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## The American Passport in Turkey: National Citizenship in the Age of Transnationalism\*\*

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### *Origins of the Study, Theoretical Framing, and Methodology*

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*The American Passport in Turkey: National Citizenship in the Age of Transnationalism* (2020) by Özlem Altan-Olcay and Evren Balta offers an insightful exploration of U.S. (United States) influence globally, with Türkiye as a key example. American culture has profoundly influenced Turkish politics and society, evident in past political ambitions such as becoming a “little America” (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 49). In recent years, however, a provocative reversal has circulated in public discourse: that the U.S. is now becoming a “big Türkiye”, (Tan, 2022) reflecting growing questions over democracy, citizenship, and liberal norms, issues that parallel those explored in the book.

The book’s central question asks what it means to be a U.S. citizen outside the United States, specifically in Türkiye. It exemplifies the kind of well-formulated research question advocated by King, Keohane, and Verba’s seminal study: personal motivation, real-world importance, and scientific contribution (King et al., 1994). The authors’ personal experience as Turkish women who returned to Türkiye while pregnant and the surprise and questioning they faced for not giving birth in the U.S. sparked their curiosity about the meanings of U.S. citizenship, especially birthright citizenship. This personal motivation grounds the study’s origins in lived experience. The topic is timely: As more people seek dual citizenship

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amid tightening borders, the book captures this global inclination. In terms of scholarly contribution, the book provides rich empirical insights that extend beyond its limits, much like the transnational citizens who cross borders. Its findings resonate with broader debates, such as Wendy Brown's critique of the commodification of citizenship, and offer valuable data for future research on related themes (Brown, 2015).

The authors engage with key concepts from citizenship and migration studies, focusing on transnationalism and its tensions with nationalism, such as dual citizenship and transnational spaces. They draw from a range of disciplinary perspectives to construct a flexible and context-sensitive theoretical approach. While this interdisciplinarity enriches the analysis, it can at times make it harder to clearly link empirical findings to broader theoretical claims. The book, therefore, tends to emphasize interpretation over strict analytical structure, highlighting how the appeal of U.S. citizenship in Türkiye reflects broader U.S. global power and signals changes in the institution of citizenship. Methodologically, the authors use a relationalist lens, viewing "inside" and "outside" as interconnected scales (national, transnational, global). Their qualitative study is based on 110 semi-structured interviews with three groups: Turkish parents seeking U.S. citizenship for their children (conducted in 2012–2013), natural-born U.S. citizens living in Türkiye (conducted in 2014–2015) and naturalized Turkish-American returnees.

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The book advances three central claims: (1) citizenship is rescaled and operates across national borders; (2) U.S. citizenship functions as a form of imperial power in everyday life; and (3) citizenship choices reflect both strategy and emotion (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 169). While insightful, the findings are not generalizable beyond secular urban middle-class Turks and may not apply to other immigrant groups who acquired U.S. citizenship. This highlights a tension between the broad research question and the specific sample, despite the authors' reflexivity. Although limited, the authors compellingly argue that even before the full political and economic crises that emerged after 2015, fear and anxiety were already widespread among their interlocutors.

The book comprises four substantive chapters alongside an introduction and conclusion. The chapters are evenly paced and thoughtfully organized within the authors' relational framework, moving from macro-historical context to intimate, lived experiences. The opening chapter provides essential contextualization for readers less familiar with Türkiye's socio-political landscape, while the subsequent chapters closely analyze the interviews from three distinct groups of participants.

### ***Reimagining the American Empire in Turkish History***

Chapter One provides a macro-level overview of Turkish–American relations from the founding of the Turkish Republic to the time of writing, blending political history with

cultural analysis. This makes it accessible and useful, especially for readers unfamiliar with Türkiye's background, highlighting how U.S. influence has been interpreted and reshaped within Türkiye's domestic context. The authors divide this history into three phases, presenting U.S.–Türkiye relations as different stages of the American empire through the perspective of Turkish politics (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 63). This approach highlights a central theme about the American empire, including how it operates, how it is perceived, and how individuals experience it in daily life.

The first phase (late 19th century to World War I) focuses on American missionaries and entrepreneurs who founded schools and hospitals in the Ottoman Empire. Although the U.S. emerged victorious in WWI, Turkish elites did not reject American institutions; instead, these continued to shape the secular elite of early Türkiye. The authors argue that this influence persists even today, with informal interactions fostering early bilateral ties. The second phase spans the interwar period through the Cold War, during which Türkiye and the U.S. became close allies. American-educated technocrats helped align Türkiye's modernization with U.S. ideals. Yet tensions emerged as the U.S. supported right-wing factions while many leftist intellectuals—ironically educated in American institutions—adopted anti-American stances. Events like the Cuban Missile Crisis highlighted Türkiye's subordinate role in U.S.–Soviet negotiations and deepened its image as a U.S. client state, fueling anti-Americanism among leftist students and intellectuals. The third phase begins with the 1980 military coup, widely seen as aligned with U.S. interests. The military regime's neoliberal reforms and pro-American stance fostered admiration for the U.S. model among the new middle and upper classes. Though suspicions of American complicity remained, American cultural influence and migration to the U.S. increased, supported by legal reforms easing immigration. In the post-2000s era, the rise of a new political consensus in Türkiye eventually marked a shift in the prestige of Western ideals. While the early years of this period were characterized by a pragmatic alignment with global norms, significant geopolitical ruptures (most notably the 2003 Iraq invasion and subsequent regional security disagreements) strained bilateral relations. The authors observe that during this phase, a form of sovereigntist skepticism toward U.S. influence became a common denominator among diverse ideological groups, including both conservative and secular-nationalist circles. This period saw a transition where the U.S. was increasingly framed in official and public discourse as a source of strategic friction. Consequently, the book illustrates that for the urban middle class, the U.S. passport evolved from a mere symbol of prestige into a pragmatic institutional safeguard against domestic and regional unpredictability.

