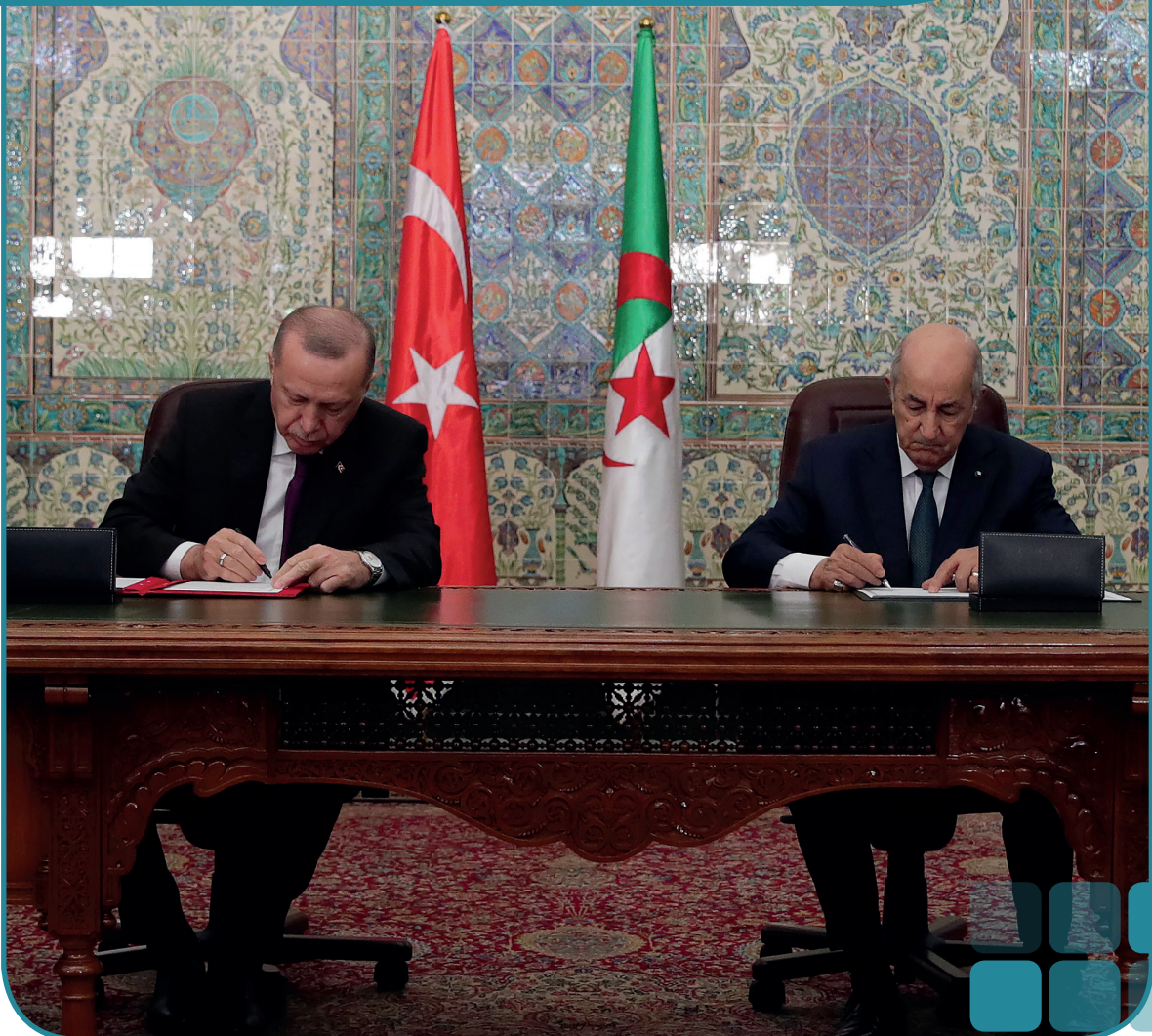
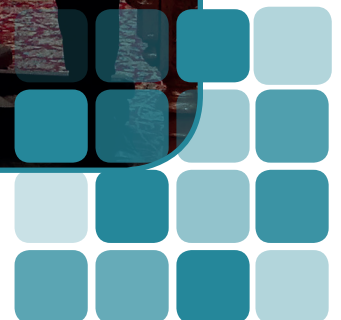


# ALGERIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS: FROM ALIENATION TO A NEED FOR STRATEGIC TIES



IMAD ATOUI





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# ALGERIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS: FROM ALIENATION TO A NEED FOR STRATEGIC TIES

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Imad Atoui is currently affiliated with Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA) as research associate. In 2011, he obtained his undergraduate degree from Ferhat Abbas University, department of History, Algeria. After he has got his first scholarship, he joined Istanbul Commerce University (Turkey) where he secured his master's degree in African Studies and International Relations, in 2018. Besides his affiliation with CIGA, he is a PhD student of Political science and International Relation at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Turkey. His main research interest is Geopolitics of The Mediterranean, North Africa and the Sahel region. Strategy, Geo-strategy, China and the Maghreb countries relationship, Sino-African countries relationship, State building and politics in North African and Sahel region countries, Conflict resolution in African Sahel Region, political and Security issues in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, and the Sahel, and Algerian Modern history.

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## Introduction

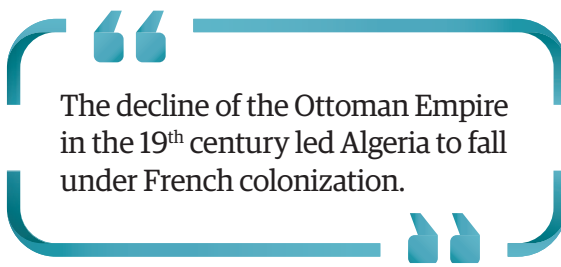
After a long distant friendship between Algeria and Turkey in the post-WWII period, both states are now struggling to develop political and strategic ties. They had been a unit during the Ottoman Empire for over three centuries (1519-1830), but political shifts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries divided the Ottoman Empire into nation states. While Algeria achieved such a status in 1960 after it had fallen under French colonization for more than 130 years (1830-1962), Turkey kept struggling to survive amid the international dispute of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

The relations between Algeria and Turkey date back to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and stretch up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of the Ottomans in North Africa generally was due to an invitation by North African tribes to defend them against the Europeans. The successive collapse of the Muvahhid dynasty at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century and Andalusia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century lead to a political recession in North Africa. The internal political problems between leading dynasties competing for power triggered European powers to launch military strikes south of the Mediterranean (Shaler, 1829: 25). Due to this situation, North Africans called Ottomans for help to stand up to the European threat. Therefore, we can understand that the first initial ties between the Ottomans and the Algerians were strategic ties. However, with the official existence of the Ottomans in North Africa (1519), Algeria became part of the Empire (João. M, 1993: 198).

## Cold War Era

The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led Algeria to fall under French colonization. The shift in the international

environment due to the first and the second world wars resulted in Turkey and Algeria becoming nation states. Both states, since then, have had different political tendencies.



The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led Algeria to fall under French colonization.

Differences continued between Algiers and Ankara during the Cold War. While Turkey started westernizing, Algeria was still struggling to gain its independence. Even though Algeria became independent, the situation between the countries did not change. The two states that were once under the Muslim rule became ideologically and politically divided; Turkey joined the West (USA bloc) while Algeria joined the East (USSR bloc). However, despite the collapse of the USSR and the rise of democracy, Algeria and Turkey remained separate in their ties.

## 1990-2010 Period

With the fall of the Berlin wall and the rise of globalization, a large wave of western democratization swept the world. Despite having, then, similar political tendencies toward democratization, both countries faced internal conflicts. While Turkey experienced the military's influence, Algeria entered into a civil war due to a failed democratic process. In other words, despite the end of the Cold War, Turkey and Algeria remained distant.

