

Narrating Antisemitism in Historical and Contemporary Turkey

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Introduction

In what follows, we will examine the experience of Jews in both Ottoman and present-day Turkey, exploring issues of diversity, social conflict, and religious intolerance in an historical and contemporary context. We will begin with a brief history of the Jewish community from the emergence of the Ottoman Empire to its decline. Then, we will look at the founding of the Turkish Republic and its impact on the Jewish communities in Turkey, concluding with some observations about Turkish antisemitism and the way it informs the lingering issues Jewish communities face in Turkey today.

Differences between early and modern types of hostility towards Jews relate to the dominant discourses of their respective times: in antiquity, a particular reading of biblical texts, and, in the modern period, the rationalisation of scientific racism. During the Greco-Roman era, before the emergence of Christianity, anti-Jewishness was based on notions of ethnicity; after the spread of Christianity during medieval times, antisemitism was shaped by religious discrimination; political, social, and economic antisemitism emerged during the European Enlightenment; the rise of Nazism was marked by an increasingly racist formulation; currently,

anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist frames of references shape antisemitism.¹ These historical transformations and the subsequent implications of this “othering” are important for the issues being discussed here. Antisemitism, as a way of “othering,” evolved in Turkey in the midst of the social, cultural and historical changes that engulfed the wider Western European experience in the modern age, but with all the inevitable caveats that come with being at the axis of East and West, Europe and Asia, and Christianity and Islam.²

Flourishing and Floundering Under the Ottoman Empire

Jews have been living under Muslim rule for many centuries, although, unlike Christian domination, it has been a less subverted process. When the Jews were expelled from Spain (1492), Portugal (1496), Hungary (1376), France (1394), and Italy (1537), the Ottoman Empire opened its doors and offered them sanctuary, becoming “a safe haven for Jews” escaping persecution.³ They grew to be an autonomous community (*millet*, see below) with its own religious beliefs and cultural traditions. Jews were also economically and politically active, making a particularly significant contribution to the economic growth of the Ottoman Empire.

¹ Jerome A. Chanes, *Antisemitism: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 5.

² Ibid.; Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).

³ Avigdor Levy, ed., *Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History, Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 246.

Many Jews also served as diplomats in the Empire, and, in 1493, one year after their expulsion from Spain, the Jews David and Samuel Ibn Nahmias introduced the first printing press in the Ottoman Empire.

Istanbul (Constantinople) became an important centre of Jewish scholarship and culture. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Jewish population of Istanbul stood at 50,000. By the end of the nineteenth century, approximately 400,000 Jews were living within the domain of the Ottoman Empire. Nearly half of them were located in the territory of present-day Turkey, with 100,000 of them living in Istanbul.⁴ The city of Salonica (Thessaloniki) also had a large population, rivalling Constantinople as the centre of Ottoman Jewry. From 1430 until 1912, Salonica was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, and in the late fifteenth century, many of the Jews expelled from Spain had moved there. Throughout the Empire, people of different religions and ethnicities lived in a multicultural and multi-religious environment.⁵

The Ottoman Empire continued the tradition of *dhimmis* (as was also the case in the early years of Islam in Medina), with Jews, as well as Christians and Zoroastrians, as non-Muslim “people of the book,” enjoying relative freedom of religion. They were a *millet* (a community that had the right to appoint its own religious leaders) and were not required to provide military service. In fact, it was forbidden for Jews to carry weapons or to ride on horseback. They were also obliged to wear a distinctive sign (usually a yellow turban). According to Bernard Lewis,

⁴ “Turkey–Jewish Encyclopedia,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, available online at

www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14546-turkey (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁵ Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

the yellow badge that was later adopted by Europeans was first used in Baghdad.⁶ There was, however, no attempt made to limit the Jewish population anywhere. The Jewish quarters in many cities were not walled ghettos like those in Venice, and Jews were permitted to live outside of them. Jews were not pressured to accept Islam or Muslim religious authorities, and unlike in Christian lands, the Ottomans did not censor Hebrew books. In general, Jews had better lives in the Empire than did Christians (Greeks, Armenians). There were two reasons for this: the Ottoman Empire was almost continuously at war with the Christian States of Europe, and Jews actively competed with Christians in trade and crafts, which displeased the Greeks and Armenians, contributing to the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment in Christian communities.

