

EPILOGUE

On *Muhabbet*



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“I am no historian, yet I know that there can be no tomorrow without knowing yesterday. In this way, it was a privilege to be part of this corpus, which draws attention to the importance of learning and understanding every aspect of the common past, joys, pains, pangs, resentments, in a word, every aspect of History, and which builds upon a vanguard posture affirming that the muhabbet berated by national narratives can be overcome through muhabbet again. In the final analysis, everything is political in its noble sense. History and the national narratives cannot be independent of politics; that’s why we talk about the lack of muhabbet and revisiting muhabbet.”

Cengiz Aktar

On Muhabbet

The roots of the word are Arabic. In Turkish, it has two meanings—the more commonly known is being engaged in a friendly conversation; the more infrequent meaning is affection. Both meanings of *muhabbet* faithfully reflect the essence of this book...

In reality, the relationship between the two peoples living in the Aegean Sea is habitually described using negative clichés. At best, there is the familiar saying: “*The people are good, but politics is bad.*” Beyond this, the memories and narratives of the two painful nation-building processes have left their deep marks on the relationship.

I have long believed that the antidote to the “inexorable” poison of nation building is an awareness of the deeply interweaved history of the two people. And for such awareness, I believe in the necessity of a learning rooted in objective knowledge and data, as free from national narratives as possible. This is precisely the purpose of our book!

In the few pages that make up my share, let me illustrate the deficiency of mutual *muhabbet* with examples from both countries, starting with Greece.

About twenty years ago, during a visit centered on friendship, I had the opportunity to tour the Museum of Byzantine Civilisation in Thessaloniki. There, a historical chronology caught my attention: In the information provided, the history of Hellenism seemed to come to a halt in 1453, the year of the fall or conquest of Constantinople, only to resume with the Greek Revolution or the Morea Uprising as the Ottoman regime named it, in the early 1800s.

I am not a historian, yet I found it strange that such a historical parenthesis was presented as a natural fact in a serious, pedagogical, and public institution like a museum. Over time, as I read more, I realized that this parenthesis was not a coincidence but rather one of the fundamental building blocks of the Greek national narrative.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the soreness caused by the centuries in which today’s Greek lands and the Greek population of Anatolia lived under the rule of another religion and another people is one thing—scientifically ignoring this period altogether is something entirely different.

Centuries in parenthesis

Is it not undeniable, whether we like it or not, that during the “centuries in parenthesis” the center of gravity of the Orthodox, Hellenic, Greek, Byzantine or Rum world—however we choose to define it—remained firmly rooted in Constantinople, growing in strength, and that through the Ottomans, who in many ways inherited the Byzantine legacy, this influence extended across the entire Ottoman geography?

Let us take a look at the period preceding the parenthesis that began in 1453. Emperor Manuel II Palaeologos repeatedly sought help from Catholic Rome in the face of Ottoman attacks, but he was always turned down due to religious dogma. Finally, fourteen years before the fall of the city, in 1438, a religious council was convened in Ferrara.

The Eastern and Western Churches had split in 1054, and the schism became one of the justifications for the Sack of Constantinople by the Latin Crusader armies in 1204. Historians argue that the events of 1204 were one of the key factors leading to Byzantium’s eventual downfall. Indeed, of the vast Empire, a mere 40.000 people remained in the city under attack in 1453.

Confident in its power, Rome imposed a reunification at the Council of Ferrara, effectively annulling the schism of 1054 and forcing Byzantium—regarded as the *Second Rome*—into submission.

In Constantinople, however, fierce opposition arose against reunification of the two historic denominations of Christianity, led by Georgios Kourtesios, the future Ecumenical Patriarch. According to the chronicler Doukas, the opposition was summed up in a statement by the last Grand Duke, Loukas Notaras, as he stood before the besieged city walls: “*I would rather see a Turkish turban in the midst of the City [i.e., Constantinople] than the Latin mitre*”

Indeed, to Catholic Rome and the other powers of Europe, Orthodox Byzantium was just as much an *Other* as the Ottoman Empire. The dominance of Catholic rule over Orthodox lands was no coincidence—the Greek language even has specific terms for it: *francocracy*, *latinocracy*, *venetocracy*. But unlike Emperor Manuel II, the Great Church—the Ecumenical Patriarchate—prioritized not the survival of the Byzantine state but the continuity of the Orthodox faith.

