

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

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ALI BALCI, OCT 4 2023

*"The Ottoman IR studies are very embryonic, but there is a serious potential there for IR to be combined with history and that may be the key to make the leap [for the Turkish IR community]"*  
(Sara 2022).[1]

In his latest article, Ersel Aydinli describes the crisis within the Turkish International Relations (IR) community as characterized by an excessive integration into mainstream IR theories, while neglecting local history and practices. From this characterization, he concludes: "20 years after [Turkish scholars] helped introduce Western IR theories to Turkish IR, it may be time to return to local histories and area knowledge to develop original concepts, frameworks, and theories." He swiftly raises the oft-repeated question: "Does such promotion of the 'local' risk parochialism?"[2] Indeed, there is such a risk, as Makarychev and Morozov have aptly illustrated in the case of Russian IR. According to them, IR scholars "who insist that Russia's standing is unique to the extent that it requires an elaboration of a qualitatively different theoretical platform" end up embracing "deeply politicized nativist discourses".[3] This isn't merely a risk; it also acts as a significant obstacle to further engagement with local practices in the pursuit of developing original concepts, frameworks, and theories. For instance, Zarakol justifies her interest in the 'Chinggisid' order on the premise that "there is no present-day state strong enough to push such a narrative in a jingoistic manner similar to neo-Ottomanism or the Chinese tributary model."[4]

Are local histories in IR inherently nativist or nationalist? If Aydinli's suggestion for Turkish IR is to be implemented, it is imperative to first overcome the discouraging implications of this question, especially in the case of Ottoman IR. Given that the legacy of the Ottoman Empire still permeates the political discourse of contemporary Turkey, Zarakol's apprehensions are valid: a narrative of the Ottoman order can potentially be weaponized within the highly polarized Turkish political context. Then, should we sideline Ottoman IR, despite its potential to rescue Turkish IR from its current crisis and offer original, valuable contributions to Global IR? Ottoman IR is not alone in facing this challenge; numerous studies focusing on non-Western cases, whether contemporary or historical, have been labeled as either nativist or nationalist. For example, Alejandro suggests that the idea of localizing knowledge, as seen in the Brazilian and Indian IR contexts, paradoxically results in "decontextualising and desociologising knowledge production by assuming individuals produce knowledge in conformity with an imaginary ethnic or national group." [5] Several years after the declaration of the Global IR research agenda, have we reached a dead-end? Can non-Western histories not speak? When they do have a voice, are they destined to either normalize the universalism of Western IR theories or legitimize nativist discourses?

### Between the Local and the Discipline

Acharya vehemently critiques this labeling, describing it as "a fundamental mischaracterization." [6] He argues that such criticisms effectively downgrade the scholarly contributions of thinkers and writers from the Global South. Moreover, Acharya posits that Global South scholars are actually less prone to nativist thinking than IR theorists whose intellectual foundations are steeped solely in European or Western historical and philosophical traditions. Although Acharya does not elaborate extensively on the reasoning behind this conclusion, it is evident that scholars from the Global South first acquaint themselves with established IR theories before examining their local, non-Western contexts.[7] As a result, they actually insert missing tales of the non-West into the tales of the West, leading to a Global IR, instead of solely engaging with the non-West.[8] Theoretically speaking, the scholarly output of non-

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

Written by Ali Balci

Western writers is shaped by their “double consciousness”[9]—a sense of always looking at their studies through the texts of those who based their arguments on the Western experience and Western philosophy. Additionally, the predominance, if not monopoly, of Western-controlled publishing platforms effectively dictates an engagement with established IR theories.

When scholars outside of the West engage with this Western-dominated IR episteme, they not only enrich the existing body of literature but also diversify it by introducing alternative perspectives. In essence, they contribute to a more inclusive and representative IR discipline that accommodates a multiplicity of voices, whether these are rooted in contemporary or historical contexts. As Shahi astutely articulates, the alternative to Eurocentric homogeneity is not a collection of isolated voices; rather, it is the incorporation of this singularity into a dialogue with a diverse array of alternative practices and perspectives.[10] This dialectic between the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ serves a dual purpose: it not only enriches the field of IR as ‘one’ but also mitigates the risk of non-Western voices succumbing to nativist or nationalist tendencies. As the dialogical process between the local and the discipline transforms the latter into a more inclusive framework,[11] it reinterprets local practices and histories in a manner resistant to nativist abuses. In the end, we might envision ‘one’ IR discipline that includes ‘many’ voices represented within it.