All of this was to change for the worse. The Ottoman Sultan's tolerance for the Empire's Jews deteriorated when the Sabbatean movement began to gain adherents in Istanbul, Salonica, Gallipoli (modern-day Gelibolu), and other cities in present-day Turkey. The Sabbateans, a mass Messianic movement, developed out of a meeting in 1665 between Shabbetai Zvi (1626–76) and the theologian and author Nathan of Gaza (1643–80). Nathan profoundly believed in Zvi's lofty mission, and his conviction helped to dispel Zvi's own doubts and fears. In Gaza on 31 May 1665, Zvi publicly proclaimed himself the Messiah. The news of the coming of the Messiah spread rapidly. Backed by the authority of Nathan and his messengers, Zvi attracted many supporters. Izmir, where he had spent his childhood and youth, greeted him enthusiastically, becoming the capital city of the Jewish Messianic movement.

Inevitably, this Messianic movement clashed with the Ottoman Empire. When the government initially found out about Zvi's activities in Izmir, it adopted a wait-and-see attitude. In late 1665, Zvi, along with his closest followers, sailed from Izmir to Istanbul to convince the Sultan to restore the Jewish Kingdom in the land of Israel. On the road, he was captured and imprisoned in a fortress near Gallipoli. In September 1666, he was delivered to the Sultan's court in Edirne (Adrianople), where he and his closest followers converted to Islam, leading the vast majority of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire to lose faith in his Messianism and to return to

⁶ Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 131.

Orthodox Judaism. Despite Zvi's claim that his intent was to win over the Sultan to his cause and have the Sultan restore the Jewish kingdom in the Land of Israel, the authorities suspected that the Jewish population was planning a coup.

The emergence of the *Dönme* (Turkish for “convert,” “reversed”) should be noted in passing. It was a sect founded by a small group of Zvi's followers after he converted to Islam. Although the sect publicly observed the Qur'an, it believed in Zvi's divinity, professed Sabbateanism and saw itself as the bearer of the true Judaism. The response of the Orthodox Jewry to *Dönme* teachings was overwhelmingly negative and members of the sect were regarded as apostates who had broken with Judaism. By the late seventeenth century, a majority of the *Dönme* had gathered in Salonica and established an autonomous community whose members married both Muslims and Jews. Many members of the sect went on to play an active role in the Young Turks revolutionary movement, which was established in 1909.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the standard of living and social status of the Jews living in the territory of modern Turkey declined steadily. The Greek revolt against Ottoman rule in 1821 resulted in a protracted war, forcing the authorities to raise taxes, including those on Jews (without regard to their real incomes). In 1826, after the dissolution of his household troops, the Janissaries, Sultan Mahmud II (1785–1839) executed the Jewish financiers who had close ties with the corps commanders and who stood at the head of Istanbul Jewry. After the 1840 Damascus Affair, which involved the prosecution of local Jews for the alleged ritual murder of a Christian priest and his servant, Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839–61) issued a decree at the request of West European representatives on 6 November 1840 denouncing blood libel as slander and prohibiting the prosecution of Jews throughout the Ottoman Empire. Because of the overall weakness of the Sultanate, however, this order had no effect on the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire. By the close of the twentieth century, Jews, who, unlike the Christians, did not have powerful patrons, had lost their once elevated status and had become an impoverished and persecuted minority.

Jews in the Turkish Republic

In the early years of the Turkish Republic (proclaimed in October 1923), the country was home to about 200,000 Jews. In Istanbul, there were about 70,000 Jews, in Izmir about 30,000, in Edirne about 15,000, in Bursa about 3,000, and in Çanakkale about 2,000.⁷ In addition, relatively small communities existed in Tyre, Menemen, Kasaba, Ankara, Urfa, Gaziantep (Atep), Diyarbakır, Çorlu, Kırklareli, Uzunköprü, Keşani, and Silivri. The majority of Turkey's Jews were Sephardim, with Ladino as their mother tongue. Only in Istanbul were small communities of Ashkenazi, Georgian Jews, Italian Jews, and Karaites found. Jews who had emigrated during the Russian Civil War (1917–22), and who had originally settled in Istanbul and Gallipoli, soon moved to Western Europe, North America, or the British Mandate of Palestine, with only a few choosing to remain in Turkey. There was also a small group of Kurdish Jews in southern and south-eastern Asia Minor.⁸

In late 1922, at a critical moment in Turkish history and a point when the country's Jewish community favoured independence, the Turkish press launched an antisemitic campaign, intermingling the antisemitic clichés that echoed throughout Europe with “local” themes and even drawing upon the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (first published in the magazine

⁷ “Turkey–Jewish Encyclopedia.”