The change in the International environment brought new challenges to the MENA region. Post 9/11, a new era surfaced in world politics with the US reaction against terrorist attacks. In other words, the offensive US for-

eign policy that coincided with military spread in the Middle East brought new challenges to the region. Many countries collapsed with the Arab uprising and threats intensified with the rise of the terrorist groups, migration etc.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US and political changes in both Algeria and Turkey brought the two countries closer together. 9/11 created a new political architecture in the Middle East. The United States' retaliation in the form of the War on Terror led to insecurity and the collapse of many states in the region. The rise of Al Qaida, ISIS and other armed groups along with the US invasion in Iraq, and the Arab uprising shook the stability of the MENA (Al-Haidari, 2017: 103). The shift in Turkey with the coming of the AKParty (Justice and Development Party) and the outcomes of the Algerian "Hirak" culminated in a new government in need of cooperation between Ankara and Algiers.

As a result of escalating challenges in the region, Ankara and Algiers were compelled to approach each other. The collapse of Libya was a turning point in the Algerian-Turkish relationship. Despite political differences, economic and cultural ties reconvened after a long time. It would not have happened had the challenges not concerned them both.

Beside these motivating challenges, the spread of Covid-19 and the internal political shift in Algeria encouraged the countries to form closer ties. This means that the Algerian political movement, "Hirak," that caused the collapse of Bouteflika's system and brought a new elite had a will to strengthen its ties with Ankara. As the spread of the virus wreaks havoc in the world, there is a simultaneous struggle for global and regional power. The rise and recession of some powers would open a space for countries like Turkey and Algeria to balance regional power.

## Approach

Both states are pragmatic toward each other. Despite being a single unit during the Ottoman Empire, the two states have never had religious or social harmony after their independence. It is true that Turkey helped Algerians during their struggle against the French but that was few for Algerians from those who thought of them as brothers due to their shared past. There is hope that Turkey and Algeria would be increasingly dependent on each other both culturally and economically. However, neither shared history or religion nor the increase of economic exchange could lead states to have closer ties.

The analysis adopts a realistic approach. Despite the decrease in economic exchange between Ankara and Algiers in the last two years – compared to the period between 2014-2017 (aMFA,n.d)- and the lockdown of borders due to Covid-19, both states are taking serious measures to approach to each other. The need for survival in an insecure environment and a desire for strategic gains have compelled decision makers in both states to settle differences.

Therefore, ties between Algeria and Turkey are newly established. The discrepancies between the two countries say a lot about the pragmatism of both states. The current situation has led to the revitalization of strategic ties and a strengthening of their relationship.

Pragmatic policies alone do not help relationships last. Thus, revising policies and reactivating economic and other common ties will help secure a lasting alliance between Algeria and Turkey. Both countries still have a lot in common. They had shared history, the same religion and both have experience with similar political challenges in the MENA region. Still, the choice of limited or profound ties depends



on the decision makers in each state. And herein lies the purpose of this paper.

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This paper analyses the regional political and strategic issues that may undermine the

security of both Ankara and Algeria. Ankara and Algiers must step forward to build strong political and strategic ties, just as they did for cultural and economic ties. This paper argues that the challenges that face both Ankara and Algiers can incentivize them to come closer, especially with the spread of the Covid-19.

If both states succeed in building political and strategic ties and transcend their differences towards various issues, they can play a great role in stabilizing the region. This means that they could foster deeper ties and attract other regional states to come together in an alliance that can at least preserve the region.

After it provides a short historical background on the Turkish-Algerian relationships, this paper discusses the conflict between the two states. The third section analyses common political and strategic issues that concern Ankara and Algiers. Finally, this paper is dedicated to both decision makers in both states to take a lead in regional stability.



## Matters of Differences

Algeria and Turkey's interests seem to diverge on matters concerning Syria, Libya, NATO and Israel. Algeria recently seemed to understand Turkish-Israel ties and the Turkish membership in NATO. Turkey tends to have a different agenda towards the east and the global south. In other words, after it has been considered to be a Western state through its membership in NATO and its western ideological tendency, Turkey has shifted its foreign policy towards the Eastern sphere (Gjevori. E, 2020).

