

*Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism.* By M. Hakan Yavuz Oxford. UK: Oxford University Press, 2020, 317 pp. ISBN: 9780197512289 doi: 10.22679/avs.2020.5.2.010

History is the recycling bin of politics. Politicians across the world manipulate historical facts to validate their political standing; Turkish politicians are no exception. Keen observers of Turkey have been closely following the rise of Ottomanism in Turkey since the 1980s; the craze for the Ottoman past has intensified in the last two decades under the rule of the Justice and Development Party/Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP). Scholars have published several articles and book chapters on neo-Ottomanism, paving the way for this first book-length study of the subject. M. Hakan Yavuz, a prolific scholar who has written on pretty much every aspect of modern Turkish politics, is well-positioned to cover this complex topic. The book covers neo-Ottomanism from the rise of the Ottomanism idea in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire to the contemporary domestic and foreign affairs of Turkey and contains eight chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. The brief introduction and conclusion found in each chapter provide useful, early glimpses of its contents.

Yavuz starts with a personal recollection in the preface, explaining how historical memories in his Anatolian town of Bayburt were powerful enough to instill residents with patriotic fervor. This personal connection compels readers to check their own pasts and reminded me of my kite-flying childhood days on the Theodosius walls of Istanbul. In the introduction, Yavuz states his aim to unearth the socio-political origins of neo-Ottomanism and introduces his argument that neo-Ottomanism is nothing but the product of active imagination. According to Yavuz, the core of neo-Ottomanism predated British journalist David Barchard's credited coining of the term in 1985. The author posits that neo-Ottomanism is the latest episode in a decades-long ideological struggle between Kemalists and neo-Ottomanists over Turkish identity.

In the first chapter, Yavuz digs into the Ottoman past and summarizes the nineteenth century historical background of Ottomanism. He uses excerpts from interviews with Turkish Sufi order members, politicians and opinion makers to support the claim that the idea of neo-Ottomanism has been brewing in the conservative circles of Turkey since the 1950s. Yavuz explains the nineteenth century conditions that gave rise to the idea of Ottomanism, beginning with the Ottoman *tanzimat* (restructuring) reforms initiated in 1839. In an age of separatist nationalism, the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire sought to craft a new overarching identity to maintain the multiethnic, multireligious empire, while modernizing with western ideas, including nationalism. The swim against the tide failed to save the empire but left behind a western-educated elite, first the

Young Ottomans and later the Young Turks. While the former embraced Ottomanism to preserve the empire, the latter lacked unity and were ideologically divided between Ottomanists, Turkish nationalists and Islamists. A series of wars from 1911 to 1922 from Libya and the Balkans to World War I and finally, warfare within the Turkish homeland brought the end of empire along with the deaths and suffering of millions. This chapter provides a broad overview of the rise and fall of the Ottomanism idea within the Ottoman Empire.

The second chapter delves into Kemalist reforms in the early Turkish republic and traces the fragmentary pieces of the Ottomanism idea in post-Ottoman Turkish society. Selective amnesia in the Kemalist republic became a coping mechanism to forget the devastating suffering of the late Ottoman period and helped legitimize the existence of a new state. The western-educated republican elite followed Orientalist thinking emanating from Europe which identified Islam as the core cause of Ottoman weakness.

Earlier coverage of these concepts in the book would have been more helpful for novice readers of the topic. While turning a heterogenous Ottoman society into a homogenous nation-state required imagination, so did the resistance against this social engineering project. Yavuz narrates this struggle in detail; Kemalists turned to the little-known history of the pre-Islamic Turkish world, casting aside the Ottomans as useless, decadent, and corrupt. The dichotomy between Kemalist selective amnesia and popular social memory shaped by suffering, death, and migration drove a rift between state and society, which widened further through a radical shift in alphabet from Arabic to Latin, rendering millions illiterate and cutting their connection with the Ottoman past.

The divide between the Kemalist elite and the people offered an opportunity to conservatives, who bridged the gap with an imaginary Ottoman past. Popular historians, fiction writers and poets crafted an imagined Ottoman history unsubstantiated by academic knowledge. Yavuz mentions some leftist intellectuals and novelists such as Dogan Avcioğlu and Kemal Tahir, who joined out of a desire for a communal society with a strong statist tradition, akin to the Ottoman structure and preferred Ottoman cosmopolitanism to a republican homogenous nation-state. Nevertheless, the conservative thinkers writing about the Ottomans far outnumbered the leftists and nearly dominated the field. The Turkish right's Cold War anti-communist stance brought together nationalism and Islam through a Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS), which fostered creation of the quintessential Ottomans.