⁸ “Istanbul, Turkey,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, available online at

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0010_0_09766.html (accessed 20 April 2016).

Millî İnkılâb [National Revolution] in 1934).⁹ Among other crimes, Jews were accused of disloyalty to the state, seeking to take over the national economy, exploiting Turks, supporting the Greeks, and illegally appropriating property abandoned by fleeing Greeks and Armenians during the war of Turkish independence. Although the campaign was purely rhetorical and did not receive a broad response in Turkish society, it created insecurity and—in conjunction with the financial difficulties of the post-war period—led many Jews to leave Turkey.¹⁰

In 1933, a Nazi group headed by the journalist Cevat Rifat Atilhan (1892–1967) emerged in Turkey. Atilhan maintained close contact with Julius Streicher, the publisher of *Der Stürmer* and one of Adolf Hitler’s closest associates. The antisemitic propaganda disseminated by this group provoked pogroms in several cities in Eastern Thrace on the night of 2 July 1934, causing the Jews living there to flee to Istanbul. State leaders strongly opposed the antisemitism in Eastern Thrace and ordered the armed forces to protect Jews and their property. Many rioters were arrested and prosecuted. The authorities closed Atilhan’s newspaper (*Millî İnkılâp*),

⁹ On the printing history of the *Protocols* in Turkey, see Rifat N. Bali, “*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Turkey,” in *The Global Impacts of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, ed. Esther Webman (New York: Routledge, 2011), 220–28.

¹⁰ Marc David Baer, “An Enemy Old and New: The Dönme, Anti-Semitism, and Conspiracy Theories in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 4 (2013): 523–55.

prosecuted him and punished officials who had not taken appropriate measures to prevent the disorder,¹¹ stymieing this attempt to establish a mass Nazi movement in Turkey.

In 1935, Dr Samuel Abravaya Marmaralı (1879–1953), who ran as an independent candidate, became the first Jew to sit in the Grand National Assembly (the parliament of the Turkish Republic). Prime Minister Celal Bayar (1883–1986) issued a statement asserting that there was no “Jewish question” in Turkey, and there was no place for “alien trends” (i.e. Nazism). Newspaper articles defending the Jews were also published at the time.¹²

In Turkey, the process of “othering” has occurred within specific parameters. The Turkish Republic was constructed as a nation-state, and the direct translation of the word “nation” in Turkish is *millet*. As noted above, in the Ottoman Empire the meaning of the *millet* system and the perception of *millets* were very different than they are now. In the Ottoman Empire, *millets* were classified by religion, and the different ethnic groups were subdivisions of various religions. The leader of a *millet* was a representative of the religion in question and was responsible for all of the legal and economic affairs of the group (i.e. Jews, Armenians, and Greeks). However, after the formation of the Turkish Republic, in lieu of the old *millet*, political authorities in Ankara established a new “Turkish model” of citizenship. In this case, religions

¹¹ Rıfat N. Bali, “The 1934 Thrace Events: Continuity and Change Within Turkish State Policies

Regarding Non-Muslim Minorities: An Interview with Rıfat Bali,” *European Journal of*

Turkish Studies: Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey 7 (2008), available online at

<https://ejts.revues.org/2903> (accessed 27 April 2017).

