

## **Turkish Foreign Policy: The Lausanne Syndrome in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East**

**ZENONAS TZIARRAS**

**Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022**

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Zenonas Tziarras, despite his relatively young age, has a remarkable contribution to English and Greek literature regarding Turkish foreign policy in the era of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [AKP]) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although he is one of many authors who have systematically tried to contextualise and explain the impact of President Erdoğan's revolution in Turkish foreign policy, he has offered original ideas and concepts to the debate. One of them is the concept of the 'Lausanne Syndrome' elaborated in this small and concise but theoretically and empirically solid piece of work.

According to Tziarras, the Lausanne Syndrome 'is connected to certain historical memories and ideological narratives, indicative of certain strategic aspirations that stem from an undesirable geopolitical status quo.'<sup>1</sup> It encompasses 'a nostalgia in terms of the Ottoman Empire's international stature, its domestic socio-political and cultural order, and its geopolitical size and influence.'<sup>2</sup> He approaches it as an intervening variable at the level of elite ideas and beliefs that dominated Turkish politics after the rise of AKP as a dominant political power and can explain a remarkable spectrum of foreign policy decisions. One out of many interesting aspects of this book the comparison between the 'Lausanne Syndrome' and the so called 'Sevres Syndrome'. These two sets of pre-dispositions to a large extent respond to the two main 20<sup>th</sup> century political traditions in Turkey: the first one is that of modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal, which envisions a secular, Western-style state that breaks with its theocratic Ottoman past; the second one is that of political Islam, which was incarnated by the National Outlook

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<sup>1</sup> Zenonas Tziarras, *Turkish Foreign Policy: The Lausanne Syndrome in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (Switzerland: Springer, 2022) 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

parties and, more recently, by AKP. This tradition celebrates Turkey's imperial and oriental past and aspires to retrieve some elements of Ottoman theocracy and imperial foreign policy, thus reversing some of Kemal's pro-Western reforms. What's interesting in Tziarras' work is that he tries to approach and explain these conflicting ideological narratives through the study and presentation of their original ideas, as well as the socio-political processes that gave them continuity and timelessness throughout Turkey's turbulent history in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Probably the most important part of this work is the contextualisation of the 'Blue Homeland' ('Mavi Vatan') strategy, as 'one of the later manifestations of the Lausanne Syndrome', which 'emphasized the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean for Turkey, especially in terms of maritime space and naval power.'<sup>3</sup> Since 2019 the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine has been perceived in Greece and Cyprus as the incarnation of a revisionist agenda that aspires to undo some of the Lausanne Treaty's arrangements, particularly in relation with Greece's sovereignty over Aegean islands. Statements made by President Erdoğan and other members of his government leave very little room for alternative approaches. However, it is very important to scrutinise the process that brought about these revisionist assumptions. From a Turkish perspective, Ankara's response to the initiatives of Greece and its partners in the Eastern Mediterranean over the last decade is defensive and supportive of (its own version of) the status quo. Tziarras provides a deep analysis of these issues and draws a distinction between different approaches in Turkish public debate.

Another point worth mentioning in relation with Tziarras' contribution to the study of Turkish foreign policy, is the use of neoclassical realist theory. In my view, realism remains a solid theoretical tradition that can provide credible explanations on various matters related with state power and state interests and how these are incorporated in foreign policy agendas. Since Hans Morgenthau's publication of *Politics Among Nations* in 1949, classical realism was based on human nature as the cognitive foundation upon which knowledge of power politics could be based. Following the publication of Kenneth Waltz' *Theory of International Politics*, in 1979, realist thought eventually escaped from Morgenthau's human-nature theory and embraced a positivist approach that aimed

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 59.

to turn the scholars' attention towards the structure of the international system (namely the distribution of capabilities across the system), as the main apparatus governing power relations among states. Theorists like Waltz, Walt, and Mearsheimer made a significant contribution to the understanding of dynamics stemming from the distribution of power among States in the international system, thus advancing one of the most challenging tasks in IR theory: the description and explanation of the universal rules that states obey when it comes to their security, self-preservation and prosperity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the revolutionary change that took place in the international system stimulated the emergence of post-positivist theoretical approaches that put neorealist positivist determinism to the test and brought the human factor back to the center of research.<sup>4</sup> Following this development, some realists re-evaluated the main pillars of their research program. As a result, the neoclassical realist approach has emerged, which attempts to combine attributes of systemic analysis with individual and state-level variables as a means of explaining foreign policy and power-related choices made by states.<sup>5</sup> In this framework, issues like the leaders' perceptions of power distribution, as well as individual characteristics of each national political and governance system, gained attention as factors that may explain foreign policy and security decisions. Tziarras makes excellent use of this theoretical evolution as he turns the spotlight on unit-level elements, particularly state elite ideas and narratives, as factors that may explain developments in the realm of Turkish foreign policy. However, I am not sure whether systemic factors, which neoclassical realist theory considers as independent variables, get the attention they deserve in his work. There seems to be an analytical asymmetry between intervening and independent variables, which tends to undermine the importance of macro-systemic factors like changing global power distribution and great power relations. Of course, this does not entail that the book's research objectives are not met, but it would be even more interesting to see a deeper analysis on how the evolution of Turkey's relations with the United States, Russia

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<sup>4</sup> Yosef Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era' (1989) 33(3) *International Studies Quarterly* 235–254; Steve Smith et al. (eds) *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics' (1998) 51(1) *World Politics* 144–172; Radnall L. Schweller, 'Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing' (2004) 29(2) *International Security* 159–201; Norrin M. Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and China (or relations among these three great powers) play out in the Lausanne Syndrome-related aspects of Turkish foreign policy.

Tziarras' work should not be seen isolated, as just one more analysis on Turkey and its fascinating history and contemporary politics. In my view he sets the benchmark for the study of revisionist states' foreign policy, at a time when this is extensively discussed in relation with Russia's effort to seize Ukrainian territory and China's attempt to dispute the existing sovereignty status in South China sea and bring reunification with Taiwan back to the fore. The debate on polarity in the international system, particularly whether the later goes multipolar or bipolar (or, as Brooks and Wohlforth insist,<sup>6</sup> it is still unipolar) mainly focuses on how relations between established great powers may be affected by power re-distributions, but scarcely enters deeply into the realm of domestic politics to understand how traditional political and ideological trends may be connected with systemic developments and what outcomes could such connections produce. Furthermore, to my knowledge, so far there is no significant research contribution regarding horizontal characteristics of revisionist states in the post-American era. Tziarras' work could serve as the bedrock for a broader, comparative research project.

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power' *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023.