

# Book Review

## Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring

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**Isiksal, Huseyin and Goksel, Oguzhan (Editors): Turkey's Relations with the Middle East; Political Encounters after the Arab Spring; September 18, 2017: 220.**

"TURKEY'S Relations With the Middle East: Political Encounters After the Arab Spring", edited by Hüseyin İşıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel, is an excellent contribution to the study of foreign relations of Turkey and the international relations in the Middle East. It is a valuable narrative of the internal political discourse of the region in addition to being a critical evaluation of the geopolitical jockeying in recent years. The thorough discussion of the Arab Spring, criticism of Eurocentrism in conjunction with the critique of the Orientalist approach, the discussion of the limitations of the Westphalian system in the Middle East are among the leading concerns. Further, Turkey's policy of "zero problems" with neighbors, the ambitions of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Kurdish factor as well as the exposure of sectarian issues of geostrategic significance augment the analytical scope and depth of the collection.

Each of the fourteen chapters presents a distinct analytical piece rather than a mere continuation of the preceding one. By contrast, the three parts are seamlessly woven into a meaningful whole in part due to the exposure of a variety of ideological and analytical perspectives. While the diversity of views and a myriad of analyses-geopolitical, value-based, economic, ideological-sectarian-enrich the collection immensely, the disquisition could be strengthened through a more exhaustive investigation of alternative views. Firstly, the book would benefit from the inclusion of what we call the "flip side" of the issues. Secondly, the cyclical analysis of events would add an important dimension to the examination of the issues. Lastly, the addition of quantifiable data would generate knowledge about attitudes concerning the Turkish model (all of the suggestions discussed later in detail).

Part One mainly discusses the intricacies of neoliberal policies, popular uprisings and the Turkish model in light of the "political, economic, and social interactions between Turkey and the post-2011 Middle East" (p. 2). It sheds light on the so called "orientalist discourse" in the study of the region which "has tended to ignore the negative implications of the state formation and artificial boundaries in the Middle East along with the role of external powers" (p.16). Further, Part One emphasizes the Sunni-Shia divide and draws attention to the fact that it "needs to be replaced with more flexible frameworks" (p.34). Finally, the "rise and fall of the Turkish model"

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(p.53) is discussed followed by the interpretation of the impact of neoliberalism with a focus on the Turkish and Egyptian cases (p.68)

Part Two is centered on the rise and implications of the Arab Spring, the chaotic developments in the Levant and turbulence in Turkish-Iranian relations (p.105). Moreover, it refers to the "Westphalian delusion" to argue, albeit somewhat controversially, that "among all the Westphalian principles, secularism is the most conflicting for the Middle East" (p.86). Further, it concentrates on geopolitical rivalries of regional powers, intra-sectarian disagreements and concludes that "the intra-Gulf divide between Riyadh and Doha is apparent in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine and has severe repercussions for Ankara's regional policies" (p.128). Finally, an important aspect of AKP's foreign aspirations is revealed through the reference to the issue of Cyprus as "the AKP's divergence from the traditional state policy on Cyprus had multiple dimensions and it marked the first notable clash with the Kemalist establishment" (p.137)

Part Three elevates the discussion of interstate relations in the region to the notion of soft power. It powerfully argues that "the political, economic, and information interconnectedness that characterizes the globalized world of our time has made the use of conventional military forces costly for states and, in certain conditions, even damaging to their interests" (p. 152) In addition, it elaborates on the Kurdish issue leading the discussion to the rebirth of securitization of Turkish policy and the emergence of "economic penetration" into Northern Iraq (p.185).

The book employs the strategy of the comprehensive analysis of Turkish foreign policy in relation to the Middle East considering the ongoing geopolitical reshuffles, internal divisions as well as the strategic assessment of political values and systems across the region. The study is methodologically rigorous as it applies a combination of critical approaches and research tools: comparative historical analysis (Eurocentrism, the Westphalian system), comparative political analysis (Turkish model, geopolitical rivalry) and comparative-cultural analysis along religious-sectarian (Shia-Sunni) or ideological (Muslim Brotherhood, AKP etc.) lines.

The scholarly rigor of the work is further enhanced through economic case studies (Turkish and Egyptian economic growth scrutinized comparatively in the context of neo-liberal policies).