With the arrival of the AKParty, Turkey has been successfully establishing ties with many countries in the eastern sphere (Norbrook, 2011), like Qatar, Morocco, Tunisia, Pakistan, Libya, Malaysia, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad etc.

With the arrival of the AKParty, Turkey has been successfully establishing ties with many countries in the eastern sphere (Norbrook, 2011), like Qatar, Morocco, Tunisia, Pakistan, Libya, Malaysia, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad etc. Moreover, the Turkish stance towards regional and international issues encouraged not only Algeria but many Muslim countries from the global south to revise their policies and open up to Ankara on issues like Palestine, Myanmar and Kashmir (Povera, 2020; Frantzman, 2019).

However, both states stand on opposing sides when it comes to Syria and Libya. While Algeria still recognizes the Assad regime (Belkaid, 2016) and stands against external interference in both Syria and Libya, Turkey

considers it a matter of national security since Syria is its immediate neighbor. For Algeria, besides being with Syria in the same pole of Russia, Algeria considers the Arab uprising a direct threat that would cause a collapse of nations in the MENA. After the collapse of Iraq and Libya, Algeria understood that Arab revolutions would only turn Arab states to fall in geopolitical disputes between great powers. Thus, Algeria kept its non-interference policy and maintained its stance with Bashar al Assad to prove that uprisings in Arab states are failures. In contrast, Turkey sits in the Western bloc, and, by that, it supports the wave of Arab uprisings that lead to democracy. Consequently, two different political stances towards Syria projected each state's pragmatic policy and, more importantly, reflected each state's political tendency.

In Libya, while Algeria held the banner of no-interference, Turkey considers its military backup to Libya as a military partnership according to international law and not interference as the Libyan GNA (Government of National Accord) is recognized by the international community (TRT, 2019). Again, Algerian foreign policy is always to consider what happened in Arab states as internal affairs, and by that any problem could be easily resolved as non-external interference. However, geopolitical shifts in the Mediterranean with a new vision towards Africa, lead Ankara to adopt an offensive policy. For Turkey, the dispute over geopolitical interests in the east of the Mediterranean pushed Turkey to proactively step toward establishing an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with Libya. Turkey wanted to claim and secure its rights by establishing a cooperative EEZ with the GNA on the one hand, and it wanted to assert its strategic presence along with competing powers in the Mediterranean, on the other.



Even though the political stance has not changed yet, these issues do not seem to hamper both states to step forward and strengthen their ties. The increasing economic, cultural and even strategic ties are all signs for building more cordial relations. Despite their divergent visions, regional and international challenges have pushed Ankara and Algiers in the same direction. The next section analyses political and strategic concerns for both states.

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### Political and Strategic Concerns: Risks and Prospects

The international environment concerning Libya is intensified by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which have become the main motives for the Algiers-Ankara rapprochement. If 9/11 opened the door for both states to revise their foreign policies towards each other, the outbreak of the corona virus is pushing the states to build strategic cooperation.

Despite the existence of a prior strategic agreement of military cooperation between the states in 2003 (TBMM: 2003) and the escalating security threats in the region, the economic and cultural ties remained on the sur-

face of the Algerian-Turkish ties. This means that, despite both being part of the Middle East and many common regional concerns, Algeria and Turkey have never been on the same page. For instance, when there was a dispute between Qatar and some other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, Ankara supported Doha while Algeria kept neutral and away from interstate dispute (Öznur, 2019; Cherif, 2017: 20). Again, despite the convergence on the GNA, Algeria urged both the Libyan wings headed by Al Sarraj and Haftar for a round table while Turkey did not accept Haftar (Coskun and Evans, 2020). Also, towards the Sisi military coup in Egypt, Algeria has always adopted a non-interference policy and recognized Sisi (Mouafaq, 2013) while Turkey has condemned it. (Akyol, 2013).

