

From Consultation to Coexistence: A Methodological Approach for Improving Turkish-Arab Relations¹

Abstract

This article analyzes practicable methodology for facilitating a meaningful discourse between Turks and Arabs in Turkey with a purpose and scope of improving Arab-Turkish cultural relations. The originality of this article is in its description and analysis of two group types established by academicians in Konya, Turkey, formal academic roundtables and informal Stammtisch meetings (regular informal discussion meetings), which could be used to facilitate discourses between Turks and Arabs leading to more mutual familiarity with both Arabic and Turkish language and culture. A series of interviews was conducted with participants as a field study, regarding their experiences with formal and informal meetings to determine the utility and effectiveness of these groups. Importantly, these two groups in Konya have involved not only academics but also involved non-academics within the public sphere. The example of these two group types in a Turkish context, roundtables and stammtisch meetings, presents the possibility of an alternative option of method for academicians in arts and humanities, and also an option of method for Turkish civil society organizations (non-governmental organizations.) For academic and civil society organizations, these two group types should be economic and can be made available as methodology which can be dedicated to topics relevant to improving Turkish-Arab relations.

Key words: Turkish-Arab Relations, International Relations, Stammtisch, Round Tables, Civil Society Organisations, Public Sphere

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Müzakereden birlikte yaşama sürecine: Türk-Arap ilişkilerini Geliştirme Konusunda Metodolojik Bir Yaklaşım

Öz

Bu makale Türkler ve Türkiye’de bulunan Araplar arasında, Arap-Türk kültürel ilişkilerini geliştirmek amacı ile anlamlı bir söylem oluşturmaya olanak sağlayacak pratikte uygulanabilir bir metodolojiyi analiz etmektedir. Çalışma; tanımı ve Konya-Türkiye’de akademisyenler tarafından organize edilen, Türkler ve Araplar arasında Türk ve Arap dili ile kültürü arasında daha çok benzerlik bulma konusunda önderlik edecek söylevlerin oluşturulmasına olanak sağlayacak, akademik yuvarlak masa toplantıları ve Stammtisch buluşmalarının (düzenli gayrı resmi tartışma toplantıları) incelenmesi ile özgünlük sergilemektedir. Saha çalışması aşamasında katılımcıların tecrübeleri baz alınarak resmi ve gayrı resmi toplantıların bu gruplara sağladığı fayda ve verimliliği belirlemek amacı ile seri görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Önemli diğer bir konu da Konya’da oluşturulan bu iki grubun sadece akademisyenlerden oluşmayıp aynı zamanda akademisyen olmayan sivil halktan kişileri de içermesidir. Türkler açısından incelendiğinde, yuvarlak masa toplantıları ve Stammtisch buluşmalarında örnek olarak ele alınan iki grup, sanat ve sosyal bilimler konusunda çalışan akademisyenler ve aynı zamanda Türk sivil toplum kuruluşları için de alternatif bir metod sunmaktadır. Akademi ve sivil toplum kuruluşları açısından ele alındığında; önerilen iki farklı çalışma grubu ekonomik olmasının yanısıra Türk-Arap ilişkilerini geliştirmeye odaklanan bir metodoloji sunmaktadır.

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Anahtar Kelimeleri: Türk-Arap İlişkileri, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Stammtisch, Yuvarlak Masaları, Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları, Kamusal Alan

من التفاوض إلى التعايش: منهج منهجي لتنمية العلاقات التركية العربية²

تلخيص

في هذا المقال ، بهدف ونطاق تطوير العلاقات الثقافية العربية التركية ، يقترح بعض الأساليب يمكن التطبيق من أجل تسهيل الخطاب ذو معنى بين العرب والأترك في تركيا. و اصالة هذه المقالة هي ان يمكن التحديد و تحليل نوعان من المجموعات التي تم تطويرها لتسهيل الخطابات بين الأترك والعرب، وتمهيد الطريق لمزيد من الألفة بين الثقافة واللغات العربية والتركية بترتيب اجتماعات المائدة المستديرة رسمية و اجتماعات مناقشة غير رسمية منتظمة من قبل الاكاديميون موجود في احدى مدن التركية في قونيا. أجريت سلسلة من المقابلات مع المشاركين كدراسة ميدانية ، فيما يتعلق بخبراتهم في الاجتماعات الرسمية وغير الرسمية لتحديد مدى فائدة وفعالية هذه المجموعات. ومن المهم جدًا ألا تضم هاتين المجموعتين في قونيا أكاديميين فقط ، بل أيضًا أشخاص من خارج العالم الأكاديمي كالعاملين في المجال العام. إن إعطاء مثال على هذين النوعين من المجموعات في السياق التركي تكون أن اجتماعات المائدة المستديرة رسمية و اجتماعات مناقشة غير رسمية يوفر طريقة بديلة لأكاديميي الفنون والعلوم الإنسانية ومنظمات المجتمعات المدني التركي. بالنسبة للمؤسسات الأكاديمية والمنظمات غير الحكومية ، يجب أن يكون هذان النوعان من المجموعتان يكون اقتصاديا وأن يتم تقديمهما كمنهجية يمكن استخدامها في القضايا المتعلقة بالعلاقات التركية العربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقات التركية العربية ، العلاقات الدولية ، ستاميتش ، الموائد المستديرة ، منظمات المجتمع المدني ، المجال العام

