

Ottomanism Then and Now: Historical and Contemporary Meanings

An Introduction

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On the evening of Friday, 15 July 2016, a large number of international news channels were frenziedly broadcasting live from Turkey. Most of the world sat watching, stunned, as they observed events unfolding in the streets and skies of Ankara and Istanbul. A part of the Turkish military had occupied major areas of the two cities. Officers had taken over the TRT (the national TV channel), and had announced to the Turkish public, and the international viewership, the removal of the government; a new constitution was to be prepared. But that was only the beginning of a long night, one in which the military was not only defeated, but humiliated. The following day, newspaper headlines featured pictures of Erdoğan's supporters waving Turkish and Ottoman flags. Terms such as 'sultan' and 'caliph', referring to the Turkish president, appeared everywhere in the international press. In the hours following the failed coup, it emerged that *muezzins* had called on the people to take to the streets and oppose the military. Many observers, especially in Turkey, had vivid memories of the past; for them, after all, a military takeover was nothing new: since 1960, at almost constant intervals of about a decade, Turkey has been the setting for military coups. While the earlier ones were all successful, the last two have had different outcomes. In 2007, after the issuing of a threatening memorandum directed against the government, which appeared on the website of the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, the military was firmly rebuffed, being told to stay out of politics and asked to respect democracy and the will of the people. Nine years later, the sections of the military that had acted were heavily defeated by other military units, the police and a wave of

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public support in favour of the governing party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Justice and Development Party, JDP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP).

After the first few hours of amazement, what surfaced were overlapping images of the present and the past: the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, the juxtaposition between a forcefully imposed 'pseudo-secularisation' of society, during the Republic's infancy, and the spasmodic display of religious symbols that has emerged since the 1990s. The presence of the military, too, echoed the imperial past, as the pivotal role played in politics by the armed forces dates back to the 'Revolution' of 1908 and the subsequent transfer of power to the Unionist regime that autocratically ruled until the Ottoman defeat in World War I. The politicisation of the religious apparatus during the evening of the attempted coup, too, recalled images of the Ottoman past, and the ecstatic crowd that awaited Erdoğan at Istanbul Atatürk Airport reminded many of the sultan's procession to the mosque for the Friday prayer. A raft of questions began to be asked: Has the Empire returned? How should one read the more or less open references to past imperial glories? What are the real links between the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey? What is the place of religion in the public sphere in Turkey? The events of last July, along with their accompanying images, have attached even more urgency to provide clear answers to a set of key questions linked with the past, its projected image in the present, and the ties, if any, between the Ottoman Empire and its successor states.

In social sciences, the political developments in modern Turkey and the other successor states of the Ottoman Empire have been the focus of special attention for some time. Issues such as the demise of the Republican (Kemalist) Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the wars in the Balkans between 1995 and 1999, and the series of revolutions that swept the Middle East in the 2010s, have all been accorded substantial attention. Moreover, in the wake of the somewhat unexpected rise of religiously-based parties in Turkey since the 1990s, as well as the latter's relationship with the Turkic states of the former Soviet Union, both academics and the general public have turned their attention towards the interpretation of the Ottoman past.¹ By looking into these

1 See, for example: Idris Bal, *Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model* (London: Ashgate, 2001); M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito eds., *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Fuat E. Keyman ed., *Remaking Turkey: Globalisation, Alternative Modernities, and Democracies* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007); Fuat E. Keyman and Ziya Öniş eds., *Turkish Politics in a Changing World: Global Dynamics and Domestic Transformations* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2007); William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy*

issues, recent scholarship has noted an ongoing reformulation of the political discourse in Turkey. This has become especially pertinent when inquiring into the place of the Ottoman past in Turkish foreign policy, along with the projection of its image as peace broker and success story for the Arab world following the wave of revolutions in the Middle East. The specific reinterpretation of the recent past is embodied in the formulation of ideas that have been labelled, more or less openly, as neo-Ottomanism.

