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Jews in Contemporary Turkey

Franklin Hugh Adler

*T*hough listed as twenty thousand, the Jewish population of contemporary Turkey, a country of nearly seventy-one million, is actually closer to fifteen thousand and shrinking, a relic of what had been one of the most important components of the so-called Ottoman mosaic. At the beginning of the Turkish Republic, in 1923, the Jewish population was 81,454. In Istanbul alone there were 47,035 Jews, roughly thirteen percent of a city that then numbered 373,124.¹ Sephardim, those who came from Spain and Portugal after the expulsions of 1492, are the most celebrated group of Ottoman Jews, for they came to play such an important role in commerce, medicine and diplomacy, yet there had been an older Romaniot group of Jews that had been living continuously in Asia Minor from Biblical times, mentioned by Aristotle and several Roman sources, including Josephus.² Jews, in fact, had inhabited this land long before the birth of Mohammed and the Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, or for that matter, the arrival and conquests of the Turks, beginning in the eleventh century. On the eve of the birth of Islam, most of world Jewry lived under Byzantine or Persian rule in the lands of the Mediterranean basin.

Nevertheless, Turkey's diminished Jewish population of 15,000 is the largest concentration of Jews in a predominantly Muslim land, a relic not only of what had been a central component of the distinctively Ottoman mosaic, but, more tragically, all that is left of the Jewish presence in Levantine society, from North Africa through Asia Minor, where Jews also had been a vital and permanent feature in the social,

economic and cultural landscape.³ With the rise of Arab nationalism, and the creation of the state of Israel, 940,000 Jews were forced to leave Arab countries under circumstances often far more brutal than those visited upon displaced Palestinians, a population of 726,000, according to U.N. sources.⁴ The large and prosperous Jewish community of Baghdad consisted of 77,542 Jews, while 10,537 lived in Basra, and 10,340 in Mosul.⁵ It is highly unlikely that Jews will ever reclaim their distinguished place in the Arabo-Islamic world, even with changes of regime. For example, in February 2004 the Iraqi Governing Council quickly approved provisions allowing tens of thousands of exiles to return, with the sole exception of Iraqi Jews who had lived there continuously for 3,500 years.⁶ Nevertheless, history is full of surprises and unanticipated turns, especially in these ancient lands that have witnessed flowers of hope as well as rivers of tears. An examination of Jews in contemporary Turkey is thus a window looking out at a broader horizon of disappointments and possibilities.

In most respects, Turkish Jews fared far better under the *Millet* organizational scheme of the Ottoman Empire than they did under the Republic. "For more than three hundred years they lived as a distinct unit with its particular religion, culture, and language in the mosaic of different religions and ethnic groups that together comprised the Ottoman Levant."⁷ Though all non-Muslims occupied a subordinate position and an inferior juridical status within this scheme, they were nevertheless allowed a degree of autonomy in their internal affairs that, in certain respects, insulated them from the dysfunctions and bureaucratic inertia of the larger society. Jews, Greeks and Armenians carved out important niches in the Empire's economy, developed superior educational systems, and, with the payment poll tax (*cizye*) were spared onerous duties such as military service. Jews in particular had prospered from the place it had cultivated in the old Ottoman structure that began to rapidly disintegrate by the end of the eighteenth century. The age of reforms, referred to as the *Tanzimat*, led to political centralization, unification, and secularism inspired by the French model, one that allowed for none of the communal autonomy that had existed earlier. By the end of the nineteenth century, the *Millets* persisted as a cultural and sociological reality, but no longer had juridical status or political significance.⁸

