

Neo-Ottomanists and Neoconservatives: A Strange Alignment in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT In a curious and hitherto largely overlooked episode, the revisionist “neo-Ottomanist” ambitions of King Hussein of Jordan and Turgut Özal of Turkey converged during the 1990s with the interests of an influential group of “neoconservatives” centered in Washington to press for a radical redrawing of the Near Eastern political and territorial map. Due to a combination of material and normative limitations, neither Hussein’s nor Özal’s ambitions materialized, but the common central elements of their visions – a rejection of the nation-state system imposed on the region after the Ottoman Empire’s collapse; the evocation instead of past imperial greatness, updated to reflect contemporary democratic norms; and a style of rule characterized by a cosmopolitan and accommodating realpolitik – constitute an alternative to rival (authoritarian secular-nationalist, liberal, militant Islamist) prescriptions for the region’s future at a time when the erosion of the post-Ottoman status quo continues to accelerate.

In a curious episode overlooked by the scholarly literature, the ambitions of two Near Eastern leaders generally viewed as conventionally conservative, King Hussein of Jordan and Turgut Özal of Turkey, aligned during the 1990s with the interests of a group of influential American and Israeli policy hawks to press for a radical redrawing of the regional political and territorial map. That such a revisionist agenda should arise during the 1990s is not in itself surprising, for this was a time of great upheaval, precipitated in part by broader developments such as the end of the oil boom and the collapse of Communism. Politically, long-entrenched authoritarian regimes in the Near East came under unprecedented challenge. Territorially, a substantial number of new entities –Iraqi Kurdistan, Somaliland, Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Kosovo, Palestine– emerged exhibiting (for a while at least, in some cases) a measure of real autonomy that fell short of recognition as sovereign states. Such developments revealed the growing strains on the regional political order created and sustained by the great powers after the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in World War I.

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in pursuit of a grander imperial vision. In doing so, they appealed both to a broader, more cosmopolitan political identity (a “greater *asabiyya*,” to use Ibn Khaldun’s terms) of the kind that sustained the Ottoman and earlier Islamic empires, and to the democratic norms that are increasingly constitutive of political legitimacy. As such, their initiatives constitute an early signal of the current regional identity crisis, reflect the variability of political legitimacy during times of extraordinary flux, present an alternative to the prescriptions of Islamist militants and liberal modernists alike, and highlight the urgency of the quest for viable alternatives to a collapsing status quo –an urgency that has only intensified since the 1990s.

King Hussein

On March 11, 1924, the Hashemite Sharif Hussein, custodian of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina and ruler of Hijaz until his ouster by the Saudis later that year, proclaimed himself Caliph of all Islam. His declared aim was to pick up the mantle of the Ottoman caliphate, which had just been abolished by the Turkish republicans, and by extension that of the Abbasids and Umayyads all the way back to the founding of the Islamic polity by his ancestor the Prophet Muhammad. Hussein’s proclamation, and its near-total dismissal by Western powers and local nationalists alike, is emblematic of the modern Hashemite project as a whole.

In pursuit of this project the Hashemites proved willing to deal with anyone wielding real power. Sharif Hussein’s sons Abdullah and Faisal accordingly accepted British offers to assume the thrones of Transjordan and Iraq respectively –in order to establish beach-heads for more expansive initiatives such as Abdullah’s Greater Syria and Faisal’s Fertile Crescent unification plans– even though the creation of the two states was itself popularly viewed as a Western betrayal of pan-Arab nationalism. They also sought to come to terms with the Zionist movement, despite widespread Arab hostility and charges of collaboration with the enemy. The Hashemites appealed to realism, Jordan’s King Hussein arguing in a foreword to his grandfather Abdullah’s memoirs that his family’s “criterion in [...] every judgement is whether what they are seeking is feasible and attainable or not.” In Palestine, Abdullah “had perceived the

Zionist iceberg and its dimensions [...] His tactics and strategy were therefore attuned to circumventing and minimizing the possible consequences of a head-on collision. Others saw only the tip, and their responses were over-confidence, inflexibility, and outright complacency.” Such was Hussein’s defense, self-serving to be sure but compelling nevertheless, of the Hashemite proposition that “Morality and power-politics do not, in most instances, match.”¹

What the Hashemites hoped to achieve, then, was as comprehensive a reversal of the fragmentation of the region as realistically possible. “From his father,” Avi Shlaim writes, Abdullah “inherited the belief in Arab greatness, the yearning to revive the glory of its past, and the vision of a mighty Hashemite empire and caliphate.”² Abdullah lamented the splintering of the Ottoman “Imperial Caliphate” into narrower “racial” entities: “It is true that the Turks are today stronger than before, better organized and more progressive, but where is the fame and influence they once had, when their Sultan was Commander of the Faithful?”³ Although practical constraints obliged him to focus his acquisitive energies on Greater Syria and the Hijaz, accordingly, he never stopped looking farther afield: “It is my hope that from now on we shall see these things come to pass and, if God so wills, form federations from Pakistan in the southeast to Edirne in the northwest and from the borders of Tibet in the east to Tangier in the west.”⁴

Such an outlook is congruent with the worldview of an ambitious prince whose father was born in Istanbul and married a grand-daughter of one of the most eminent Ottoman statesmen, and who himself lived in Istanbul between the ages of eleven and twenty-seven and then again as a deputy for Mecca in the Ottoman parliament during the years leading up to World War I. In his memoirs Abdullah vividly evokes the imperial capital as “fascinating beyond description, a city of great beauty entralling in every season [...] [A]s the traditional seat of the Caliphate it gathered a multitude of different people – Turks and Arabs, Kurds and Circassians, Albanians and Bulgarians, Egyptians and Sudanese. It contains Muslims of every walk of life, of different fashions and tongues, yet nobody and nothing seem strange and you can find anything you want from any country.”⁵ This is an imperial worldview, expansive but also cosmopolitan and accommodating.