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² يستند هذا المقال جزئيًا إلى كمال أرجون ، «منهجية تطوير الحوار والعلاقات بين العرب والأترك» ، ورقة مؤتمر غير منشورة ، المؤتمر الرابع للعلوم الاجتماعية العربية التركية ، عمان ، الأردن ، جامعة البتراء ، ٦٢-٧٢ أكتوبر 2014. تستند هذه الورقة أيضًا جزئيًا إلى كمال إيز أرجون ، «بعض المنهجية المقترحة لبناء السلام بين الأديان و مع الأديان في نيوزيلندا» ، ورقة غير منشورة ، «أوتياروا نيوزيلندا بعد ندوة الهجمات الإرهابية في ٥١ مارس» ، ١ مايو 2019 ، جامعة ألباتو ، نيوزيلندا. استندت بعض الأبحاث في هذا المقال حول المجال العام جزئيًا إلى KE Argon ، «توصيل الإسلام في المجال العام: تاريخ فكري للإسلاميات المعاصرة في باكستان مع إشارة خاصة إلى حورشيد أحمد» ، أطروحة دكتوراه منشورة ، جامعة إكستر ، المملكة المتحدة ، 2009.

Introduction

The following proposed methodology presents an option of (usually) inexpensive small-scale groups for use within efforts to facilitate better understanding and relations between Turkish and Arab individuals and communities. The two suggested group types, formal academic roundtables and informal stammtisch meetings, are typically inexpensive and logistically feasible models.³ Utilizing this existing methodology in the form of these two group types would ultimately entail improving mutual knowledge and understanding in cultural areas for Turks and Arabs. The starting point for any local use of methodology for improving Turkish-Arab relations would need to take into consideration aspects of the current local societal and demographic reality in Turkey. For example, the population of Arabs in Turkey is now in the millions. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Turkey has more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees.⁴ It may also be stated as common knowledge that, many Syrians have decided to stay permanently in Turkey and build their lives and careers in Turkey.

While improved relations and cooperation with Arabs both within Turkey and abroad could have certain benefits, we must ask if there is really a need for improved relations. Some sources opine that a need does exist for improved relations.⁵ As the International Crisis Group Report No. 248 states, "Turkish society ultimately must come to terms with the reality that a significant portion of the Syrian refugees who fled into Turkey will remain there. The question is not whether but how to weave them into the country's social fabric."⁶

Whatever the solution might best be of "how to weave them into the country's social fabric,"⁷ with so many native speakers of Arabic in the country, this presence of a Syrian Arab population can be an advantageous

³ Inter-Muslim dialogue using roundtables as described in K. Argon, "Academic Roundtables to Benefit Colleges and Universities (and Religious Institutions)" online article of 9/29/2014, was previously suggested in the article, Kemal Enz Argon, "Turkish Sunni-Alevi Dialogue Methodology: A Proposal For Pro-Jects Using Qur'an Citations In Classical Alevi Sources", *Mütefekkir*; 2(3): (2015), p. 25-39. The use of roundtables for peace building was also suggested in an unpublished conference paper by Kemal Argon "Some Prospects for Muslim and Christian Peace Building in the Bosnian-Herzegovinan Region" presented at TIMAV/ Türkiye Imam Hatipliler Vakfı 2. Sempozyum Sarajevo, Bosnia 19-21 May 2016.

⁴ The UN Refugee Agency Operations Portal <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113> accessed 25/07/2019

⁵ The Brookings Institution: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/07/18/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-need-better-access-to-formal-jobs/> accessed 09/02/2019

⁶ Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions Crisis Group Europe Report N°248, 29 (January 2018), p. 22. From: www.crisisgroup.org accessed 08/25/2019

⁷ Ibid.

human resource factor for projects facilitating Turkish and Arab relationship building. Where a part of the Syrian population is well integrated both Syrians and Turks could benefit. Such benefits could be, for example, that more Turks would be able to use Arabic, be more familiar with one or more Arab cultures, and know better how to work with their Arab counterparts in various economic and cultural areas. To achieve such aims, a question of how to proceed, including outlining a method, remains.

Regarding these two group types as method and to more clearly articulate our main research question we could ask, “can the two models of the suggested group types, formal academic roundtables and informal Stammtisch meetings, possibly be utilized not only for facilitating improved understanding and relations amongst Turks and foreigners generally but also and especially between Turks and Arabs in particular?” The implication of a positive result or results would be that these groups could benefit relations between Turks and foreigners and could also be applicable to Turkey’s relations with Arabs primarily domestically. With such a large recently established Arab population in the country, to work towards a facilitation of relationship- building and to find new ways of engaging in worthwhile cooperation, for example, in academic, cultural and commercial areas, is appropriate and timely. In addition to what people and organizations in Turkey are already doing with Arab-Turkish relationship building, utilization of these two group types as methodology suggested in this article prospectively might facilitate discourses and more understanding that would be relevant to relationship building between Turks and Arabs. This could be realistic because these two group types have already been used cross-culturally in a local Turkish context for working with arts, humanities, religious studies and other areas. The description and analysis in this article of these two groups is based largely on direct observation and participant observation of these two group types functioning in Konya as public events organized in a local context.⁸

However, in addition to direct and participant observation of these two groups in their local context, in July of 2019 the author conducted a field study with a series of interviews with various former participants from both the academic roundtables and the stammtisch meetings in Konya. The interviews were semi-structured, anonymous and consistent with current requirements of research ethics at Necmettin Erbakan University. It was made cle-

⁸ For the method of direct observation and participant observation I relied upon Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, Marilyn L. Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*, (London: Sage Publications, 2013), p. 75-112.

ar to interviewees that participation in interviews was voluntary and anonymous. Participants also had the chance to review their answers. With these semi-structured interviews, the interviewees answered general questions of whether or not they as participants thought that the roundtable meetings and stammtisch meetings were useful and if they thought these might be useful for relationship building. The relevant results of these interviews are selected and follow within this article in the analysis section.