¹² Mücahit Düzgün, “Cumhuriyetin İlanından İsrail’in Kuruluşuna Kadar Türkiye’deki

Yahudiler,” *Journal of Modern Turkish History Studies* 3, no. 9–10 (2000): 65–83 (here 78).

became subdivisions of the nation¹³ in a nation-building project that altered the social, economic, and political lives of every individual. Through this process, the State was attempting to create a new, unified nation out of diverse communities, as well as engaging in an overall process of modernisation. As a result, Jews were caught between the efforts to preserve their Jewish language and culture and the new “Turkification policy.”¹⁴

This secular Kemalist reform created hope for democracy and equality, and the Jewish community welcomed the new Turkish nationalism with optimism. The shift from subjects to citizens, however, was not without its challenges, especially for people who previously had *dhimmi* status in the Ottoman Empire. During the first three decades of the Turkish Republic, there were indications that not all citizens were being treated equally, with those who had had

¹³ Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 136.

¹⁴ Ahmet İçduygu, Şule Toktaş and B. Ali Soner, “The Politics of Population in a Nation-Building Process: Emigration of Non-Muslims from Turkey,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 358–89; Şule Toktaş, “Citizenship and Minorities: A Historical Overview of Turkey’s Jewish Minority,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18, no. 4 (2005): 394–429; Rıfat N. Bali, *A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey* (İstanbul: Isis Press, 2008).

dhimmi status were still being treated like *dhimmis*.¹⁵ After the foundation of the republican nation-state, the main targets of Turkish “othering” were non-Muslims. In the 24 July 1923 Lausanne Treaty (one of the main documents to come out of the Lausanne conference, 1922–23), non-Muslims were defined as minority groups in Turkey. However, the definition of non-Muslim was questionable, as it covered only the three biggest non-Muslim groups: Armenians, Jews, and Greeks. Syriacs, another non-Muslim group, were not granted minority rights. The treaty simply ignored their existence.¹⁶

Other issues also created serious problems, among them, the 1923 Population Exchange (*Nüfus Mübadelesi*), a compulsory exchange of populations involving Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria. It was the result of the defeat of Greece in the Second Greco-Turkish war of 1919–22 and the conclusion of the Lausanne Peace Treaty. The exchange affected over two million people—the Greek population of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace in particular. The main objective of the exchange was to create homogeneous populations in the States formed in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire in order to prevent separatism from arising among ethno-religious minorities. As a result, Turkey had to accept the *Dönme* population in Salonica as a Turkish

¹⁵ Rıfat N. Bali, “The Politics of Turkification During the Single Party Period,” in *Turkey Beyond*

Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 43–49.

¹⁶ Hazan Kuru, “Türkiye’de Antisemitizm ve Büyük Doğu Dergisi,” unpublished Master’s dissertation (Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi, 2010), 30.

Muslim people. However, the government continued to classify them as *Dönmeh*, as became obvious when the capital tax was collected.¹⁷

The “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” (*Vatandaş, Türkçe konuş!*) campaign, initiated by government-backed law students, began on 13 January 1928 and continued on through the 1930s. The goal was to prevent minorities from speaking their own languages. During the campaign, varieties of fines were levied against people who spoke a language other than Turkish, even in their own districts. Then, in 1942, the capital tax (*Varlık Vergisi*) was imposed on the non-Muslim citizens of Turkey. Officially, the tax law was presented as taxation of the high profitability created by exceptional wartime conditions, and not as targeting any specific religious or ethnic group.¹⁸ These and similar developments were seen as strong evidence that minorities were not perceived as full citizens.¹⁹

In response to these measures, the Jewish population rapidly decreased. In 1945, the Jewish population was 76,965. Three years later, in 1948, with the establishment of Israel, the

¹⁷ Baer, “An Enemy Old and New: The Dönme, Anti-Semitism, and Conspiracy Theories in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic”; Rıfat N. Bali and Paul Bessemer, *A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey* (İstanbul: Isis Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Şule Toktaş, “Perceptions of Anti-Semitism Among Turkish Jews,” *Turkish Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 203–23.

¹⁹ Avram Galanti, Ömer Türkoğlu, and Rıfat N. Bali, *Vatandaş Türkçe konuş!* (İstanbul: Kebikeç Yayınları, 2000).