Nonetheless, it effectively blends political history with cultural and social dynamics. The U.S. is portrayed as both ally and adversary, cultural ideal and perceived threat. The authors also outline legal changes enabling dual citizenship, setting the stage for the interview chapters. This section provides a succinct overview of Turkish political history, making the

book a valuable resource for integration into undergraduate course syllabi. Importantly, this historical context is not confined to the opening but is effectively woven throughout the book. The authors argue that American empire's power operates not only through state relations but also through everyday individual strategies and desires, a theme the following chapters explore in more depth.

### ***Citizenship as Strategy: Risk, Identity, and Motherhood***

Through interviews, the authors seek to reveal how individuals uniquely and contextually assign meaning to the American empire, emphasizing that political categories like citizenship are fluid and shaped by personal desires, anxieties, and lived experiences (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, pp. 66-67). Chapter Two centers on middle- and upper-middle-class Turkish mothers who travel to the U.S. to give birth, examining how U.S. citizenship is imagined from afar. These well-educated, secular, Western-oriented women pursue citizenship not only for material reasons but also from deep anxieties about identity, belonging, and Türkiye's future. For them, U.S. citizenship serves as both "insurance" and a symbolic gift, an investment in their children's future security and mobility. Interpreting these choices through the lens of neoliberal subjectivity, the authors argue that individuals increasingly manage risk and make strategic life decisions, rather than rely on collective support or state institutions. A telling example is the rise of private companies offering "birth tourism" services, which the book discusses without naming explicitly. These businesses package U.S. citizenship as a consumer good, marketing it through "birth packages" that include hospital arrangements, accommodation, legal support, and concierge services. This commodified model is especially appealing to clients unfamiliar with the U.S. system, for whom these firms offer reassurance and logistical ease. By contrast, more affluent and U.S.-savvy interviewees tend to bypass such intermediaries, relying on their own networks and knowledge. The emergence of these services illustrates how neoliberal logics transform even citizenship—traditionally tied to political belonging—into a marketable, strategic resource consumed in response to insecurity and inequality. In this context, U.S. citizenship becomes both an insurance policy and a symbol of transnational privilege.

The chapter builds on the historical background, grounding it in contemporary narratives that help readers unfamiliar with Turkish politics understand these experiences. The mothers interviewed represent a privileged segment of society (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 88). Most do not intend to emigrate but want their children to have the option, motivated by concerns over shifting domestic policies, especially those affecting women's rights, and nostalgia for early Republican values. These women wrestle with the contrast between the Türkiye they grew up in, as "modern Turkish women" (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 80), and the political climate prevalent at the time, which diverges from that identity. The authors highlight the profound significance U.S. citizenship holds for those outside the U.S., illustrating transnational citizenship as identities and loyalties extend beyond national borders. This is

not a rejection of nationalism but a navigation of citizenship to protect children's futures. In sum, Chapter Two argues that Turkish mothers' pursuit of U.S. citizenship for their children embodies idealized American imaginaries alongside deep political anxieties. Citizenship here becomes a transnational entitlement, both an emotional and strategic resource imagined as a safeguard against uncertainty.

### ***Living the American Dream Abroad: Identity and Inequality***

Chapter Three builds on earlier discussions of transnational citizenship and neoliberal subjectivity by focusing on U.S.-born citizens living in Türkiye. At this point, the global hierarchy of citizenship becomes central. The chapter stands out for its engaging tone and vivid anecdotes, which show how U.S. citizenship functions like a "magic ticket", granting individuals mobility, social status, and a sense of security. The authors follow U.S. citizens from diverse class backgrounds (many lacking elite education) who have relocated to Türkiye. One likens life in Istanbul to *Grand Theft Auto*, capturing a sense of freedom and unpredictability. Türkiye is imagined as a "new frontier", where Americans believe they can live more freely than in the U.S. or as Turkish citizens. They engage in a dual process: on the one hand, they reproduce American exceptionalism by envisioning themselves as agents of freedom and opportunity; on the other, they critically reflect on the political and cultural shortcomings of both the U.S. and Türkiye.

