

Article of H. Millas in *Rethinking Greek-Turkish Relations Since 1999*, Edited by Gökçe Bayındır Goulakas and Hakan Sezgin Erkan, Lexington Books, New York, London, October 2017.

Neo-Ottomanism, a Book and Bilateral Perceptions

Various political analysts lately introduced the term Neo-Ottomanism to interpret Turkey's political choices. [1] No matter whether this term is the proper one to use since Turkey officially disassociated itself from it, the conservative/Islamist governments that rule the country since 2002 followed an innovative course that needs to be defined. The political and ideological motives behind important decisions, such as to confront the military and judiciary bureaucracy of the country, to stage an active foreign policy and to encourage a more traditional public life-style, for some were positive signs of a more democratic and dynamic society and for others an indication that there was a major ideological shift inspired mainly by a conservative interpretation of an Ottoman legacy.

In this article I will try to illustrate how a book on political strategies that was published in Turkey in 2001 played an important role in both a) publicizing within Turkey a positive understanding of Ottoman legacy and b) causing a negative perception of a "revival of new-Ottomanism" within Greece. In other words an academic endeavor played a role in forming political opinions and eventually strategic concerns since the term Ottomanism itself initiated its own momentum.

The modern Turkish state and its anti-Ottoman worldview

The modern Turkish Republic was established in 1923 by distancing itself from the Ottoman past. Especially the recent past of the empire was discredited and demonized by the new regime. This can be best documented by the textbooks of 1930's in which the official views of the new state were most clearly and systematically stated and where everything Ottoman was shown as decadent, harmful, unethical, non-patriotic, backward, etc. Two aspects of these "secular" textbooks are of special interest since by comparison with the present-day textbooks show what have changed, or better, what was yearning to have changed the last decades: The first was the militant position taken against "religious fanaticism" which was attributed to the Ottoman past and the second, the dissociation of modern Turks from their recent past by discovering (rather by inventing) the ancestors of the new nation in Central Asia. Both endeavors were targeted against the "Islamist Ottoman" past, naturally, as this past was perceived and presented by the founders of the new state Kemalist cadres.

A historical thesis was introduced for the first time in its most detailed form in the textbooks of 1930s. [2] The purpose of the "Turkish History Thesis" was to assist the Turkish nation-building. The Turks were shown to be the oldest people on earth who originally lived in Central Asia. They then migrated and founded almost all the major civilizations (Mesopotamian, Ionian, ancient Greek, and so on). This absurd thesis was gradually abandoned in the following decades but its remnants are felt in efforts of present-day Kemalists when occasionally they try to bypass the recent Ottoman past.

In the textbooks of the 1930s the Ottoman past was discredited directly. The Ottoman culture, Islam and its practices, the sultans, the language used in the Ottoman period, the multi-ethnic imperial structure, the relations with the "west", the educational system, the "eastern" life style and the philosophy of the Ottoman state were all condemned. For example in the textbooks of the 1930s we read the following: [3]

"During the Ottoman period not only was national history neglected but also negated and distorted... The Turkishness that existed before Islam was absent in the textbooks. They wanted to pass the message that the Turkish civilization, grandeur and nobleness were attained only after reaching Islam and the Ottoman rule... Only after 1929 national history in its true meaning started being taught in our schools" (Tarih 4, page 259).

"The Ottomanist movement which had the dream of creating a single nation out of different ethnic groups did not even mention the name 'Turk' and thus opened the road to delete this name from the pages of history" (1, Preface) "They were naïve enough to believe ... that with freedom and equality the Greeks [the term Rums is used, HM], the Bulgarians and the Serbs will forget what they are and they will become Ottomans" (Tarih 3, p. 128).

The Arabic aspect of Islam was specially criticized. Islam was interpreted as a political system and not as a pious faith, let alone as a “true faith”. It was even inferred that the Koran was the result of the inspiration of the Prophet and not “the order of Allah”.