In the late 1970s, Abou-El-Haj, a leading Ottoman historian, called for “*laissez-faire* scholarship... to be replaced by more consciously delineated theoretical models which can provide future scholarship with a systematic and cumulative body of knowledge”. For him, only such a transformation will put the Ottoman studies in “a genuine scientific dialogue”. [12] Since this call, although Ottoman historiography has experienced a theoretical turn, this appeal has not yet found a meaningful response within the disciplines of political science and IR. Perhaps the dangers and risks mentioned above might have been discouraging for the IR community. Maybe for this reason, a limited number of studies preferred to focus on the absence of the Ottoman Empire within the IR discipline rather than including it as an ‘agent’. The vast majority of IR-related journal articles on the Ottoman Empire deal with the 19th century to criticize the Eurocentrism of the English School and other theories.[13] While those earlier studies have done excellent work in revealing Eurocentrism within the discipline, the Ottoman Empire, as an actor, promises much more for the IR discipline.[14] It can serve as an active focal point of scholarly investigation that enriches the field’s theoretical scope and diversifies its perspectives. In subsequent sections, I will elaborate on the rationale and potential areas of inquiry for studying the Ottoman Empire and its prospective contributions for IR.

## Why Study the Ottoman World?

I propose an Ottoman-focused research agenda in IR for three salient reasons: one disciplinary, one global, and one local. Currently, voices within the discipline have increasingly called for in-depth studies on the Ottoman Empire to bolster its global and historical reach. The cultivation of Ottoman IR as a distinct area of inquiry not only holds the potential to ameliorate the prevailing Eurocentrism within the discipline but can also counteract the increasing dominance of historical studies that focus on China. Kang, a prominent scholar in historical IR, cautions against the pitfalls of substituting Eurocentrism with Sinocentrism.[15] In tandem with the geopolitical frameworks of South Asia, the Ottoman realm has the capacity to temper the rise of Sinocentrism in historical IR.[16] This potential arises not merely from the Ottoman Empire’s historical status as a global superpower, extending over three continents and enduring for six centuries, but also from the extensive corpus of primary resources and scholarly monographs that enrich our understanding of the Ottoman world.

Secondly, the contemporary world is grappling with a multitude of urgent challenges, ranging from climate change to imbalances in global governance. Environmental pressures are incrementally destabilizing our planet; however, in some ways, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. During the apex of its power, the Ottoman Empire confronted its own climate crisis, which precipitated numerous uprisings. The ways in which the Ottomans managed such social unrest, and the impact of these revolts on the fate of this historical superpower, remain pertinent questions for understanding our modern struggles with successive climate crises.[17] The increasing demands from states and populations for their voices to be heard is another salient global issue. Given the ascent of emerging powers like China, the regulation of these demands is becoming more imperative. Once again, the Ottoman Empire offers a rich case study for contemplating governance in a diverse society or globe, given its accommodation of three Abrahamic religions (Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Jews, and Christians), multiple ethnic groups (Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians,

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

Written by Ali Balci

Serbian, Albanian, Greek, among others), and an array of political entities (tribes, corsairs, dynasties, etc.). Consequently, it is essential to investigate how the empire's diversity regime functioned, and under what circumstances it resorted to violence against disparate identity groups.[18]

The third consideration is also of a disciplinary nature, but specific to the Turkish context. Scholars like Ersel Aydınli have long explored the feasibility of cultivating indigenous theorizing or authentic IR scholarship within Turkey.[19] One avenue for such theorizing involves the integration of Islamic philosophers and their alternative frameworks into the broader IR discipline—a task already being undertaken by emerging Islamic IR scholarship.[20] The Turkish IR community, being one of the largest and most well-versed in IR theories, possesses the potential to further globalize, pluralize, and historicize the field. Given that the practices and systems of great powers are instrumental in shaping IR theories, Turkish IR could benefit immensely from examining its empire. To put it explicitly, if Turkish IR aims to become a central player in theoretical advancements within the field, it must delve into the complexities of the Ottoman Empire and its rich intellectual traditions, which notably include advice literature and palace histories. Turkey, classified as a small- to middle-power, faces the risk of its IR scholarship remaining peripheral if confined solely to contemporary Turkish foreign policy studies. Therefore, investigation into the Ottoman Empire becomes imperative for elevating Turkish IR into a position of theoretical significance within the larger IR discourse.