Unlike the Turkish mothers in Chapter Two who sought U.S. citizenship as protection, these Americans use their citizenship to escape stagnation. One interviewee reflects that simply being born in the U.S. "opened every possible door" (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 100). Others criticize the double standards of global mobility, noting that elite passport holders often act with impunity abroad—confident that their privileged status will shield them from consequences that locals or less privileged foreigners would face (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 101).

The chapter identifies two key dynamics: (1) U.S. citizenship grants Americans in Türkiye notable advantages, and (2) they see themselves as distinct from both Turks and Americans in the U.S. Their citizenship functions as a global status marker, allowing smoother border crossings and social navigation. While Turkish mothers imagine the U.S. as a safety net, these Americans experience their privilege abroad. This highlights the asymmetries of transnational citizenship. Though some Americans felt culturally secure in Türkiye, many relocated after 2015, citing the shifting socio-political landscape of the period. Yet, they often felt admired (even "celebrity-like") in their communities (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 109). One interviewee was hired solely for being American, as her employer leveraged her presence to impress clients with phrases like, "this is how we do it in New York". Ultimately, third chapter reveals how U.S. citizens abroad, through a mix of pride and critique, reimagine "America" from afar. The American Dream, seen as fading domestically, is revived overseas.

This reinforces both personal narratives and broader global inequalities that underpin U.S. power.

### ***Returning Home with Exit Plans: Risk Society and Layered Belonging***

Chapter Four examines the return migration of highly skilled Turkish individuals who had successfully integrated into the U.S. through education, employment, and legal status, yet chose to return to Türkiye. Their experiences illustrate how contemporary migration is no longer a one-way path from periphery to center, but rather a fluid process shaped by shifting labor markets, emotional ties, and strategic citizenship decisions. Despite stable lives in the U.S., these individuals returned not to reject American life, but to recalibrate their priorities. Many felt they could achieve greater social status in Türkiye as U.S. citizens, echoing patterns discussed by natural born U.S. citizens. Their return was often motivated by family ties, particularly the desire to connect their children with grandparents and draw on familial support in child-rearing. Their decision-making also reflected disillusionment with aspects of American life, such as harsh working conditions, expensive healthcare, and post-2008 economic uncertainty. Meanwhile, the author suggests that the evolving domestic environment in Türkiye after 2013 prompted a sense of caution among returnees, leading them to view their U.S. citizenship as a strategic asset or a form of future security.

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The authors, drawing on Ulrich Beck's "risk society" framework, argue that U.S. citizenship enables individuals to manage uncertainty by creating "transnational safety zones" (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 151). These returnees strategically balance local rootedness with global flexibility, using dual citizenship as a tool for both emotional and material security. Interviewees often maintained a cosmopolitan identity anchored in both global mobility and strong local attachments, especially to Istanbul. Yet, when discussing identity, many emphasized a deep cultural Turkishness over American legal affiliation. Interestingly, even some U.S.-born interviewees from Chapter 3 expressed strong identification with Turkish culture and values, highlighting how national identity was sustained through emotional and cultural inheritance (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 156).

In essence, the final chapter shows how citizenship today is not simply a legal status, but a dynamic resource shaped by inequality, mobility, and layered belonging. Influence of American empire, the authors contend, is less about allegiance to the U.S. and more about its role in shaping life strategies, imaginaries, and aspirations (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020, p. 161)

### ***Citizenship as Capital in an Unequal World***

The conclusion offers a timely reflection on the shifting meanings of citizenship in a transnational world. Published in 2020, its insights into the structural realignment of citizenship regimes have only gained relevance as we witness a global movement toward more contingent and

securitized forms of legal status. While Altan-Olcay and Balta originally analyzed these transformations during the first Trump administration, the developments leading into the current second term suggest that these trends have moved beyond mere “anxieties” into a phase of systemic redefinition. In the U.S., the intensification of policies—moving from the early visa restrictions of the first Trump era to more expansive measures like Executive Order 14159 which is titled *Protecting the American People Against Invasion* and the Executive Order 14160 which proposes a reinterpretation of birthright citizenship —indicates that the “magic ticket” described by the authors is being replaced by a model of conditional privilege. This evolution substantiates the authors’ claim that citizenship functions as a form of transnational capital; however, it also suggests that this capital is becoming increasingly volatile. In an era where borders are being technologically and legally fortified, the “safety zones” once provided by a dual passport are now subject to the shifting priorities of national security and institutional changes.

In this increasingly complex landscape, the global demand for U.S. citizenship is met with a shift toward more restrictive legal frameworks. While the book primarily focuses on the experiences of privileged groups, its insights into passport hierarchies and the emotional weight of citizenship remain both timely and valuable. A significant strength of the study lies in its exploration of domestic dynamics through the lived experiences of interviewees. By highlighting the shifting perceptions of institutional predictability and the divergence from long-standing secular social values, the authors illustrate why segments of the urban middle class have come to view U.S. citizenship not merely as a legal status, but as a necessary refuge and a strategic aspiration. Ultimately, the book serves as a prescient diagnostic tool for understanding a world where legal belonging is no longer a static right but a strategic asset that must be constantly navigated against an unpredictable global landscape.

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