On the one hand, Jews were largely unprepared for the transition from *Millet* to minority; on the other, the republican political program made no serious effort to integrate the non-Muslim communities into a new national community. Jews, for the most part, did not speak Turkish with great facility, but spoke Ladino (or Judeo-Spanish). If they were educated beyond primary schooling, they learned French and became one of the largest *francophone* groups in the region, thanks to a network of schools constructed and maintained by French Jews through the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. Such French influence in the Jewish community, together with the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment movement, led to a significant group of Jewish modernizers, some of whom (Albert Fua, Emmanuel Carasso and Nissim Mazliach) not only supported the Young Turk movement, based in Salonika where Jews were particularly influential, but played a leading role. It soon became clear, however, that the republican commitment to equality, on which Jewish support had been predicated, was substantively empty. In effect, the Young Turks appropriated the most dubious aspects of the French Jacobin model—relentless unification, centralization and cultural homogenization—while rejecting its most democratic ones, most specifically a generous universalism and principled commitment to equality. What emerged was a pathological compound of top-down control and standardization, fused with fanatical ethno-nationalism. Instead of creating a new, inclusive civil society based on the historical experience of multicultural Ottomanism, the Kemalist project became one of so-called *Turkicization* which left no social, cultural or political space for those who were non-Turks and non-Muslims, for those who had once enjoyed *Millet* status, for those who now would become isolated and suspect minorities. When the Republic was founded in 1923, non-Muslim bureaucrats were at first treated with suspicion and then quickly eliminated.

There were, of course, contingencies that must be noted. The republican state emerged in a moment, not of peace, but war and crisis. Large expanses of the old Ottoman realm were lost in a decade of relentless military combat that spanned the Balkan wars of 1912–13, World War One, and the Turkish war of independence of 1920–1922. Turks and other Muslims had been mistreated in what we now call *balkanization*, as boundaries and populations were caught up in constant struggle. Most of the Armenian population perished in Turkish acts of genocide, and most of the Greeks were transferred to Greece in return for the transfer of most Turks to Turkey. Under these circumstances, creating

a new republic could not be disassociated with the project of national salvation. This truly had become a tragic moment for dominant nations as well as minorities in the region, regardless of political ideology or state design. Unlike Greeks and Armenians who were associated with hostile neighbors, Jews suffered less, though there had been a strong suspicion that the treatment of the Armenians was a warning to the other minorities as well. Analytically, it is thus difficult to differentiate between anti-Semitism *per se* and anti-minority prejudice; most likely, at this point, the former was subsumed under the latter, as doctrinal anti-Semitism, generally speaking, has been alien to the Ottoman experience. Nevertheless, it is not at all difficult to imagine that, under such circumstances, anti-minority sentiment could become transformed into anti-Semitism. And, indeed, this is what appears to have happened. In 1934, pogroms broke out in Thrace whose unprotected Jewish communities permanently resettled in Istanbul. Turkey did not enter World War Two, so its Jews were not exposed to the immediate dangers that faced their coreligionists in Europe. In 1941, non-Muslim males were conscripted for military service. Not permitted to bear arms, they were sent off for forced labor instead. In December 1941, the S.S. Struma docked in Istanbul. It was an overloaded, unseaworthy vessel that had departed from the Romanian port of Constanta, bound for Palestine carrying 767 Jews fleeing the Germans. Its hull leaking and its engine malfunctioning, the refugees implored the Turkish government for sanctuary. The appeal was denied, and after two months of further negotiation the boat with all of its passengers, who the whole time had been confined to the ship, was ordered to leave. Five miles at sea in the Bosphorus, it sank with the loss of 428 men, 269 women and 70 children.⁹ In November 1942, the discriminatory wealth tax (*Varlik Vergisi*) was levied whereby non-Muslims were assessed at confiscatory rates, which were not subject to appeal. Those who could not pay within a month were deported for forced labor during the harsh winter, breaking stones for a new road at Askale. The press and politicians praised the measures against people of "alien blood," who were "Turks in name only." Under public criticism from the United States, including a series of articles in the *New York Times*, and from other Allied powers as the war was turning against the Axis powers, the republic stopped enforcing the tax. "Subsequent government inquiries exposed the injustices that had been committed, but proposals to compensate the victims were never implemented."¹⁰ For many Turkish Jews, this was the last straw; by 1949 more than 31,000 left for the new state of

Israel where eventually 60,000 would settle, roughly four times the size of the present Jewish community in Turkey.