However, an emergent risk looms that could potentially stifle the nascent field of Ottoman IR before it gains traction. While there exists abundant research on the Ottoman historical record, it has rarely been studied from an IR perspective. Also, the recent mainstream interest of the Ottoman Empire tends to pigeonhole it within the confines of so-called Islamic IR theory. Yet, the question of why theorizing Ottoman IR has not materialized is more empirically grounded than the query regarding the absence of an Islamic IR theory. While the latter question propels researchers towards a reductionist framework,[21] eclipsing the array of empirical practices within Islamic regions, the former offers a gateway to a more multifaceted understanding of historical dynamics. The viability of a non-Western IR does not rest on homogenizing a multitude of diverse practices under the expansive umbrella of Islam; rather, it necessitates a focus on the rich array of historical practices in their own right. Islamic IR could indeed be a vibrant field of study, so long as it avoids conceptualizing the diverse empires of the non-Western Islamic world as a monolithic religious collective. In short, thinking about cultural peculiarities, together with functional imperatives and practical exchanges, takes the Ottoman Empire out of Islamic IR and opens the door to the possibility of studying it as a distinct historical phenomenon.[22]

## What Areas Warrant Academic Investigation?

While by no means exhaustive, I advocate for the exploration of three promising research domains concerning the Ottoman realm as a basis on which to stimulate further scholarship: the broader Ottoman *nizâm* (order and/or system), the decision-making processes of the Porte, and the compilation of datasets. To start with, contemporary IR scholars are not constrained by the scholarly milieu that shaped Albert H. Lybyer's contentious monograph on Ottoman governing institutions.[23] Gone are the days when scholars had to justify their reticence to access the Ottoman archives by invoking Orientalist discourse that privileged "European records" while relegating Ottoman sources to insignificance.[24] The increasing accessibility of books on Ottoman history now allows IR scholars to engage with the Ottoman Empire without requiring exhaustive archival research or a command of the Ottoman language.[25] Those lacking language expertise or archival methodologies are nevertheless encouraged to investigate the intricacies of the broader Ottoman *nizâm*. Comprising diverse political units such as the imperial center, autonomous frontiers, offshore allies, and extraterritorial subordinates, the Ottoman international *nizâm* presents a rich field for scholarly inquiry. Essential questions to consider include: How were these disparate political entities interconnected, culminating in the unique historical phenomenon of the Ottoman international *nizâm*? How did this *nizâm* evolve across various centuries? What factors precipitated changes in the nature of this *nizâm*? How did it ultimately disintegrate and vanish? What, if any, are the enduring legacies of this *nizâm* in the modern global context?

The vast amount of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature on decision-making in the First World War often overlooks Ottoman actors, treating the Ottoman Empire as if it were merely a passive recipient of the war's events. This glaring omission highlights the Eurocentric biases prevalent in much of the current literature on historical

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

Written by Ali Balci

FPA.[26] An exploration of Ottoman case studies serve to not only rectify this source of Eurocentricity but also furnish invaluable insights that enrich this specialized area within IR. Nonetheless, such a scholarly venture demands proficiency in Ottoman language and archival methods, as FPA is inherently concerned with the meticulous scrutiny of details and micro-processes. A focused examination of late Ottoman war decisions,[27] for example, could yield three significant contributions to the literature on war decision-making and FPA. Firstly, these studies would challenge Orientalist assumptions that overly emphasize the role of religious factors in Ottoman declarations of war. Secondly, they would demonstrate that relying solely on European records from the twentieth century could lead to erroneous generalizations about war decision-making processes. For instance, contrary to dominant theories such as power transition, bureaucratic models, and overconfidence theory, war decisions in the Ottoman context were far from mechanistic. Lastly, the late Ottoman Empire provides rich and illuminating cases to understand major war decisions in states suffering from long-term decline.

