



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale 22-24 giugno 2022

TITOLO/TITLE: *'Chaos' as a productive space of negotiation: Turkey's diplomacy in the MENA region mobilizing the legacy of the Ottoman Empire*

PROPONENTI – PROPONENTS: Chiara Pagano (University Of Bologna); Nicola Melis (University Of Cagliari)

DISCUSSANT: Jeremy Walton, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

ABSTRACT

Ever since the early 2000's, Turkey has been gaining an increasingly crucial role in (re)orienting the internationalization of the regime legitimacy's crisis currently affecting the MENA region. This became extremely visible in the unfolding of both the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, and the way Ankara affected how both 'crises' intersected with the most urgent themes of contemporary international politics: e.g., the mobilization and (re)negotiation of national and group identities, sectarianism, but also forced migration, the enforcement of violent border regimes, and the control of both internal and international mobilities.

Recent scholarship has interpreted this shift in Turkish regional politics through the prism of "neo-Ottomanism", suggesting that a "transformational narrative rooted in historical rhetoric" is being mobilized by contemporary Turkey to navigate contemporary socio-political changes – which are often framed in terms of 'chaos' - both at the domestic level and with respect to the extended regional landscape (Hartmann 2013). This is supposedly done through reviving alleged contemporary legacies of the Ottoman Imperial past in Turkish relationships not only with Eastern Europe, but also with the Middle East as well as North and East Africa. In fact, «since the 1990s, Turkey has been using its heritage, religious networks, and shared history to become an important player in several regions— the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East— all of which were, not coincidentally, part of the Ottoman Empire, as well as Central Asia and Muslim sub-Saharan Africa». (Yavuz 2020: 176). This Ottoman nostalgia is probably also for domestic consumption, a nationalist rallying point for Turkish identity in a time of tumult.

And yet, whilst Jeremy Walton and his research group "Empires of Memory" have been investigating the afterlives of the Ottoman Empire in recasting the present and possible futures of Eastern Europe, MENA scholarships have not sufficiently addressed whether and to what extent the legacy of the Ottoman Empire continues to inspire nostalgia, identification, pride, anxiety, skepticism, and disdain in the present of the region.

Aiming to fill in such a scholarly gap, the present panel is open to contributions addressing whether and how the Ottoman imperial past continues to influence regional politics, public life, and political debate in the MENA region, as well as East Africa, both from the Turkish perspective and from within these zones.

Contributions will be particularly welcome that critically engage with the socio-political processes, discourses, and projects mobilizing the Ottoman past for navigating contemporary 'crises', and that can



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productively enter into conversation with other scholarly works reflecting along the tryptic “memory-history-patrimony”.

We believe such an undertaking will shed unprecedented light on how the Ottoman imperial pasts contributes to the articulation of political and cultural horizons that go far beyond the nation-state in the considered regions, as much as the contemporary legacies of the European imperial and colonial powers.

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Chairs:

Nicola Melis, a specialist in Near Eastern and Ottoman history, is an Associate Professor at the University of Cagliari, Sardinia. He is a member of the editorial advisory boards of some journals and academic associations. Prof. Melis’ current research deals with the idea of Ottoman Africa, past to present. He has shared his ongoing work at numerous international conferences and has authored several recent articles on the subject

Chiara Pagano obtained her PhD in African History from the University of “Roma Tre” and is currently post-doctoral researcher within the scope of the Horizon2020 Research Project “MERGING - Housing for immigrants and community integration in Europe and beyond: strategies, policies, dwellings and governance”. She is also associate researcher to the international research project “Regions2050: mobile spaces, porous borders, and pathways of regionalization”, coordinated by Pr. Dr. Achille Mbembe at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research of the University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg).

From 2018 to 2020, she was post-doctoral researcher in African History at the University of Pavia and principal researcher for Italy, Tunisia, and Libya for the international research project “Infrastructure Space and the Future of Migration Management: The EU Hotspots in the



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Mediterranean Borderscape", funded by the SNIS at the University of Basel and coordinated by Pr. Dr. Bilgin Ayata.