Already during the 1930s it had become clear that a distinctive form of anti-Semitism, not simply disdain of Turkey's minorities, had taken root. Cevat Rifat Altilhan, who published the first Turkish editions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, traveled to Germany where he met with Nazi leaders who subsidized his dissemination of German anti-Semitic propaganda. Between 1940 and 1998, *Mein Kampf* was published in twenty-nine separate editions, while the *Protocols* was published ninety-three times between 1934 and 1991.¹¹ As Rifat Bali, the leading student of Turkish anti-Semitism notes, Turkey had rigid censorship during this period that was meticulously applied against the Left and the Kurds. One can only wonder why it was seldom applied against the nationalists of the extreme right and the Islamists, who beyond classically anti-Semitic imported texts like those cited, target the Jews as the cause for every misfortune that befalls Turkey, beginning with the assertion that it was the Jews who foisted the secular state upon the country, through their agent, none other than Kemal Atatürk, who allegedly was a *dönme*, a cryptic Jew.¹² Islamist anti-Semitism became still more radical after the Iranian Revolution, conjuring Jewish or Zionist conspiracies behind every humiliation suffered by Muslims in Turkey and throughout the world. And yet, despite the dissemination of such venomous tracts, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which it has had an impact on public opinion. Unlike France, for example, there has been no wave of physical assaults nor vandalism of property, aside from the attacks of Neve Shalom (Oasis of Peace) synagogue in 1986 and 2003 (the first conducted by Palestinians associated with Abu Nidal; the second by Turkish presumptive associates of Al-Qaida). Turkish Jews have serious security concerns in the wake of the bombings of Neve Shalom and the Sisli synagogues in November 2003, but these are centered on distinctively Jewish sites and institutions, not the fear typical of French Jews concerning attacks in public spaces or personal property.

The Jewish community continues to live in a world of *dhimmitude* where subordinate status and second-class citizenship is uncontested. Turkish Jews, as many scholars have pointed out, prefer to remain "hidden" and apolitical, traits that they brought even to Israel, accord-

ing to one study entitled *The Unseen Israelis*. There are no prominent social critics who are Jews, as incredible as that might sound, only one major journalist, and only a handful of academics in non-technical disciplines. The Jewish community of Turkey has produced no shortage of world-class scholars (Seyla Benhabib, Aaron Rodrigue, Esther Benbassa, Riva Kastoryano, Nora Seni, Dani Rodrik, Mahir Shaul, Karen and Henri Barkey, to name a few), but, as Rifat Bali suggests, they were mostly trained and made their reputations abroad, in Israel, Europe, or the United States. Jewish children know they will never hold high public office, and are steered mostly toward commerce, engineering, or the physical sciences.

Lina Filiba, vice-president of the Jewish Community, argues that quiet diplomacy, not contestation, has worked to their advantage compared to the treatment of other minorities. In this way, they have secured permission to construct new synagogues and enhance existing structures, as well as other benefits. Relations with the present Islamist ruling party, she maintains, are especially good because as believers, not secularists, they understand and respect the spiritual needs of the Jewish community. Bension Pinto, president of the Jewish Community, says that things are “a thousand times better than before,” though he could not predict how long this will remain the case.¹³ In response to Jewish critics, such as the historian Rifat Bali, who argue that the community’s complicity in *dhimmitude* has made the situation worse, Lina Filiba responds by saying that the community has not been passive or submissive in quietly defending Jewish interests, but has diplomatic cards of its own that occasionally have been played, most importantly relations with American Jews whose political clout successive Turkish governments has needed to counter the influence of Greek and Armenians lobbies on obvious issues. Anything that endangers or disadvantages Turkish Jews, she suggested, would have immediate and potentially devastating diplomatic consequences. In fact, the Turkish government occasionally treated its Jewish community as a pawn, not a recognized force, when dealing with American Jews. For example, in 1988 Ambassador Sükü Alekdag threatened that if the U.S. Holocaust Museum made any reference whatsoever to the Armenians, “it will go badly for the Jews in Turkey. Also for the refugees from Iran. We permit them to cross into our territory, you know, even without passports. That could all stop.”¹⁴

