in order to get some clue about Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. With this media attention, Erdoğan has succeeded in making his opinions on contemporary issues known to the Turkish public and foreign actors. Surely, Erdoğan can use other means to realize this objective: he may give interviews to the press or simply show up in front of the press waiting in the press room of the Presidential House. Yet, with speeches scheduled 2-3 times a month, the mukhtars' meetings offer a more organized way to address the public and the world.

In addition, the mukhtars' meetings provided Erdoğan with an avenue through which to indirectly talk to the AKP parliamentarians, officials, and pro-government press. In the highly-centralized and hierarchical Turkish political culture, leaders' thoughts are crucial in determining the actions of their followers, and it is unusual to see a divergence of views within the political parties and governments. If a leader adopts a political stance, opposite views are seen as dangerous and a sign of weakness as it may be interpreted that the leader is not able to control his/her followers. Therefore, the followers prefer to know the leader's views first before commenting about the issue, especially when there is an ambiguity about the leader's preferences. However, based on his constitutionally impartial position – until April 2017 – and lack of time, Erdoğan was not able to communicate with all AKP parliamentarians and officials as well as the pro-government press. In this respect, the mukhtars' meetings provided Erdoğan an indirect

way to deliver his messages to these groups. Taking this into consideration, it is no surprise that when Erdoğan made a point in a mukhtars' meeting - Turkey is under a financial terror attack, for example (34th meeting) - AKP officials and pro-government press repeated the same point in the following days.¹⁵

2.2. Controversial Aspect of the Mukhtars' Meetings

In the last decade, Turkish domestic policy has suffered due to several turbulent events, which made Turkey one of the most polarized countries in the world. The roots of this polarization date back to the modernization period of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century when a rift emerged between secular and religious Turks, however, this kind of analysis would exceed the scope of the article. When we focus on contemporary events on the other hand, we see that the polarization basically started with the 2008 Ergenekon trials, in which several military officers including former Chief of Staff İlker Başbuğ, journalists and academics were imprisoned with the charge of attempting to overthrow the government. As the controversial trials polarized the Erdoğan government and opposition, Chief of Staff Işık Koşaner resigned from his post along with the heads of the army, navy and air force to protest the trials.¹⁶ The Gezi Park protests and corruption scandal in 2013 further increased the polarization as the opposition criticized Erdoğan for following authoritarian and divisive policies while Erdoğan blamed Fethullah Gülen, an U.S.-based Muslim cleric, whom Ankara regards as terrorist today, for organizing the events. The 2014 presidential election proved the polarization as Erdoğan received only a little more than a half of the votes, 51.7 percent. Finally, the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 failed to provide unity in Turkish domestic politics as after the event Turkish politicians were “so polarized that they cannot even near a consensus over whether polarization exists in the country.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Bekir Hazar, “Terörist Dolar.” *Takvim*, January 13, 2017, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.takvim.com.tr/yazarlar/bekirhazar/2017/01/13/terorist-dolar>.

¹⁶ “Eski Genelkurmay Başkanı Koşaner Neden İstifa Ettiğini Anlattı,” *NTV*, October 26, 2016, accessed March 8, 2018, https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/eski-genelkurmay-baskani-kosaner-neden-istifa-ettigini-anlatti,kX9f2WiKGkmF4rS_npX91w.

¹⁷ Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Evren Balta, “Turkey After the July 15th Coup Attempt: When Elites Polarize over Polarization,” *Istanbul Policy Center*, April 2017, accessed

With this polarization in the background, the mukhtars' meetings became a controversial issue between Erdoğan and the Turkish opposition as the latter claimed that the political speeches Erdoğan made in these meetings not only violated the president's impartiality, but were also problematic because mukhtars were not allowed to have any link with a political party. According to the Republican People's Party (CHP), Erdoğan addresses the mukhtars similar to political party leaders instead of behaving like an impartial president, and spreads propaganda against the CHP, its leader, and its parliamentarians.¹⁸ A similar criticism was brought by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) when Erdoğan urged the mukhtars to inform the officials if there are suspicious developments in their neighborhood in terms of terrorist activities (8th meeting). The HDP interpreted this call as "an attempt to strengthen the informant system" in the Kurdish-populated regions, and accused Erdoğan of trying to make the mukhtars "spies of the government."¹⁹ The opposition also pointed out that Erdoğan uses the mukhtars as figureheads to make political speeches in front of a loyal crowd as only pro-government mukhtars are invited, who are not allowed to ask questions, and cannot do anything except applaud Erdoğan, and show appreciation for him.²⁰ All in all, Turkish opposition saw the mukhtars' meetings mainly as an institution Erdoğan benefits from in discrediting those who criticize him. Indeed, with standing ovations, supporting interruptions and even tear-dropping mukhtars,²¹ these meetings generally do not look much different from the AKP meetings so that the

March 8, 2018, http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/33176/1/Aydin-Duzgit_Balta_When_Elites_Polarize_Over_Polarization-1.pdf, 12.