While social scientists have been analysing the place of the past in present-day Turkey, the fields of imperial and Middle Eastern history have witnessed an increase in studies addressing the late Ottoman Empire. Historians are interested in the modernisation of the Empire, especially in the dynamics that characterised the complicated and frail ethnic and religious coexistence that was once its trademark. Specifically, these themes are being analysed in the context of the Empire's final demise and the emergence of successor nation states. Incidentally, these issues are all closely related to discussions on the nationalist discourse of Ottomanism. This ideology emerged around the first quarter of the 19th century and, articulated in different ways – sometimes in competition with each other – remained at the core of central and peripheral discussions of reform and of the future. Researchers have studied, among other topics, the parties involved in Ottomanism, the origins of the ideology, the intended audience, its content, and the reasons for its ultimate failure.² Ottomanism has also emerged as a crucial lens through which late Ottoman society can be analysed. Substantial aspects of the discussions around this set of ideas have been deeply concerned with attempts to identify a solution to project the Empire into the new century and support the country as it tried to adapt to the new realities emerging from both internal and external forces.

and Liberalism in Turkey (London: Routledge, 2011); Bülent Aras, *The New Geopolitics of Eurasia and Turkey's Position* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

- 2 Among the extremely long list of works dealing with these aspects, some crucial titles include: Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Elizabeth Özdalga ed., *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); M. Şükrü Haniöğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Amy Singer, Christoph K. Neumann and S. Akşin Somel eds., *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2011); Ayşe Ozil, *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Study of Communal Relations in Anatolia* (London: Routledge, 2013); Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

Apart from a few exceptions,³ neo-Ottomanism and its 19th-century counterpart have not yet been exhaustively analysed together. Considering the growing interest in and relevance of the two, the main purpose of this collection is to facilitate a collective inquiry into these issues. The aim is to discuss the ideas and concepts that characterised Ottomanism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, analyse how these are remembered and represented today, understand whether the meaning of Ottomanism at that time corresponds to the meaning assigned to it today, and establish the extent to which Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism can, if at all, stand a meaningful comparison. What this thematic issue aims to achieve is to nuance the image of the past as represented in post-Ottoman states, and to do so through reference to their nationalist histories and discourse. In doing so, this collection of articles attempts to sketch a clearer picture of the past, one which puts into perspective the post-Ottoman nation states' political and social engineering activities which, in turn, support the construction of memories of their imperial past, whether positive or negative, that appear distorted or incomplete. Ultimately, this collection does not focus only on highlighting the similarities between Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism. Instead, substantial effort has been placed on emphasising the contradictions employed by today's political elites in their attempt to construct a legitimate claim to power and justify policies on the basis of a tenuous, fabricated link with the past.

A total of eleven articles make up this thematic issue, divided between six historical inquiries and five contemporary analyses. Such an endeavour is particularly important at this time, with topical developments involving Turkey and other post-Ottoman societies unfolding by the day. It is precisely for this reason that the contemporary analyses within this thematic issue do not cover the latest turn of events: the situation is volatile, so an analysis of the latest events might well result in making assessments that rely heavily on guesswork rather than in considerations based on empirical research.

The historical articles approach the investigation of Ottomanism from very different angles, seeking to provide a wide spectrum of interpretations of the nationalist discourse during imperial times. A number of conclusions stem from these pieces. Generally speaking, what emerges is that Ottomanism should be considered as having been a viable and concrete option in the 19th

3 See, among others, Yılmaz Çolak, "Ottomanism vs. Kemalism: Collective Memory and Cultural Pluralism in 1990s Turkey", *MES* 42, no. 4 (2006): 587–602; and Şuhnaz Yılmaz and İpek Yosmaoğlu, "Fighting the Specters of the Past: Dilemmas of Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans and the Middle East", *MES* 44, no. 5 (2008): 677–93. However, this field deserves closer attention.

century. It should not simply be discarded, by applying a teleological approach, as an unworkable concept that was bound to fail. As far as the contemporary papers are concerned, their focus is on the meaning of Turkish (national) culture, the need for internal pacification, Turkish foreign policy, and the sites of imperial memory. This, already, conveys part of the story: although Ottomanism used to be a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon that adopted numerous avenues and permeated a variety of fields, its interpretation today seems to be somewhat narrower and limited to specific areas and purposes. A number of considerations can be drawn from this collective work.

Ottomanism was not a uniform concept. It was articulated in various overlapping discourses and plans, at times competing and at other times compatible, carried out and propagated through different means. Emerging at the onset of the reform period (Tanzimat, 1839–1876), Ottomanism took the shape of a critique of reform, as Sotirios Dimitriadis aptly reminds us when referring to the group known as the Young Ottomans. It embodied a call for changes geared towards re-establishing the constitutional regime that had been suspended in 1878, as well as towards representing the rights and duties of the non-dominant groups of the Empire, discussed in this issue with reference to Albanian, Arab, Kurdish, and Jewish Ottomans (in contributions by Hamit Bozarslan, Stefano Taglia, and Michael Talbot). Ottomanism was also a state initiative, oscillating between including foreigners in Ottoman society based on organic law and using Muslims abroad as a tool of diplomatic harassment against colonial powers, rooted in the idea of the religious legitimacy of the sultan/caliph. Ottomanism was also the guiding principle behind the foundation of educational establishments that sought to mould pupils according to specific societal values. This dynamic ideology took the shape of a transnational concept that necessarily transcended boundaries and was, surprisingly, welcomed by some sections of Western society. It was not solely a defensive discourse but an active ‘global Ottomanism’ that contributed to the formulation of anti-colonial practices. The diversity in discourse was also reflected in the means each group and individual employed for implementing and discussing each specific blend of Ottomanism: setting up and writing in journals, undertaking missionary activity, organising a political opposition, (mis)applying legal texts, and setting up ad hoc schools.