Jewish population in Turkey dropped to 45,995.²⁰ The contradictory nature of politics in Turkey must also be taken into consideration. Despite secularisation, Islam remained a decisive factor in Turkey, used as a tool for exclusion and for discriminating against non-Muslims—although Islamist tendencies were also under constant pressure. For example, between 1924 and 1930, during the first attempts at multiparty democracy, the mood was that the Progressive Republican Party was influenced by Islamist ideology, and so it was banned. This contradictory political situation meant that antisemitism in Turkey survived within a policy of denials, which included leaders of the Turkish Jewish communities denying the existence of antisemitism. Non-Muslim minorities in Turkey have always had an uncertain place in society.²¹ Turkey always believed that non-Muslim minorities were in contact with their countries of perceived ethnic origin—Greeks with Greece, Jews with Israel, and Armenians with Armenia.²²

Nonetheless, the events that negatively affected the Jews (Citizen, Speak Turkish!, the wealth tax, etc.) targeted non-Muslim minorities in general—and even some Muslim minorities. As Toktaş sees it, only the early events in Thrace directly targeted Jews, largely because of Nazi influence. The rise of fundamentalist Islam also played a role. For their part, many prominent

²⁰ Rifat N. Bali, “The Slow Disappearance of Turkey’s Jewish Community,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* (2011), available online at

<http://jcpa.org/article/the-slow-disappearance-of-turkeys-jewish-community/> (accessed 20 April 2016).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Toktaş, “Perceptions of Anti-Semitism Among Turkish Jews”; Kuru, “Türkiye’de Antisemitizm ve Büyük Doğu Dergisi.”

Jews in Turkey denied the existence of antisemitism, instead seeing these developments as the result of events in the Arab world. Landau, for instance, points to the rise of anti-Jewish elements in Islamist publications, especially after 1950. In 1970, anti-Zionism pushed all of this into the forefront, something that was exacerbated by the impact of popular antisemitic publications, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.²³

Today, there are three categories of antisemitism in Turkey: Islamist, leftist, and nationalist.²⁴ The 1945 establishment of a new multi-party system was a hopeful shift in the direction of democracy in the country. It was at this point, however, that the Islamist movements began to rise and take their place as leading purveyors of antisemitic rhetoric. After the establishment of Israel, the conflict between the new state and the Palestinians provided the primary source for the antisemitic sentiments expressed in the Islamist media. The Palestinian issue also had an important Ottoman legacy; Abdulhamid II had refused Theodor Herzl's demand for land in the Palestinian territories. The Islamists believed that the Jews were behind Abdulhamid II being deposed and the subsequent downfall of the caliphate.

While Palestine is an issue for Islamists, it is also important to Turkish leftists, who see this struggle as a conflict between the oppressed in the Middle East and American imperialist hegemony, with Israel perceived as a US instrument. This idea originates in the 1970s, when some far-left activists received military training from the Palestine Liberation Organisation and joined in armed combat against Israeli forces. Today, some of these militants are in positions that

²³ Jacob M. Landau, "Muslim Turkish Attitudes Towards Jews, Zionism and Israel," *Die Welt des Islams* 28, nos. 1–4 (1988): 291–300.

²⁴ Rifat N. Bali, "Present-Day Anti-Semitism in Turkey," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, (2009), available online at <http://jcpa.org/article/present-day-anti-semitism-in-turkey/> (accessed 20 April 2016).

allow them to play a role in shaping public opinion. Antisemitic rhetoric is, however, not confined to the Islamists and the left. It is also found in nationalist and neo-nationalist ideologies. In recent years, nationalists have been openly hostile to the European Union, the United States, and Israel. In 2005, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was number four on the bestseller list in Turkey, which was perceived as signalling the rise of a new form of nationalist antisemitism in the country.²⁵

These different antisemitic ideological streams—Islamists, leftists, and nationalists—are all interconnected and influence each other. While Islamists use the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a source of antisemitism, leftists and nationalists also use an antisemitic discourse to criticise and oppose the Islamists.²⁶ Antisemitism has always been a tool of exclusion in the Turkish political arena where it also plays a role in diverting attention from weaknesses.²⁷

Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Everyday

Distinguishing antisemitism from criticism of Zionism is a difficult endeavour. On the one hand, a certain ambiguity allows for antisemitism to be presented as criticism of Israeli government policy. On the other hand, accusations of antisemitism are used in some quarters to discredit any criticism of Israel. Some scholars argue that criticising Israeli politics and opposing Zionism

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Baer, “An Enemy Old and New.”