Still, the Hashemite prince encountered one disappointment after another. Although both the British and the Zionists had at various points considered ways of “Arabizing” the Palestine problem within a broader regional framework (with David Ben-Gurion going so far as to contemplate in 1934 an “association” between an independent Jewish state and an Arab federation), ultimately neither had any interest in the kind of meaningful consolidation of Arab power envisaged by the Hashemites.⁶ Even after Abdullah gained control of the West Bank and the eastern half of Jerusalem in the 1948 war –his single, and



One of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal's aides looks at a painting at the Jordanian foreign ministry 05 September 2001 in Amman, depicting, from L to R, Sherif Hussein bin Ali, leader of the Hashemite dynasty, the late King Hussein, King Talal, the latter's father, and King Abdullah bin al-Hussein, founder of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, during Faisal's meeting with Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdel Ilah Khatib. King Abdullah II is hidden from view.

AFP PHOTO / LEILA GORCHEV

temporary, acquisition– Israel's leaders refused to conclude a peace agreement that would recognize his annexation of the Palestinian territories. Avi Shlaim describes their attitude: "There was always a tendency among them to under-rate and belittle Abdullah, but as their power and self-confidence increased, so did their disregard for him, a revealing example of which was Ben-Gurion's refusal to meet him face to face."⁷ As for British officials, Abdullah's pursuit of unification with Syria provoked an exasperation that led one of them to muse: "It is very difficult to know what place we can find for him in the post-war Near East, and if he plays the fool and gives us an excuse to eliminate his dynasty, so much the better."⁸

Such, at any rate, was the worldview of the man his grandson King Hussein would call "the greatest single influence on my life."⁹ Abdullah met his death at the hands of an assassin on July 20, 1951, while attending Friday prayers at the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Hussein, who stood next to him and barely survived himself, later recalled how the sight of his grandfather's attendants fleeing in all directions revealed to him "the frailty of political devotion" and left him with a disillusioned if more realistic outlook: "it was his death which taught me the ultimate lesson [...] that brought me face to face with myself and made me clarify my philosophy of life for the first time."¹⁰ Many years later he told an interviewer who asked whether he ever confided in his wife on matters of state: "There is no one in the world with whom I can discuss problems frankly. The burden is too big, and I am prepared to bear it alone. That is how it is, that is how I am."¹¹ Hussein's own revisionist agenda would later be shaped by this grim view of human nature.

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In terms of foreign policy, however, the expansionist component of Hussein's Hashemite legacy would remain dormant for many years, eclipsed by the popularity of Nasserist and Ba'thist nationalism. That dormancy began to pass with the 1967 debacle, allowing him to float proposals such as his 1972 "United Arab Kingdom" plan for the reunification of Jordan and the West Bank, and his 1986 development plan for the occupied territories, both of which however once again failed to overcome Israeli and Palestinian opposition. Only in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, did the time finally seem ripe for a more radical reassertion of the Hashemite vision.

Hussein's initial response to the crisis was a surprisingly vigorous attack on the proposed American intervention, often explained as appeasing the pro-Iraqi sentiments of his citizens. It is possible, however, to discern a sequence of reactions that indicate a more proactive effort to capitalize on this upheaval. Hussein's first major theme was the looming danger posed by predatory foreign powers. In a speech to the Arab summit in Cairo on August 11, he warned of "plans" to strike "a blow against Iraq to [...] weaken it and [...] liquidate it as a promising power" as a prelude to seizing the "oil reserves in our region."¹² In an "address to the American public" aired on Jordan Television on September 22, he pointed out that Kuwait and southern Iraq had belonged to the same Ottoman province, and questioned the legitimacy of the post-Ottoman map more generally.¹³ In a speech addressed to the entire Muslim nation in February 1991, he again combined the themes of external threat and potential greatness, asserting that "the real objective" of the war was to plunge Iraq "back to primitive life [...] to destroy Iraq and to rearrange the regional state of affairs in a manner that would be far more serious for the present and future of our nation than what had been arranged by the Sykes-Picot treaty. Our homeland, nation, aspirations, and resources will thus be placed under direct foreign hegemony."¹⁴

Who could avert this danger? Hussein turned next to his second major theme, the bankruptcy of both existing alternatives: the authoritarian secular nationalism represented by the Ba'th Party, and the authoritarian reactionary despotism represented by the Saudi regime. From the earliest days of the crisis, amid reports that he now referred to himself as "sharif," the title of his forefathers in their capacity as custodians of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, Hussein denounced Saudi Arabia's willingness to allow non-Muslim troops on

Hussein's emphasis after August 1995 on federalism as a solution for Iraq was, moreover, almost always accompanied by references to a confederation between Jordan and a future Palestinian entity as well

its territory, as well as its readiness to finance the war effort.¹⁵ These attacks if anything intensified following Iraq's defeat. He reminded the graduating class of the Royal Staff and Command College on November 23, 1992, for example, that: "We are worthy of legitimacy and credibility, which cannot be said for those ingrates who have no more than an incidental connection to

the nation's history." To remove any doubt about whom he was contrasting to the Hashemites, Hussein went on:

"Let us, we the Arabs, have a new Arab order, a united Arab states, or one Arab state. Let us defend its borders, not the borders drawn up by the colonialists, bypassing those Arabs who are motivated by tribal affiliation and arrogance, after they had flooded the nation with their oil and bragged about their seats which were restored at the hands of the foreigner and with its lances stained with the blood of their brothers."¹⁶

Even as Hussein was reviving his grandfather's challenge to the post-Ottoman state order, he took care to distinguish it from the more exclusionary pan-Arabism of the authoritarian secular nationalists exemplified by Saddam Hussein. If the Saudi alternative rested on an absurdly narrow principle of political solidarity ("tribal affiliation"), the Ba'athists and their ilk upheld an ethnic chauvinism that could never win the consent of all their diverse populations and therefore tended to devolve into cruel tyranny instead. King Hussein indicated the bankruptcy of that alternative in a major address on November 5, 1992, in which he called on "this beloved nation [...] to stand up to the ambitious and to the renegades; to protect its capitals from those who would advocate tyranny or who would tie the destiny of nations to individuals; and to open wide the gates of freedom, democracy, pluralism, and respect for human rights."¹⁷ More explicitly, in May 1993 Hussein told reporters that the Iraqi leadership had, "through its practices, led us to a situation that has broken our backs. I cannot continue to support that policy and that leadership."¹⁸

Hussein's references to democracy and pluralism introduce the third, and most innovative, element of his campaign. Already on March 1, 1991, as the fighting in Kuwait was coming to a close, Hussein suggested that amid the darkness "a new dawn [...] beckons on the horizon."¹⁹ In the following years he called repeatedly for "rebuilding the pan-Arab project [...] on new formulas and a modern appeal."²⁰ The new formula, on which Hussein hoped to mount his case for an updated Hashemite alternative, was the coupling of "freedom and

unity.”²¹ Only now, “freedom” referred not just to a pluralistic tolerance for heterogeneity characteristic of the traditional imperial paradigm, but also to reforms Hussein introduced in 1989, including the legalization of parties across the spectrum, and their participation in regular elections for parliament. It was on this basis that Hussein felt ready to assert in his November 5, 1992, speech: “Our own model is open to the entire nation.”

In that speech Hussein described his alternative model as one that raised the banners of Mu’ta and Karbala, embracing both Sunni and Shi’i elements of Islam. In another address in 1995, even while ostensibly denying any revisionist ambitions, he further emphasized that this model extended beyond the Arab nation: “We have let the fraternal Iraqi people choose their own way and [...] hoped that the Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs, Kurds, and all the elements of its national fabric which the Hashemites had held together, would not be torn apart.”²² Sensing that the Ba’thist regime was nearing its end, accordingly, Hussein began arguing that Iraq’s salvation lay not just in greater political pluralism, but in also in a federal structure that accommodated the country’s ethnic and sectarian heterogeneity. By the mid-1990s, in short, Hussein had put all the elements of his updated version of the old paradigm in place: political pluralism and cultural cosmopolitanism within a unified imperial framework, guided by *realpolitik* rather than ideology.

Hussein’s emphasis after August 1995 on federalism as a solution for Iraq was, moreover, almost always accompanied by references to a confederation between Jordan and a future Palestinian entity as well.²³ Certainly his critics in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Egypt were convinced, despite his denials, that he was indeed trying to bring about some kind of association combining Jordan, the Palestinian West Bank, and the three regions of Iraq within a broader union –perhaps as a prelude to further expansion that brought in other lands, including the ancestral Hashemite homeland of Hijaz, as well. According to an article citing anonymous Saudi officials, for example, “the Saudis immediately assumed that the use of the title ‘sharif’ indicated some deep dark scheme by Hussein, in league with Saddam, to try to lay claim to the Hejaz if Iraq defeated the Saudis in a war.” Syria’s Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam accused Hussein of proposing to Iraqi opposition leaders “a plan to partition Iraq into three states [...] and then establish a union between these three proposed states and another Arab party [i.e., Jordan].”²⁴ Hussein’s critics further charged that he intended to align this confederation with the United States and its regional allies in a new axis that would dominate the Near East; a charge that intensified following the signing of the Jordan-Israel peace treaty on October 26, 1994.²⁵

Could Hussein really have hoped to realize his grandfather’s dream of a kingdom commensurate in size and power with their shared understanding of Hashemite destiny? Publicly he continued to deny it, telling interviewers in

October 1995: “I gave all that up.”²⁶ Certainly, however, the mere pursuit of such an ambition must have seemed worthwhile. At a minimum, any projection of Hashemite influence into Iraq or Palestine could be convertible into an extra measure of control over events at a time of extraordinary flux, and an extra measure of leverage with other powers capable of influencing the course of those events. At a maximum, Hussein’s policy kept the door open for more significant transformations, even in borders, should it turn out that circumstances allowed.