Lall identifies a phenomenon he terms “advanced democracy bias”, which refers to the problematic nature of studies built on incomplete data from poorer and less democratic countries. According to Lall, listwise deletion is not only inefficient but also tends to produce biased inferences since the missing values do not adhere to a completely random pattern.[28] The Correlates of War dataset exemplifies this issue, as it lacks data on non-Western political entities, thereby perpetuating the misconception that the African continent was devoid of states.[29] Similar limitations plague other datasets as well. Upon examining Pamuk and Kahraman’s comparative study of Ottoman and European finances,[30] I was intrigued by Peter Brecke’s dataset on the material power of historical states. However, I found it conspicuous that Ottoman data was absent in his latest dataset.[31] I reached out to Brecke via email to inquire about this omission, and his response was illuminating. He acknowledged that the “biggest failing of the index is that I do not have the Ottoman Empire/Turkey included. That is because I could not find data for most of the variables used in the index components.” Unfortunately, previous versions of his dataset have been employed in academic research, as in the case of Pamuk and Kahraman’s work, thereby perpetuating bias in scholarly conclusions. Although alternative datasets that focus on military projection,[32] rather than quantitative measures of military strength, could be useful, incorporating diverse Ottoman-specific data could significantly enrich comparative historical analyses.[33] To be sure, compiling such datasets necessitates extensive archival work and proficiency in the Ottoman language, which in turn requires substantial research funding.

## Conclusion

The study of Ottoman international relations presents a promising research trajectory for both the broader IR discipline and the Turkish IR community. However, the exploration of the Ottoman realm is not solely the domain of the Turkish IR community. Libraries in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia house extensive archival documents pertaining to the Ottoman era. History departments in the United States not only hold significant quantities of Ottoman sources but also host many of the leading scholars in Ottoman history. While Turkish IR might leverage its(?) empire to carve out a unique identity and authority within the broader IR discipline,[34] the Ottoman legacy invites scholars globally to make meaningful contributions, transitioning IR from its Western-centric origins to a truly global discipline.

[1] Sara is the pseudonym given by Ersel Aydınli to a Turkish IR scholar he interviewed. Quotation is from Ersel Aydınli, ‘Theory Importation and the Death of Homegrown Disciplinary Potential: An Autopsy of Turkish IR’, *Third World Quarterly*, 2013, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2023.2257141.

[2] Ibid, 14-5.

[3] Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov, ‘Is “Non-Western Theory” Possible? The Idea of Multipolarity and the Trap of Epistemological Relativism in Russian IR’, *International Studies Review* 15, no. 3 (2013): 345.

[4] Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 271.

[5] Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations?: The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and*

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

Written by Ali Balci

*India* (London: Routledge, 2018), 182; Sinan Chu, 'Whither Chinese IR? The Sinocentric Subject and the Paradox of Tianxia-ism', *International Theory* 14, no. 1 (2022): 60.

[6] Amitav Acharya, 'What is "Global" in Global IR? A Reflective View', in Antonia Witt, et al., 'How to Problematize the Global?', *Millennium* 51, no. 1 (2022): 77.

[7] Christian Reus-Smit, 'Theory, History, and Great Transformations', *International Theory* 8, no. 3 (2016): 429.

[8] Raymond Duvall and Latha Varadarajan, 'Traveling in Paradox: Edward Said and Critical International Relations', *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 83-99.

[9] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[10] Deepshikha Shahi, 'One and Many: A Futuristic Foundation of the Global IR Research Programme', in Witt, et al., 'How to Problematize the Global?', 64-73. See also Morten Valbjørn, 'Dialoguing About Dialogues: On the Purpose, Procedure and Product of Dialogues in Inter-National Relations Theory', *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2017): 291-6.

[11] Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver, 'Conclusion: Worlding where the West Once Was', in *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, eds. Arlene B. Tickner, and Ole Wæver (London: Routledge, 2009): 338.

[12] Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, Review of *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History*, by Thomas Naff and Roger Owen, *The Historian* 41, no. 4 (1979): 791.

[13] See, for example, Kerem Nisancioglu, 'The Ottoman Origins of Capitalism: Uneven and Combined Development and Eurocentrism', *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 325-47; Cemal Burak Tansel, 'Deafening Silence? Marxism, International Historical Sociology and the Spectre of Eurocentrism', *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2015): 76-100; Pinar Bilgin, 'How to Remedy Eurocentrism in IR? A Complement and a Challenge for *The Global Transformation*', *International Theory* 8, no. 3 (2016): 492-501.

[14] Although this was a symptom in studies dealing with the East/Southeast Asia contexts, it has gradually changed over the last few years, leading to theoretical and conceptual contributions of those studies to the IR discipline. I would like to thank Kye Allen for bringing this point to my attention.