However, signs of political and strategic cooperation have recently surfaced regarding the diplomatic movements between the states. After they restricted their ties and any increasing economic exchanges during the Bouteflika' era, there were calls for strategic cooperation from both sides in the post-Hirak (Duran and Ataman, 2020). In fact, the need for cooperation resulted from escalating threats in the region with the outbreak of Covid-19. Despite the escalating threats in the Mediterranean and Libya for more than a decade, Algiers and Ankara would not have come together to revitalize their strategic cooperation had it not been for Covid-19 that made both powers understand the changing world politics.

The shift in world politics implies change in the international system. Yet, the Covid-19 outbreak scratched the surface of international politics and brought strategic dynamics up to the top. The US strategic recession in many areas with the rise of China that started with its Health Silk Road and the strategic movement of Russia are all signs of shifts in the interna-

tional system. While major powers prepare for world leadership, regional issues are left with regional players (Atoui a. 2020). As great powers are actively checking each other in many places like the Mediterranean, the South China Sea and in different maritime straits, competition among regional powers is undergoing in the MENA and the Mediterranean basin. Thus, both states must take advantage of each other in order to reposition themselves in the region and to get rid of traditional powers' dependency in the Mediterranean basin.

For Turkey, the dispute over the Mediterranean basin is not a new one, but it is an auspicious moment for Turkey to finalize the issue of the Mediterranean with its neighboring countries. Ankara has also seen that building a maritime bridge with the GNA is a geostrategic interest. Turkey could maximize its influence and hedge its European opponents in the basin, and it could simultaneously secure its delimited EEZ by strategic agreement between Ankara and Tripoli (Atoui b, 2020).

For Algeria, despite being part of the Mediterranean, there was no intersection in the Eastern Mediterranean basin as Algeria intersects with Turkey in Libya. Libya shares about 982 kms of borders with Algeria. Since the collapse of Qaddafi in 2011, Libya has known massive instability. Local wings fight for power backed by external actors while terrorist groups rise internally. Libya is a backyard for Algeria. Insecurity in Libya means Algerian national security is at stake (Brahimi and Kharief, 2020).

Regionally, with the outbreak of the virus and the lockdown in the world, the world economy proceeded towards a recession, western powers, US with EU states, stepped back and turned their attention inwards instead of focusing on geopolitical interests abroad. As

western powers shifted their focus, local powers started filling the vacuum left by these players (Atoui a, 2020).

Internationally, Eastern powers filled the gap left by Western powers. China took the banner of medical aid and reached even some EU member states like Italy, Spain and others. Meanwhile, Russia took the initiative of medical aid to Italy and other EU member states. Locally, Turkey provided medical aid to different states, whether they were considered Western or Eastern states (Yuzbasioglu, 2020). In other words, the spread of the virus has hampered western powers from fostering their strategic interests outside their borders, while it forced them to consume their energy locally.

Consequently, Algiers and Ankara seemed to have a common interest in decreasing the French influence in the Mediterranean. Both states are now working to reactivate the strategic agreement they signed in 2003. In other words, while Turkey wants to gain influence in the Mediterranean and the North Africa, Algeria seeks to diversify its military weapons beyond European weapons.

After losing the Algerian market and being superseded by Turkey (Santender, 2020), France fears that Algeria may shift its interests to an Eastern power (Gjevori, 2020). Even though Algeria considers that Turkey belongs to the Western bloc, it is still a rival to France and, to some extent, the EU in the Mediterranean (Frantman, 2020). It is not only that the rapprochement between Ankara and Algiers seems pragmatic but historical and social ties that have existed help build confidence between the two states.

Turkey's growing economic and military power has forced Algeria to recalculate. The Turkish military industry provides Algeria with

new technology that could be helpful for Algerian defense. The latest technology of Turkish drones and their defense system could particularly make a difference in Syria and Libya at a time where all of Algeria's neighboring borders are posing asymmetric threats. Starting from Libya, Niger, Mauritania, Mali up to Western Sahara, there is suffering from active terrorist groups, weapons and human smuggling etc. (Atoui d, 2020; Frantman, 2020; Gjevori, 2020).