Still, Saddam Hussein’s continued hold on power through the 1990s deferred any alternative scenarios for Iraq, while territorial intransigence and Israel’s settlement activity kept the Palestinian front frozen as well. Domestically, despite his allusions to pluralism and democracy as the key new ingredients of the old paradigm into which he was trying to tap, King Hussein’s statecraft never transcended the politics of palace intrigue and foreign collusion. Perhaps as a result of the dim view of human nature he acquired at the site of his grandfather’s assassination so many years before, he always seemed to prefer taking his subjects as they were, and manipulating them accordingly, rather than attempting serious ennobling reforms of their opinions and manners. Jordan’s democratizing experiment, an essential component of his revisionist design, consequently faltered during the final years of his reign, in tandem with his external ambitions.

Turgut Özal

For all the differences in their social backgrounds, Turgut Özal and the Hashemites shared several key characteristics: dissatisfaction with the regional order imposed by the Western powers after World War I; a yearning to recapture lost imperial greatness; a cosmopolitan and pragmatic, not to say opportunistic, political temperament. In all this Özal stood in marked opposition to the austere Republican dogmas of secularism and unitary nationalism at home, caution and non-intervention abroad. When circumstances combined to propel him to Turkey’s leadership, first as prime minister then as president, from 1983 to 1993, therefore, his acquisitive spirit alarmed the spartan guardians of the Kemalist state.

Domestically, Özal’s pursuit of economic liberalization generated massive growth, driven by an export boom and accompanied by the importation of an unprecedented diversity of goods and products from all around the world – even as corruption and income inequality increased as well. Externally, his equally acquisitive appetite was in evidence even before he assumed power. In 1973, after Iran occupied three strategic islets near the outlet of the Persian Gulf, Özal wrote to the prime minister exhorting him not to let this bid

for regional hegemony go unchallenged, and urging him to initiate Azeri language broadcasts to project Turkey's influence among Iran's large population of Azeri Turks. Eight years later, as Iraq teetered on the brink of defeat at the hands of Iran, Özal reportedly again counseled intervention, this time in order to seize the oil fields of Iraq's Kurdish north.²⁷ Nevertheless, the foreign policy initiatives of his first years in power remained relatively modest: reaching out to Greece, expanding trade with the Arab world and Iran to unprecedented levels while simultaneously initiating a rapprochement with Israel, and seeking membership in the European Community. It was only with the nearly simultaneous twin earthquakes of the collapse of Communism in East Europe and the Soviet Union, and the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1991, however, that the full extent of the radicalism of Özal's break with Kemalist foreign policy orthodoxy became apparent.

Özal rejoiced at this revolution in Turkey's geopolitical environment: "God has opened up a gate in front of us. A great gate. We must go through this great gate. If we don't, such opportunities come by only once every 300 or 400 years."²⁸ A vast region extending "from the Balkans to Central Asia" suddenly emerged as a potential sphere of influence. All that was required was to remember that "we, as a nation and society left over from an empire," had once been able "to create a cultural and political identity transcending ethnic differences." It was necessary now to recover that common identity, and to reaffirm the principle of solidarity underlying it: "Today as well, just as in the imperial period, I believe that Islam is the most important element constituting such an identity. [...] The Islamic religion is the cement unifying the different ethnic groups adhering to it." Viewed from such a perspective, "Turk, Kurd, Albanian, Bosnian, whatever – whoever was previously an Ottoman citizen and remained in those lands after we left there, are kinsfolk of our citizens today and are the people beyond our borders who concern us in the first degree."²⁹ First, however, Turkey needed to abandon the "timid" approach that had dominated its actions since the establishment of the Republic, to cast off the "animating spirit of Republican policies" which had stunted Turkey into "a closed society, a closed economy, and as a result [...] an inward-looking country that has isolated itself to a great extent from the rest of the world." If Turkey could reconfigure itself so as to capitalize on its imperial legacy, and dare to reestablish connections with its long-lost kinsfolk once again, "why shouldn't it become the most powerful and leading country in this most important region of the world?"³⁰ And



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that, in turn, would position Turkey for greatness on a much grander scale: “I say, Turkey’s prime objective during the ten years ahead of us is to become one of [the world’s] ten or fifteen leading countries [...] to enter into the ranks of first-class nations.”³¹

Özal’s “neo-Ottomanism,” then, went well beyond a merely Turkish nationalist expansionism. It also went beyond a dogmatically religious revisionism, as he indicated by pointing out that “neither the Kurds of Iran nor the Turks of the new [post-Soviet] republics are as close to us as the Turks and Kurds who had been Ottoman citizens.”³² Özal instead pursued a pragmatic political agenda, based on real, historically-grounded identity networks and cultural legacies, which aimed at capitalizing on new regional dynamics that were putting pressure on the map that had been in place since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. So did he in fact envision territorial revisions? His own words exhibit a certain ambivalence. “We’re not saying let’s now redraw these artificial borders into a more natural form, but there is a reality in place: these people [the ex-Ottoman populations beyond Turkey’s borders] are the kinfolk and co-religionists of our own citizens here. Therefore, when they are troubled, our citizens are troubled as well. And we are obliged to take our citizens’ well-being into consideration.”³³ As with King Hussein, the least that can be said is that projecting influence beyond one’s borders is likely to yield benefits even if it falls short of changing those borders; it can, as Özal repeatedly insisted, increase one’s leverage with other actors as well as one’s capacity to shape developments abroad. Beyond that, however, who could foretell the future? As he put it just days after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, while one should of course be careful about embarking on “adventures”: “Sometimes circumstances become propitious and everything comes of its own accord, that’s another matter.”³⁴

Indeed, the Kuwait crisis provides the most illuminating test case of Özal’s new approach. With the retreat of Baghdad’s authority during the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s, northern Iraq once again became the incubator of a Kurdish nationalism that spilled over into Turkey as well, where fighters of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) were already waging a separatist struggle. The end of the Iraq-Iran war had encouraged Turkish security elites to look forward to a reassertion of Iraqi state authority in the north, but their hopes were dashed when Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait soon thereafter once again cast Iraq’s entire future into doubt. Özal by contrast saw a sea of opportunities opening up. His initial posture, spelled out in press conferences during the days following the occupation of Kuwait, was that in a “rapidly changing” world where the imminent end of the Cold War threatened to reduce its influence more generally, Turkey needed to play some kind of active role in order to reserve a “seat at

the table” and have a say in shaping the postwar disposition in Iraq. It was vital not to permit an outcome to emerge “that does not reflect our desires, that is not shaped by our involvement.”³⁵ Accordingly, Özal requested extensive war powers from parliament even as he continued to deny any intention of actually initiating hostilities. His request was denied; he could deploy troops abroad or invite foreign troops onto Turkish soil only if Iraq attacked Turkey first.

In private, Özal was even more assertive. As he pressed the military to prepare contingency plans for a campaign against Iraq, and instructed his own staff to research every aspect of its northern region –from its precise demographic makeup to the legal status of Turkish territorial claims there– his opponents grew convinced that he did indeed desire to invade. Chief of Staff Necip Torumtay, who resigned in protest in December, later wrote in his memoirs: “in our various exchanges the President insisted on the necessity and importance of a cross-border land operation [...] In this context he used every opportunity to recall the fact that Mosul and Kirkuk fell within the National Pact borders [the original borders claimed by the Turkish Republic in the early 1920s].”³⁶ Özal’s defense and foreign ministers resigned as well. General Kemal Yavuz, commander of Turkish forces along the Iraqi frontier at the time, later recalled the objections he had expressed to Özal:

It was an adventurist approach. [...] I said that if I was given the order [...] I could conquer that territory within four days. But the important thing was to keep it under control. I pointed out the trouble we’ve had in controlling south-eastern Turkey, where we enjoy the support of 98 per cent of the population. What would it be like in a region where we did not enjoy such support? [...] I asked him: “Do you really think the West will leave Mosul-Kirkuk in our hands?” [...] Is it conceivable that the United States will allow an area in which it wants to establish a Kurdish state to remain under Turkish control?³⁷

Such opposition from a security establishment that feared foreign adventures ultimately prevented Turkey from joining the war against Iraq. As Özal’s new defense minister (and cousin) Hüsnü Doğan put it: “Özal wanted to go into Iraq. Those forces [the military and civilian bureaucracies] blocked him. [...] It’s as simple as that.”³⁸ Still Özal continued to hope, telling a veteran politician soon after parliament rebuffed him: “For Turkish soldiers to embark on such a campaign, for them to take control of the petroleum sources in places such as Erbil and Mosul [...] would be a very easy operation. [...] And it would rescue Iraq from Saddam, strip it of its weapons, and on top of that make Turkey sovereign over the oil region. I was unable to make either the military or the government accept this idea. But this chance is not yet lost.”³⁹

It was not yet lost because Özal still sought to project Turkey’s influence into Iraqi Kurdistan. He sent an emissary to the Kurdish leadership there bearing



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the message: “You Iraqi Kurds are historically part of us. That’s not the case with the Iranian Kurds. [...] Don’t place your hopes on Iran [...] Iran will abandon you; your interests lie in coming together with us.”⁴⁰ But what was Özal really offering the Kurds? When he told them they were “historically part of us” he referred to a shared Ottoman past, so many observers understood him to mean an updated, perhaps looser, version of the conglomeration of communities that constituted the Ottoman Empire. If so, it would be necessary to detach Iraq’s north from the rest of the country. Having been denied the option of direct intervention, Özal in April 1991 called for the creation of a UN-administered autonomous zone in northern Iraq –a major departure from the traditional Turkish policy favoring a strongly centralized Iraq.⁴¹ He also reportedly contemplated federal options for Iraq that would give the north greater autonomy.⁴²

In order subsequently to attract the Kurds, however, it would also be necessary to address the monocultural nationalism that characterized the Turkish state itself. Just weeks after the Kuwait war, accordingly, Özal lifted the official ban on the use of the Kurdish language in Turkey. He also expressed his intention to allow schools to teach in Kurdish, and to initiate Kurdish-language television broadcasts. On the political level, finally, Özal dared to raise the explosive issue of federalism within Turkey as well. Özal’s solution both to Turkey’s domestic identity crisis and to the foreign policy paralysis that crisis engendered, then, evidently involved replacing the unitary Republic with a more decentralized and multicultural structure. Such a turn could accommodate the diverse

attachments of Turkey's own population, and at the same time permit an entirely new, proactive rather than reactive, foreign policy in which the Kurds, like other former Ottoman peoples, would become a vehicle for the projection of Turkish influence abroad rather than a conduit for hostile foreign actors seeking to infiltrate and undermine Turkish sovereignty at home.

Although Özal's political and economic liberalization programs initiated a revolutionary transformation of Turkish society that is still unfolding, however, his country's borders remained unchanged when he died on April 17, 1993. He enjoyed at least two crucial advantages over King Hussein: his country had much greater indigenous power resources, and he could deploy democracy's potential as a normative basis for a modern revisionist agenda much more credibly than the monarch ever could. Özal underscored this potential repeatedly, arguing that Turkey's entire history of authoritarian secular nationalism, from the establishment of the republic to the end of Kemalist one-party rule in 1950, was a period in which *asabiyya* narrowed and the rich imperial "inheritance" from "past centuries" was squandered. It was only "after the transition to democracy" –after the convictions and sensibilities of the populace gained political salience– that "serious developments" in terms of material and cultural advances became possible and the prospect of establishing a "great nation" could arise once again.⁴³

Nevertheless, during Özal's lifetime Turkey's Kemalist elites still remained too entrenched for the revisionist agenda he envisaged, and Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement lay too far in the future to permit a successful intervention in northern Iraq. It would be another two decades before conditions would seem more propitious for his successors at the helm of the AK Party. Their updated neo-Ottomanism would draw alarmed reactions from numerous quarters, not least of all an influential group centered in Washington that had adopted a far more sanguine stance toward the revisionist ideas of both Turgut Özal and King Hussein back in the 1990s.

The Neoconservatives

In June 1996 an Israeli think-tank posted on its website a document outlining policy recommendations for the new Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," the document listed an eight-member "study group" (Richard Perle, James Colbert, Charles Fairbanks Jr., Douglas Feith, Robert Loewenberg, Jonathan Torop, David Wurmser, Meyrav Wurmser) from whose "discussion" the "substantive ideas" it contained had emerged. Some of these "neoconservatives" would later hold important positions in President George W. Bush's administration.⁴⁴ Beyond exhorting Netanyahu to embrace free-market economics and thus end

his country's financial dependence on the United States, the document advocated a clean break in regional policy as well:

Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq –an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right– as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions. Jordan has challenged Syria's regional ambitions recently by suggesting the restoration of the Hashemites in Iraq.

The prominent role envisaged for Turkey reflects this group's continuing high regard for the late Turgut Özal, whose eagerness to join the American-led coalition against Iraq and to project Turkish power northwards into post-Soviet Muslim territories had coincided with their own interests. Former U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Richard Perle later described Özal as “a great man, a courageous leader, a true visionary,” and credited his willingness to override the reservations of Turkey's foreign policy establishment with the successful conclusion of two security agreements which “would guide U.S.-Turkish relations throughout the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war against Saddam Hussein.” Perle ended by bemoaning his successors’ “failure to pursue Özal's vision” of a “Turkey that looms large in world politics.”⁴⁵ Given that failure, at any rate, the 1996 “Clean Break” document focused primarily on Jordan: “Israel has an interest in supporting the Hashemites in their efforts to redefine Iraq [...] Were the Hashemites to control Iraq, they could use their influence over Najaf [a major Shi'i theological center] to help Israel wean the south Lebanese Shia away from Hizballah, Iran, and Syria.” The neutralization of those forces would in turn leave the Palestinians and Syrians isolated and allow Israel not simply to “manage” its conflict with them but finally to “transcend it.”

These points subsequently received further elaboration by David Wurmser, who went on to serve as U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's advisor on Middle East affairs from 2003 to 2007. Writing near the end of 1996, Wurmser looked forward –as being “in both Israel's and the West's interest”– to the “demise of secular-Arab nationalism” as exemplified by the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th. Only a “traditional regime” of the Hashemite type, anchored in a “new pro-Western Jordanian-Israeli-Iraqi-Turkish bloc,” would be able to “contain and manage [...] the coming chaos in Iraq and most probably Syria.”⁴⁶ In a book published by the American Enterprise Institute in 1999, Wurmser expanded on the virtues of the Hashemite alternative:

The Hashemite concept is quite different, and it represents a hope for the future. It envisages an evolution toward decentralized, loosely bound nations. Specifically, the Hashemites embrace the idea of a federated Iraqi entity, with maximum autonomy residing in local bases of power, broadly tied to a Jordani-

an-Iraqi confederation. In essence, this design harks back to the old Ottoman *Millet* system –decentralized administration along ethnic, sectarian, regional, and community lines– that was abandoned during the *Tanzimat* reforms.⁴⁷

Elsewhere in his book, Wurmser wrote of “a Hashemite confederation across the northern Levant,” thus incorporating Syria as well, and of a region-wide “conservative restoration” aligned with Israel and Turkey.⁴⁸

Robert Loewenberg, another member of the “Clean Break” study group and president of the think tank that sponsored it, took a different tack in 2000, during a period in which Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak appeared ready to make territorial concessions. Dismayed by what he viewed as Jewish enervation in the face of Arab hostility, gripped by the “sense that Israel’s sovereignty as a nation-state is slipping away and will not be regained,” Loewenberg concluded that Israel’s “best hope” might well lie in “a confederal relationship with Turkey.” Because Turkey “is the only authentic nation-state in the region capable of [...] dealing with the Arabs and the fundamentalists,” it must be induced to accept the leadership of “a confederal or a cantonal relationship with Israel (and with other separate and homogeneous bodies of peoples marked-off along ethno-religious lines in cantons – including within Turkey itself).”⁴⁹

How to explain such a remarkable congruence with Hashemite and Özalian revisionist ambitions? The answer seems to lie in a profound and pervasive sense of insecurity. The notion that Ehud Barak’s willingness to trade away some of the occupied Palestinian territories engendered a threat to the survival of the Jewish nation so dire that cantonal autonomy within a new Turkish empire would seem preferable, is extreme even within these circles, but it is extreme only in degree, not kind. Hence David Wurmser’s warning, for example, that the “Middle East has absorbed the deadly politics of modernity that led to Stalin and Hitler.”⁵⁰ For at least this group of Israel’s defenders –facing a Palestinian population radicalized after thirty years of occupation, itself the perceived vanguard of still vaster and also increasingly mobilized masses of Arabs and Muslims– the pragmatic and cosmopolitan neo-Ottomanism articulated by King Hussein and Turgut Özal presented an attractive alternative to the authoritarian chauvinism of the Ba’th, so evocative of the totalitarian ideologies of Europe with which it does indeed share affinities.

At the same time, however, proceeding from the view that any consolidation of power in Israel’s vicinity poses a mortal threat, these neoconservatives un-



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derstood the evocation of older imperial traditions not as a call for reconsolidating regional power, but precisely its opposite: “What most differentiates the pan-Arabic nationalists from the traditional leadership is the attitude toward centralization: the nationalists emphasize centralized statism, the old guard, decentralized civil society. [...] Effectively, the words *decentralization*, *break-up*, *federalism*, and *confederalism* are coded references to the great struggle between the pan-Arabic, nationalist, revolutionary leadership on the one hand and the Hashemites and traditional leadership on the other.”⁵¹ If the Hashemites are seen to represent “the old [...] landed, feudal aristocracy,” their central principle of social solidarity (*asabiyya*) can then be interpreted not as pointing upward toward an integrated Islamic imperial state, but downward toward a more primordial (“tribal”) and therefore less threatening form of political organization: “The Hashemites alone are adept enough in forging strong tribal, familial and clan alliances to create viable nations in the Levant. [...] In the long run, a Hashemite victory could usher in an era defined by a stable balance of power rooted to tribal alliances.”⁵² Following the same logic, it is not sufficient that the Hashemites display realism in their dealings with powerful intruders into their territories; they must also be understood as having “welcomed [...] the British and even the Zionists.”⁵³

Such wishful thinking culminates in a dismissal of all dissonant evidence, whether it be Hussein’s lament that the American-led attack on Iraq aimed at “dismembering” the “bonds” of the Arab nation, “weakening” it “more than it is now, fragmenting it further, and humiliating it more and more;” or Özal’s advocacy of Islam as the “cement” needed to recreate upon the traces of the Ottoman Empire a new power ranking among the world’s “ten or fifteen leading countries.”⁵⁴ Instead, in a trope current among these neoconservative circles, Özal was alleged to have realized the folly of mixing politics and religion after a failed attempt on his life in 1988, and adopted a much more secular approach.⁵⁵ This despite the increasing prominence of Islam in Özal’s most comprehensive political statements during his final years. Above all, the aspiration to political greatness that lies at the heart of the Hashemite and Özalian visions is simply erased: “In both Europe and the Middle East since the end of the nineteenth century, radical efforts have continuously challenged traditional society; utopian, statist, and arrogant political movements have replaced burgeoning ones that were more liberal, decentralized, and humble.”⁵⁶ But for Hussein and Özal, tyrannical utopianism and humble liberalism were not the only alternatives imaginable.

Even so, to the extent that the tactical objectives of various states converged in the 1990s—destabilizing the Iraqi regime, for example, or isolating the Syrian regime—degree of cooperation could and did take place. Even before Netanyahu became prime minister in June 1996, both Jordan and Turkey had already taken advantage of the opening created by the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Decla-



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ration of Principles to recalibrate their own relations with Israel, the former by signing a peace treaty in October 1994, the latter through a set of bilateral accords culminating in a “Military Training Cooperation Agreement” signed in February 1996. During the following three years this recalibration took the form of biannual “strategic dialogue” sessions between Israeli, Turkish and Jordanian officials, as well as arms deals and joint military exercises between various combinations of the three parties. Netanyahu felt encouraged enough to say in September 1998: “We are working to transform the Israeli-Turkish cooperation in the Middle East into a regional security system. [...] I hope that Jordan will participate in the system. I have already discussed the matter with the Crown Prince Hassan.”⁵⁷ Indeed Hassan, Hussein’s younger brother, emerged as the leading candidate to lead a Hashemite restoration in Iraq. Michael Rubin wrote an article suggesting that “If Iraqis Want a King, Hassan of Jordan Could Be Their Man,” and even after the 2003 U.S. invasion, Bernard Lewis (the leading intellectual light of these neoconservatives) and R. James Woolsey (head of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the mid-1990s) wrote an opinion piece of their own that, without naming Hassan directly, called for “a Hashemite prince with political experience” to be made king of Iraq.⁵⁸ It was around this time as well that Robert Loewenberg pinned his hopes on Turkey instead, advocating a Turkish-led regional confederation –somehow epitomizing “the Western ideal: a republican nation,” and somehow distinct from both historical Ottoman imperialism and the “secular Ottomanism” of the European Union– as offering the best “hope for stability and republicanism to Asia Minor and the Levant.”⁵⁹

Given the ongoing erosion of the post-World War I political order, it is not surprising that alongside the “routine” determinants of policy behavior, more fundamental alternative visions for the region’s future, from the most liberal to the most totalitarian, should emerge

In the event, of course, none of these schemes materialized. For the secular nationalist elites, particularly on the General Staff of the Armed Forces, who shaped Turkey’s security policies during the decade following Özal’s 1993 death, any talk of neo-Ottomanism or Levantine confederations was pure anathema. Far from overturning the regional status quo, their interest lay in upholding it. While they were willing to align with Israel against Syria so long as Damascus sponsored the Kurdish separatist PKK, according-

ly, once that sponsorship ended following a Turkish ultimatum in late 1998, Turkish-Syrian relations grew warmer once again. In Iraq, that same concern about Kurdish separatism led Turkey to favor a restoration of Saddam Hussein’s authority. That is why General Doğan Güreş kept urging the Americans to “learn to live with Saddam” during his tenure as chief of staff until 1994, and that is why Turkey coordinated its cross-border operations against PKK bases in northern Iraq with an Iraqi government assault which devastated opposition forces there in the fall of 1996. As Turkey’s foreign minister at the time, Tansu Çiller, put it: “We have sent a delegation to Saddam to tell him that if he can impose central authority there, O.K.”⁶⁰ Turkish foreign policy during most of the 1990s, in short, had nothing to do with Özal’s transformative vision for his country or the region.

As for Jordan, King Hussein’s death on February 7, 1999, paved the way for a successor, his son Abdullah II, who confined his ambitions within the boundaries of Jordan; initiating a “Jordan First” campaign, describing his uncle Hassan as having “blundered” in attending a London conference of Iraqi opposition figures in July 2002, and declaring: “I have been very opposed to the idea of the Hashemite family getting involved in Iraq and have said so to everyone, including Prince Hassan. [...] [I]t’s a non-starter for me.”⁶¹ In truth, however, even had King Hussein lived to see the overthrow of Iraq’s Ba’thist regime in March 2003, the odds would have remained overwhelmingly against him. Above all, it would have taken a remarkable set of circumstances to induce the Americans or Israelis, in the cold light of day, to go along with a project that would actually consolidate and enhance Muslim power in the Levant, when so many alternatives remained at hand –from outright partition of Iraq to the federal structure currently still being attempted. It is far more likely that had he made any real headway with his revisionist goals, Hussein’s erstwhile backers in Israel and the United States would have quickly grown as exasperated and

dismissive with him as their Zionist and British predecessors had done with his grandfather over half a century earlier. It is noteworthy in this regard that Prince Hassan himself ended up denouncing “the Clean Break paper of 1996” for advocating a “fragmentation” of the region in line with the plans of “Israeli extremists that believe Israel should emerge as the dominating minority in a region of minorities.”⁶²

Conclusion

The Hashemites’ predicament ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire has been the disjunction between their desires and their limited power resources, forcing them to rely on the arms of others. Even if under some extraordinary set of circumstances outside actors did find it in their interests to promote Hashemite ambitions in a land such as Iraq, however, the reality is that the days when one could simply ride to conquests on foreign tanks are long gone. The politics of the region have evolved to a point where any new regime must attract a much more substantial measure of legitimacy and consent. Prestige, albeit rooted in a lineage extending back to the Prophet Muhammad, is not enough. Even a mode of rule that, in comparison to Ba’athism and other regional alternatives, is considerably more benign is not enough. Along with autonomous power, a legitimate regime consonant with prevailing norms is required as well. Özal’s state was stronger than Hussein’s, and his democratic government far better positioned to mobilize popular aspirations, but even so it would be many more years before Turkey’s material resources and normative outlooks reached a point where a credible bid for regional hegemony could be contemplated.

Speaking to Turkey’s parliament in April 2012, soon after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu foresaw “fundamental changes” in “regional conceptions of statehood, governance, and human geography” and asserted that Turkey, having undergone the “most important democratizing drive” of its history, was now positioned “to be the vanguard of a new idea, a new regional order.”⁶³ Almost a year later, he explained that this “new regional order” would be based on the restoration of an “older conception” of community (*millet*), one that would allow “Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians, [and] Arabs” to erase “artificially drawn maps” and “break the mold that Sykes-Picot drew for us.”⁶⁴ Just one week after Davutoğlu’s second speech, imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan used strikingly similar language, denouncing “Western imperialism” for dividing the “Arab, Turkish, Persian and Kurdish communities” into “nation-states and artificial borders,” recalling their “common life under the banner of Islam for almost a 1000 years,” and declaring that “it is time to restore to the concept of ‘us’ its old spirit and practice.”⁶⁵

Given the ongoing erosion of the post-World War I political order, it is not surprising that alongside the “routine” (economic, balance-of-power, etc.) determinants of policy behavior, more fundamental alternative visions for the region’s future, from the most liberal to the most totalitarian, should emerge. The neo-imperial one evoked by Hussein and Özal may seem particularly implausible. But its persistence, as well as the opposition its latest articulation by Turkey’s current leadership is provoking –not just in the United States, Israel and elsewhere, but also among rival currents within the region’s political culture– suggest that its promise to combine multicultural democracy with imperial greatness continues to find some resonance among the peoples of the Near East. ■

Endnotes

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55. Personal communications from an individual closely associated with the “Clean Break” group. In fact, Özal’s would-be assassin reportedly had secularist, not Islamist, connections – see Can Dündar, “Özel Harpçinin Tırmanış Öyküsü,” *Milliyet*, 8 January 2006.

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