Two Group Types within a Theoretical Framework:

What became clear from direct observation by the author and also from the interviews is that these public groups were not merely academic but were actually within the Turkish public sphere. What is meant here is the idea of a public sphere as theorized originally by Jürgen Habermas.⁹ We have to be clear on what is meant with this terminology because, as Hazama noted, "... in Turkish public usage, *kamusal alan* is generally interpreted as an area directly or indirectly related to the state, as observed in statements or reports by politicians, bureaucrats, and the mass media."¹⁰ This necessary involvement of the state is not implied here by usage of the term "public sphere." We can understand as Okay states, that "the bodies named as Non-Governmental Organizations' throughout the world, are called 'Civil Society Organizations' in Turkey."¹¹ These shape the public sphere.¹² The term "public sphere" here means a sphere between the official and private spheres, not necessarily involving the state.¹³ This concept of a public sphere in Turkey is a framework within which these two groups can be understood to function, to participate, along the lines suggested earlier by Habermas and also in line with Alan McKee's description. McKee gives a description of the public sphere pointing

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge Massachusetts: (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, trans. 1989, MIT Paperback Edition 1991), p. 27-31. cited in K. E. Argon, *Communicating Islam in the Public Sphere: An Intellectual History of Contemporary Islamisms in Pakistan with Special Reference to Khurshid Ahmad*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK, 2009, p. 91, 229.

¹⁰ Yasushi Hazama, "The Making of a State-Centered Public Sphere in Turkey: A Discourse Analysis", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (2014), p. 163.

¹¹ Ayla Okay, "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations in Turkey Make Use of Public Relations in Shaping the Public Sphere? Example: the Field of Education", *Istanbul Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi*, Sayı 33, (2008), p. 122.

¹² Ayla Okay, "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations in Turkey Make Use of Public Relations in Shaping the Public Sphere? Example: the Field of Education", p. 122.

¹³ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Public Sphere, Civil Society, And Political Dynamics In Islamic Societies in Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Nehemia Levtzion, *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), p.140: cited in K. Argon, *Communicating Islam in the Public Sphere*, p. 232.

to “social, cultural and political” issues.¹⁴ He states, “it’s where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in the process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done about them.”¹⁵ Within this “public sphere” in Turkey it should be possible to do what McKee states without necessarily involving the state.

The reality of the position and functioning of the two group types are that, the official roundtables were organized under the Rumi Center for the Study of Civilizations at Necmettin Erbakan University and ultimately under the Office of the Rector.¹⁶ In contrast, the unofficial stammtisch meetings were independently organized upon the personal initiative of some academics but were not part of the university bureaucracy. The two models of groups suggested are functional as examples within the public sphere. They were open to all¹⁷ and engaged people to participate within the public sphere similar in some ways to the way described by McKee above.

Roundtables and Stammtisch Meetings: General Description of Group Model and Method of Functioning.

There are plenty of individual speakers making public talks in Turkish academia and, on the surface, the model that I suggested in 2014 would appear to be identical to a single-speaker guest lecture or public talk, having a host, invited speaker and attendees.¹⁸ However, there is a critical point of differentiation in the method, which must be noted, this being that the roundtable model, which I have suggested previously, typically has respondents. Therefore, the roundtable model is differentiated in an important way from an invited talk or “guest lecture” because of the dedicated respondents who should engage the presented material more than typically happens in a “question and answer session” after a public talk. Public academic talks in

¹⁴ Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5.

¹⁵ McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi Uluslararası Rumi Medeniyetler Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi URM (International Rumi Center for the Study of Civilizations IRC) Document number 2014.10.24 . 10885

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 1.

¹⁸ The model suggested in Kemal Argon, “Academic Roundtables to Benefit Colleges and Universities (and Religious Institutions)” Huffington Post online article of 9/29/2014 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kemal-argon/academic-roundtables-to-b_b_5880436.html This thinking about roundtables relied originally upon Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, editor, *Islamic Resurgence: Challenges, Directions & Future Perspectives: A Roundtable with Prof. Khurshid Ahmad*, (Tampa, FL: World & Islam Studies Enterprise, 1994); reprinted (Islamabad, Institute of Policy Studies, 1995; 1996).

Turkey (as I have observed them to be doing also elsewhere) often will have such a “question and answer” session after the talk, which can fail to achieve more systematic inquiry, engaged discussion, and thinking together.

It should be made clear that, the roundtable respondents in the suggested model engage the contributions of the speaker, hopefully in a deeper and more reflective way than the typical “question and answer session.” This deeper and extended engagement is centrally important and relevant to the applicability of the group types because their functioning facilitates collective thinking. In planning such events, the idea of the method is the same as an invited public academic talk, but the question and answer session afterwards should have these dedicated respondents. These respondents can drive a process of discourse and help to achieve a collective process of thought.

The concept of a “Stammtisch” meeting is commonly and ubiquitously known in the German-speaking region of Europe. Generally speaking, I will define the Stammtisch concept for use here as “a regular gathering of participants with common interests to achieve discussion and collective thinking about these common interests.” Boyer defines the concept of a Stammtisch as a “regulars’ table at a bar or restaurant.”¹⁹ Koshar defines a Stammtisch similarly as “the Stammtisch was a table reserved for the same day by the same group of individuals at a neighborhood restaurant; it was a basic unit of local sociability.”²⁰ Boyer makes a description of a rather dynamic group functioning that facilitates discussion, as he describes a Berlin Stammtisch stating, “...whose lively, open-ended discussions of current affairs, regional politics and national history, provide compelling comparisons and arresting contrasts to the technical rigor of academic theory.”²¹ With this description of a Stammtisch we also can see a deeper and more extended engagement of material than typically happens in the “question and answer” sessions after a public talk. The “method” of the stammtisch is open but its culture and functioning is typically one of deep engagement of issues as Boyer has described above. For it to function as a model suggested here, a responsibility falls upon the organizers that the goal should not be obscured or forgotten, and that it should be organized, and the discourse facilitated to achieve collective thinking about issues and matters of interest.