¹⁸ "Oran; "Erdoğan, 'Muhtarlar Bahane, Siyaset Şahane' Mantiğıyla Hareket Etmektedir" Dedi," *Official Website of The Republican People's Party*, April 27, 2015, accessed March 8, 2018, <https://www.chp.org.tr/Haberler/4/muhtarlar-bahane-siyaset-sahane-1089.aspx>.

¹⁹ "HDP'li Oluç: Muhtarlar İktidarın Ajanı Değil," *Bianet*, August 13, 2015, accessed March 8, 2018, <https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/166790-hdp-li-oluc-muhtarlar-iktidar-in-ajani-degil>.

²⁰ Murat Belge, "Ona Görev Vermem," *İlke Haber*, August 30, 2015, accessed March 8, 2018, <https://www.ilkehaber.com/yazi/ona-gorev-vermem-14159.htm>; Çiğdem Toker, "Muhtarlar Toplantısı," *Cumhuriyet*, September 30, 2015, accessed March 8, 2018, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/378409/Muhtarlar_toplantisi.html.

²¹ En Son Haber, "Erdoğan'ın Muhtarlar Toplantısında Bir Muhtar Ağladı," September 29, 2015, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.ensonhaber.com/erdoganin-muhtarlar-toplantisinde-bir-muhtar-agladi-2015-09-29.html>.

opposition simply sees it as a politicized event.

Erdoğan, on the other hand, stated that those who criticize his meetings with the mukhtars do not respect democracy, and the people's will while preferring him only to be a symbolic president standing idle without saying a word about political developments. In the first meeting, Erdoğan started his speech with his imprisonment story when the newspapers wrote that he "cannot even become a mukhtar." He argued that those forces who do not respect democracy are the same people believing that being a mukhtar is a bad thing whilst looking down on them (1st meeting). Yet, he stated, the mukhtars are at the core of Turkish democracy, "the closest branches to the roots of the democracy tree" as they were chosen by public votes (4th meeting). In most of the speeches, Erdoğan stressed that elected officials like mukhtars are above the appointed officials in the governance system, an emphasis which also refers to him as he was the first Turkish president chosen by public votes. In this respect, he defined himself as "the mukhtar of Turkey" (6th meeting) or "senior mukhtar" (29th meeting), and pointed out that no force could prevent his meeting with mukhtars and the people whom they represent. In these meetings, Erdoğan also stressed that he will not remain silent on political issues as former dominant forces in Turkish politics expected it from the presidents. "Paying attention to all matters - internal and external - of Turkey, expressing my views, offers, and criticisms are my promise and responsibility to my people," Erdoğan stated (6th meeting). In this regard, while Erdoğan acknowledges the political functions of these meetings, he also tries to legitimize them by ascribing to them a democratic spirit, although the basic norm in democracies - diversity of opinions - is missing in this institution.

3. Erdoğan's Foreign Policy Messages in Mukhtars' Meetings

While this domestic controversy around the mukhtars' meetings has been frequently heard, the foreign policy dimension of this institution is generally neglected. In this regard, this section will analyze how Erdoğan frames his foreign policy preferences in these meetings with two frequently asked questions about his foreign policy: (i) Does he follow an Islamist foreign policy? (ii) Is there an axis-shift in Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan's leadership?

