4
The Contemporary Perspective

The prelude

The Greek-Turkish antagonism is neither perennial nor primordial and it is a 19th century rivalry only in part, as we have seen. Thus, a good case could be made that the rivalry and enmity is mainly, though of course not exclusively, a contemporary conflict, a clash of the 20th century. The turning point is the 1st Balkan War (1912), which catapulted relations to their worst ever level for a decade, with armed conflict, persecution and ethnic cleansing being the rule of the day. Before picking up the thread from 1912, three events are worth highlighting as preludes to what was to come.

First is the Greek-Ottoman war of April–May 1897, prompted by a bout of Greek nationalist frenzy triggered by the recurring Cretan question (the Greek Cretan call for union with Greece). The small Greek army on the attack crossed the Greek-Ottoman border in northern Thessaly, only to be soundly beaten within less than a month. The Great Powers intervened and no territory was ceded to the Ottomans, but Greece was made to pay a heavy indemnity. The lesson of the war for Greece was that it was futile to take on the Ottomans head on, yet the prevailing spirit was that, despite reverses, ‘a general historical tendency was at work in favour of Greece’, with the European parts of the Ottoman Empire destined to be ‘liberated’ by the Balkan peoples.

A second event as far as Greece is concerned on the road to the showdown of 1912–22 is the 1909 pronunciamento by a group of officers that brought the government down (the ‘Goudi Revolution’ as it is known in Greece), which led, a year later, to the summoning of Eleftherios Venizelos, a distinguished Cretan leader of the 1897 call for union, to take over power. Thus, after 13 years in the wilderness, Greece made
a comeback as a potential actor to reckon with. Rid of its meagre self (as it was seen at the time), and with a leader of the stature of Venizelos, it could more confidently contemplate the realisation of Greater Greece at the expense of the ‘Turks’.4

But by far the most momentous event in the region is the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908. In fact it was no revolution, in the sense of a popular uprising, but a military insurrection organised mainly by the nationalist wing of the CUP.5 It was ‘conceived and executed in Macedonia by a conspiratorial organization whose leadership harboured a quintessentially conservative aim: to seize control of the empire and save it from collapse’.6 Abdülhamid tried to react but in the end conceded, issuing a decree for future elections for a new chamber of deputies (after a year he was relieved of office and was succeeded by Mehmed V Reşad as a constitutional monarch).

The Young Turk Revolution espoused liberty, equality and ‘a new fraternal Ottoman identity’.7 The restless minorities hailed the Young Turk Revolution, rejoicing in the cities of the Empire, in Salonika, Istanbul, Izmir/Smyrna and beyond.8 The pre-Goudi Greek government was duly impressed. The Young Turks promised elections and kept to their word. The elections (November–December 1908) were surprisingly fair and the ensuing parliament represented, proportionately, the various ethnic communities (only the Arabs were under-represented), with Turkish-speakers comprising only slightly more than half of the deputies. The Ottoman Greek deputies won 26 out of 288 seats, that is, nine per cent of the total, which roughly amounted to their percentage in the still-large Empire. Thus, for the first time since 1878, the hopes for the much needed evolutionary transformation seemed a distinct possibility. However, the two main protagonists seeking change, the nationalist and liberal wings of the Young Turk movement, were at loggerheads, with irreconcilable visions of the future. Needless to say, only if the liberals were to prevail could real change for the better take place. Unfortunately, the nationalists had the upper hand most of the time, making the non-Muslim communities as well as the Arabs all the more apprehensive. There were also conservative Islamic groups which strenuously resisted change and resorting to violence. The liberal wing under Sabahaddin (with Greeks and Armenians in its ranks) split from the CUP and formed the Party of Ottoman Liberals (Osmanlı Ahrar Fırkası), while the nationalists took over the CUP. Finally, opposition to the heavy-handedness of the CUP gained momentum and most of the opposition forces united into one party, known internationally as Entente Libérale.9