

Cihan Dizdaroğlu*

Samim Akgönül (2024) *One Hundred Years of Greek-Turkish Relations: The Human Dimension of an Ongoing Conflict*

The topic of Greek-Turkish relations is one of the most studied among International Relations scholars, as the ups and downs in bilateral relations have attracted many scholars to focus on the topic. The continuation of the long-standing problems between the two provides lively discussion points and can be approached from different angles. There is a vast literature covering almost every aspect of the bilateral relationship, from historical to political, social to economic and so on. The humanitarian aspect, however, is one of the areas of Greek-Turkish relations that has been covered to a lesser extent. Thus, Professor Samim Akgönül's book entitled *One Hundred Years of Greek-Turkish Relations: The Human Dimension of an Ongoing Conflict* provides a thorough discussion of the human dimension of the issue by focusing on the minorities of Greece and Turkey. The minority issue remains one of the ongoing problems between Greece and Turkey, and since the compulsory exchange of population, they have experienced the tensions in bilateral relations first-hand. In order to understand "the complexities of Greek-Turkish relations through a different lens" (p. 5), namely people's experiences, the book draws on primary sources of interviews collected in different time periods and different research sites, not only in Turkey (Istanbul, Bursa, Izmir, the islands of Imbros and Tenedos) and Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Komotini, Xanthi and Echinis), but also in Germany and France. In addition, the author uses various documents, publications and, most importantly, newspaper archives, including Greek and Turkish national newspapers, minority newspapers and a French newspaper called *Correspondance d'Orient*, to support discussions throughout the manuscript.

The book consists of six chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. The brief introduction sets the scene for the reader by discussing why the humanitarian aspect is important, and emphasises how the compulsory population exchange left deep psychological scars that continue to affect not only individual lives, but also contemporary developments in bilateral relations. The section also includes methodological details and a short but concise overview of the book.

* Başkent Üniversitesi, cihandizdaroglu@baskent.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-8613-8585.

The first chapter, “Turks and Greeks: Of Partition and Separation” tries to show how the Greek-Turkish relationship, based on rivalry and historical grievances, is also deeply marked by shared experiences and mirrored identities. Professor Akgönül argues that while it is possible to construct national identities of both countries against various “others”, the Greco-Turkish otherness remains the “most fruitful opposition” (p. 15) because it is useful for both governments in implementing policies and shaping public opinion against the “other”. The chapter reveals the historical background of the construction of Turkishness and Greekness through the use of the other in various policies implemented by both governments. The author stresses that while it is possible to use a shared history to create common interests, there is a tendency for both nations to believe that they are inherently different.

The second chapter makes an original contribution to the literature by dealing with the historical archive of a French newspaper, which mainly reflects the liberation of Arabs (in Syria and Lebanon) under the French mandate between 1919 and 1922, but also provides interesting and original insights into the Greek-Turkish war. Looking at this battle, which the Greeks called the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Turks called the War of National Liberation, from the perspective of an outside observer offers a novel and fresh perspective. Based on his extensive archival research, Akgönül shows that the *Correspondance d'Orient* initially took a pro-Greek stance, using Greek claims to justify Arab claims, but gradually changed its stance from anti-Turkish to pro-Turkish. This transformation was particularly marked after 1921, when the Greek advance began to threaten the Syrian struggle and provoke a nationalist reaction among the Turks (p. 42).

The third chapter entitled “‘New Turks’: Turkey’s 1923 *Muhacirs*” examines whether an “identity change occurred” (p. 48) following the 1923 population exchange through the lens of Muslim immigrants in the newly established Turkey. Akgönül believes that the concept of “identity change” is a bold one, as it is difficult to say that the “new Turks”, who came to Turkey with the exchange, “had a Greek identity which they traded for a Turkish one after the exchange”, so he prefers “identity shift” (p. 53). Focusing on three main factual changes, including geography, language and lifestyle, he asks whether these changes would be sufficient for a shift in identity. Language barriers and cultural unfamiliarity initially reinforced a strong sense of otherness for both locals and *muhacirs* (immigrants). Similarly, both the local population’s perception of the *muhacirs* –reflected in labels such as “*bitli macir*, *pis macir*, *çıplak macir*” (p. 60)– and unfriendly attitudes damaged the *muhacirs*’ sense of belonging. The intensive learning of the Turkish language, however, allowed these people to integrate into the newly emerged nation. On the basis of testimonies, the author draws the conclusion that while the first generation of immigrants struggled to adapt, the later generations gradually became integrated, with many of them fully identifying with their new national identity a century later.