There are two alternative futures that confront the Turkish Jewish community. The first is further diminution, a continuation of the pattern that has persisted since the creation of the Republic in 1923. If not entire families, children, especially those who pursued their university studies abroad, will remain in Israel, Europe or the United States. A brain drain has taken place during the past twenty years affecting all Turks, not just Jews. Among better educated and more affluent Turkish families, more relatives than ever before have settled abroad where opportunities in the academy, science and commerce are more plentiful and far better paid. As Jews are disproportionately represented in this group, but comprise a vastly smaller population, the differential effect on the Jewish community would be far more pronounced than among Turks in general. In fact, this is the future anticipated by leadership of the Jewish community; that it will become smaller quantitatively though hopefully better qualitatively.

Alternatively, one could imagine a more optimistic future if the Turkish economy prospers, especially if accession to the European Union takes place, securing external guarantees for human rights and the genesis of a more open, dynamic civil society where equality for all Turks might become possible. Under such circumstances, Jews might return to Turkey and reconstitute the dwindling community. Despite the vicissitudes of Middle East politics, and the emergence of an ever more popular Islamist party, relations between Turkey and Israel in trade, as well as security, have remained strong. Unlike other Muslim countries, Jews who left can always return to visit or remain. In terms of tourism, Turkey, one hour away by air, has become a prime Israeli venue, attracting 300,000 tourists per year. One striking aspect of globalization has been the rise of so called "transnationals" who for professional reasons have multiple residences. If the Turkish economy continues to grow, and if trade and technical relations with Israel continue to develop, transnational Jews might become a new element of Turkey's Jewish community. One could well imagine transnational Jews originating from Europe and perhaps America as well. Of course, should meaningful and lasting peace come to the Middle East, conditions would be created for émigré Jews to return to all of their Levantine homelands, not just Turkey, where with Muslims they could reconstitute what had once been such a vital, diverse, multicultural space. ●

Notes

1. Riva Kastoryano, "From Millet to Community: The Jews of Istanbul," in *Ottoman and Turkish Jewry*, ed. Aron Rodrigue (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 255. On the same theme, see Aron Rodrigue, "From Millet to Minority: Turkish Jewry," in *Paths of Emancipation*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). For an excellent history of Sephardic Jewry, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
2. Walter Weiker, *Ottomans, Turks and the Jewish Polity* (New York: University Press of America, 1992), pp. 2–7.
3. On Levantine culture, see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
4. For full documentation and case histories, see Moïse Rahmani, *L'exode oublié, Juifs des pays arabes* (Paris: Editions Raphael, 2003) and Shmuel Trigano, ed., *L'exclusion des Juifs des pays arabes* (Paris: Pardès, 2003).
5. Reeva Spector Simon, "Iraq," in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 348.
6. *New York Times*, 26 February 2004.
7. Aron Rodrigue, "From Millet to Minority," p. 239.
8. See Riva Kastoryano, "From Millet to Community."
9. Howard Sachar, *Farewell España: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 105.
10. George Gruen, "Turkey," in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, ed. Simon, Laskier, and Reguer, p. 308.
11. Rifat Bali, *Les relations entre Turcs et Juifs dans La Turquie Moderne* (Istanbul: Isis, 2001), pp. 49, 68.
12. Interview with Rifat Bali, 31 May 2004. The term *dönme* refers to a sect descending from the followers of the 17th-century messianic pretender Sabbetai Zevi. Faced with the choice of death or converting to Islam, Zevi and his followers chose the latter, though secretly they remained Jews.
13. Interviews with Lina Filiba and Bension Pinto, 3 June 2004.
14. Howard Sachar, *Farewell España*, p. 110.