3.1. Ideology Behind Erdoğan's Foreign Policy

Given his roots in political Islam and his Islamist rhetoric, the religious dimension of Erdoğan's foreign policy has been frequently debated in the international press and literature. The debate on whether Erdoğan's Turkey follows an "Islamist foreign policy"²² is not a new phenomenon. In late 2000s, when Ankara focused on increasing its influence in Middle East politics by not supporting military measures against Iran, and when its political relations with Israel were frozen after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, some analysts and experts preferred to define Turkish foreign policy as "Islamist."²³ In the last few years the emphasis on Erdoğan's "Islamist" policies has intensified as some comparison was drawn between him and Iran's Khomeini,²⁴ and some analysts and foreign politicians even accused him of deliberately Islamizing Europe through the Turkish diaspora.²⁵ As a result, "how Islamic" Erdoğan's foreign policy is and will become

²² Islamist foreign policy refers to a foreign policy orientation based on Islamist values and principles. In practice, Islamist foreign policy generally includes anti-Westernization and resistance against Western values. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has followed an Islamist foreign policy as its rulers define its foreign policy objectives through Shiite Islamic principles. Necmettin Erbakan, the Turkish prime minister in 1996-97, can also be counted as following Islamist foreign policy when he determined to establish close relations with Iran and Arab countries while showing unsuccessful opposition against the United States and Israel. Islamist foreign policy defines friends and enemies in terms of religious bonds, and aims at protecting the interests of Muslims around the world.

²³ For instance, Cornell argued that ideological factors were at play in Turkish foreign policy as there was a "growing tendency in Turkey's policies to side with Islamist causes," and to cooperate with Islamist movements across the Middle East. See Svante E. Cornell, "What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy? Changes in Turkey," *The Middle East Quarterly* 19 (2012). Similarly, Cagaptay defined Turkish foreign policy as "econo-Islamist" by arguing that financial interests and religious view of the world are what shaped Turkish leaders' foreign policy decisions. Soner Cagaptay, "The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of "Neo-Ottomanism," *The Washington Institute*, April 24, 2009, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-akps-foreign-policy-the-misnomer-of-neo-ottomanism>.

²⁴ Alireza Nader, "What Erdogan and Khomeini Have in Common," *Foreign Policy*, August 24, 2016, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/24/what-erdogan-and-khomeini-have-in-common-turkey-coup-iran>.

²⁵ Raphael Ahren, "Ex-Defense Chief: Erdogan is 'Deliberately Islamicizing' Europe in Bid for World Domination," *The Times of Israel*, June 6, 2017, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/an-ex-defense-chief-sees-europe-deliberately-islamized-at-turkeys-hand/>; Yves Mamou, "Islamization of Europe: Erdogan's New Muslim Political Network," *Gatestone Institute*, June 11, 2017, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/10509/france-islamic-party>.

remains an important question that researchers and politicians are seeking to answer.²⁶

The content of Erdoğan's speeches in the mukhtars meetings does not give a sign of an Islamist foreign policy. Despite a relatively high religious rhetoric²⁷ and frequent use of the words such as *Allah* (God), *inşallah* (God's willing), *Allah'ın yardımıyla* (with God's help) etc., Erdoğan did not present an Islamist foreign policy doctrine in his speeches. When Islamic issues come up as a topic, Erdoğan seems to be using a more rational and pragmatic rhetoric. For example, although he is frequently accused of following sectarian domestic and foreign policies,²⁸ in the mukhtars' meetings, Erdoğan refrains from using a Sunni rhetoric and promotes Islamic unity and non-discrimination among Muslims.²⁹

²⁶ Mustafa Akyol, "How Islamic Will Erdogan's Presidential System Be?" *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2016, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-islamic-erdogans-presidential-system-will-be.html>.

²⁷ Some examples are: A reference to Prophet Muhammad's settlement policy for refugee Muslims (1st meeting); an emphasis on equality between men and women in religious perspective (2nd and 4th meetings); a citation from Qur'an about using intelligence (5th meeting); an emphasis on the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood with a reference to the Crusades (5th meeting); a reference to the Prophet's definition of a Muslim (8th meeting); a citation from Qur'an about martyrs (9th, 11th and 13th meetings); an emphasis on equality of all ethnic groups in religious perspective (10th, 11th, 14th and 24th meetings); an evaluation about "sacrilegious" terrorists (11th meeting); a reference to the Prophet about the value of hard-work (13th meeting); a critique against Islamophobia and the arguments that he is "Islamizing Turkey" (15th meeting); a critique against sectarian conflicts through a religious perspective (18th, 20th and 25th meeting); an emphasis on God's helping them to do their job (19th meeting); a comparison between mukhtars' duties and what Caliph Omar did in his lifetime (26th meeting); an emphasis on unity among Muslims (28th meeting); an emphasis on hosting Syrian refugees as an Islamic duty (29th meeting); an emphasis on ISIS's contradiction with Islam (34th meeting); a critique against headscarf ban in the past (34th meeting); an emphasis on the prayers Turkey received from other Muslim countries during the failed coup attempt (35th meeting).

²⁸ Semih Idiz, "The 'Sunnification' of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Al-Monitor*, March 1, 2013, accessed March 14, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/akp-sunni-foreign-policy-turkey-sectarianism.html>; Halil M. Karaveli, "Erdogan Stokes the Sectarian Fires," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2013, accessed March 14, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/08/opinion/erdogan-stokes-the-sectarian-fires.html>; Edward Luttwak, "Erdogan's Purge is a Sectarian War," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2016, accessed March 14, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/03/erdogans-purge-is-a-sectarian-war-turkey-gulen>.

²⁹ Erdoğan stresses that there cannot be a sectarian division in Islam yet sectarianism turned into a virus in the Islamic world (24th meeting). "We love the creatures because of the Creator" is the proverb he often uses to emphasize his opposition against ethnic

Similarly, Erdoğan's critiques of Islamophobia in Europe (25th meeting) or the lack of Muslim representation in the United Nations Security Council (27th meeting) are also difficult to be defined as Islamist policies as both issues are highly controversial in international politics.

Rather than giving signs of an Islamist foreign policy, Erdoğan's rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings reflects a nationalist re-awakening in Turkish politics. Since the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a threat in the south of Turkey in 2014, the Kurdish question again has become the focus of Turkish foreign policy as some Western powers, especially the United States, have partnered with the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in fighting radical terrorism.³⁰ This development coincided with the HDP's unanticipated success in the June 2015 elections and armed conflict between the Turkish military and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since then. These domestic and foreign developments elevated the nationalist rhetoric in Turkish politics, which is most apparent in Erdoğan's speeches in the mukhtars meetings. For instance, Erdoğan's motto "One nation, one flag, one homeland, and one state" is frequently repeated in the mukhtars' meetings to stress the indivisibility of Turkey mainly against the internal and external Kurdish threat (5th, 11th, 17th, 25th and 32nd meetings). Similarly, the emphasis on martyrs and the religious rhetoric surrounding it - definition of martyrdom as the highest place after the prophethood (13th, 19th and 23rd meetings) - also serves to the nationalist, instead of Islamist, mood in the meetings. Nationalism and the centrality of the Kurdish threat in Turkish politics are also visible in Erdoğan's foreign policy messages.

In the mukhtars meetings, Erdoğan maintains that Turkey is the only country surrounded by multiple terrorist groups - ISIS, PKK, YPG and Fethullah

and sectarian discrimination in Turkey and the Islamic world (5th, 10th, 11th, 14th, 24th, 25th and 36th meetings).

³⁰ As an US Congressional Research Service report states, the YPG "has arguably been the most successful anti-IS ground force in Syria," with the exception of some forces aligned with the Assad regime. Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief," *CRS Report*, March 21, 2017, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44000.pdf>, 3. The YPG has close links with the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) which has been recognized as a terrorist organization both by Turkey and the United States. Yet, Washington does not see the YPG as a terrorist group, a difference that has deteriorated relations with Ankara in recent years.

Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETO) - but behind these groups there are bigger forces that aim to divide Turkey, or at the very least, prevent its political and economic growth (35th meeting). This accusation sometimes accompanies the concept of mastermind (*üst akıl*) (25th meeting), an ambiguous term referring to the “dark” and “secret” forces which have grand designs in Turkey and its neighborhood.³¹ Therefore, Erdoğan believes that the terrorist groups Turkey faces do not represent genuine social or political problems in the region, but they are only fabrications that are serving their masters. In this respect, Erdoğan defines the recent development in the Middle East as a “cruel power struggle,” in which the first rule is to stay strong and united if they do not want to be exterminated by domestic conflicts, and fraternal fights between Turks and Kurds, and/or between Sunnis and Shias (34th meeting).

This situation, in Erdoğan’s belief, necessitates an aggressive foreign policy against the Kurdish groups in Syria. In presenting Turkey’s new security doctrine at the 28th mukhtars’ meeting in October 2016, Erdoğan argued that Turkey should no more follow traditional defensive foreign policy, in which decision-makers wait until the danger “knocks at the door.” According to him, this policy brought significant economic, political, and human costs to Turkey. Therefore, Turkey now has to meet the danger beyond its borders. In this struggle, Ankara also has to rely mainly on its own powers because, Erdoğan argues, dependence on foreign powers hurts Turkey’s deterrence power as its political history shows (25th meeting). Finally, Erdoğan points out that although Ankara is willing to cooperate with other powers, they will pursue security objectives in Turkey’s neighborhood no matter what others say, and Turkey will widen its security area with the principle of “Whoever is not with Turkey is against it” (35th meeting). With these arguments, Erdoğan’s rhetoric in the mukhtars’ meetings and his security doctrine mainly point to an aggressive, unilateral and nationalist foreign policy that focuses on the Kurdish threat within and beyond its borders - mainly in Syria - instead of an Islamist foreign policy.