Discussant

Jeremy F. Walton is a cultural anthropologist whose research resides at the intersection of memory studies, urban studies, and new materialism. He leads the Max Planck Research Group, "Empires of Memory: The Cultural Politics of Historicity in Former Habsburg and Ottoman Cities," at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Dr. Walton received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 2009. His first book, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2017), is an ethnography of Muslim NGOs, state institutions, and secularism in contemporary Turkey. Prior to his current position, he held research and teaching fellowships at the Center for Advanced Studies of Southeastern Europe at the University of Rijeka, the CETREN Transregional Research Network at Georg August University of Göttingen, Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, and New York University's Religious Studies Program. He has published his research in a wide selection of scholarly journals

Presenters

1) Title: *The Myth of Empire in Turkish Conservatism and Islamism*

Author: Michelangelo Guida, İstanbul 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi

Abstract

Since the early 2000s Turkish conservative and Islamist intellectuals have started to promote a new foreign policy relying heavily on a new interpretation of the country's history and identity prioritizing its imperial heritage and centrality in the Muslim world. Ahmet Davutoğlu, above all, and İbrahim Kalın—both as academicians and as policy-makers—have contributed to the reshape of Turkish foreign policy and its legitimacy discourse during the AK Parti era. However, Turkish conservatism and Islamism with all its numerous souls have in diverse ways looked at its imperial past. Early conservatism and Islamism even rejected its corrupted imperial past and many looked to the Turks' kinship with another myth, "Turan", which still remains influential. Then, for many decades conservatism and Islamism has been inward looking focusing on its Turkishness and bounded geographically to the Anatolian plateau.

This paper intends to study Davutoğlu and Kalın's reading of Turkey's imperial magnificence in the general framework of Turkish Islamism and conservatism. Moreover, it also aims at understanding how and when Turkish conservatism and Islamism have reformulated the country's identity and relation with Ottoman heritage. This paper will demonstrate that global events and social transformation have certainly influenced intellectuals' perception of themselves. However, the shift from Turkish-Islamic synthesis to an Ottoman-Islamic synthesis has been promoted by a new



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generation of academicians who since the early 1980s have worked to uncover Ottoman past that, allegedly, had been ill-treated by Kemalist dominant ideology. Thus, new research accompanied by vengeance has accompanied this new image of self among Turkish conservatist and islamist intellectuals.

Michelangelo Guida is full professor at the İstanbul 29 Mayıs University. He holds a BA in politics and a PhD in Turkish history from Istituto Universitario Orientale (Naples, Italy) as well as a MA in Turkish Studies from SOAS (London, UK). Michelangelo is currently the chairman of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul 29 Mayıs University. From 2005 to 2013 he worked in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Fatih University (Istanbul, Turkey). He has published several articles (in English and Italian) on Islamist intellectual in Turkey; also, he conducts research on voting behavior and has published a book in Turkish on electoral campaigns. Michelangelo speaks Italian, English and Turkish (as nearly native) and fluent Arabic.

2) Title: *A shared legacy? Arabs, Armenians and the remembering of the Gallipoli campaign.*

Author: Fulvio Bertuccelli, Università di Roma “La Sapienza” e Università di Bologna

Abstract

The process of transforming the Ottoman imperial past into heritage, a resilient archive capable of constituting the foundation for the creation of new identitarian projects, plays a central role in the ongoing redefinition of Turkey’s national symbolic and cultural paradigms (Yavuz 2016; Taglia 2016; Volfová 2016, Ergin and Karakaya 2017). Furthermore, the centenary of the Great War and the commemorative celebrations it sparked highlighted how the memory of the battle of Gallipoli (1915-1916) continues to be a crucial tassel in the mosaic of the construction of collective identity in Turkey (Uyar 2015; Macleod e Tongo 2016; Okur 2016; Şakul 2016; Aktar 2020). The initial assumption of the paper is that artistic representations of the past, which have recently undergone an incredible proliferation globally as well as in Turkey, can be considered an extension of practices of remembering. The use of the term ‘remembering’ here refers not just to its performative sense nor to initiatives of official commemorative propaganda, but ought instead to be interpreted in light of Jan Assman’s conceptualization of “cultural memory” (1995). In this perspective, I will first provide a summary diachronic reconstruction of the official narratives, semantic changes and omissions connected with remembering the battle of Gallipoli evaluating the recent use of this commemoration to legitimate Turkey’s agency in crisis scenarios in the broad sense. I will thus focus on some textual representations – novels, popular history, and memoirs- which can be useful tools in order to trace



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the continuities and the shifts in the popularisation of the myth of Gallipoli with regard to the perception of non-Turkish and non-Muslim groups.

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Fulvio Bertuccelli Fulvio Bertuccelli is research fellow in History of Eastern Europe at Sapienza University of Rome and adjunct lecturer of History of Islamic Countries at the University of Bologna. His research interests include History of Turkish Nationalism, Kemalism, Communism in Turkey, Turkish Literature, Memory Politics and Turkish Literature. He is author and editor of books and essays in scientific journals and literary translator from Turkish to Italian.

