Book Panel Introduction

On ‘Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism’ by M. Hakan Yavuz


Summary

Four international scholars have individually reflected critically on M. Hakan Yavuz’s new book Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism. The book recognizes nostalgia as a major variable in articulating and analyzing the current spectrum of Turkish politics by exploring neo-Ottomanism which has, in many respects, become an instrumental frontal display for Islam and Islamism.

Keywords


One significant contribution of the book is its attempt to unpack nationalized and vernacularized Islam as well comprehend and assess their sociopolitical implications for the region along with nations across the globe which hold diplomatic ties with Turkey.

As the first comprehensive book dealing with the subject of nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire and its diverse political manifestations such as neo-Ottomanism, Islamism and nationalism, the text offers a wide-ranging
elucidating perspective to comprehend the range of complexities that define contemporary Turkish politics. With that objective in mind, these international scholars have offered their in-depth analyses of the book from different vantages to shape a more holistic discussion about the work.

Courtney Dorroll recommends the book as a comprehensive study of memory, history and identity politics, which also incorporates psychological considerations of trauma, shared pain and forced amnesia in its political analysis. Another dimension she highlights is its interdisciplinary analysis, which incorporate literature, religion, history, urban planning, culinary arts, fine arts and social commentary. Emphasizing that the book views the “conversation on Neo-Ottomanism through the lens of political leadership,” she highlights what she sees as the “delicate balance of empire to nation-state that becomes the context for Yavuz’s exploration of contemporary nostalgia around Turkey’s Ottoman past.” The focus is on Turkey’s contemporary elite conservative leaders who use the Ottoman past as a source of political capital “that differentiates them from the political imaginary of their opponents in the secular, Kemalist-oriented cdp.” An area that she believes deserves richer analysis is how Kurds engaged and contended with neo-Ottomanism throughout their contemporary history.

Umut Uzer considers Nostalgia a significant contribution to Turkish politics, which unveils the mindset of the conservative and Islamist masses whereas he is more critical of Yavuz’s presentation of the Kemalist era for having trivialized nationwide reforms and policies. Nonetheless, Uzer acknowledges the immense explanatory power of the concept of neo-Ottomanism to cover much of the last century in Turkish politics. Uzer sees the analysis as leading to a more sophisticated perspective on Turkish politics, as Yavuz’s focus “is not only on the Islamists or the Justice and Development Party but also on Turkish social democrats, left-wing novelists and even Albanian, Greek, and Serbian intellectuals and their understanding of the Ottoman past and the contemporary Turkey’s fascination with it.” Uzer believes rounding out the analysis to include a deeper engagement with the developments and reforms of the Atatürk era (1920–1938), as they “were not as alien or inauthentic as conservatives make us believe.”

Taking a theoretical approach to contextualize the instructive dimensions of the post-imperial nostalgia phenomenon, Mehmet Arısan turns to the Lacanian concept to situate the contemporary existence between two symbolic deaths. That is, the first was a “physical loss of something” and the second as the “final exhaustion of the symbols and memories as the remainders of the past,” but, in Turkey’s case, that second death has yet to materialize fully, “as the current state of affairs in Turkey completely depends on an elusive spectre.
of Ottoman Empire that is mostly detached from it as a historical reality." Thus, Arısan perceives neo-Ottomanism very much alive in today’s world of fantasy and illusions. However, Arısan also rejects portraying Kemalism as breaking completely from the Ottoman state. Instead, he argues that there is still a link and that the Kemalist state preserved its ideal of the “sublime and omnipotent,” which represents its own unique form of imperial glory.

Igor Torbakov, on the other hand, frames the issue as rethinking the aftermath of World War I, when the Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman Empires collapsed and disintegrated. Noting the resilience of the empire legacy contravenes the perception of empires as backward or anachronistic entities, Torbakov sees the value of understanding a “blurred border between the ‘realm of nations’ and the ‘realm of empires,’” which, in turn, cannot be divided neatly into halves for comprehending the historical discourse. With Yavuz’s “colorful and complex tableau representing the genesis and evolution of ‘Ottomania’ … essentially a uniquely Turkish story,” Torbakov also notes that imperial nostalgia is not an exclusively Turkish ailment in the contemporary geopolitical arena. The nostalgist’s “temporal disconnect” between “a present that is deemed to be subpar and a past that is seen as a lost ‘golden age’” exists in striking similarities (as well as dissimilarities) not just for the Ottoman Empire but also for its Habsburg and Russian counterparts.