“[Prophet] Mohammed understood that the Arabs needed to reform their bad and primitive ethics and habits, he thought for years in seclusion about this and then the idea of ‘vahiy’ [revelation, apocalypse the word of Allah, HMMHM] and inspiration occurred to him... Mohammed presented the verses of Koran which were the fruits of his long thinking according to the needs [of the society]” (Tarih 2, 91).

These textbooks explained that starting from the 15th century religious fanaticism caused the expulsion of “the European artists that were in the royal court... and they were replaced by the ones that came from the East” (Tarih 3, 36) inferring that “the West” was superior to “the East” (Tarih 3, 38). Islam, Islamism and Ottomanism were also condemned with references to Sultan Abdulhamit, one of the latest Sultans. “They mistakenly thought that they could protect the country by the support of some Muslim powers” (Tarih 3, 139). In other words Islamism was also a “dream”, similar to Ottomanism. “The authoritarian, disastrous, dishonest and gloomy reign of Abdulhamit” had caused unrest and resistance (Tarih 3, 140). Science and positivist thinking had to replace the old approaches: Superstition had to be abandoned and “the true way, the route to civilization” had to be followed (Tarih 4, 236). “Religion has to be in harmony with common sense, with logic and science in order to be natural” (Tarih 4, 249).

The “Kemalist reforms” that shook the country in the years 1922-1935 clearly showed that the understanding expressed in these textbooks was actually put into practice by the new regime. Especially the changes made in religious matters, associating them in each case to a negative Ottoman past, signaled the meaning of these reforms. The caliphate and the position of Sheikh ul-Islam (both religious authorities) were abandoned, a directorate of Religious Affairs was established and the state control on related issues was secured, the state undertook the mission to “enlighten” and direct the public in matter of beliefs by closing down and prohibiting the Sufi “orders” and their holy places the “tekkes”, the traditional dresses associated with Islam like the headgear were outlawed and the western hat was imposed, the Quran was translated into Turkish and the call to prayer changed from Arabic into Turkish, the Arabic script was changed into Latin alphabet, etc. It was made clear that a positivist and “scientific” approach was to replace the backward (“gerici”) Ottoman/Islamic practices.

Irrespective of the motives, the intentions and the nature of these initiatives, the new measures were perceived as anti-religious and/or as an abuse of private life by a considerable section of the society. The subsequent changes cannot be understood unless the “history” behind the developments is clarified. When democratization schemes were put into practice after 1945 and a multi-party parliamentary system was introduced, the political leaders were obliged to come into terms with their voters. Some “secular” measures were loosened. For example the Quran in Arabic returned, dress codes were relaxed and religious lessons in schools were reestablished. Changes of these kinds were gradual and their course will not be dealt here. Suffice to mention that with the coming to power of the “Islamists”, as the Justice and Progress Party (AKP) was called by many, the situation changed considerably.

The “Ottomanism” of the Islamists

A comparison of the textbooks of 2010’s with those of 1930s illustrates the changes incurred and/or attempted by AKP governments. I limit the comparison to the Ottoman legacy.

The image of the Ottoman past in the textbooks of 2000s was almost the opposite of the one presented in the textbooks of 1930s. This past has been re-evaluated and exalted, new constructed memories, concepts of legacy, identities and Ottomanism are introduced.

“The Ottoman State was multi-ethnic in character... In the city of Thessalonica Greeks [Rums], Bulgarians, Serbs, Jews and Armenians lived (along with the Turks). This multi-ethnic structure along with various languages, beliefs and traditions secured a great cultural richness in the country” (Başol, 16).

The various ethnic groups lived in peace for centuries in the Ottoman Empire (Cangır, 62). In the new textbooks the “East” is shown as superior to the “West”: Renaissance occurred because “Italy was in close relations with the Muslim cultures” (Cangır, 58). “When the Ottomans were making important developments in science in Europe ... Galilei was facing the Inquisition. In Italy Bruno ... was executed” (Okur, 2008b, 189).

