

Jews in Ottoman Society: Identity and Nation-Building

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1. Introduction

History retains many incidents of Jewish and Turkish meetings in parts of the world, influencing each other, even converting to each other's faiths.

Most of the influence initially came from the nomadic lifestyle of Turkish people in Central Asia. There were several communalities in daily lives and practices of nomads and Jews, including cuisine. Wheat is an important part of both the Jewish and nomadic people's cuisine. Milk and meat products are not to be mixed, and pork is not consumed, rules adhered to by both communities. Since pigs cannot be herded it is not bred among the nomads regardless of religion.

The main Jewish communities that have the closest relations with Turkish people throughout the history are the Sephardim, the majority of Jews living in Turkey, Karaite Jews who were of Turkic origin and the Urfalim and Romaniote Jews. Jews of Karaite are one of the oldest Jewish communities who made contact with Turks in the early days of Islam when Amr ben As was the governor of Egypt. Refusal of the mixture of word of men and word of God was the main philosophy between the Karaite communities of those days. The Karaite refuses to use Talmudic oral traditions, for them, it is only Torah which is valid, and all other writings and traditions are deemed to be the word of man. The Karaite religious service is also different in terms of language. The prayer and rituals are conducted in Turkish. The Karaite with their non-traditional ways had been distanced from other Jewish communities. Israel had recently been

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highlighting contribution of the Karaite who immigrated from Turkey and Crimea to Israel during its nation-building phase.¹

Urfalim Jews originated from South Eastern Turkey and were mainly living in Suruc, Urfa (Edessa), and Cermik Diyarbakir. These cities were prominent trading spots and places of Asian merchandise fairs in history. The Urfalim used Hebrew and Kurdish at home. The community moved out after the chaos during the First World War and relocated to Jerusalem.² Most of the Jews have extended family relationships that connect them with Urfa and its surroundings. These Jews are pro-Turkey in their relations to Israeli nation-building.³

2. Jews and the Ottoman Empire

When Ottomans had started to rule Europe from Bursa in 1324 as its capital, tolerance was the main tenet of the Empire and the first Jewish synagogue was allowed to be built in the city.⁴ Ottoman Empire was a multi-cultural, multi-faith, moral based idealistic empire to promote justice and Islam in the lands she conquered. The Empire made allies with other faiths, initially Orthodox Christianity and eventually with Judaism. The freedom that was extended to each community under Ottomans was not found in any part of the world at that time. Actually, Ottomans actively encouraged Orthodox Christian and Jewish immigration to its land. Freedom of trade, freedom of travel, freedom of worship, freedom of education as well as freedom of holding office was extended to most communities including the Jewish community inside the Empire. When Istanbul was conquered by Fatih Sultan Mehmed II, Jews were invited to live under the Ottoman reign.⁵

The Ottoman Empire who was rivaling Catholicism in its strategy in the world order of the age had extended protection to expelled citizens of Andalucian Muslim state in Spain within its borders

¹ Corry Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 131.

² Yusuf Besalel, *Osmanlı ve Türk Yahudileri (The Ottoman and Turkish Jews)* 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Gözlem Gazetecilik ve Basın Yayın, 2013), 74.

³ Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (London: Springer, 2016), 82.

⁴ Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 36.

⁵ Elli Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim: Memories of a Past Golden Age* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 47.

namely the Sephardim.⁶ In the Year 1492 when Jews were expelled by the Catholic Castile and Aragon states, the Ottoman Empire was the main destination for the most. The new Spanish rulers were not tolerant of its minorities. Sultan Beyazid extended state protection to Jewish refugees to settle in the Ottoman state. Istanbul and Thessalonica were the places of resettlement for the Jewish refugees.⁷

The Jewish communities had created a tradesman class within the Empire and extensive connections with the European countries; thus, they have created new opportunities for the Empire. Sephardim dominated Jewish life thereby assimilating the Romaniote and Karaite Jewish life during the Ottoman Empire.⁸ Eventually, more Jewish settlers relocated to the Empire as a result of tolerance. The Jewish community had autonomy and had the right to collect taxes from their respective communities. Many Jews had been forefront for the external government relations on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan for Britain and the Netherlands.⁹ Ottoman Sultans had always defended the rights of Jews within their international relations.

Jewish communities had been one of the most prominent in nation-building among Ottoman communities. Ottoman lands had also encompassed the Jewish holy land where life was fulfilling. At one point in the 16th-century Ottoman lands had the most populous Jewish community in the world. The nation-building had commenced from the declaration of Hatti Humayun in 1856; where citizenship to was first established rather than being a religious community. Ottoman Jews had a variety of views on who a Jew was. The founding member of the Young Turk movement Emanuelle Carasso had a view of being first a Turk and then a Jew.¹⁰

3. Jews and the Turkish Republic

When the Ottoman Empire started losing power and land due to self-determination and nationalist movements, the Jewish population numbers started to fall, the Jewish population found

⁶ Jane S. Gerber, *Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 17.

⁷ Marc David Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 35.

⁸ Besalel, *Osmanlı ve Türk Yahudileri (The Ottoman and Turkish Jews)*, 45.

⁹ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 67.

¹⁰ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 94.

itself under the Christian rule of Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the First World War, the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the Republic of Turkey which adopted a secular constitution, in which Turkishness was promoted and minority rights were left to be defended by the state. The Lausanne Treaty guaranteed rights for religious minorities, including the Jewish community, such as operation of Ladino schools.

Many Turkish Jews displayed a firm commitment to secularism and adopted Turkishness as the main agenda. An example is Munis Tekinalp who was born Mois Cohen. Cohen was an ardent supporter of Turkishness and a passionate supporter of Mustafa Kemal.¹¹ He was one of the ideologues of the Turkish Republic and Turkish Nationalism. He advocated for turkifying the Jewish community in Turkey so that Turkish Jews be part of the society. Tekinalp published a book under the title *Türkleştirme* (Turkification) which was dedicated to Turkish nationalist association *Türk Ocağı*.¹² He had written few principles that would make his community more Turkish that include turkifying names, prayers, schools and speaking the Turkish language in daily life, sending children to state schools, and being part of the Turkish social life with other fellow Turks. He also encouraged Jews to associate with the national economy, serve in the Turkish military, and reduce community spirit.¹³ Moreover, Tekinalp, Henry Soriano, and Marcel Franco had started a cultural association, namely *Türk Kültür Cemiyeti* in 1934 to promote turkification and the use of Turkish language.¹⁴

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and other ideologues of the Republic always declared that non-Muslim citizens of the Republic had to adopt Turkish language, culture, and ideals of Turkism as part of being a citizen of the new Turkish Republic. As an example, the prime minister of the time İsmet İnönü, during the uprising of Sheik Said declared that the Republic's utmost duty is to make all subjects adopt Turkey as their homeland and make everyone a Turk, and cut

¹¹ Baer, *The Dönme*, 82.

¹² Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews*, 98.

¹³ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 128.

¹⁴ Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, 21.

and discard all sprits that do not conform or oppose Turkishness.¹⁵ In 1925, further speeches of Ismet Inonu to Teachers Union stated that alien cultures must melt into the overall population. Anyone who thinks differently should follow the mainstream civilization that was to be built for the unity of the new Turkish Republic.¹⁶ The same message was repeated by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in his speeches. The CHP regulation in the year 1927 adopted the wording reading “the most prominent bond of a citizen is the ability of language and ideals”.¹⁷ Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had repeated his vision of speaking Turkish in his speeches in the year 1931, to him it was an integral part of citizenry.¹⁸ What the Republican elites were wishing for the non-Muslim minorities was to have them join into the social life and melt into the mainstream without emphasizing the identities of religion or languages of their ancestors. Furthermore, the minorities had to be indistinguishable from other fellow Turks.¹⁹

Right before and during the Second World War, Nazism in Germany, the propaganda from a former ally was being promoted in Turkey. However, Turkey refused all sorts of anti-Semitism.²⁰ In the year 1933, a new law came into effect in Nazi Germany: mandatory dismissal of all officials who are of non-Aryan race. Most Jewish scientists and researchers were fired from their university positions. The unemployed scientists led by Albert Einstein formed an association in Bern, Switzerland contacting President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the Turkish Minister of Education to provide jobs for 34 unemployed Jewish scientists in Turkish universities. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk invited the German Jews to the Turkish universities with presidential decree.²¹ These researchers were located in Balat and Haskoy districts of Istanbul. In 1935 Rabbinate of Jews was recognized by the Turkish Republic. Jewish relocation was a new source for the new Turkish Republic to create its own independent research capacity and in return Turkey became a

¹⁵ Arthur John Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 96.

¹⁶ Murat Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi (Turkification of the Economy in the Early Republican Period)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), 49.

¹⁷ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 89.

¹⁸ Murat Belge, *Militarist Modernleşme: Almanya, Japonya ve Türkiye (Militarist Modernization: Germany, Japan and Turkey)* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), 147.

¹⁹ Belge, *Militarist Modernleşme*, 154.

²⁰ Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East*, 72.

²¹ I. İzzet Bahar, *Turkey and the Rescue of European Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 28.

transit point for Jews after the World War.²² During World War II, Turkey was one of the few safe havens for Jews. Turkish diplomats had helped rescue several Jews running for their lives. Although Turkish policy towards Jews was rather flexible by the advent of the war, there were restrictive immigration rules for the Jews. By 1942 this was lifted and the Jewish community had a chance of seeking safe haven in Turkey.²³

At the beginning of the Turkish Republic, there were about 82,000 Jews 47,000 of whom lived in Istanbul which had a population of approximately 375,000 people. The second biggest population was in the Thrace area, followed by South-Eastern Turkey. Today the community is strong but dwindling to 17,000 people.²⁴ Although melting and indistinguishableness were part of the motto of the time, three events were hard for the minorities, during the time leading to the Second World War. Minorities with the European press influences started to be seen as the fifth column in many countries. These incidents dented perfect relations within the New Republic. Although minorities were to be Turkish citizens, the equitable sharing of economic power was not established in the Republic.²⁵ One of the incidents called Trakya incidents of 1934, involved the large community of rich and powerful Jewish people in Thrace. Influenced by German anti-Semitic propaganda, the local population on the pretext of the income gap between the community and locals started attacking the businesses of the Jewish community, eventually forcing the them to leave for Istanbul.²⁶

Another major incident was the introduction of a new wealth tax in 1942-1944, which was levied on the non-Muslim population. This was supposedly a way for the government ruled by the Republican People's Party to Turkify non-Muslims.²⁷ The policy was justified on the basis of having an equitable social distribution of wealth in the country. The heavy tax was to be paid on a strict deadline, at the end of which most of the properties belonging to minorities had to

²² Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, 67.

²³ Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, 138.

²⁴ Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews*, 107.

²⁵ Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi (Turkification of the Economy in the Early Republican Period)*, 74.

²⁶ Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews*, 103.

²⁷ Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi (Turkification of the Economy in the Early Republican Period)*, 98.

be sold for low prices. This, in turn, made land ownership change hands, from minorities to the majority.²⁸

After multiparty elections, when the government changed to Adnan Menderes' Democrat Party, Jews were supportive of this change due to their suffering from the wealth tax, similar incidents occurred in 1955 under Democrat Party, which once again made land ownership change hands from minorities who were mostly residents of Istanbul to the majority Muslims.²⁹ One of the main policies of the New Republic during the Republican People's Party rule was land reform. Most Democrat Party cadres were former Republican People's Party members, and might have shared their disinclination to create a rich class that belonged to a specific community.