³¹ Mustafa Akyol, “Unraveling the AKP’s ‘Mastermind’ Conspiracy Theory,” *Al-Monitor*, March 19, 2015, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-zion-protocols-akp-version.html>.

3.2. Is There an Axis-Shift in Erdoğan's Foreign Policy?

Another controversy about Turkish foreign policy in recent years is whether Ankara is going through an “axis-shift” in its relations with other countries. Similar to the Islamism arguments and related to them, some scholars and analysts ask whether Turkey has left its traditional Western-oriented foreign policy as both sides have had some important disagreements throughout the AKP period. In fact, the direction of Turkish foreign policy³² and its relations with the West³³ became a matter of controversy as soon as the AKP came to power, and in one of its first foreign policy actions the AKP-dominated parliament refused to let American troops use Turkish lands in the 2003 Iraq War. Nevertheless, the controversy reached its zenith again in the late 2000s when Turkish-Israeli relations entered into a crisis period, Ankara and Washington disagreed on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear program, Turkey's EU accession process froze as a result of the Cyprus issue, and the Erdoğan government focused more on increasing its influence in the Middle East. As a result, some argued that an axis-shift happened in Turkish foreign policy, and that Ankara departed from the West,³⁴ while others emphasized the independence and multi-dimensionality of the AKP foreign policy.³⁵

In the following years, not only did most of the older problems with the West remain unsolved, but new developments in Turkey and its neighborhood also deteriorated Turkey's relations with the West. Washington's cooperation with the YPG in Syria, European countries' criticism of Turkey in terms of

³² Nikolaos Raptopoulos, “Rediscovering Its Arab Neighbors? The AKP Imprint on Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” *Les Cahiers du Rmes* 1 (2004).

³³ Soner Cagaptay and Mark Parris, “Turkey after the Iraq War: Still a U.S. Ally?” *The Washington Institute*, 2003, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-after-the-iraq-war-still-a-u.s.-ally>.

³⁴ Mensur Akgün, “Turkey: What Axis Shift?,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 9, 2010, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://kit.mondediplo.com/spip.php?article5676>; Ariel Cohen, “Washington Concerned as Turkey Leaving the West,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 9 (2010).

³⁵ Kılıç Buğra Kanat, “AK Party's Foreign Policy: Is Turkey Turning Away from the West?,” *Insight Turkey* 12 (2010); Mesut Özcan and Ali Resul Usul, “Understanding the ‘New’ Turkish Foreign Policy: Changes Within Continuity, Is Turkey Departing from the West?,” *USAK Yearbook* 4 (2011); Ekrem T. Baser, “Shift-of-Axis in Turkish Foreign Policy: Turkish National Role Conceptions Before and During AKP Rule,” *Turkish Studies* 16 (2015).

democracy and human rights, Western countries' slow reaction to the failed coup attempt of July 2016, the residence of Fethullah Gülen in the United States, and the disagreement with Europe over the Syrian refugees issue are some, but not all, of the problems of the new era. As a result, an axis-shift in Turkish foreign policy and a permanent break in Turkish-Western relations have become more likely in the last few years.

Erdoğan's rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings reflects the tension with the West during his presidency. Except for some criticism to Russia during the "aircraft crisis" between the two countries (16th, 17th, 18th and 23rd meetings),³⁶ criticism toward the West mainly forms the center of Erdoğan's foreign policy remarks in the meetings. This criticism intensified when Erdoğan focused on foreign policy issues after two successive elections in June and November 2015 but even before that it was possible to see some serious accusations against the West about the terrorism issue. For example, in the first mukhtars meeting after the June 2015 elections - in which the AKP failed to win majority in the parliament - Erdoğan accused the West of being in pursuit of dividing Turkey and flaming internal fights by publishing wrong analyses about him in their media (7th meeting). Criticism of the West continued in the inter-election period as in some speeches Erdoğan stated that the West attacks him in person because they do not want to see a strong Turkey (10th meeting). In this period, the Turkish president also accused the West of ignoring the terrorism threat to Turkey by arguing that the Western media was refraining from showing the brutality of the terrorist attacks in Turkey (10th meeting), and the representatives of Western organizations were writing false reports about the situation in the Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey (13th meeting).