The fourth chapter, “A Peculiar Group: *Polites*”, focuses on Turkey’s Greeks, or *Polites*, who have been “brought to the brink of disappearance in their home city” of İstanbul by the “Turkification” policies. The Greek inhabitants of Istanbul, together with the islands

of Imbros and Tenedos, were exempted from the compulsory population exchange under the Convention on the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, and they were granted minority rights under the Treaty of Lausanne. Despite these arrangements, Akgönül argues that they “were never accepted as integral parts of the Turkish nation and were suspected of being a Trojan horse serving the interests of Greece” (p. 67) as reflected in various government policies. These policies manifested themselves in the creation of a special corps for young Greeks, called *amele taburu*, in 1941 and the imposition of a wealth tax (*Varlık Vergisi*) on non-Muslims in 1942, followed by others resulting from the Cyprus-related crises: the anti-Greek riots of 6-7 September 1955 and the expulsion of Greeks in 1964. Of course, there are other measures such as the deployment of police forces, the increase in the Turkish population and the construction of a prison on the islands of Tenedos and Imbros, as well as the closure of the Halki Seminary, all of which have created other economic and psychological reasons for Turkey’s Greeks to leave the country. The section details the impact of these policies on demographics, minority institutions such as churches, schools, hospitals and so on, while also devoting a generous section to the Greek Patriarchate to discuss its influence throughout history. Despite all the negative effects of the Turkish government’s policies on the Turkey’s Greeks, the chapter offers some concrete and humanitarian suggestions (pp. 97-117) to preserve these minority institutions and the almost disappeared community as a historical and cultural asset for the country.

The fifth chapter focuses on Greece’s Muslim minority living in Western Thrace. While other Muslims in Greece returned to Turkey during the exchange of population, the Muslims of Western Thrace were also exempted from the compulsory exchange and their reciprocal minority rights were recognized in the Treaty of Lausanne. From a historical perspective, the chapter provides a detailed account of the challenges and discriminations faced by the minority group, comprising not only ethnic Turks but also Muslim Pomaks and Muslim Roma, as a result of the subsequent assimilation policies of the Greek state. It assesses the dynamics of Greece’s Muslims with reference to the “diasporic phenomenon”, given that this group has experienced strong emigration to different places and has had a complex citizenship status, with some even having the status of stateless persons due to an exclusive article in the Greek Nationality Code that applied from 1955 to 1998 (pp. 132-138). After briefly examining the problem of “appointed” and “elected” muftis, the chapter goes on to explore the problems of education and political representation through the case study of Sadık Ahmet, whose life story clearly reflects the difficulties of being a member of a Muslim minority.

The sixth chapter focuses on “breaking points”, “evolutions” and “continuity” in bilateral relations to assess their impact over the humanitarian issues in the centenary of Greek-Turkish relations. Breaking points were assessed in the light of three major developments over three decades, namely the new world order after the end of the Cold War, the Öcalan affair and the impact of the earthquake on bilateral relations. In parallel with these ruptures, the developments/evolutions are detailed through their reflections on the Europeanization of

Greece and the European integration of Turkey, the relative improvements in the situation of the Partiarhate as well as the role of civil society. Structural problems such as Cyprus, the Aegean and minority issues are studied as a continuity in bilateral relations. While the context is seen as ripe for positive change since the 1990s, the author is cautious, noting that “Greece and Turkey remain the best targets because they are close enough, yet estranged” (p. 182).

After a thorough examination of the humanitarian aspect of the issue, the book shows how “Turks and Greeks used and continue to use the opposite group to solidify the cohesion of the nation” (p. 193). Therefore, Samim Akgönül’s book is a useful and rich source for people who are interested in humanitarian issues, especially those of minorities, not only in the field of International Relations, but in general. Of course, from the reader’s perspective, it has some shortcomings, such as the limited use of primary data in the last three chapters, compared with the heavy reliance on interviews in the first three. This is mostly covered by in-depth investigations of newspaper archives, but real-life stories are always better and more attractive for readers to support the narrative. The chapters on the Greece’s Muslims and Turkey’s Greeks could be more balanced, especially with regard to minority institutions, since the section on Western Thrace—which is less studied in the literature—is limited compared to Istanbul. Although Professor Akgönül has largely avoided the “technical and purely political” dimension of bilateral relations, he has inevitably fallen into the trap of the political and the technical aspects when giving details on the subject, as can be seen, for example, in the sections related to Cyprus. In any case, for those who like to read a novel and fresh perspective on Greek-Turkish relations, the book offers a comprehensive and comparative one with its humanitarian dimension.