[15] David C. Kang, 'International Order in Historical East Asia: Tribute and Hierarchy Beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism', *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 65-93.

[16] The other promising areas that are greatly neglected are historical Africa and Central Asia. For some exceptional studies on this topic, see Charles Butcher and Ryan Griffiths, 'War, Interaction Capacity, and the Structures of State Systems', *International Theory* 13, no. 2 (2021): 372-96; Filippo Costa Buranelli, 'Authoritarianism as an Institution? The Case of Central Asia', *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2020): 1005-16.

[17] See for a popular debate, Andrea Duffy, 'What the Ottoman Empire Can Teach Us About the Consequences of Climate Change – and How Draught Can Uproot Peoples and Fuel Warfare', *The Conversation*, 7 June 2021, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-ottoman-empire-can-teach-us-about-the-consequences-of-climate-change-and-how-draught-can-uproot-peoples-and-fuel-warfare-159781>.

[18] See Christian Reus-Smit, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Ayşe Zarakol, 'The Ottomans and Diversity', in *Culture and Order in World Politics*, eds. Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 49-70.

[19] See, for example, Ersel Aydınli and Julie Mathews, 'Türkiye Uluslararası İlişkiler Disiplininde Özgün Kuram Potansiyeli: Anadolu Ekolünü Oluşturmak Mümkün mü?', *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 5, no. 17 (2008): 161-87.

# Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda

Written by Ali Balci

[20] See Dina Abdelkader, Nassef Adiong, and Raffaele Mauriello, eds., *Islam and International Relations: Contributions to Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[21] Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[22] Ali Balci, 'Bringing the Ottoman Order Back into International Relations: A Distinct International Order or Part of an Islamic International Society?', *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 2090-107.

[23] Albert Howe Lybyer, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the time of Suleiman the Magnificent* (Harvard University Press, 1913).

[24] Norman Itzkowitz, 'Eighteenth century Ottoman Realities', *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962): 77.

[25] Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xi.

[26] For a recent example, see Joe D. Hagan, 'Diversionary Theory of War in Foreign Policy Analysis', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.412.

[27] Ali Balci, et al., 'War Decision and Neoclassical Realism: The Entry of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War', *War in History* 27, no. 4 (2020): 643-69; Ali Balci, et al., 'When Doves Feed Hawks: Ottoman War Decision and European Powers Towards the Crimean War', *Alternatives* 47, no. 2 (2022): 67-83.

[28] Ranjit Lall, 'How Multiple Imputation Makes a Difference', *Political Analysis* 24, no. 4 (2016): 415.

[29] Charles R. Butcher and Ryan D. Griffiths, 'Quantitative Approaches: Towards Comparative and Trans-Regional Approaches in Historical International Relations', in *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations*, eds. Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira (London: Routledge, 2021): 542.

[30] K. Kivanç Karaman and Şevket Pamuk, 'Ottoman State Finances in European Perspective, 1500–1914', *The Journal of Economic History* 70, no. 3 (2010): 593-629.

[31] Peter Brecke, 'An Index of Country Power: Military Capabilities, 1494-1945', available at: <https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.gatech.edu/dist/1/19/files/2018/09/Brecke-Power-Index-Paper.pdf>.

[32] Ali Balci and Tuncay Kardaş, 'The Ottoman International System: Power Projection, Interconnectedness, and the Autonomy of Frontier Polities', *Millennium* (2023), DOI: 10.1177/03058298231185974.

[33] For some outstanding examples, see Eric Chaney, 'Measuring the Military Decline of the Western Islamic World: Evidence from Barbary Ransoms', *Explorations in Economic History* 58 (2015): 107-24; Asli Cansunar, 'Distributional Consequences of Philanthropic Contributions to Public Goods: Self-Serving Elite in Ottoman Istanbul', *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 889-907; Bogdan G. Popescu, 'Direct and Indirect Rule in the Early Ottoman Empire: Evidence from the Sancak of Arnavid?', available at: [https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/voices.uchicago.edu/dist/a/107/files/2017/10/CPW\\_-POPESCU-Oct.-11-2017-1wob9ea.pdf](https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/voices.uchicago.edu/dist/a/107/files/2017/10/CPW_-POPESCU-Oct.-11-2017-1wob9ea.pdf).

[34] Ole Wæver, 'The Sociology of a Not so International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations', *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 713.

# **Ottoman International Relations: A Research Agenda**

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