Yavuz's third chapter analyzes and explains how three literary groups contributed to the creation of the idea of neo-Ottomanism. The first group includes Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar and 2006 Nobel literature laureate Orhan Pamuk. Beyatlı was an Istanbul romantic poet, who has written a poem about almost every neighborhood of the old city. His poems were among the elements used to Turkify the Ottomans. Yavuz could have strengthened his argument by mentioning Beyatlı's

famous *Akıncılar (Raiders)* (1919) poem and its romanticized Ottoman warrior culture which was taught in school textbooks during the 1980s and the 1990s. While Yavuz mentions that Tanpınar preferred Ottoman communitarianism over individualism, the republic clearly did not embrace individualism during his lifetime. Rather, Tanpınar favored Ottomania for its gradual modernization, which he preferred to a radical break in social fabric that alienated and isolated the people. The identity crisis created by this sudden shift became a major theme in the works of Pamuk. Unlike the Kemalist elite, neither Beyatlı, Tanpınar, nor Pamuk has viewed the dichotomy between the Ottoman Empire and republic as black and white; they wished a smooth transition to modernity. Tanpınar and Pamuk missed Ottoman cosmopolitanism, while Beyatlı longed for the Islamic cultural components of the empire. In the second literary group, Yavuz covers TIS proponents Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Seyyid Ahmad Arvasi, leftist novelist Kemal Tahir, and nationalist Erol Güngör. Kısakürek garners particular attention because of his influence on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ideological evolution and the larger political Islamic movement in Turkey. Turkish Islamic movements, in general, and Erdoğan, in particular, held similar prejudicial views of Jews, minorities, and freemasons. The leftist Tahir saw a powerful all-reaching Ottoman state akin to the communism he envisioned. Ahmet Arvasi and the Sufis of the third group spread the ideal Ottoman image through their Sufi circles and kept alive the selective Ottoman memory. The chapter's theme reveals how fiction writers projected their personal ideologies onto the Ottomans. Proponents of TIS and Islamic political groups discovered the ideal of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, for the nationalists, the empire contained ideal nationalism, and for some in the Turkish left, the Ottomans attained the ideal statist society.

The fourth chapter covers the evolution and promotion of neo-Ottomanism under the rule of the late Turkish prime minister and then president Turgut Özal in the 1980s. Özal was the architect of Turkey's transition from a mixed economic to capitalist system. With a Nakşibendi Sufi order background and an admiration for the Ottoman past, Özal did his best to spread a positive Ottoman image through school textbooks. It is a pity that Yavuz omitted from this chapter useful information that would have strengthened his argument. He mentions Tarık Buğra's *Osmancık* novel (p. 90) but overlooks that the 1987 *Kuruluş "Osmancık"* television series, produced by Turkey's sole TV station at the time, the state-run TRT, exerted a greater domestic impact than the contemporary series. Moreover, Özal opened up the Ottoman archives to researchers and facilitated academic studies of the Ottoman past. Nevertheless, the chapter offers a detailed analysis, not only of the Nakşibendi Sufi order's dissemination of an imagined ideal Ottoman society, but of the order's role in forming political Islam in Turkey through Necmettin Erbakan's National Outlook (Milli Görüş) movement, a precursor of the current Erdoğan AKP government.

Yavuz uses chapter six to analyze "Erdoğan's Neo-Ottomanism" along with

AKP's overall neo-Ottomanist domestic policy. He leaves no AKP decision maker unbruised in this chapter and the next, which examines the neo-Ottomanist foreign policy. The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (r.1878-1909) earned the hatred of the Young Turks by forcing them underground. Their Kemalist successors maintained this anger for generations. The Kemalists' conservative adversaries responded with the polar opposite view of Abdulhamid II, as an ideal Ottoman-Islamic leader. Erdoğan's supporters have picked out parallels between Abdulhamid II and Erdoğan, whom they hold as the last bastion of Islam, paving the way towards his sultan-style form of authoritarianism. While Yavuz finds far more differences than similarities between the two leaders, Kemalists and Islamist political activists care little about nuanced academic analysis. Yavuz covers the impact of neo-Ottomanist gentrification projects in Turkey, or how Turkey's greedy construction industry has used reproductions of the Ottoman architectural past as a smoke screen. One such project, which aimed to replace Istanbul's Gezi Park with a replica of the demolished Ottoman military barracks, Topçu Kışlası, backfired, triggering nationwide protests in 2013. Business entrepreneurs have not failed to capitalize on the spread of Ottomanism. Turkish society has developed a taste for neo-Ottoman consumption, from Ottoman cuisine to the fine arts to daily consumer goods, like tea and coffee cups. The menus of some of the so-called Ottoman restaurants resemble French fries in a Chinese restaurant but in a country with so few culinary historians there is little to no adverse reaction. A massive budget allows Turkey's state-owned broadcasting network, TRT, to run AKP backed Ottoman-themed television series, such as Ertuğrul and Abdulhamid II, for years. While the original *Kuruluş "Osmanlı"* had only 12 episodes, the latest series have hundreds of ninety minute episodes. Fictional depictions of the past tend to leave a deeper mark on the public mind than less exciting academic works. Perhaps because of the weightier impact of these fictions, Yavuz does not delve into the details of history textbooks.

