Turkey’s Imperial Legacy: Understanding Contemporary Turkey through its Ottoman Past

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Abstract
The modern Turkish Republic emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire less than 85 years ago. Yet the majority of analysis and writing on contemporary Turkey neglects or superficially treats the Ottoman historical legacy. This chapter argues that contemporary Turkey is very much shaped by the legacy and identity that the Ottoman Empire left it as a clear imperial successor state. A key contention is that understanding Turkey’s Ottoman legacy and the historical memory of past leadership among the Turkish public, in the region and globally, is instrumental for any analysis or discussion about Turkey’s present or future. By looking at Turkey’s identity and international behavior since the Republic, this chapter seeks to develop a better understanding from which to analyze the historical roots of many of the values, tensions, institutions, and motivations that permeate contemporary Turkey today.

Keywords
Turkey, imperial, national identity, legacy, international relations

Introduction: Understanding Contemporary Turkey

Understanding contemporary Turkish politics and foreign policy has become an area of increasing interest for scholars of international relations. As a regional power that exemplifies a synthesis between a Muslim-majority population in the Middle East and a functioning democratic ally of the West, Turkey’s stock is on the rise. As analysts and academics debate the recent developments within Turkey and its neighborhood, the focus of attention typically shifts from the present to the past.

As the heart of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey claims the mantle for the imperial rule inherited from the former Roman and Byzantine Empires that made the Ottomans the center of Eastern and Western world interactions for over six hundred years. As a result, there is a growing interest in the Ottoman legacy for modern Turkish foreign policy and international vision. However, before one can truly assess the Ottoman legacy for modern Turkey, it is
imperative not to simply treat this question in isolation or as an anomalous case, but rather evaluate it in the broader framework of identity and politics in post-imperial nations.

The fact is that the majority of today's most important states that are studied under the rubric of great powers in international relations are still recognizably the progeny of empires. Russia, Britain, France, Germany, China, Turkey, and Japan, to name but a few modern-day great and regional powers, are all direct descendants and successor states of their former empires. In the same way that not all nations share the same power capabilities, ideology, or history, these post-imperial nations inherited a different type of legacy and experience with international leadership than their former colonies. The legacy that these former empires have bequeathed to their respective successor states vary on a number of important areas ranging from collective memories, institutions, ethnicities, boundaries, and historical disputes. Therefore, the way in which these states deal with and interpret their imperial legacies varies widely and is an important yet under theorized and understudied field in international relations. The implications of this research agenda goes beyond the theoretical into the practical as this chapter seeks to demonstrate the impact interpretations and legacies have had on decision-making throughout Turkish history.

Post-Imperial Leadership Puzzle

Turkey is not an economic superpower or even a great power by most standards used in the field of international relations.\(^1\) Turkey's economic progress, while steadily improving, has never dominated its region in the modern period, either in Europe or the Middle East. Given Turkey's geographic position, it has been an outlier for most of its modern history as a Middle Eastern regional power that chose to reject its region and past in favor of the West and Europe. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the revolutionary secular ideas upon which the Republic of Turkey were formed made Turkish leaders reluctant to draw on the nation's 600-year past as head of the Ottoman Empire that might have culturally, historically, and religiously resonated with its Middle Eastern neighbors in concrete and material terms. Yet despite contemporary Turkey's modern past and relative structural weakness, Turkish leaders are increasingly finding

\(^1\) The typical examples of great powers always include the United States, Russia, and China, and then often differ over countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. The seminal work in this respect was by Paul Kennedy in his classic *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Press 1987) which included all of the aforementioned countries, but not Turkey.