The derogatory language against the Ottomans and their legacy is completely absent in the new textbooks. It is reminded that in the first years of the Turkish Republic efforts to start a multi-party parliament had failed (Okur, 2008b, 53- 54) and that the positive aspects of modern Turkey had their roots in the Ottoman legacy:

“The Ottoman State passed to the new Republic with the inherited establishments like the parliament, its political cadres, a press organization and its educational system... The constitutional system, the basic rights and liberties, the political parties, the free press were started in this (Ottoman) period” (Okur, 2008b, 121).

The cultural superiority of the Ottoman period is demonstrated by mentioning Ottoman “scientists”, “artists”, “researchers” etc. Exaggerations are frequent. The harems for example are presented as schools where the girls: “with extensive study learned music, painting, literature, embroidering and religion... They passed their days by reading and especially learning history” (Cangır, 54). All citizens could see the Sultan and ask for his intervention when they felt mistreated by the courts (Cangır, 75). In these old times Hasan Çelebi flew 300 meter high into the air in a rocket and then landed with the help of wings! (Okur, 2008b,190).

Islam now is taught as the “true belief”. Atatürk is quoted to have said that “our religion is the most normal religion and the one in harmony with reason; it is the most tolerant; everybody should be free to choose his belief... this is the requirement of secularism” (Okur, 2008b. 160); and “The Muslims of all the world should follow the way showed by the last prophet of Allah and should follow His orders” (Okur, 102).The Arabs having chosen Islam as their religion “they turned to the vanguards in the fields of economy, arts, science and thinking” (Okur, 128). The various religious orders like the Mevlevi, the Bektashis who were outlawed in the 1930s now they are presented as useful to Turkishness: “*The orders facilitated Islamisation in the areas controlled by the Turks*” (Okur, 2008b, 76). *Islam, contrary to the other religions, elevated the spiritual aspect of the Turks*” (Okur, 2008b, 72).

The once demonized Sultan Abdulhamit is now praised: “Sultan Abdulhamit tried hard to find solutions in order to stop the weathering away of the Ottoman State” (Okur, 2008b, 121). It is also mentioned that “on March 1, 1921 the Turkish parliament and Afghanistan signed an agreement”, inferring that Muslim solidarity is a realistic expectation (Başol, 68). Islam is shown as indispensable for the Turkish national identity: “The Turks who chose Islam preserved their Turkish identity... the Kıpçak Turks who chose Christianity lost their national identity” (Okur, 94-96).

The paradigm shift that occurred in the sphere of national past and national identity is apparent. Turkish state in the 2000s promoted a new understanding that cannot justify a readily exclusion of the term “Neo-Ottomanism”. This change occurred gradually starting from the 1950s but it turned to a dominant scheme only lately. The term Neo-Ottomanism in the international arena is mostly used in conjunction to politics, to ideology and to the choices of Turkey in foreign policies. Indeed, the paradigm shift has this pragmatic dimension, too.

The *Strategic Depth* of a prime minister

The book titled *Strategic Depth* by Ahmet Davutoğlu (AD) which contained a thorough analysis of the state policies in the foreign affairs of Turkey the last decades and which suggested what was the proper course to be followed was published in 2001, eight years before he was involved in politics. It is important for several reasons. We see what kind of ideas attracted Davutoğlu who became the minister of foreign affairs and then the prime minister. Tayyip Erdoğan – the prime minister and later the president of Turkey – assigned A. Davutoğlu as minister of foreign affairs and later as prime minister and this shows that he was in tune with the well publicized political views of the writer of *Strategic Depth*. The book had an important impact in Turkey and the views advanced in it were popularized,

especially among the members and followers of AKP. By comparing the views of *Strategic Depth* with the ones in the present-day textbooks and with various related publications in the Turkish media, the importance and the impact of the book becomes apparent.

The book in question was translated into Greek in 2010, it was widely read in Greece and it was presented as a document that portrays Turkish intentions vis-à-vis Greece, playing a part in creating an image of Turkey and Greek-Turkish relations.