¹⁹ Dominic Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 285.

²⁰ Rudy Koshar, *From Stammtisch to Party: Nazi Joiners and the Contradictions of Grass Roots Fascism in Weimar Germany*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Mar., 1987), p. 4.

²¹ Dominic Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture*, p. 231. (See also Boyer’s discussion of Stammtisch meetings on pages 249-251.)

No shortage of good examples of stammtisch meetings in the German-speaking world can be found existing.²² This idea of small meetings for engaged discussion is not a new idea in Europe or in Turkey but has a long history. While the roundtable idea here was originally taken from the publication edited by Ibrahim Abu Rabi published in 1994 noted above,²³ the Stammtisch meeting is ubiquitous in the German-speaking world and should be counted with a longer history. Habermas describes various “institutions of the public sphere,”²⁴ including German *Gesellschaften*,²⁵ starting first in 1727 in Leipzig.²⁶ According to Habermas, these all had certain characteristics in common: for example, these disregarded status of attenders.²⁷ Another factor in common was that, “discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned.”²⁸ In these, culture could be discussed.²⁹ These meetings were participatory for everybody.³⁰ This description offered by Habermas of the functioning of these historical groups in the 1700s would appear to be describing productivity and positive results somewhat analogous to that of the public sphere that McKee described above.

Since that above selected place in history, Rudy Koshar provides some more recent historical overview of the uses of the Stammtisch in its historical and cultural context.³¹ What is important is that it still is a widespread feature of contemporary German society.³²

²² For example, see also Dominic Boyer, Conspiracy, history, and therapy at a Berlin Stammtisch, *American Ethnologist*, Volume 33 Number 3 (August 2006), p. 327-339.

²³ Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, editor, *Islamic Resurgence: Challenges, Directions & Future Perspectives: A Roundtable with Prof. Khurshid Ahmad*, (Tampa, Fl.: World & Islam Studies Enterprise, 1994); reprinted (Islamabad, Institute of Policy Studies, 1995; 1996).

²⁴ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 31-43

²⁵ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 34.

²⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 34. For a brief description of a Turkish history of groups in the public sphere see Ayla Okay, *How Do Non-Governmental Organizations in Turkey Make Use of Public Relations in Shaping the Public Sphere? Example: the Field of Education*, p. 128-129.

²⁷ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 36.

²⁸ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 36.

²⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 37.

³⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 37.

³¹ Rudy Koshar, *From Stammtisch to Party: Nazi Joiners and the Contradictions of Grass Roots Fascism in Weimar Germany*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Mar., 1987), p. 3-4, 11.

³² An internet search on July 20th 2019 on Google.com using the terms “Universität” together with “Stammtisch” pulls up many examples of this group form being used for different purposes in many different universities. Stammtisch meetings as a concept are ubiquitous in the German-speaking world.

The Case of the Roundtables and Stammtisch Meetings in Konya

The practical functioning of the two groups in practice in Konya can be described briefly. Starting in late 2014, a public academic roundtable was formally organized and met repeatedly at Necmettin Erbakan University (NEU) in Konya, Turkey. Additionally, in mid-March of 2017 a public informal (unofficial) Stammtisch meeting was also organized on a weekly basis in Konya, Turkey, separately from the formal academic roundtables. These two groups, roundtables and Stammtisch meetings, have met regularly and continually, except during the summers when the universities were generally not in session. The functioning of these two groups have provided venues where various subjects within the arts, humanities and religious studies were taught and studied in ways complementary to and augmenting existing classroom instruction and making a representation within the public sphere.

The formal public academic roundtables which were established at the Necmettin Erbakan University Faculty of Divinity were carried out under the International Rumi Center for the Study of Civilizations at Necmettin Erbakan University. Since 2014, the roundtables have been kept during the academic year on a monthly basis with a break during the summer. Both the academic roundtables that were formally organized and the Stammtisch meetings that were informally organized, were public events held primarily in English language with translation to Turkish language often made available as necessary.

For planning and programming the roundtables, in 2014, an "International Roundtables Committee" at NEU was formed to review suggested candidates as roundtable presenters and their seminar subjects and titles. This roundtables' committee consisted of an executive representative of the International Rumi Center at Necmettin Erbakan University and various other academicians associated with Necmettin Erbakan University, and persons directly involved in the ongoing meeting and functioning of the roundtables.

The roundtable speakers and their presentation titles were reviewed and were subject to final approval by the Office of the Rector of the university. These various speakers were invited and were also announced publicly on the official university webpage and the university public relations and graphics office produced high-quality, creative and original artwork for posters and invitation cards. Invitations were delivered to professors and other academic staff as well as to a list of notables throughout the Konya metropolitan

area. The university public relations office also made video and sound recordings of many of the seminar presentations, took photos and made follow-up public reports on the university webpage as well as press releases to local newspapers.