Following the conquest, in 1454, Kourtesios was appointed by Mehmed II as Patriarch Gennadios II, marking the end of Catholic rule over Byzantine lands. Catholic dominance was replaced by *Turkokratia*, or Turkish rule, although historians note that this designation was not in use before the revolutionary era.

In a similar vein, after Constantinople changed hands—particularly during the rise of the Ottoman Empire—Catholic Europe began to portray the pre-1453 period as a *lost paradise*. By the early 19th century, this perception had become one of the foundational myths of Greek national identity.

In other words, the breakdown of *muhabbet* did not actually begin in 1453 but rather in the early 1800s. It was the national narrative that formalized the *parenthesis* and national history that reinforced it. Since then, the lack of *muhabbet* has persisted through deeply ingrained clichés. A striking example is the myth perpetuated by the national narrative that Orthodox worship and Greek-language education were banned during the *parenthesis* period. However, unlike the British and French empires, the Ottoman Empire did not attempt to erase the faith, language, or culture of the peoples under its rule in favor of its own. On the contrary, it was forbidden for these communities to resemble the ruling Muslim population in any way.

The wound that never healed

Now, let us turn to Turkey and the entrenched perceptions regarding Greece. The key dates are the early 1800s, 1912, and 1919—corresponding to the Greek War of Independence, the First Balkan War, and the Greek army’s landing in Izmir, respectively.

Greece was the first nation-state to break away from the Ottoman Empire. For the struggling Ottoman state, facing severe internal and external crises, the rupture was a profound and lasting shock—a wound that never fully healed. In other words, the Greek Revolution was the true starting point of *muhabbetsizlik*, (meaning lack of *muhabbet*) or estrangement, for Turkey as well.

It is noteworthy that the apprehension developed into a mixture of belittlement and indifference. Historians specializing in the 19th century remind us that there are still 50,000 archival documents in Turkey related to the Greek Revolution between 1812 and 1828 that have yet to be thoroughly studied. Academic readings on this subject are scarce and have only recently begun.

Another striking example is Ahmet Vefik Pasha’s *Fezleke-i Tarih-i Osmânî* (1869), which was used as a textbook in the Ottoman Empire. In this work, there is hardly any noteworthy mention of the Greek uprising, independence, or state.

The First Balkan War, which led Greece to its current borders (excluding the Dodecanese), caused a new trauma, much like a century earlier. The year 1912, which marked the Ottoman Empire’s forced withdrawal from the Balkans, was a wide-ranging disaster with lasting negative consequences for the Empire’s remaining territories. In the following years, emerging national organizations

and narratives in the Empire burned with the desire to take revenge for 1912 on the non-Muslim populations still residing in Anatolia. The role of the retaliation in the genocides, pogroms, and forced resettlements of the Ottoman Empire’s final years is far from being minor.

Then came 1919, with the occupation of Izmir and the Aegean hinterland, which represented an even greater humiliation than those of a century and even five years earlier. In Turkey, the perception was that a former *millet-i mahkûme* (subject *millet*) was now laying claim to the land of the *millet-i hâkime* (ruling *millet*). The defeat of the Greek army and the end of the occupation paved the way for new traumas, culminating in a population exchange based on religious identity. The exchange, which meant the end of Anatolian Rum/Greek culture, significantly contributed to the nationalization processes of both countries. However, it also deepened the estrangement and *muhabbetsizlik*. The population exchange was a political decision that treated people as mere objects, stripping them of the human dimension. It remains a profound societal tragedy, with its effects still felt in every *mübadil* (exchangee) family.

