Journal of American Studies of Turkey
22 (2005) : 79-80

Book Review

Osmanlı-Amerikan ilİşkileri (Ottoman-American Relations) by Nurdan Şafak. Istanbul: OSAM Press, 2003. 240 pages. ISBN 975726833X.

Serkan Ünal

Relying on archival records of the Ottoman Empire, Dr. Nurdan Şafak of Marmara University has analyzed American-Ottoman relations. Şafak argues that the introduction of the topic in her work will inspire further studies in the field. As she notes, the depth of her analysis depends largely on the significance and quantity of archival materials.

In a three-part analysis, the author illuminates American-Ottoman relations from political, commercial, military and cultural aspects. The first part describes the development of diplomatic relations with the help of American missionaries in the Ottoman Empire, and of Armenian migration to America and its effects on the "Armenian question," the Armenian national cause to establish an independent state in northeastern Turkey against Ottoman multinational unity. The second part deals with commercial and military activities, and the last part analyzes cultural relations between the two nations.

Şafak dates American-Ottoman diplomatic relations to 1830 and argues that American interests in Mediterranean commerce started the relationship. Up until the commercial treaty of 1830, Ottoman administrators, believing the Empire superior to the infidel United States, refused to enter into official relations. She believes a change occurred when America started to acquire economic and diplomatic privileges through the treaties of 1830 and 1862. Yet, American missionaries in Ottoman territory caused tension between two nations. After giving an account of missionary activities, she further claims that America triggered Armenian uprisings against Ottoman authority.

It's interesting to read from Şafak's work that after 1880 the United States implemented a coercive diplomacy in its approach to the Ottoman Empire. For instance, the United States requested the Ottoman administration to assist the American missionary establishments, or else risk support growing for the Armenian lobbies in the U.S. Congress against the Ottoman Empire. She concludes that the United States often resorted to

sending its battleships to the Ottoman capital as well as applying coercive diplomacy. The United States realized its demands as a result of its diplomacy.

Western literature on American-Ottoman relations such as Leland Gordon's *American Relations with Turkey* and Robert Daniel's *American Philanthropy in the Near East, 1820-1960* relies exclusively on American/ English sources. Thus Şafak's analysis, especially relying on Ottoman sources, is innovative. But her arguments are not consistent and therefore not convincing. For instance, she concludes that U.S.-Ottoman relations were friendly, owing to the trans-Atlantic distance between the two countries, and because there were no territorial violations committed by either side. However, the details she introduces regarding diplomatic, military, commercial and cultural relations show evidence of U.S. greediness to intervene in the Mediterranean. Also, the Ottoman reaction to American missionaries shows that the relations were basically hostile. The fact that two nations did not go into war doesn't necessarily mean that their relations were friendly.

Şafak's work also has other shortcomings. It sometimes suffers from poor editing: duplicate sentences appear on pages 67 and 91. More important, it lacks a balanced point of view, in that she does not compare the Ottoman sources with the American sources. For instance, she argues, "The U.S. media published the Ottoman oppression against the Armenians" (87). However, her work gives no American source that can verify or illustrate this bold argument. In another case she uses an Ottoman archival document to indicate that the *Washington Post* exaggerated the Ottoman population of nine hundred thousand to three million (169). However she doesn't go to the *Washington Post* to verify that it argued so. In addition to using the records of the Ottoman archives, she might have used American sources themselves to depict how they really reflected U.S. perspectives of the time, and to verify the accuracy of U.S. information about the Ottoman Empire at the time.

In the final analysis Şafak's work relies on primary sources as she intends. It also has substantial appendices that offer invaluable Ottoman information, previously unpublished. While it is highly recommended to scholars and graduate students interested in American-Ottoman relations, as a one-sided picture of the relationship, it may not prove beneficial to general readers.