The actual format and functioning of the individual academic roundtables in the local context of Necmettin Erbakan University effectively adopted and maintained a simple design and format generally similar to the simple format of the suggested theoretical model for academic roundtables described in the online Huffington Post article on academic roundtables.³³ This meant that the model in practice in Konya provided that official roundtables had an invited speaker, a facilitator and respondents. Sometimes the respondents were more prepared beforehand and dedicated to the announced speaker and topic and sometimes they were not coordinated in advance. These roundtables have usually been within an hour and a half to two hours in duration, finishing after the final discussion.

A total of 32 roundtables showed how the roundtable format has been successfully used in various areas and that topics could be chosen from a wide field but also relevant to international relations including Turkish and Arab matters. These were all public events, announced publicly and open to the public, and mostly were reported about on the Necmettin Erbakan University webpage and often in local Turkish newspapers. Coverage after the events was usually also available online from the university webpage and the webpages of local newspapers. Table 1 below gives a partial listing.

Table 1. A Selection of Formal Academic Roundtables at Necmettin Erbakan University.

Presenter	Title	Date: Month and Year
Dr. Tariq Quadir, Necmettin Erbakan University	What Can Islam do for the Environment? ³¹	December 2014
Professor Dr. Murat Çemrek, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Since the New Millenium: Turkish Foreign Policy Quo Vadis?"	November 2015
Dr. Afify; Dr. Abdelghany, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Arabic Language and Change"	March 2016
Assistant Professor Dr. Gökhan Bozbaş, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood."	May 2016
Professor Dr. Metin Aksoy, Selçuk University	"Turkey-European Union Relations"	October 2016

³³ Argon, "Academic Roundtables to Benefit Colleges and Universities (and Religious Institutions)" 9/29/2014

³⁴ Based partly on Tarik M. Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism: The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2013)

Professor Dr. Ahmet Çaycı, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Islamic Art and Architectural Ornamentation" ³²	April 2017
Professor Dr. Tahir Uluç, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Maturidi's Universal Interpretation of Islam: Ethnicity, Culture and Language." ³³	October 2017
Assistant Professor Dr. Şehabeddin Kırdar, Necmettin Erbakan University	"Islamic Movements in Iraq"	May 2018
Professor Dr. Yusef Waghid, Stellenbosch University	"Autonomy, Community and Humanity in Islamic Education."	October 2018
Professor David Goa, University of Edmonton	"What is the Culture Behind Christian Religious Conservatism in America?"	November 2018
Professor Dr. Alan Godlas, University of Georgia	"A Holistic Re-humanizing Approach To Teaching Religious Studies and Islam."	December 2018
Professor Dr. Iftikhar Malik, Bath Spa University	"Silk, Scholars, Slaves and the Spies: From Bath (England) to Khiva on the Silk Road"	September 2019

The selection of above events in Table 1 shows the ability of the roundtable format to accommodate a variety of intellectual and cultural topics, these being of general interest to divinity faculty students and these have also been in the field of international relations. However, several examples of the roundtable presentations at NEU focused more specifically on topics in Arabic language and culture and these were probably more directly relevant to the topic of Turkish-Arab relationship building. One such example would be the lecture by Assistant Professor Dr. Şehabeddin Kırdar about Islamic movements in Iraq (in May 2018), which presented material which is not ordinarily covered in the classroom but gave information about culture and politics in a neighboring Arab country. The presentation in March of 2016 by two Egyptian Arabic teaching scholars at NEU, Dr. Afify and Dr. Abdelghany about "Arabic Language and Change" showed the utility of the format for increasing cultural familiarity and familiarity with Arabic language. Additionally, the presentation in May of 2016 by Assistant Professor Dr. Gökhan Bozbaş about "Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood" showed the utility of the format for increasing cultural and religious familiarity. These presentations on topics relevant for building Turkish-Arab relations were easily accommodated in the roundtable format and demonstrate the ability of the format to provide background knowledge and intellectual equipment for persons interested in pursuing more discussion about Turkish-Arab relations.

³⁵ This was based partly on material from Ahmet Çaycı, *İslam Mimarisinde Anlam ve Sembol* (Konya, Turkey, Palet Yayınları. 2017.)

³⁶ This lecture drew partly on material from Tahir Uluç, "Abū Maṣṣūr Al-Māturīdī's Universalist Interpretation of Islam," *İlahiyat Studies*, Volume 8 Number 1 (Winter / Spring 2017), p. 29-64.

While these formal academic roundtables were regularly attended primarily by academics from Necmettin Erbakan University, these were also attended by other academics from other local universities and occasionally by other non-academic professionals. It can be concluded from the public representation by the university and the diversity of attenders that these were within the public sphere, including academics and also others from outside the academy. As an example of a meeting within the public sphere, these meetings would be accessible for Turks and Arabs, not necessarily only within academia but also within the public sphere. Important to note is that these also were a place of collective thinking amongst participants.

Stammtisch Meetings

Separate from the official roundtables at Necmettin Erbakan University, the informal Stammtisch meetings in English were started in Konya in March of 2017 by academicians at Necmettin Erbakan University. These were stopped as regular meetings essentially in September of 2018. The Stammtisch meeting was relatively easy to organize and get started, finding members, not only because of the familiarity of the organizers with the German concept of a Stammtisch but also with the shared interest amongst academic organizers and attenders in inviting more curiosity in university students in the arts, humanities and languages. This familiarity with and interest in organizing with the Stammtisch idea was also helped by the presence of various students already familiar with the concept in the German-speaking world.

Using personal networking and online social media, these Stammtisch meetings first met regularly at the facilities of a local *Öğretmenevi*, i.e. an inn for Turkish schoolteachers and academics. After a few months, the Stammtisch meeting organizers were invited to move this public informal meeting from the *Öğretmenevi* over to the Konya Headquarters of a non-governmental organization, the Türkiye Imam Hatiplileri Vakfı or "TIMAV."³⁷

The starting point of this Stammtisch meeting in Konya was as a simple meeting between three academics and grew over some months' time to become larger and include academics and also a wider attendance of non-academics. The meeting had a stable attendance between, at a minimum, about 5 attenders to a maximum of about 30 attenders at any one meeting. These participants were academicians (staff and students) and nonacademic professi-

³⁷ See the TIMAV webpage: <http://www.timav.org.tr>

onals. Most of the Stammtisch meetings had a short topical presentation and discussion program with the presenter usually making a presentation within the field of humanities, arts and/or religion. The public Stammtisch meeting remained relatively small and informal and the discussions were usually of a less involved nature than those kept at the formal roundtables.

The shorter presentations of topics that were made in the Stammtisch meeting included talks on humanities, arts and religion by Turkish and foreign scholars and also certain traditional Turkish Muslim artists. For example, there were presentations on Turkish Muslim arts included such topics as Islamic calligraphy and its use as ornamentation within mosques, Turkish traditional felt-making, musical performance of the ney-flute by various professional and amateur artists.

An exemplary selection of informal Stammtisch meeting topics is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: A Selection of Informal Stammtisch Meeting Topics in Konya

Invited Presenter	Presentation Topic	Date of Event
Professor Dr. Sıddık Korkmaz	"Islamic Sectarianism" ³⁸	March 2018
Professor David Goa	"Forgiveness"	November 2018
Professor Dr. Alan Godlas	"Dhikr"	December 2018
Dr. Şeyma Can Akın	Ali Shariati and "The four prisons of men" ³⁹	January 2019
Linda Hyökki, Center for the Study of Islam in Global Affairs, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University	'The massacre of New Zealand: motivations behind and responses'	March 2019

Analysis of the Two Group Types: Roundtables and Stammtisch Meetings

If we look at these two group types for the purpose of answering our question about whether they can possibly be utilized for facilitating improved understanding and relations not only amongst Turks and foreigners generally but also between Turks and Arabs in particular, certain salient features relevant to answering the question became clear by direct observation by the author and also in the interviews. The attenders were from the academy and from the general public, establishing the formal academic roundtables and the informal Stammtisch meetings within the Turkish public sphere.

³⁸ This was based partly on Sıddık Korkmaz, *Alevilik-Bektaşilik Geleneği ve İslam*. Konya.

³⁹ This was based partly on Ali Şeriati, *İnsanın Dört Zindanı*, çev. Hüseyin Hatemi, Fecr Yayınları, Türkiye, 2013

What can also be said generally by direct observation is that, in contrast to the formal roundtables, these informal meetings of the Konya Stammtisch were more frequently organized, usually on a weekly basis, than the monthly roundtables and were not utilizing to nearly the same degree as the formal roundtables the resources of the university bureaucracy and infrastructure. The Stammtisch meetings had an advantage in that they are typically easier to organize more frequently, and they required little or no outside sponsorship or funding. The model of a Stammtisch group is typically easier to organize than formal roundtables as it does not rely much upon usage of the university infrastructure in addition to some local academics from the university volunteering their time to participate.

Although obviously different in terms of local Turkish discussion content than the Berlin Stammtisch described many years previously, the local Konya stammtisch could be said to have been analogous with the functioning of Boyer's description of a Berlin Stammtisch with "lively, open-ended discussions of current affairs, regional politics and national history provide compelling comparisons and arresting contrasts to the technical rigor of academic theory."⁴⁰ The Konya Stammtisch hosted an engaging discourse facilitating encounter and collective thinking.

As per the author's observations, while there were some very formal academic presentations, most of the presentations and discussions within the Stammtisch meetings were less formal, more discursive, more open (and more frequent) which made them also useful for inviting a larger pool of cultural representatives and attenders, not only within the academy but from the general public. This facilitated more cross-cultural and linguistic encounter. Importantly, one of the most important findings in this research has been that, although they were more informal than the roundtables and more economic, the Stammtisch meetings were no less engaging than the formal academic roundtables, sometimes even more engaging for the attenders.

In addition to or confirming the author's direct observations described above, the field study interviews conducted used open-ended questions regarding the utility of these formal and informal meetings. These opening questions led to further questions which were specifically related to the personal experiences of the informants. This provided some interesting perspective on their utility and relevance to the goal of facilitating an improvement of Turkish-Arab relations. A number of salient ideas emerged from the field

⁴⁰ Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture*, p. 231.

interviews relevant to the functioning of formal roundtables and informal Stammtisch meetings. The following edited interview excerpts and ideas are selected from these interviews. These were edited to reduce size, protect anonymity and correct grammar and language.

One important aspect that became apparent from the interviews was the hospitality and openness of the events, inviting people from both within and beyond the academy and essentially positioning these groups within the public sphere. In one interview a scholar was clearly opining on the importance of having these events to be hospitable and inviting within the public sphere. This scholar, a senior Western academic working in the field of religion stated,

“There is a real tendency in the academy to be bound in one’s own discipline speaking only to one’s own ideological group. Questions are important far beyond the university. We can study these in depth in the university, but we must break the burden of thinking that the only thing of value is to hone the tools of our discipline. We have an obligation in the humanities to pull forward the gifts of insight and knowledge that we’ve had the privilege of. We do this by engaging in a conversation that bridges our disciplines, the academy, religious communities and the public. It really occurs when we enter into a serious conversation that rises to a level of thinking together rather than merely reaffirming positions. With roundtables and Stammtisch meetings, the gift is to learn and think together.”⁴¹

This quote above presents a scope for these events which are public with an impact not only within the academy but also beyond the academy and can achieve collective thinking with, not only academics but also by working with other human resources from beyond the academy. However, the mere format and design of these groups is not enough to achieve optimal results. More is needed on the part of organizers and facilitators. Another important finding in the interviews was that these require a vision on the part of the organizers and facilitators for their implementation and functioning to achieve certain important results. The same Western academic stated,

“... the people should be invited to speak out of mind and out of their heart. What we need to do is break down the ideological silos that have so deeply shaped academic discourse. And these two group types have great potential to do that.”⁴²

⁴¹ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴² Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

This suggests “inviting,” creating a hospitable atmosphere and achieving something more than our current knowledge.