Diversifying weapons' suppliers would provide different choices for Algeria to get rid of French influence and to keep weapon sources always open for its needs. Most of the Algerian industries are in partnership with the EU (ECCI, 2020). Algeria used to strategically deal with the French, and Paris has keenly calculated in keeping the North African giant under the EU umbrella. After the Hirak movement, however, there was a will in Algiers to move towards strategic cooperation between Ankara and Algiers (Atef, 2020).

Furthermore, political and geostrategic rapprochement could bring stability to both states. Since they both are part of the MENA

region, Turkey and Algeria can work to stabilize the region. Turkey is a strong state in the Middle East while Algeria is a regional power in the North of Africa. Cooperating among the Middle Eastern countries would help stabilize the region, though it would be challenging. If Turkey and Algeria miss this opportunity, the whole region will likely be in trouble. Building alliances is important. Even though the states are acting pragmatically, it cannot be denied that historical, social, political ties matter when it comes to building an alliance. Since both states are parts of the same region, they share similar geopolitical and strategic concerns, they should cooperate. Otherwise, new geopolitical architecture will take place with a new power in the region.

With the current shift in the international order, the Mediterranean is likely to fall under a major power, whether China, the US or Russia. That player would dominate the region, and no state would be able to bargain unless it has a major influence. Similarly, in the Sahel region, with the French recession, asymmetric threats will consume Algeria's energy (Toumi, 2020). Taking a proactive step by building a ma-



ture alliance is better than facing uncertainty. Moreover, the energy bases that the nation's economy relies on are targets for terrorist groups. All Algerian energy bases are close to terrorist seats in neighboring countries.

Whatever the new order will be, building regional ties would at least help both states stand against any competing power in the region. Just like Libya, if Turkey, Algeria and other MENA states would have been in an alliance, the NATO intervention would never have taken place in 2011, and Libya would have never been a disaster in the region. Historical records speak volumes about the time of peace and security when the Mediterranean was under the Ottoman and Algerian influence.

The countries must come to a common political stance. Despite the existing political differences, building strategic ties has become vital. There needs to be an understanding of the differences and long-term economic and cultural ties can help transcend these differences.

Turkey and Algeria need to put their strategic agreement in practice. Turkey can provide Algeria with military weapons of the latest technology, and Algeria could in turn be a guaranteed supplier of oil and gas. Other exchanges can also take place in science and technology, military and investment in hydro-carbon fields etc.

## Conclusion

To sum up, this study analyzed the political and geostrategic issues that led Algeria and Turkey to build closer ties. It is understood that a shared history, religion, cultural or economic ties could not alone help Algiers and Ankara form strategic relationships. However, a threatening environment, intensified by the

outbreak of Covid-19 could compel both states to revise their policies and improve relations.

The shift in the world order in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries divided the Ottoman Empire into states. Later, the dispute over world leadership between the US and the USSR led to the formation of two opposite ideological blocs. Turkey joined the Western bloc while Algeria joined the Eastern bloc headed by the USSR.

The fall of the Berlin wall though, the two countries remained distant. The internal political restlessness made both Algiers and Ankara focus inwards. Prior to this, there were no signs of any friendship between the two states.

However, the consequences of 9/11 on the MENA region and various local political shifts have made it possible for Turkey and Algeria to establish economic and cultural ties. The arrival of the AKParty that focused on opening to the Global South enabled Ankara to reach the Eastern sphere and build ties.

Despite the success in building great economic and cultural ties, and ratifying strategic agreements, political differences between Algiers and Ankara over regional issues postponed their strategic alliance.

The outbreak of Covid-19 posed a challenge for survival for both states. The impact of the virus on the international and regional environment pushed both states to implement their strategic agreements.

Finally, adopting a realistic approach in this analysis helps us understand and contextualize the facts of Algeria-Turkey relations. Hopefully, decision makers can realize that there are lots of similarities between the states that can be utilized. Building serious ties would be beneficial to both. It would strengthen their own position and bring peace to the region.

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# ORTADOĞU ETÜTLERİ

MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES



Hakemli Siyaset ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi

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