On the evening of Friday, 15 July 2016, a large number of international news channels were frenziedly broadcasting live from Turkey. Most of the world sat watching, stunned, as they observed events unfolding in the streets and skies of Ankara and Istanbul. A part of the Turkish military had occupied major areas of the two cities. Officers had taken over the TRT (the national TV channel), and had announced to the Turkish public, and the international viewership, the removal of the government; a new constitution was to be prepared. But that was only the beginning of a long night, one in which the military was not only defeated, but humiliated. The following day, newspaper headlines featured pictures of Erdoğan's supporters waving Turkish and Ottoman flags. Terms such as ‘sultan’ and ‘caliph’, referring to the Turkish president, appeared everywhere in the international press. In the hours following the failed coup, it emerged that muezzins had called on the people to take to the streets and oppose the military. Many observers, especially in Turkey, had vivid memories of the past; for them, after all, a military takeover was nothing new: since 1960, at almost constant intervals of about a decade, Turkey has been the setting for military coups. While the earlier ones were all successful, the last two have had different outcomes. In 2007, after the issuing of a threatening memorandum directed against the government, which appeared on the website of the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, the military was firmly rebuffed, being told to stay out of politics and asked to respect democracy and the will of the people. Nine years later, the sections of the military that had acted were heavily defeated by other military units, the police and a wave of
public support in favour of the governing party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Justice and Development Party, JDP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).

After the first few hours of amazement, what surfaced were overlapping images of the present and the past: the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, the juxtaposition between a forcefully imposed ‘pseudo-secularisation’ of society, during the Republic’s infancy, and the spasmodic display of religious symbols that has emerged since the 1990s. The presence of the military, too, echoed the imperial past, as the pivotal role played in politics by the armed forces dates back to the ‘Revolution’ of 1908 and the subsequent transfer of power to the Unionist regime that autocratically ruled until the Ottoman defeat in World War 1. The politicisation of the religious apparatus during the evening of the attempted coup, too, recalled images of the Ottoman past, and the ecstatic crowd that awaited Erdoğan at Istanbul Atatürk Airport reminded many of the sultan’s procession to the mosque for the Friday prayer. A raft of questions began to be asked: Has the Empire returned? How should one read the more or less open references to past imperial glories? What are the real links between the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey? What is the place of religion in the public sphere in Turkey? The events of last July, along with their accompanying images, have attached even more urgency to provide clear answers to a set of key questions linked with the past, its projected image in the present, and the ties, if any, between the Ottoman Empire and its successor states.

In social sciences, the political developments in modern Turkey and the other successor states of the Ottoman Empire have been the focus of special attention for some time. Issues such as the demise of the Republican (Kemalist) Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the wars in the Balkans between 1995 and 1999, and the series of revolutions that swept the Middle East in the 2010s, have all been accorded substantial attention. Moreover, in the wake of the somewhat unexpected rise of religiously-based parties in Turkey since the 1990s, as well as the latter’s relationship with the Turkic states of the former Soviet Union, both academics and the general public have turned their attention towards the interpretation of the Ottoman past.1 By looking into these

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