It is undeniable that the nation-building process is one that almost forbids, or at the very least undermines the *muhabbet*. Before the era of nationalism, different communities in both countries lived together or co-existed side by side. With the rise of nationalism, however, they suddenly developed a mindset that excluded the other. Over time, the exclusion extended to the entire polity, including both the state and society. The resulting *muhabbetsizlik*, the coldness and the distance, led to indifference, indifference led to ignorance, ignorance led to fear, and fear led to hostility.

As anyone closely observing the two countries knows, relations on the diplomatic front have long been tense. The turning point for this period was the 1974 Cyprus military operation or the occupation of northern Cyprus. Since 1974, the already strained bilateral relations have evolved into a much more conflict-prone climate over the past fifty years. Within this context, Athens’ ambiguous stance in 2004, driven by national momentum, regarding the Annan Plan—which could have paved the way for a federal solution in Cyprus and, consequently, facilitated Turkey’s path to the European Union—was not insignificant.

More recently, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean have become a primary area of interest for Ankara in the context of its search for fossil fuels. It is clear that the quest is driven by a desire for regional power and influence.

The so-called exploratory talks between the two countries, ongoing since 2002, were unilaterally halted by Ankara after the crisis of the Turkish officers who sought asylum in Greece following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Although these negotiations now seem to have resumed, lasting peace still appears to be a distant prospect.

Before the termination of these talks, the summer of 2015 saw a massive refugee crisis. There is a possibility that Ankara actively encouraged this large-scale migration.

Then, in 2019, under the “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine—fabricated by far-right opposition figures and later adopted by the government—Turkey signed a controversial maritime jurisdiction agreement with Libya. The agreement, which disregards the landmass of the island of Crete, was an unprecedented move in international marine relations.

Similarly, in the same context, the Kemalist opposition introduced the claim that several Aegean islands were “occupied by Greece,” a notion that was eventually accepted by the ruling establishment.

Meanwhile, Ankara continued its threats to release refugees, conducted military overflights over Greek islands, and carried out naval drills and fossil fuel exploration activities without pause.

Faced with these hybrid threats, Athens began taking defensive measures. Contrary to what many in Turkey believe, these efforts did not begin under the Mitsotakis government but rather during the left-leaning Tsipras government.

Greece established a new security and defense architecture, signing a Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States, a Strategic Partnership Agreement in the Military and Defense Industry with France, and started developing defense and energy-related facilities in Alexandroupoli in partnership with the U.S. Additionally, NATO's reinforced base in Souda Bay, Crete, further bolstered Greece's strategic position.

Let us now examine the rhetorical aspect. The security threat posed by Ankara to Athens is perhaps more significant now than even in 1974. Yet, despite this, Turkish commentators have largely refrained from seeing these developments as a direct threat from Ankara. Instead, they have framed them within the two-century-old rivalry, competition, and hostility between the two nations.

Commentators who view international relations almost exclusively through a power dynamic lens have flocked to television screens and newspaper columns. They have begun speaking of Turkey's chronic victimhood and its eternal "legitimate security concerns."

Listening to them one would think that Greece is about to attack Turkey. The public, including the opposition, seems to have embraced Ankara's vengeful rhetoric of "*We may come suddenly one night.*"

If we analyze the issue in the context of international relations, first and foremost, whether in interpersonal relationships or international affairs, one side is never entirely right while the other is entirely wrong.

The issue of the Greek islands right across Turkey and their continental shelves has been a persistent headache—since 1947 for the Dodecanese and since 1923 for the others. Numerous attempts at a solution have been made, but all have failed. The missed opportunities are countless.

Is there a cure and if yes how?

Nevertheless, it is clear and undeniable that the solution is not a military one. There are many serious experts on both sides regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf, territorial waters, and airspace. Almost all reasonable proposals are well known. What is needed is an *ad hoc* agreement tailored to the Aegean, guided by international treaties and, if necessary, international arbitration, while taking examples from similar cases worldwide. However, it is also evident that the two sides are far from a constructive dialogue.

From a societal perspective, those who are familiar with both countries—or think they are—often emphasize their similarities.