What clearly emerges from all of the historical articles is that Ottomanism was, in all its aspects and facets, a political and civic nationalist discourse. Too often, the emergence of nationalism in the wider Middle East is positioned in the post-imperial period because, from the Western experience, nationalism took shape after the fall of empires, either in the form of emancipation from foreign rule or following a revolution. In parallel, there is also a tendency to

analyse discourses and events in the wider Middle East through the lens of religion,⁴ thus neglecting to consider Ottomanism as a more complicated discourse than an Islamic reaction to Western imperialism or a secular ideology copied from the West. In a similar way, the frequent claim that Ottomanism should be regarded as a transnational discourse rather than a nationalist one misses the nuances of the discourse itself. As is clear from this collection, Ottomanism, in its many forms, attempted to create a new concept of a political entity and to locate the source of its legitimacy within an imperial framework. Whether it was focusing on the rights of the non-dominant groups, abolishing authoritarian rule, or incorporating newcomers to make them part of the game and force them to respect the game's rules, the main objective was to turn subjects into citizens. This was carried out by drawing on local sources of inspiration, not unequivocally based on a religious ethos. In attempting to do all this, old barriers of religion and ethnicity needed to be dismantled. Similarly, whether it was used in a corrupt way, e.g. as leverage to harass the colonial powers, or by non-Ottoman Muslims to legitimise their own position abroad, Ottomanism revealed itself to be a real and powerful (at least for a time) associative discourse, so much so that disparate groups such as Albanians, Arabs, Kurds, and Jews all discussed and negotiated their dual allegiance (to the state and to their own communities).

In the historical contributions, Blumi's work shows that Ottomanism was used by some to imagine their future as citizens of a unified Ottoman Empire and that the ideology "took on the characteristics of a modern civic identity, linking disparate actors by the simple conviction that the Ottoman Empire must survive". Simultaneously, Ottomanism emerged as a defensive, but not passive, and powerful idea that fuelled resistance to British and French colonial encroachments. As far away from Ottoman dominions as the Western Indian Ocean and South America, those struggling against colonialism found in the Ottomanism propagated by charismatic spiritual leaders a forceful ideology, which, in turn, contributed to the formulation of Orientalist images on the part of the West. Akcasu and Dimitriadis brilliantly show how Sultan Abdülhamid II and his statesmen, including Midhat Paşa, hoped to use Ottomanism as

4 In this sense, rather than Ottomanism, one should recall the idea of *vatan*, as formulated by Namık Kemal and other Young Ottomans; which framed the idea of 'nation' and called for a sense of patriotism as a reaction to Western ideas and policies, as well as being imbued with Islamic undertones. For more on the Young Ottomans and *vatan*, see Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottomans Thought: A Study in the Modernisation of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); and Nazan Çiçek, *The Young Ottomans: Turkish Critics of the Eastern Questions in the Late-Nineteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

a means of creating a modern citizenry, with a clear awareness of nationality and national culture, a modern education system, and a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities. From the discussion on this issue in Akcasu's "Migrants to Citizens", it emerges that, by accepting migrants into the imperial dominions, the sultan's Ottomanism was more interested in encouraging newcomers to embrace an Ottoman 'national' sentiment than it was in applying a Sunni-Ottoman exclusivism in selecting 'new' Ottomans. However, Abdülhamid also used Ottomanism to inspire the image of an accessible Ottoman nation for those outsiders struggling for independence from colonial rule. In doing this, the contradiction between internal and external Hamidian Ottomanism stands out clearly: as Akcasu points out, the extraterritorial Ottomanism of the sultan relied heavily on the divine source of caliphal authority. The presence of religion in external Ottomanism is also addressed in Sotirios Dimitriadis's article. Using the example of an Ottoman vocational school (*islahhane*) in Salonica, Dimitriadis argues that as long as Ottoman authority in the Balkans was not fully threatened, the school curriculum reflected an Ottomanism inspired by promoting a civic identity imbued with inclusiveness. When Ottoman authority in the area began to be challenged, the curriculum of the *islahhane* increasingly included Islamic elements, which served as a link between those Muslim communities located in the newly emerging Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire.

