

BOOK REVIEW

Amit BEIN, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period*
(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Mehmet DOGAR

Master's Student, Middle East Technical University, Department of International Relations

To cite this book review: Mehmet Dogar, Book Review: "Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No. 67, 2020, pp. 131-132.

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations
E-mail : bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr

All rights of this paper are reserved by the *International Relations Council of Turkey*. With the exception of academic quotations, no part of this publication may be reproduced, redistributed, sold or transmitted in any form and by any means for public usage without a prior permission from the copyright holder. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the author(s)'s and do not reflect those of the *Council*, editors of the journal, and other authors.

Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period

Amit BEIN

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 305 pages, ISBN: 9781107198005

Mehmet DOĞAR

*Master's Student, Middle East Technical University, Department of International Relations, Ankara
Email: mehmet.dogar@metu.edu.tr*

Amit Bein's well-researched monograph introduces an alternative way of looking at Turkey's engagement with the Middle East in the interwar period. Using a wide range of Turkish, Arabic and English archival materials, plus an abundant number of contemporary newspapers, magazines, travel accounts and memoirs, the author challenges the widely-accepted view in the secondary literature that Kemalist Turkey deliberately disengaged with its Middle Eastern neighbours and argues that this view is "a serious overstatement of the realities" (p. 240). Adopting an approach that goes beyond the state-to-state understanding of diplomatic history, this book covers not only border issues (Chapter 2), regional relations and security (Chapter 3), but also projects for transportation networks within the region (Chapter 4) and Turkey's efforts to create a good image in the Middle East through the use of propaganda (Chapter 5 and 6).

The originality of the book owes much to Bein's examination of the relationships through a detailed analysis of specific cases, which together portray a different picture than that usually portrayed, for example, in the relationship with Iran, which was reluctant to support the building of a road from Trabzon to Tabriz. On the other hand, however, Reza Shah's visit to Turkey in 1934 was "a resounding success" (p. 83), resulting in warm cultural relations, such as the Iranian Shah allowing a visiting Turkish theatre company to perform 10 plays in Turkish in Tabriz in 1934 (p. 85). This complex nature of the relationships is also emphasised through the discussion of security issues in the region, Bein arguing, for example, that despite mutual suspicions and border disputes between the two countries, Turkey signed the Saadabad Pact in 1937 as an attempt to provide regional security in the face of Italian expansionism in Southeast Europe (p. 87). Similarly, Bein also successfully unveils the multifaceted nature of Turkish-Egyptian relations by juxtaposing the Fez Incident in late 1932, which created a diplomatic crisis between the two countries, and the Turkish Miss Universe Keriman Halis's visit to Egypt less than a month after the incident. Keriman Halis's visit to Egypt (on which Bein later wrote a much more detailed book chapter, "There She is, Miss Universe: Keriman Halis Goes to Egypt, 1933", in Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet (eds.) *Middle Eastern and North African Societies in the Interwar Period* (Leiden, Brill, 2018) was only one of the positive image building efforts of the Turkish government in the Middle East. Such image building activities in fact demonstrate the active involvement of Turkey in the region, contrasting with the view of the country as merely a passive

observer. Bein's examining Turkey's role from the perspective of image creation and propaganda in Chapter 5 and 6 is thus perhaps the most powerful part of the book offering significant support for his main argument that Kemalist Turkey did not disengage from the region in the interwar period.

Bein's book, which revolves neatly around this main argument, would have been strengthened by the inclusion of other aspects of the relationship. Firstly, the author touches upon Turkey's economic relations with the Middle East only within the framework of the transportation network projects in Chapter 4. He does not provide any detailed analysis of the trade relations with the region, even though the importance of this is acknowledged by the author himself when he notes that "Ankara did not overlook the significance of its trade relations with the Middle East" (p. 107). Given the significance of these economic relations, both from the point of view of economic agreements concluded between Turkey and other countries in the region and illegal economic activities, including extensive smuggling and illegal production of commodities such as tobacco and opium in Eastern and South Eastern Anatolia, it is unfortunate that the author does not include them in the discussion. The second shortcoming of the book is due to its understating the role of British and French mandate rule in the region. Even though Bein's attempt to develop the discussion around the regional actors is admirable, this attempt leaves the reader with the impression that the mandate powers did not have much effect on Kemalist Turkey's relations with the Middle East. The third problem concerns the regional coverage of the book. The author chooses cases mainly from Egypt, Iran and Iraq, thus overlooking other regional actors such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. In the period which the book examines, the Turkish stance on many political developments in the region, such as the Arab revolt of 1936 could have been, integrated into the discussion. This problem could perhaps have been overcome if the author had provided a justification for the emphasis on these particular countries in the introductory chapter. Finally, the concluding chapter, demonstrating that Turkey's disengagement from the region occurred not during the Atatürk period but much later, unfortunately casts a shadow over the book due to the inevitable generalisations which occur in an attempt to cover Turkey's relations with the Middle East from 1939 to the present in 26 pages.

Overall, however, this book not only achieves its aim of "writ[ing] Turkey back into the history of the Middle East in the early post-Ottoman period" (p. 6), but it also contributes to the study of Turkish diplomatic history in general by offering a fresh and balanced perspective on the foreign policy of Kemalist Turkey.