For decades, we have heard the cliché: "The people are good, but politics is bad." There have been joint concerts, ouzo/raki gatherings, and friendship meetings. Yet, nothing substantial has come out of these efforts. Why is that?

Perhaps for two fundamental reasons...

First, without addressing the shared yet deeply intertwined painful history, no new and healthy relationship can be built. Without understanding the past, there can be no future.

For instance, in 2022, Greece widely commemorated the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which marked the end of Anatolian Hellenism—a consequence of political and military mistakes made a century ago. Every Greek family has a relative, close or distant, with roots in Asia Minor/Anatolia.

In Turkey, however, 1922 was remembered with the taunt, "We threw them into the sea, and we can do it again!" The vast majority remained unaware that those who were forced into the sea were their neighbors, citizens of their state. Even fewer recognized the civilizational loss that resulted from their departure.

Out of the 16 million people living in the lands that correspond to modern Turkey in 1914-15, three

million non-Muslims were eliminated through various means. How many people today realize the extent to which the country was left barren as a result?

Secondly, the idea of "great similarities" between peoples is quite problematic.

Politically speaking, unlike Turkey, the Greek government does not engage in war rhetoric to win nationalist votes, nor does the public cheer them on for doing so. This "comfortable" illusion, quite common among certain leftist and democratic circles in Turkey, will be addressed below. In Greece, on the other hand, apart from a small minority, there is a consensus across the political spectrum—from left to right—on taking the necessary political, diplomatic, and military measures to protect the country against threats from Ankara.

Turkey's western neighbor, both its politicians and its people, is not a country obsessed with establishing regional dominance or pursuing dreams of becoming a global power. Rather, Greece is a country that enjoys life, has endured countless hardships since the 1820s, is at peace with itself as much as possible, and is generally opposed to violence and inclined toward amicability, as many visitors from Turkey know.

However, recent developments are increasingly interpreted by both pro-government and opposition politicians and commentators in Turkey as a security threat from Greece. This, in turn, legitimizes calls for preemptive action as a form of self-defense. The reason behind this perception is rather fantastical: Turkey's ruling establishment remains fixated on the outdated expansionist doctrine of the "Megali Idea" from Greece's independence era, convinced that Greece is still obsessed with territorial extension at Turkey's expense.

Due to a chronic lack of serious academic insight about modern Greece, discussions on the topic in Turkey are often dominated by retired diplomats, some of whom have served in Athens but remain trapped within institutional biases and unable to think critically.

Indeed, Turkey does not have a single academic institution dedicated to Modern Greek Studies. As for Byzantium, although two academic centers have existed for a decade with great difficulty, there is still no Byzantine Institute in the old capital on a scale worthy of the empire's glory. There are dispersed research and expertise through the personal efforts of some academics. This is true not only for Greece but also for Turkey's entire neighboring geography, with the exception of Europe. The issue is not merely a result of academia's decline in Turkey but points to a deep structural void. *Kütüphane de Muhabbet*, Conversation in the Library was initiated precisely to fill this gap with knowledge.

Because of this sustained shortfall in knowledge and analysis, people in Turkey largely overlook Greece's transformation after 1974, its transition to democracy (Μεταπολίτευση), and its path to European Union membership. As a result, they fail to accurately assess contemporary Greece. For example, in Turkey, few understand why, despite the severe economic and financial crisis that began in 2011—an environment highly conducive to the rise of right-wing populism—the far-right in Greece never became a serious political alternative.

The fundamental principles in foreign relations of self-respecting democracies are dialogue, negotiation, and respect for international law—a kind of *muhabbet* ethics. The foundation of these lies on a knowledge-based societal understanding, which goes beyond monolithic national narratives to acknowledge a shared, if not hybrid, history. And there is the commencement of the politics of memory.

Let us conclude as we began—with our book. This rich collection, filled with the dedicated work of expert researchers grounded in objective knowledge will hopefully give rise to new sprouts and, in time, strong trees in this fertile yet untapped land.

Who knows? Perhaps one day, this book in your hands will be recognized as one of the early milestones of a common history textbook—just as the Germans and the French have managed to produce for their schools.