In the period when Ottomanism was emerging and developing, the Empire was undergoing drastic changes that impacted various religious and ethnic groups, with ethnic and linguistic nationalism being spread through missionary and foreign educational establishments, as well as through newly arrived immigrants. Because of this, a substantial component of the formulations and discussions on and around Ottomanism involved the non-dominant Ottoman groups. In his article, Michael Talbot surveys the push and pull of Ottomanism for a Jewish community faced with the powerful idea of Zionism. He depicts a situation in which a whole community, divided between Ottoman Jews and new Jewish immigrants, debated the issue of where its allegiance lay and what the future held for its members. To counter the possible appeal of Zionism, the state protected itself and the idea of Ottomanism by employing part of the Ottoman Jewish community as educators of the population and censors of possibly seditious publications. Bozarslan and Taglia, on the other hand, present an assessment of oppositional Ottomanism, as propagated by members of the non-dominant groups that challenged the Hamidian or Unionist visions of the nation, as opposed to the more widely discussed position put forward by the dominant members of the organisation known in Europe as the Young Turks. What stands out is that among the Albanian, Arab, and Kurdish Ottoman

communities there were those who were convinced proponents of Ottomanism. They abandoned it only after the Turkish community did; as Bozarslan himself suggests, they were non-nationalist upholders of a multi-ethnic and multireligious discourse, Ottomanism. What seems to emerge strongly from Bozarslan's piece, however, is that Ottomanism was regarded by parts of the non-Turkish Ottoman communities as being too loose an ideology and thus prone to give way, too easily, to Turkist undertones, under the rule of the Committee of Union and Progress. It was, nonetheless, regarded as an important tool to manipulate in order to work against the hegemony of the Turkish community, within the imperial framework. Taglia's contribution concentrates on the specific formulations of Ottomanism developed by the Young Turk intellectuals in exile. Taking the works of the Albanian Young Turk İsmail Kemal as an example, Taglia's article emphasises the involvement of non-Turkish Ottomans in formulating Ottomanism as a viable nationalist project. As a discourse in flux, Ottomanism also allowed for simultaneous belongings, as the analysis of İsmail Kemal's contribution to the thinking of Young Turk intellectuals clearly shows. Efforts to reform the Empire by individuals such as Kemal, Şerif Paşa, and Sâti'âl-Huṣṣrî should be regarded as genuine, despite their allegiance to a specific community and their commitment to the latter's improvement. The legitimacy of their actions, as well as their wholehearted commitment to the welfare of two seemingly contradictory yet ultimately compatible communities, should be appreciated. In the end, it surfaces from this collection of articles that Ottomanism failed for a number of reasons. Specifically, it was abandoned by a large part of those who had been its proponents and believers because its core idea of equality was betrayed by the dominant section of society when the latter arrived at a crossroads: the struggle to pursue a multireligious and multi-ethnic avenue that appeared doomed to fail, or the appeal of sacrificing everything, including the people, in exchange for gaining authority and control over the political process and social environment.

The contemporary section of this collection further emphasises that Ottomanism was a more complicated and articulated discourse than the way in which it is currently remembered. Neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, presents itself as a more linear and uniform train of thought. It is a specific projection of 'what used to be' in the Ottoman world, with unequivocal targets and with a narrower aim. Yet, as M. Hakan Yavuz argues, there are differences within neo-Ottomanism as well. Although they are viewed as overlapping, the neo-Ottomanisms formulated by former Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal and by the JDP today are fundamentally different. From all these articles, a common feature of both Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism does in fact emerge. Similar to Ottomanism, the re-examination of the Ottoman past, as