In general terms, specific views regarding the Shia-Sunni divide, the Westphalian system as well as the oppressive policies of al-Maliki's Shia government tend to express ideologically predetermined positions. In other words, they tend to ignore, albeit to various degrees depending on the perspective, the cyclical nature and the political culture dimension of the subject matter. More specific, the suggested incompatibility of Westphalian secularism with Islamic values as well as the criticism of the oppression of Sunnis at the hands of al-Maliki's government do not envisage the flip side of the issues.

A more detailed look reveals that the above-mentioned facets of the book could have been addressed within the methodological confines of the work if certain aspects were considered to strengthen argumentation more holistically. Most important, a reference to the secular traditions of the Republic of Turkey (laicism; "Six Arrows") and its interpretation in the context of the changing ideological countenance of Turkish politics would either strengthen or objectivize the research. Alternatively, it could have served as a limitation to the discussion of the proposed incompatibility of secularism with Islamic values.

Another significant addition could be the cyclical analysis of the regime change and subsequently employed domestic policies in Iraq. The criticism of the oppression of Sunnis on the part of al-Maliki's government does not address the previous grievances of the Shia majority at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime. Thus, lacking a cyclical-historical analysis of Iraqi political culture and without addressing the roots of tendency of mutual political oppression between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq the book lacks a coherent strategy to address the "flip side" of the phenomenon.

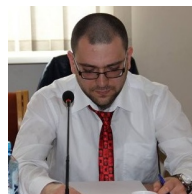
Furthermore, Iranian aspirations are hailed as having a tendency to be hegemonic either explicitly or covertly. In other words, while the regional objectives of Turkey are explained and interpreted through the lens of both legitimately acquired roles (Turkish soft power, economic penetration in Northern Iraq, the attractiveness of the

Turkish model) and ideologically driven ambitions (reversal of non-intervention, emergence of "Neo-Ottomanism" and the resultant "zero-problems" strategy), Iranian aspirations are not 'legitimized' in any way leaving the reader to make assumptions regarding the broader strategy of Iran (Shia Crescent, regional hegemon, Hamas, Hezbollah) in that regard. Further, the role of Saudi Arabia in regional affairs is mainly confined to a neutral assessment as opposed to the tactics of its rivals which are principally defined in sectarian or ideological contours (Turkey, Iran). Thus, an addition of a "Shia perspective" would further strengthen the arguments exposing the nature of geostrategic rivalry in the region and would equally "legitimize" the aspirations of Iran.

Another aspect of the work worth revisiting is a dimension that, we believe, might be called a major flaw. More specifically, the "Neo-Ottomanism" is examined in the light of the recent Turkish foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors". However, this approach completely ignores the perceptions of "Neo-Ottomanism" and, by extension, the Ottoman legacy, in neighboring countries. Hence, the concept of "Neo-Ottomanism" in relation to 'zero problems with neighbors' is rendered profoundly controversial. Finally, the appeal of the Turkish model for the Arab World is called into questions in the context of the Arab Uprisings which might not reflect popular views and attitudes. The discussion of Turkish soft power capabilities and the current extent of the appeal of the Turkish model would benefit greatly from the availability of quantifiable data (polls and survey results) measuring the dimensions of the influence of the Turkish model in the public eye.

Overall, the work is a vital contribution to the field of international relations and geopolitics in the Middle East as well as Turkish foreign policy after the Arab Uprisings. While certain works exploring the Turkish foreign and security policy in the Middle East emphasize a certain dimension of the subject matter, such as Syrian conflict and the Kurdish issue (Başaran 2017), the Arab Spring and geopolitics (Fuller 2014), specific bilateral relationships (Başkan 2016; Bengio 2004) or ideological-regional issues (Bein 2017), the volume under scrutiny connects the dots through a

holistic approach to analysis. The examination of an amalgamation of issues in the light of recent developments is most enlightening and addresses both complex issues and their specific dimensions. However, further expansion into the domain of alternative views (flip side, cyclical nature) and the inclusion of quantifiable data to evaluate public perceptions could have enhanced the work in important ways. This sharply focused and highly analytical treatise can be a genuine and highly valuable guide into Turkish foreign policy and the geopolitics of the Middle East.



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