Strategic Depth is not easy, however, to read and to summarize. It is voluminous, more than 550 pages with tiny letters, it contains many repetitions, occasionally unintelligible poetic metaphors and incoherent theories. [\[4\]](#) Here I will sum up the main arguments of A. Davutoğlu.

1. AD clearly criticized the “Kemalist” foreign policy that was followed after 1923 and almost to our days: “The new Turkish state evaded all international responsibility and quitted all demands. Instead of trying to cover a strong place in the international system it was decided to protect the borders of ‘national oath’ [‘Misaki Milli’ of 1920]... They preferred to be in the western bloc” (p. 69).

2. AD even challenged the prevalent view that the late Sultan was an awful one. Sultan Abdulhamit – whose policy was condemned in the textbooks of the 1930s but praised in the textbooks of 2011 - was shown as a wise leader, even as an example to be followed in our days. Abdulhamit was presented to have exercised a clever foreign policy by utilizing his Muslim identity to secure the help of the Muslims who were under colonial rule (52-53).

3. Turkey is seen as a special country that cannot be compared to its neighbors.

“Turkey is not any nation-state that came to existence due to conjectural circumstances. On the contrary it is the outcome of a historical legacy which was formed out of centuries-long lasting struggles against the dominant civilization which formed the international system... The Ottoman state was the political entity in the only cultural area where the opposite part of Europe was established and where it exercised its rule” (p. 66).

One senses that Turkey is presented as a kind of counterbalance and even an antagonist to the “opposite part” which is Europe.

4. This political entity which contests Europe had special merits: “History teaches that the Ottoman-Turkish foreign policy was not imperialist or colonialist” (52).

5. On the contrary the Christian West has negative characteristics, barbarism being one of them:

“Each Ottoman city which had to be abandoned preserved its old characteristics until they were destroyed by the barbarous invading powers... The most recent example is Sarajevo. The direct destruction of the Ottoman cities by part of the representatives of western civilization meant also a process of withdrawal of the accumulated cultural richness of humanity from the scene of history” (195).

6. The Ottomans who “accumulated the cultural richness of humanity against the western civilization” and Turkey which continues its legacy deserve and even are obliged to have certain rights in the area which other nations should not.

“Turkey is the residue and the heir of the Ottoman State and as such it preserves its imperial structures in different forms as does Russia ... Therefore, it has the obligation to choose much different defense policies than, say Romania, which does not have an obligation of that kind due to its different legacy” (38).

7. Due to its imperial past Turkey has the right, even an “obligation” to have a zone around it, a “hinderland” a “life area” (hayat sahası, hayat alanı in Turkish). This was explained with references to “Lebensraum” (SIC). This “right” is not recognized to the neighbors of Turkey since they did not possess an imperial legacy (102-171). “It is impossible for Turkey... to think of planning its defense based on its present day borders. Its historical legacy dictates interference at any moment to the de facto situations beyond its borders” (41).

8. What in practice “interference” might mean is found in the following sentences.

“A country that ignores Cyprus can not have a determinant say in the global and peripheral politics” (176). “Turkey has to maintain a Cyprus issue even if there were not a single Muslim Turk on the Island” (179). “Turkey should try to obtain legal guaranties which will enable it to intervene in cases of the Muslim minorities in the Balkans. The legitimate intervention in Cyprus ... became possible because of this kind of a legal status” (123).

9. Almost a metaphysical historical destiny and identity compel Turkey to express its interest in its periphery, being the heir of a unique empire (29, 66). The Muslims in the neighboring countries are considered “Ottoman residues” (Osmanlı bakiyesi) and Turkey was presented to have a say and an obligation vis-à-vis these communities.

“Turkey’s basic political influence ... should be based on the Ottoman residues which are the Muslim communities” (123). «Due to the new conditions in the area, the defense of Eastern Thrace and of Istanbul does not depend on the ground forces stationed in Eastern Thrace but on the dynamic influence in the diplomatic and military spheres that will be attained beyond borders” (104).

10. Finally AD proposed that Turkey should not be involved in controversies with small countries like Syria and Greece (this was compared to a heavy-weight wrestler practicing with a light-weight wrestler) but instead to undertake a worldwide role in international relations (147).

The Greek perception of *Strategic Depth*.

In Greece the above mentioned principles were perceived by some analysts as a new strategic

state policy of Turkey which is characterized as follows: [5] Turkey sees herself as a special case where she attributes to herself special rights and missions. The foreign policy followed the last decades and until recently was not correct and should be revised. The new policy should be based on the notion that Turkey is special, not like and especially not equal to its neighbors and a force counter to the “Western world”. The “West”, where Greeks believe they belong, is portrayed as negative in respect with Turkey and even “barbaric”. Turkey has the right to have a special defense policy. This includes a right to obtain a “hinderland” (Lebestraum) where she will be able to interfere and intervene beyond her borders. An example of this “right” is the intervention in Cyprus, which—contrary to official viewpoint of Turkey until recently - is not justified as an effort “to protect the Turkish population” but as a strategic act. The same should be exercised, states AD, in other parts of the Balkans by the justification of the presence of Muslim minorities.

On hearing of the “interference” the Greeks automatically think of the Muslims of Dodecanese and of Western Thrace and the “intervention/invasion” of Cyprus. Some other passages in the said book also caused concern in Greece. The writer mentioned the missed opportunity to possess the (present) Greek islands of the Aegean when the Germans were leaving Greece at the end of the Second World War. “The Aegean islands limit the Turkish necessary life area and this is because of past mistakes that cannot be excused... The crisis of Kardak [Imia] is the price of the accumulated mistakes” (154).

What will happen if this new policy of Turkey is not implemented? According to Davutoğlu “Turkey will lose its influence in the Balkan area vis-à-vis Greece which tries to gain an ecumenical character with the use of the Patriarchate of Istanbul and its tiny Greek [Rum] minority and on the other hand with respect to Russia which tries to influence the Serbs ...” (123).

The themes of *Strategic Depth* were generally in tune with the views presented in the textbooks of the AKP period: the Kemalist legacy was criticized as one that was not interested in the state’s rights “beyond the borders of Turkey” and the Ottoman past and practices were endorsed. Islam in both cases was shown as a constituent part of “our” accomplishments.

The book titled *Strategic Depth* attracted the attention of Greek readers when Ahmet Davutoğlu became minister of foreign affairs. Thereafter in a sense the thesis of the book belonged to the person that was in charge of the foreign policy of Turkey. These views composed a new approach in evaluating the past and present of Turkey as it was also clearly stated in the *Strategic Depth*.

If “Neo-Ottomanism” is the proper name to highlight this change it may be disputed; but the

book publicized a new approach in dealing with international relations.

In Greece “Ottomanism” is associated with the Ottoman rule of many centuries over the Greeks and perceived as a negative experience. The Greek grand national narration is strongly connected to this “unhappy past”. Therefore the claim that Turkey is a special case with rights, obligations and missions beyond its borders is understood as a return to very old policies. Especially the nationalists of Greece publicized this interpretation. They claimed that Turkey was shifting its policy

towards irredentism, expansionism and territorial hegemony.

These concerns which were discussed in the media in Greece were not voiced by the official Greek state and A. Davutoğlu’s book was not made an issue in the diplomatic sphere, possibly for two reasons. First, bringing this matter into the agenda of the bilateral relations would have caused a new tension. Not to emphasize the issue seemed pragmatically more profitable. Second, Turkey and especially A. Davutoğlu personally expressed the desire to have “zero problems with the neighbors of Turkey.” Actually A. Davutoğlu

in various occasions has stressed that Turkey seeks friendly relations with Greece. There was a substantial difference of the views of the “book” and of what was verbally expressed. The officials of Greece decided that it is more preferable to hear what was being said than reading what was written.