In the seventh chapter Yavuz examines AKP government neo-Ottomanist foreign policy since 2002, which he attributes to the former Foreign Minister and one-time Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. While Yavuz finds the idealism-driven foreign policy to be irrational, he points out that the European Union's rejection has forced Turkey to seek alternative foreign policy options. Erdoğan's (Milli Görüş) National Outlook predecessor, Erbakan, initiated a D-8 group with the goal of establishing economic collaboration between eight Muslim-majority nations but pro-Islamic AKP governments prioritized nationalist-oriented neo-Ottomanism over Islamic focused D-8 foreign policy. A comparative approach between the two would have enriched this chapter.

The eighth chapter covers the impact of neo-Ottomanist foreign policy in the former Ottoman lands, the Balkans, and the Arab world and examines the reaction of those in the Balkans and the Arab world to neo-Ottomanism. Yavuz emphasizes that

the Muslim and Christian views of neo-Ottomanism starkly differ in the Balkans: the Muslim population warmly welcomes neo-Ottomanism, while Christians are terrified by it. In the aftermath of the Cold War a shifting ideological and political landscape left Balkan Muslims without a protector. Any government in Turkey, whether Kemalist or Islamist, would have been pushed to adopt a more active foreign policy to protect Turkish interests and security in the Balkans and Middle East. Yavuz indicates that the AKP's foreign policy in the Middle East was torn between Islamic idealism and political realism. AKP support for the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt frightened royal leaders in the region who feared the precedent established by an Islamic democracy in the most populous Arab country and saw it as a threat to their survival. Turkey thus ended up with torn relations with major Arab countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and having failed diplomatically, had to resort to military involvement to protect its interests in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. An explicit neo-Ottomanist foreign policy does not seem to have produced viable outcomes, as Turkish military involvement in conflict zones has multiplied in the last decade. Yavuz uses a quote from former American ambassador James Jeffrey (p. 234) at the end of chapter eight to support the argument that politicians lacking economic resources must rely on their imagination, but additional economic data could have better illustrated the point.

Yavuz concludes with five negative outcomes of neo-Ottomanism. First, its collectivist and xenophobic rhetoric hinders domestic peace. Second, sloppy and uncalculated neo-Ottomanist rhetoric spreads fear and mistrust among neighboring countries, making it harder to reach goals. Third, opposition to nearly all of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms creates another internal layer of domestic strife. Fourth, the inability to distinguish Western practices from ideals creates domestic adversaries to universal values, some of which are championed by Islam. Fifth, occasional mentions of the stillborn Sevres Treaty (1920) to rally the masses scares potential foreign investors.

From the Byzantine dreams of Greece and the Zionism of Israel to America's evangelical foreign policy and neo-Ottomanism, nearly all of the competing foreign policies in the Near East have been inspired by the historical imagination. All seem to follow a similar religious pattern: things were good for their respective peoples in the past, they have deteriorated, and now we are coming to restore lost glory. While only experienced readers of Middle East politics can decipher these historical patterns, more explicit coverage from Yavuz would have helped younger readers. The book nevertheless opens up new avenues of research for future inquiries into neo-Ottomanism.

Senior scholars often fall into the assumption that readers may have basic knowledge about the concepts they employ. Here Yavuz is guilty of using Benedict Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities* (1983) without mentioning Anderson and referring to Orientalism and self-Orientalism without discussing Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Yavuz presents neo-Ottomanism and the AKP government as anti-Western but does

not specify the context and type of West they oppose. Approaching the orient or occident as a monolith impairs academic understanding and clouds judgment. While Yavuz mentions Jacobin Westernization and secularization in Turkey, an explanation of these ideas would have been particularly useful for American readers, who often simply regard secularism as the separation of state and religion. Turkish secularism followed the French model in which the state controls religion. Moreover, the West followed by Turkey in the interwar period was the authoritarian West, not the progressive liberal West which emerged victorious from WWII.

Historians are familiar with the use and abuse of historical knowledge. In the past, history textbooks and public education systems handed over the magnetic needle of the history compass to politicians who shifted the path of nation wherever they desired. Today, the media, social media, fiction, literature, and public relations in general have a greater impact than formal educational institutions. In her *Nostalgia for the Modern* (2006), Esra Özyürek, cited by Yavuz, explored how Turkey's Kemalists were vying to return to the authoritarianism of the 1930s. In an ironic twist, the neo-Ottomanist adversaries of Kemalism are now vying to bring back Ottoman authoritarianism. In a land of authoritarian dreamers, proponents of democracy may not fulfill their desires without imaginations as creative as their rivals.

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