This kind of statements may be seen as election tactics; however, because the criticism of the West intensified after the November elections, in which

³⁶ On November 24, 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft, which allegedly crossed the Turkey-Syria border without notice. After the event, Russia imposed some sanctions against Turkey, which damaged economic relations between two sides. Until the normalization process started in the summer of 2016, trade volume between two countries dropped 35 percent, while the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey declined as much as 87 percent. See "Uçak Krizi Sonrası Türk-Rus İlişkilerinde Neler Yaşandı?," *NTV*, August 9, 2016, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/ucak-krizi-sonrasi-turk-rus-iliskilerinde-neler-yasandi,nqUpARHsW0Sizw9Jx9LgZQ>.

the AKP regained the majority in the parliament and throughout 2016, it is certain that they were not designed merely to gain domestic support. One of the continuous themes in Erdoğan's speeches was again the Western countries' approach to the groups Ankara identified as terrorists. When the Obama administration declined to recognize the YPG as a terrorist group, Erdoğan called the United States to make its choice between Turkey and the terrorists (20th meeting), and complained about the American and Western weapons that were used in the terrorist attacks in Turkey (22nd meeting). According to Erdoğan, the Western countries' cooperation with some terrorists groups - PKK/YPG - against others like ISIS, and their biased responses to the bombings in Paris and Ankara (with clear sympathy expressed for France but not for Turkey) (21st meeting) are detrimental not only in the fight against terrorism but also to the alliance between Turkey and the West. Erdoğan also criticized the United States and European countries for letting Gülen and PKK supporters walk freely on their streets (27th meeting), and demanded from these governments to take security measures against those who threaten Turkey.

The rift between Turkey and the Western countries was also visible in Erdoğan's reply to Western criticism about Turkey's democracy and human rights record. When European governments call on Turkey to respect democratic norms and values, Erdoğan accused the West of being "two-faced," as he never heard these governments calling on the terrorist organization - PKK - "not to attack Turkey and kill the innocents." Erdoğan asserted that those who put democracy and human rights arguments ahead of Turkey's security follow a different attitude when France takes security measures against terrorism during its state of emergency (22nd meeting). Erdoğan also claimed that the West has nothing to do with freedom as they are standing with those - HDP mayors - who use state resources to prevent the security forces from entering Kurdish-populated cities instead of protecting people from the terrorist threat (35th meeting). According to Erdoğan, the West's "fake democratic mask" drops when European governments do not tolerate Turkish citizens who want to support their homeland while the members of a separatist terrorist organization – the PKK - hold meetings in European parliaments (32nd meeting).

Finally, Erdoğan also accused the West similarly as he complained that the West does not show respect to human lives by following a self-interested

approach to the Syrian refugee crisis. On this issue, Erdoğan argued that the Western governments prioritize their own security and welfare while watching the death of Syrians whose bodies hit the Aegean shores, while Turkey hosts millions of refugees with its own resources (16th meeting). All in all, Erdoğan's rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings shows a serious rift between Turkey and the West on multiple issues as this never happened before in Turkish political history.³⁷

4. Turkish Eurasianism and Erdoğan's Discourse

As pointed out, Erdoğan's discourse in the mukhtars' meetings shows a significant degree of nationalism with strong anti-Western remarks. This rhetoric can be explained by the increasing effect of Eurasianism in the non-Western world including Turkey. Originally created by Russian refugees in Europe after the Bolshevik Revolution, Eurasianism is an ideology proposing that every nation should develop in accordance with its own characteristics. Classical Eurasianists argued that Russian culture is a unique combination of Western and Eastern cultures. They also asserted that the principles of Roman-German civilization including materialism, rationalism and Western-style democracy do not fit the moral values of other nations. Therefore, they suggested that Russia should not imitate the Western development model, but create its own by taking its cultural, historical, and even geographical characteristics into consideration.³⁸ While losing its influence in 1930s, Eurasianism came back into Russian

³⁷ How this anti-Western discourse is reflected in actual politics is another question that should be discussed. Although Erdoğan is quite critical of Western countries' policies in general, Turkey, as a medium-power, does not have an interest in clashing with the United States and European countries at the same time. Traditionally, Turkish foreign policy based on a balance-of-power between these two parts of the West: Whenever Ankara had a problem with the United States (2003 Iraq War, for example), Turkish officials tried to establish better relations with European Union, whereas when the relations with Europe froze (after 2006 because of the Cyprus problem), they sought better relations with the United States. Recently, the same balance was adopted when Washington and Ankara had disagreements over the Pastor Brunson issue, and Turkish officials tried to ease relations with Europe, especially with Germany. So despite Erdoğan's antagonism against the West, one should not ignore the geopolitical realities in analyzing Turkish foreign policy.