The concern remained however. The moves of Turkey in the international milieu were and still are evaluated taking into consideration “Neo-Ottomanism”. The Greek reader perceived an intention on the part of Turkey in revising its traditional foreign policy for a more “active” one with involvements “beyond Turkey’s borders”. Actually this was the interpretation of the calm analysts; the Greek nationalists perceived a more aggressive foreign policy on the part of Turkey.

This setting sustained the mistrust which already existed between Greece and Turkey due to the national interpretation of the past. The last decade was marked with this ambivalence.

**

Bibliography

Başol, Samettin. *T.C. İnkılap Tarihi ve Atatürkçülük, Ders Kitabı, İlköğretim 8*, Devlet Kitapları, Ankara, 2011.

Cangır, Vicdan. *Ortaöğretim Tarih, 10. Sınıf*, Vicdan Cangır etc. Devlet Kitapları Döner Sermaye İşletmesi Müdürlüğü, Ankara 2011.

Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* [*Strategic Depth, The International Position of Turkey*, in Turkish], Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2010.

Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Το Στρατηγικό Βάθος, Η Διεθνής Θέση της Τουρκίας* [*Strategic Depth, The International Position of Turkey*, in Greek], Εκδόσεις Ποιότητα, Athens, 2010.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Ottomanism> and [Kemal H. Karpat](#) , *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* , BRILL, 2002, [ISBN 978-90-04-12101-0](#)

,
[p. 524.](#)

Millas, H. "History Writing among the Greeks and Turks: Imagining the Self and the Other", in *The Contested Nation – Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, Edit. Stefan. Berger and Chris Lorenz, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2008.

____. "Μορφές «Οθωμανισμού» και Πολιτικές στην Τουρκία", *The Athens Review of Books*, October and November 2012, issues 33 and 34.

____. "*Stratejik Derinlik Kitabı- Yurt Dışında Okunduğunda*", in *Türk Dış Politikası*, Edit. Baskın Oran, İstanbul, İletişim, 2013.

Okur, Yasemin. *Ortaöğretim Tarih 9. Sınıf, MEB*, Devlet Kitapları, Ankara, 2011.

Okur, Yasemin, *Ortaöğretim Tarih 11. Sınıf*. Yasemin Okur etc., Devlet Kitapları, Ankara, 2011b.

Tarih 1, Tarihtenevvelki Zamanlar ve Eski Zamanlar, T.T.T. Cemiyeti tarafından yazılmıştır. İstanbul, Devlet Matbaası, 1932.

Tarih 2, Orta Zamanlar ve Eski Zamanlar, T.T.T. Cemiyeti tarafından yazılmıştır. İstanbul, Devlet Matbaası, 1933 (First edition 1931)

Tarih 3, Yeni ve Yakın Zamanlarda Osmanlı-Türk Tarihi, İstanbul, Devlet Matbaası, 1933.

Tarih 4, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti. İstanbul, Devlet Matbaası, 1933.

**

[1]

[1] The word Neo-Ottomanism was first theorized by the Greeks after the [Turkish intervention of Cyprus](#) in 1974 according to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Ottomanism> and [Kemal H. Karpat](#)

,
Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays
, BRILL, 2002,
[ISBN 978-90-04-12101-0](#)
,
[p. 524](#)
.

[2]

[2] For a more detailed presentation of this period see in bibliography below: H. Millas, 2008.

[3]

[3] Four textbooks were published in 1931-1933 for the secondary education. See bibliography below *Tarih 1, 2, 3 and 4* (History 1, 2, 3 and 4).

[4]

[4] A relatively detailed analysis was published in Greek and a short one in Turkish by H. Millas: See Millas 2012 and 2013 in bibliography below. Here I used the 52nd

Turkish edition of Ahmet Davutoğlu's book.

[5]

[5] See for example: <https://ifestos.edu.gr/%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%BC%CE%AD%CF%84-%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%B2%CE%BF%CF%8D%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%B3%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%85-%CF%84%CE%BF-%CF%83%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C-%CE%B2%CE%AC%CE%B8/> where there are more than forty articles on the book by A. Davutoğlu.