3) Title: "The Caliphate question": archive of a crisis in the legal imperial order (1914-1926)

Author: Fatima-Ezzahrae Touilila, Columbia University and Sciences Po (Paris)

Abstract

In 14 October 1914, the French Ambassador in Istanbul informed his Minister of Foreign affairs of a panislamist pamphlet by Germany in which the German Emperor declared not to be in war against the Muslim world and ordered that all Muslims war prisoners from the French, British and Russian



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Empire to be released and sent to the Ottoman Sultan, in his quality of “Calif of the Mahometan world.” This message was to cause much disruption and distress for the colonial powers. Most evidently, through declaration of peace to Muslims, while the colonial empires were relying on them at the very front of the war. Moreover, by calling the Ottoman sultan the Caliph of the Muslim World, by recognizing to him this title and sending him Muslim war prisoners, Germany was disrupting the fragile pillars of international law. The processes of extradition of Muslim prisoners threatened the nation-state order and its principle of citizenship, colonial subjecthood by suggesting that Muslims independently of their imperial status are subjected to the Ottoman Sultan. The German proclamations were pointing toward a transnational politico-religious order that overflows the recently erected borders of national belonging and imperial affiliation. It blasts open questions of sovereignty, by pointing toward the discrepancy between territorial sovereignty and a jurisdictional sovereignty (over people) and reopens the Pandora box of questions that follow from it: what does it mean to have sovereignty over Muslim subjects? Can a Christian empire, even when redeemed through secularization ever claim or, *de facto*, achieve such sovereignty? How did concepts of Islamic political jurisprudence influence such debates? This paper explores, through the French diplomatic archives, how the colonial powers, Great Britain and France, faced the issue that territorial conquests, national borders, military power, law and violence do not guarantee the control over people sense of belonging, affiliation, allegiance and loyalism and how they sought to remedy to such a discrepancy in the postwar legal and diplomatic order..

Fatima-Ezzahrae Touilila is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at the Columbia University. She holds degrees in Political Science, Law and International Relations from Sciences Po (Paris) and Columbia University. Her work focuses on intellectual history, the epistemological ruptures in the making of Modernity in the Maghreb, Judeo-Islamic syncretism in Morocco.

4) Title: *The role of Somalia in Turkish foreign policy*

Author: Gaia Poccetti, University of Naples “L’Orientale”

Abstract

This presentation aims at analysing reasons and purposes underlying Turkey’s Somali policy. The main focus will be to understand to what extent this political interest in the Horn of Africa fits into the Neo-Ottomanist thought. As a matter of fact, Somalia as a whole was not a part of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey’s most recent and effective involvement in Africa, more specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa, started with the “Africa Opening Action Plan” in 1998 and increased considerably during the AKP rule. Among the countries of the African continent in which Turkish policies are carried out, in Somalia Turkey is experimenting and developing a *sui generis* kind of foreign policy: the multitude and diversification of actors involved has given rise to a multi-dimensional policy in



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the country. The involvement of both state (e.g. TIKA and Diyanet) and non-state bodies, such as NGOs and civil society (e.g. Doctors Worldwide, IHH, Denezi Feneri, Turkish Red Crescent), has led to a humanitarian approach. Thus, Turkey is finding legitimacy to its presence in Somalia and in the Sub-Saharan region by funding aids in the main fields of the society (transports, healthcare, schools, academic relations, ...), aware also of its not-existent colonial past in the continent.

The humanitarian policy can be explained by taking into consideration the embedded role of Islamism in contemporary Turkish politics. In this perspective the fact that the 99% of Somali people is Muslim favoured Turkey's current approach to Somalia. Moreover, these religious grounds served to legitimize also the Turkish presence in the surrounding region of the African Horn, going beyond the nation-state concept. Analysing the foundations of Turkish policy in Somalia will reveal some vague and undefined aspects within the implementation of the Neo-ottomanist and Islamist ideology in that area. This assumption will lead to the core question about Turkey's Somali experience: whether it should be considered as consistent strategy in order to extend its influence on the African continent or as a pro-active but not forward-looking way to solve both domestic and foreign issues.

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Gaia Poccetti obtained both the bachelor and the MA degrees in Oriental and African Cultures at “Università di Napoli L'Orientale”. She graduated with a MA thesis about the journalistic production of Yaşar Kemal in March 2021. In the fall of the same year, she became a Ph.D candidate submitting a research project about Neo-ottomanism and Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean.