

BOOK REVIEW

Ali BALCI, Yıldırım TURAN, Tuncay KARDAS, and Ismail EDİZ, *İmparatorluğun Savaş Kararı: Osmanlı Devleti Birinci Dünya Savaşına Neden Girdi*
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İmparatorluğun Savaş Kararı: Osmanlı Devleti Birinci Dünya Savaşına Neden Girdi

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In “*İmparatorluğun Savaş Kararı*”, the authors mainly discuss the reasons why an empire, which was on the verge of disintegration, became involved in a war between the Great Powers of Europe and whose conditions ultimately precipitated the end of that state. In attempting to answer these questions, they explain the decision to go to war in light of neoclassical realist theory rather than stereotypical ideas such as “the only option for the Ottoman Empire was to enter into war” or “Enver Pasha put the Ottoman Empire into war”, which are frequently repeated in the literature. As is understood, previous studies either focus on personal decisions (especially Enver Pasha and his team) and neglect systemic factors or focus on systemic factors (the change in balance of power that happened before World War I in Europe) and neglect the decision-making mechanisms of ruling groups and the way local politics worked. However, the authors of this book take a more complementary approach and attempt to merge the decision-making mechanisms of ruling groups and systemic factors. In other words, the authors focus on ruling actors and stress that these actors opted for war under the influence of surrounding circumstances and developments. To explain their approach, the authors combine systemic variables, including the offence-defence balance of naval military technology between the Ottomans and the Russians in the Straits region, German “foreign penetration” and economic aids, and the catastrophic defeat of the Austrian army by Russia with the unit-level variables, such as the divided nature of the Ottoman foreign policy executive and the Unionists’ strategic culture.

First, in the book, it is stated that the main factor leading to the decision to go to war was dividedness within the ruling group, which is where the originality of their approach lies. The authors analyse how the Ottoman Empire did not go to war right away, but instead later (within 3 months) and how this delay changed the decision. Despite this claim, they do not explain how the members of the ruling group underwent serious changes in character, tendencies or political perspectives in such a short period of time. Also, completely contradictory decisions from the same decision-making processes are explained only through internal factors, while external factors are ignored.

Moreover, the book, citing the parameters of “foreign aid” and “transnational penetration” that Stephen M. Walt uses to identify formation of alliances, argues that the efforts by German officials (Admiral Souchon and Ambassador Wangenheim) to influence and manipulate the ruling group

should not be overlooked and concludes that Germany permeated the decision-making process of the Ottoman Empire in order to affect the final decision. However, Walt clearly states that “the importance of transnational penetration is often exaggerated... such ties are largely one result of alignment, not an independent cause... penetration is most effective when alignment is likely for other reasons.”¹ Moreover, Walt has similar ideas regarding foreign aid. Although it is not discussed in the book, Walt’s statements raise the question of “Why did the Ottoman Empire form an alliance with Germany?” Walt explains this question with the Threat Balance Theory.

According to Walt, states seek alliances to address perceived threats. However, what defines a threat for a state is not only material or aggregate power, but also geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions also play a role. At this point, the “Eastern Question” should be addressed. One of the main causes for the delay in the dissolution of Ottoman Empire was the fact that the Western countries could not agree upon the matter for decades. In other words, England, Germany, France, and Russia were in political and military conflict for decades to break up the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, among these countries, the Ottoman Empire repeatedly faced England, France and Russia before World War I and lost almost every conflict. Therein, it is already mentioned in the book that the Reval Meetings strengthened the idea among Unionists that Western countries were in solidarity against the Ottoman Empire.

Going back to Walt, the Ottoman Empire did not have physical distance or geographic obstacles to protect it from the Great Powers; this situation is referred to as the second structural variable in the book. Russia had also longed for the Turkish Straits and the city of İstanbul itself for centuries, yet the Ottoman Empire was too weak to defend these places. So, the biggest and truly existential threat to the Ottoman Empire was Russia, while other countries such as England and France were after “distant” parts of the empire for their colonial purposes. For this reason, it was only rational that on whichever side Russia went to war, the Ottoman Empire would be on the opposite one. Moreover, along with other Western countries, Russia pursued a policy that was against the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Wars and openly supported Armenian and Kurdish uprisings in the empire. So, the following geographic point should be made: since no road linked between Germany and Ottoman Empire, Germany was not a vital threat.

Finally, the fact that both the English Fleet blockaded the Gallipoli Strait right before the empire decided to go to war and that English troops were arriving in Egypt from other colonies, point to the concepts of offensive intentions and offensive capabilities that Walt puts forward to explain how a threat forms. Similarly, Russia signaled its threat by starting a campaign against the empire at the same time while also increasing military maneuvers in Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia. Since desperate times called for desperate measures, the empire sought help from Goben and Breslau, and received military and financial aid from Germany, albeit in a limited amount. All in all, in light of Walt’s Balance of Threat theory, it is safe to say that the primary threats that the empire faced, the offensive capabilities and intentions of Allies, and the empire’s geographic proximity to the threat environments, as well as its defenselessness and desperation, pushed it into an alliance with Germany.

There is one further matter that the book does not fully comprehend. The authors emphasize that Ottoman statesmen did not want to get involved in a war before the status of Bulgaria became

1 Stephen Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 260.

clear.² Yet, Bulgaria went to war in September 1915, almost one year after the empire, which means that it made the decision to go to war despite the remaining ambiguity about Bulgaria. Hence, the status of Bulgaria can only be a determining factor in regards to opting out of war, not opting into it.

To conclude, it should be noted that studying the Ottoman Empire through the prism of international relations (IR) theories provides a considerable understanding and paves the way for further studies to comprehend major incidents that happened at that particular period and geographic situation. Moreover, as stated in the book itself, this work can help scholars better apply IR theories to non-European contexts. Therefore, it is vital to say that the authors made a significant contribution to the IR literature by offering a new theoretical explanation of the Ottoman Empire's decision to go to war, which has been understudied from this perspective. In this regard, the book provides a process-oriented analysis rather than a rigid rationalist approach, considering the role of the changing systemic dynamics and unit-level factors in foreign policy decisions.

2 Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: the Ottoman Empire and the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 123.