³⁸ Aleksandr Dugin, *İnsanlığın Ön Cephesi: Avrasya* (Ankara: Kaynak Yayınları: 2017), 19-26.

politics in the 1990s when the Russian state was at a critical juncture to choose its political, economic, and social direction. Countering Anglo-Saxon values this time, neo-Eurasianists rejected to imitate the West – in other words, the United States – with an apparent nationalist rhetoric that proposed Russia as the main power in its near abroad.³⁹ Eurasianism made its real impact in Russian politics when Vladimir Putin adopted it in an article, *A New Integration Project for Eurasia*, which he wrote in October 2011.⁴⁰ Putin used Eurasianism as an ideological background for his political and military policies to oppose the American presence in Russia's neighborhood, including Georgia and Ukraine.

Eurasianism has also been a powerful ideology in Turkey even before it was created in Russia. In the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, politicians like Ahmet Cevdet Pasha opposed the idea that the state should directly adopt the Western law systems to fix its problems, and supported a governance system combining Western institutions with Islamic ideology.⁴¹ Yet, these kinds of ideas lost effect when the Empire collapsed, and the founding fathers officially adopted the Western model. Similar to Russia, Turkish Eurasianism was re-born in the 1980s and 1990s when the regional status quo changed with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Turkish politicians including Turgut Özal, Süleyman Demirel, and Necmettin Erbakan approached Middle Eastern countries and the Turkic world but except Erbakan these politicians did not take an anti-Western position, instead they focused on Turkey's function as a bridge between the West and the East.⁴²

During the AKP rule since 2002, Eurasianist ideas were heard more than before with the name "neo-Ottomanism" that aims to increase Turkey's political, economic, and social influence in former Ottoman lands. Similar to Eurasianism, neo-Ottomanism proposes that every geographical

³⁹ Dugin, *İnsanlığın Ön Cephesi*, 33-40.

⁴⁰ Salih Yılmaz and Evgeniy Bahrevskiy, *Rusya ve Türkiye: Avrasya Paktı Mümkün mü?* (Ankara: SRT Yayınları, 2017), 76.

⁴¹ Ahmet Zeki İzgöer, *Müslüman, Osmanlı ve Modern: Ahmet Cevdet Paşa* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık: 2014).

⁴² Özgür Tüfekçi, "Turkish Eurasianism: Roots and Discourses," in *Eurasian Politics and Society: Issues and Challenges*, ed. Özgür Tüfekçi, Hüsrev Tabak, and Erman Akıllı (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

area has its own cultural characteristics, and a Western model would not necessarily become successful in realizing development in former Ottoman territories. In this ideology, the Ottoman Empire was successful in developing different regions but with its collapse and integration into a foreign model, these regions suffered under conflicts, crises and social problems. Neo-Ottomanism maintains that with its historical, cultural, and geographical ties to the region, Turkey knows the needs of the regional countries and people for successful development. Therefore, instead of the Western model, a Turkish model, which integrates cultural values with modern governance, would be more appropriate for the countries in Turkey's neighborhood.³⁵ In this sense, neo-Ottomanism shares important characteristics with Russian Eurasianism including a sense of nationalism and opposition to Western influence in the close neighborhood.