Finally, Turkey decided to form a battalion by enlisting soldiers from male minorities aged 27-40, in the year 1941. This battalion was a way to bring together able bodied males of different minorities scattered in parts of Anatolia and to control them by making them serve under a Turkish commander to build roads and air bases. This battalion was decommissioned in 1942 during which the chances of the German invasion of Turkey faded.³⁰

All these three incidents took place after the fall of Greece and Bulgaria to Nazi Germany, and were instigated by either the German propaganda or caused by the fear of invasion by Nazi troops. Nevertheless, they were also in line with the Turkish Republic's ardent support for Turkish nationalism and push towards minorities to adopt a Turkish identity and remain loyal to Turkey.

After the World War, most Jewish population emigrated to Israel. Turkey was one of the first countries to formally recognize the State of Israel. Currently, the population of Jewish minorities living in Turkey is 17,000 and 77,000 Turkish Jews live in Israel.³¹ New laws in Portugal and Spain have made it easier for the Sephardic Jews of Turkey to relocate also to Portugal if one proves descent from one of the expelled populations of the time. Nation-building in Israel had

²⁸ Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi (Turkification of the Economy in the Early Republican Period)*, 109.

²⁹ Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi (Turkification of the Economy in the Early Republican Period)*, 117.

³⁰ Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust*, 83.

³¹ Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East*: 119.

many Turks contribute to many walks of life. Turkish Jews became peoples of excellence like a world-class scientists such as Aaron Rodrigue, Dani Rodrik, Esther ben Basa to name some. Moreover, Yasmin Levy and Sholomi Shabt are famous Israeli musicians and Adi Ashkenazi is a renowned comedian, all with Turkish heritage. Upon establishment of the state of Israel 4,000 Jewish citizens of Turkey have immigrated.³²

4. Conclusion

Given the relatively high birthrate among the Sephardim population on or about 60% of all Israeli Jewish population, Israeli politics will definitively one day be sharing power with the Sephardim population. Although disunited due to cultural reasons and economic hardship, new politics for Israel has to be inclusive towards Sephardim. Urfalim Jews could be a lobbying point for Turkish policy towards southeastern Turkey as the community is supportive of Turkish causes related to current hotspots along the southern border of Turkey. Karaite Jews with Turkish identity will always have a say for Turkish affairs within Israel. The amicable relations were created by an association called Arkadaş, which means friend in Turkish, aiming to preserve Turkish heritage and friendship with Turkey. Ulkumen-sarfati association was created and named after Selahattin Ulkumen who helped rescue Jews during the Second World War to create interfaith dialogue for the future. Meanwhile, Sephardic Bikur Holiim Synagogue was formed by Jews of Turkish extraction in Seattle Washington state where services are done in Turkish and Ladino.³³ Furthermore, in the year 2015 restoration project of Synagogue of Edirne was done 40 plus years of decay of the building. It had served 20,000 or more people at the beginning of the 20th century.³⁴ Turkish nation-building has always had Jews as an integral part of the New Republic. Turkish Jews who were supportive of Kemalism and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk after moving to Israel had been prominent in nation-building of Israel as well. Most of the Jews of Turkish extraction live in Batyam, a small Turkish neighborhood that stands firm in Israel.

³² Besalel, *Osmanlı ve Türk Yahudileri (The Ottoman and Turkish Jews)*, 140.

³³ Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews*, 129.

³⁴ Besalel, *Osmanlı ve Türk Yahudileri (The Ottoman and Turkish Jews)*, 109.

Turkish Jews 'although from different backgrounds' had been the main sources of nation-building during the start of the New Turkish Republic. Historically Jewish population was always loyal to the Turks, this was also manifested after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey has been indebted to the Jewish population in establishing the research development in universities and Turkification of the minorities. Amicable relations has been deep-rooted and will survive with establishments in Turkey and Israel.

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