The same Western academic said,

“These are not using the usual academic framework with two or three questions in a “Question and Answer.” This is setting the table for an actual conversation. Both have the potential to invite people to speak out of intellectual and research concerns but with the intention of thinking together. This is significant in both these forms, but this needs to be cultivated, not just their “critical hat” but their “thinking hat.” We have intellectual depth but are able to think publicly. Their concerns are too important to be confined to the university.”⁴³

This opinion provides a scope for these meetings within the public sphere but also points to a responsibility on the part of the organizers and facilitators. The same academic said, “Intellectual and spiritual hospitality in both the Stammtisch and the roundtables is not just in form, but this needs to be cultivated.”⁴⁴

Similarly, an academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated, “People need to be willing: it is possible. People coming to the Stammtisch have an open attitude.”⁴⁵

As described above, cultivating a culture and functioning within the group for achieving an interactive discourse and collective thinking requires facilitation for such on the part of the organizers. Additionally, certain other aspects can be identified in the interviews which can inform the intentions of organizers and facilitators. An intention to facilitate an interactive discourse and an engagement of the meeting topic is important. Further ideas from the interviews can inform such an intention to achieve this interactive discourse. The benefit of such can be seen with the opinion provided by an academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University who stated,

“Such meetings are useful not only in sharing scholarship but also with the responses to my scholarship and finding intellectualism in society.”⁴⁶

The same academic stated,

⁴³ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴⁴ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴⁵ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴⁶ Anonymous, 18 July 2019, Personal Interview

“Sometimes I am reaching results but need them checked by peers/colleagues and ordinary Muslim members of society.”⁴⁷

The same academic also stated, “As opposed to simply doing our publishing, if equipped and prepared colleagues are in attendance, it is a good test of our research.”⁴⁸

This scholar from Necmettin Erbakan University above clearly found it a valuable experience regarding feedback for his own academic research. From this same interviewed scholar above, what was pointed to was the need for respondents (and participants) to be prepared beforehand to engage the material of the presenter in the interactive format of the roundtables: sometimes the respondents needed better preparation.

Formal academic roundtables and informal Stammtisch meetings require openness and hospitality and an organization and facilitation with a vision for achieving certain results and certain aspects of these two group types became apparent from the interviews relevant for Turkish-Arab relations, language and cross-cultural functionality of the groups. These aspects can inform the intention of the facilitators. Specifically, the linguistic and cross-cultural functionality of the groups is important.

This can be seen where another academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated,

“The first advantage was a language advantage, English. The second advantage was that we can communicate with a population from other countries. We can understand another culture and another country. We can research beforehand presenters’ material before the presenter’s speech. I learned many things, ideas. Even if it is Turkish/non-Turkish, we encounter different cultures and perspectives.”⁴⁹

Similarly, a Turkish student studying in Austria stated, “It was nice for me meeting foreign people from other cultures. It’s nice to have that communication on some level. Basically, we are all the same.”⁵⁰

An academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated,

“They could listen to people from different cultures and religions. We got interesting feedback about multicultural aspects of the Stammtisch presenters. It was a very good form of networking. These are people from all kinds

⁴⁷ Anonymous, 18 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴⁸ Anonymous, 18 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁴⁹ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁵⁰ Anonymous, 16th July 2019, Personal Interview.

of social groups who normally might never meet but these people come together to discuss ideas. The Stammtisch is good for relations and networking. You meet different kinds of people from different groups and with different ideas. The Stammtisch is a place where we can discuss with different people, bringing together people from different ideological backgrounds. People of different nationalities come to the Stammtisch."⁵¹

These groups have a linguistic and cross-cultural functionality that can be relevant for improving Turkish-Arab relations.

A last important point to be discerned from these interviews was the comparative utility of formal academic roundtables and informal Stammtisch meetings. Some found the Stammtisch meetings easier and perhaps even more useful than the formal academic roundtables.

An academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated,

"Comparing the Stammtisch to the roundtable, the roundtable is academically very good/beneficial but not a form of networking. It has limited Q and A, with one or two questions. It is a chance to meet some experts who have done extended research in specialized branches but the Stammtisch includes academic and outside people. The Stammtisch allows more discussion, going deeper into the subject. The roundtable is more limited to one focus while the Stammtisch allows wider discussion. With the roundtable it is limited to academic matters."⁵²

An academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated,

"The Stammtisch is more ordinary, has less rules, is freer. The Stammtisch is a more friendly place, freer to speak than in a roundtable. This is because the Stammtisch is not official, not necessarily academic. Both the roundtable and the Stammtisch are fruitful because of different speakers from different fields such as history, cultural fields, politics and international relations. Experts come to both the Stammtisch and the roundtable and we are exposed to new ideas and perspectives. This is an opportunity to practice speaking English and is an advantage with language. The networking also is an advantage, getting to know people from different countries, fields, and institutions. There are certain advantages: new cultural and academic information, language practice, sharing ideas, and networking with new contacts for possible future cooperation."⁵³