Erdoğan's nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric should be read by taking this ideology into consideration. As mentioned, several times in his speeches Erdoğan mentioned a "mastermind" that flares the ethnic, religious, and political conflicts in Turkey's neighborhood. While who is the mastermind is not clear, it is certain that the Turkish president points to foreign powers who, in his belief, geographically, culturally, and politically have no business in the region. Erdoğan argues that following the Ottoman withdrawal, "a serious exploitation" started in its former lands as a lot of countries saw only gold, diamond, coal, oil, and cheap workforce in these regions (1st meeting). Related to this exploitation, Erdoğan points out that the terrorist organizations - whether it is PKK or ISIS - in the Middle East are not groups that reflect people's rights, concerns or identities, but they are simply some "projects" or "pawns" that serve their masters (22nd meeting). Erdoğan believes that if foreign powers do not mess with the region, there would be no fraternal fighting between ethnic and religious groups, who lived peacefully for centuries under Ottoman rule. According to Erdoğan, because the countries and regions such as Iraq, Syria, Turkestan, and Africa are within Turkey's "border of love," Ankara cannot remain out of the developments there (35th meeting). Unlike Turkey, foreign powers such as the United States and Russia approach the regional issues only as a matter of interest, and therefore, they have no business interfering in these areas, especially in Syria (21st and 29th meetings). Behind his criticisms against Western powers and sometimes against Russia, apart from the growing Kurdish presence in Turkey's southern borders, Erdoğan reveals a

displeasure of seeing a great-power game in Turkey's close neighborhood. In this sense, Turkish version of Eurasianism - neo-Ottomanism – may explain the ideological background of Erdoğan's rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings.

5. Conclusion

This article attempted to find the main characteristics of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign policy rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings, an institution that was created in early 2015. As the presidential referendum of April 2017 approved the complete introduction of the presidential system by 2019, and it provided Erdoğan with the ability to remain in power potentially until 2029, it became important to understand Erdoğan's foreign policy preferences in a region that has been unstable in the last decade and expected to remain so in the foreseeable future. In this analysis, I tried to answer two controversial questions about Erdoğan's policy preferences. The first question was what ideology Erdoğan adopts in his foreign policy. Despite of the arguments that Erdoğan is an Islamist leader, his rhetoric in the mukhtars' meetings presented a nationalist, unilateral and Kurdish-oriented foreign policy. Although in his speeches Erdoğan uses a relatively high religious rhetoric, he does not present an Islamist foreign policy doctrine. Instead, he seems occupied with the internal and external Kurdish threat that increased in recent years with the anarchical situation in Syria.

The second question examines whether Turkey departs from the West under Erdoğan's presidency. The findings show an intensive anti-Western rhetoric in Erdoğan's speeches at mukhtars' meetings, which illustrates significant differences on multiple issues such as terrorism, human rights, and the refugee issue. Criticism of the West is a continuous theme in Erdoğan's rhetoric and with the deteriorating relations between both sides, an axis-shift on Turkey's side seems more likely than ever.

The article attempts to explain this nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric with Eurasianism, a popular ideology in the non-Western world including Russia, China, and Turkey. The Turkish version of Eurasianism is commonly called neo-Ottomanism, which relies on a sense of Turkish nationalism with an apparent opposition to Western influence in Turkey's

neighborhood. Although being successful in the 2000s, Turkey's attempts to increase its influence in its close neighborhood seems to be decreasing as a result of domestic developments in Turkey as well as continuing anarchy in the region. Turkey could not establish control over former Ottoman territories, causing disappointment amongst the Turkish leadership. This led to a more nationalist and anti-Western form of neo-Ottomanism, as Erdoğan's speeches in the mukhtars' meetings illustrate.

Although it has not drawn academic attention before, the mukhtars' meetings became a critical institution for Erdoğan to shape the political atmosphere in Turkey during a time, in which the Turkish constitution put significant limits on the political power of the president. Erdoğan used the mukhtars' meetings for several political purposes: He attracted media and public attention; channeled his views to the AKP officials and parliamentarians as well as to the pro-government press, and made himself heard by the Turkish public and foreign audiences. Indeed, the findings of a recent poll show how Erdoğan's anti-Western remarks in the mukhtars' meeting have shaped public opinion in Turkey as Turks increasingly see the United States (66.5%) and the European Union (24%) as the biggest threats - in the category of country - against Turkey. Undoubtedly, the developments on the ground - US-YPG alliance, EU's criticisms of Turkey's human rights record, etc. - also shape the Turks' perception but as they see Erdoğan as the main decision-maker in foreign policy - 69.2%, according to the poll - one cannot ignore the effects of what Erdoğan has said to the Turkish public.⁴³ All in all, the mukhtars' meetings have turned out to be a critical institution to frame a de facto presidential foreign policy in the parliamentary system, and if this practice continues, it will still be an important tool for Erdoğan to channel his views to the Turkish public and press as well as to foreign actors.

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⁴³ "Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algılamaları Araştırması," *Kadir Has Üniversitesi*, 2017, accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.khas.edu.tr/w243/files/TDP-Sunum_vfinal.pptx.

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