carried out specifically by Özal and, later, by members of the AKP, should be treated as a nationalist discourse. In this case, these new utterances of nationalism are framed within a new conception and a drive away from the older Kemalist world view, which is thought to have been, as Yavuz himself describes it, too 'Jacobinian'. In today's Turkey, as highlighted by Gabriela Özel Volfová and Lerna Yanik, these thoughts are usually formulated for outside consumption, as part of Turkish foreign policy, in order to re-establish Turkish primacy in the Middle East and in the Turkic states of the former Soviet Union. However, the projection of supremacy is also instilled within Turkey, for both foreign visitors and Turks themselves. A case in point is the attempt to stretch Turkish 'ownership' of a number of sites that were part of Ottoman dominions, but that are geographically outside modern Turkey, as Jeremy Walton's description of the various replicas of Miniaturk highlights. Furthermore, the internal presence of the memory and interpretation of the Ottoman past is undeniable. It becomes crucial when, as Yavuz suggests, it serves the purpose of building a new national (*milli*) identity. However, these new concepts should not be seen as having emerged abruptly during recent years. As Yanik and Yavuz both underline, the process has been slow and dates as far back as the first years of the Republic. The process of negation or sidelining of the recent past that was perpetrated during the Kemalist era should, therefore, be appreciated as part-and-parcel of the reconstruction and political use of Ottoman memory. This brings into consideration the use of the past. It is clear that the memory of what used to be a little over a century ago can change drastically (i.e. between Kemalism and the post-1990s), and can be reconstructed and reframed to suit the needs of the ruling establishment. Walton describes how this memory is revived or erased as part of a political project of nation-building or identity reinforcement, as in the case of Istanbul Miniaturk, Thessaloniki's Yeni Camii and the tomb of Gül Baba in Budapest; "[f]or many Turks today [Walton reminds us], neo-Ottoman memory provides a template for the beautiful, the good, and the true." But this same period can be remembered very differently by the contemporary heirs of those who were non-dominant Ottomans during the last centuries of the Empire. This is the focus of the paper by Ana Dević, who analyses how Ottoman memory and its use by the Turkish government is interpreted as a threat by Serbian observers of developments in the Middle East. As Dević shows, for them, neo-Ottomanism is the new embodiment of the centuries-old expansionist ethos of the Empire, which threatened not only the territorial rights of some, but also the overall security of 'Christian lands'. In this sense, the example depicted by Dević also speaks to an attempt to formulate and reinforce Serbian identity, by imagining an archetypal enemy of the past and projecting it into the present.

A number of crucial considerations stem from the collection. Ottomanism was multifaceted and should be regarded as a concrete attempt at the political and cultural modernisation of the Empire, whether it originated from the sultan or the opposition. This was so much the case that it caught the attention of the Great Powers and Muslims abroad. Its importance and centrality is also manifested by the interest it receives in today's sociopolitical discussions. It becomes clear that the interpretation of the past taking place in contemporary Turkey, as well as in other post-Ottoman nation states, involves an exercise in selective memory. In this sense, today's image of the Ottoman past is more representative of Istanbul's version of Ottomanism than it is of its opponents depicted in this collection. In fact, save for the central dilemma of how to deal with non-dominant groups, contemporary discussions evolve around the attempt at regaining authority and supremacy in the area that was once the Ottoman Empire. However, Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism stand meaningful comparison as both emerge from a concrete need to reposition a political entity following a period marked by old or unsustainable foundations. Whether these old pillars constituted the legitimacy of the sultan/caliph, the contract between an absolute ruler and his population, the political programme of acceptance by the West, epitomised by the 'official' suppression of religion and its symbols carried out in Republican Turkey, or the cultural reorientation carried out following the rejection of Turkey as a member of the European Union, it is clear that a new 'nationalist' programme has been devised. Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism also share a homogenising mission: developing a discourse that is inclusive of the various ethnicities and instilling a sense of pride, one which is more grounded in its 19th-century contemporaneity in terms of Ottomanism, rather than being geared up to a nostalgic attempt to re-establish bygone grandeur, as in the case of neo-Ottomanism. Yet there is another aspect that the two share, and it has to do with an increase in prestige on the world scene. Ottomanism was intended to be part of an anti-colonial struggle, as the ideology of a state that protected the oppressed and as an idea that contributed to the formulation of transnational political dynamics. It strove to achieve this by locating the Empire on the international scene as an important player. Similarly, neo-Ottomanism's objective is to present Turkey as the heir and rightful owner of past glories, the example of a successful, modern Muslim society, and the alternative ally to the exclusivist and orientalist policies of the West. There are also, however, fundamental differences between the two. One that forcefully makes its way to the fore is that Ottomanism was an elitist ideology, one that the masses did not grasp in its entirety. Possibly due to other, more appealing discourses, the larger Ottoman population regarded it as being out of tune with the times. Neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, speaks to the

wider population and, for many, is either an appealing, nostalgic world view or the embodiment of a menace from the past that haunts today's world. However, all aspects covered in this issue point to the fact that historical Ottomanism and its contemporary identifications are both concerned with redefining national culture and a world view, one that involves geopolitical repositioning and, ultimately, provides a sustainable blueprint for imagining the future. Lastly, but no less importantly, both sets of discourses should be viewed as malleable ideologies in a state of constant negotiation, adapting to the changing needs of their formulators and environment.