⁵¹ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁵² Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

⁵³ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

A Turkish student studying in Austria stated,

“A one topic focus means deep learning but less people. The final result is a common point bringing people together. The Stammtisch was “lighter and broader” than the roundtable, less focused and less deep. I got more from the Stammtisch because it was less formal. The discussion at the roundtable was more limited. I agree that it is useful for relationship building.”⁵⁴

An academic working at Necmettin Erbakan University stated,

“The Stammtisch is not official so therefore it is a relaxed atmosphere. We have more freedom to talk. The Stammtisch for me was more effective because the roundtable was very official. Because the roundtable was more official, I was hesitating to talk or ask questions.”⁵⁵

These interviews would tend to confirm the author’s own direct observation, that the informal Stammtisch was no less effective than the formal roundtable meetings.

If these interview selections and excerpts are taken together, what can be discerned is that the roundtables and Stammtisch meetings have a “hospitality,” inviting people from either one culture or cross-culturally, from within the academy and from beyond the academy, to come together to achieve an effective collective encounter and discourse, engagement of issues, and thinking about matters. As a few examples of roundtables above have already shown, the roundtables can be used to review matters that are directly relevant to Arab-Turkish cultural understanding. The Stammtisch meetings were reported by interviewees above to be places where intercultural encounter and understanding has been and can be facilitated. This intercultural encounter and understanding can be planned, directed, and focused to be Arab-Turkish.

Conclusion

With respect to our original research question, the final results of public observation and anonymous interviews suggest that these two group types could be useful as method for both academicians and non-academics for discussing various arts, humanities (religious studies) and social sciences (politics and economics) subjects, generally, within the Turkish public sphere. The results of the interviews also suggest that, while these are venues to discuss and become familiar with foreign language and culture, they can also be di-

⁵⁴ Anonymous, 16th July 2019, Personal Interview.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, 17 July 2019, Personal Interview

rectly relevant to improving knowledge and understanding cross-culturally between Turks and foreigners, i.e. this meaning also Arab-Turkish relations. One way to connect the utility of these for academic study, for example for the study of international relations, is to understand that there is “increased attention to the connection of the everyday and the international in the field of international relations.”⁵⁶ The everyday, according to Acuto, is “understood here as the spatiality of situated, mundane, and habitual practices, often little appreciated in IR because of their ‘routine’ character versus the drive of crisis and globalist thinking.”⁵⁷ Acuto also describes that, “It is a constituent sphere of global governance that partakes in shaping global processes and narratives.”⁵⁸ Although these *Stammtisch* meetings and roundtable meetings are generally small and local, they can be considered for provision of a venue for review of this above-described “everyday” matters in international relations of interest to Turks and Arabs. With such a discourse about the “everyday” in international relations taking place within these two groups Turks and Arabs can come together to have a discourse and achieve collective thinking about the “everyday,” possibly providing relevant material for studies of international relations.

Of course, facilitators and participants are not limited to an analysis of the “everyday.” We can look at the small and frequent *Stammtisch* meetings and roundtables as being probably an economical prospect for programming Turkish-Arab discourse and achieving collective thinking about common interests. The roundtables at Necmettin Erbakan University did receive formal logistical support from the university and generous voluntary support by academic participants and staff but were still generally economic. The *Stammtisch* meetings were even more economic and incurred even less expense. Academicians and civil-society organizations in Turkey could consider utilizing these inexpensive groups to achieve cross-cultural encounter between Turks and Arabs and collective thinking on issues. The suggestion here is that involved academicians and their institutions, working together with outside professionals, NGO’s, and cultural personages, could quickly and feasibly be part of small groups which facilitate more cultural and linguistic familiarity leading to improved relations between Turks and Arabs.

⁵⁶ Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall, Ted Svensson, *Everyday International Relations: Editors’ Introduction*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, volume 54(2), (2019), p. 123.

⁵⁷ Michelle Acuto, *Everyday International Relations: Garbage, Grand Designs, and Mundane Matters*, *International Political Sociology*, 8, (2014), p. 346. Acuto in this quote cites her earlier work, Michelle Acuto, *Diplomats in Crisis. Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22 (3), (2011), p. 521–539.

⁵⁸ Michelle Acuto, *Everyday International Relations: Garbage, Grand Designs, and Mundane Matters*, p. 346.

However, this is not merely speculation. As described in the interview selections, the local Turkish context (the public sphere) has provided a venue for the successful application of this method of these two groups. Interviews point to an achieved cross-cultural functionality of these groups. The cross-cultural functionality of these groups, the NEU roundtable presentations' diverse presentation contents and also the diversity in these roundtables' attendance have demonstrated the possibility that these are flexible. Different subjects relevant to Turkish-Arab relations can be accommodated and reviewed within these group types with cross-cultural encounter and discussion.

Interviews and observation also showed that, although the Stammtisch was informal, it was often as engaging or even more engaging for attenders than the formal academic roundtables. Both of these two groups can probably be a strategic option for Turkish and Arab academics in the field of education and for others elsewhere in the public sphere. For Arab and Turkish academics and civil society organization members the benefits that they could hope for from a long-term process of organizing sustained and repeated academic roundtables and Stammtisch meetings could be that more Turks and Arabs have firsthand experience with aspects of other Muslim countries' cultures and languages. These Stammtisch and roundtables participants may also benefit a process of Arab-Turkish dialogue at a scholarly level, to promote various Arab-Turkish cultural, educational, and economic interests and relationships.

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