does not constitute antisemitism,²⁸ but the line between the two is fuzzy. According to Dershowitz, it is important to understand that although criticism of Israel is not, by itself, anti-Semitism, there are certain kinds of criticism of Israel that are clearly anti-Semitic, when criticism of Israel “crosses the line from fair to foul” it goes “from acceptable to anti-Semitic.”²⁹ For his part, Brian Klug argues that criticism of Israeli policies is not antisemitic, and that like any other state, the Israeli State is open to criticism. That said, it is undeniable that some criticisms of Israel and of “Zionism” serve to reinforce antisemitism.³⁰

A certain double standard can also be seen around criticisms of Zionism. For many Jews, Zionism is a way of imagining the Jewish nation, just as in many nation-states, nationalism is the primary ideology. Modern Turkishness, for example, is a product of the Kemalist nation-state building project. Thus, Jews have the same right as any other nation in the world to shape an identity, and Zionism provides the necessary framework. Critics of Zionism are denying Jews their rights and treating them differently than they do others. In that sense, singling out Jewish

²⁸ Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011); Brian Klug,

“Interrogating ‘New Anti-Semitism,’” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013):

468–82; Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Anti-Zionism Is Anti-Semitism,” *The Guardian*,

November 2003, available online at www.theguardian.com/world/2003/nov/29/comment

(accessed 20 April 2016).

²⁹ Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel*, 1.

³⁰ Klug, “Interrogating ‘New Anti-Semitism,’” 471–82.

nationalism as distinct from other nationalisms is antisemitic.³¹ The current Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and other officials of the Republic often visit Turkish communities in Europe to strengthen ties, to establish social capital within other countries, and to build a lobby in those countries. “You are part of Germany, but you are also part of our great Turkey,” Erdoğan said in Düsseldorf in 2011.³² Meanwhile, in Turkey, Jews are not permitted any attachment to Israel or to Zionism. Jews who reject Zionism and do not have any connection to Israel are accepted as “good Jews,” while Zionist Jews are the “bad Jews.”³³ In early 2017, Erdoğan accused both the German and Dutch governments as being “Nazi remnants” when AKP ministers were barred from entering the countries to address Turkish audiences in relation to April referendum on the executive presidency. Such utterances reflect a hostile approach to the EU in the light of growing nationalist fervour in Turkey, in part reflecting the personal ambitions of Erdoğan. The problem does not stop there. Islamist intellectuals who criticise Israel and

³¹ Ottolenghi, “Anti-Zionism Is Anti-Semitism,” *The Guardian*, November 2003.

³² Özlem Gezer and Anna Reimann, “Erdogan Urges Turks Not to Assimilate: ‘You Are Part of Germany, But Also Part of Our Great Turkey,’ ” *Spiegel online*, 28 February 2011, available online at www.spiegel.de/international/europe/erdogan-urges-turks-not-to-assimilate-you-are-part-of-germany-but-also-part-of-our-great-turkey-a-748070.html (accessed 20 April 2016).

³³ Rifat N. Bali, “The Image of the Jew in the Rhetoric of Political Islam in Turkey,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Sur La Méditerranée Orientale et Le Monde Turco-Iranien* 28 (1999), available online at <https://cemoti.revues.org/590> (accessed 20 April 2016).

Zionism often turn to specific verses in the Qur'an to justify their stance against Israel: "Believers! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies" (Al-Ma'ida 5:51). However, they tend to ignore the other verses about the "People of the Book" (Al-Haj 22:17). Islamic scholars who call for interreligious dialogue and peace, like Seyyid Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), Fethullah Gülen (b.1941) and Said Nursi (1877–1960), are criticised as apostates, as Zionism's Trojan Horse. Those who hold these views are choosing to ignore the fact that renowned thinkers like the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi and the eleventh- to twelfth-century Turkic poet and Sufi Khoja Akhmed Yasawi, both of whom are important historical figures in Turkish Islamic culture, were also open to interreligious dialogue. The implication is that while particular views are singled out, other distinct religious, cultural, and historical interpretations are ignored or even eradicated.

The military coups of 1960, 1971, and 1980 were also of particular importance. Because the coups were ideological projects, state pressure was not just brought to bear by the repressive state apparatus, but also through state ideology. George Simmel contends that there is a relationship between ideology and repression.³⁴ These authoritarian interventions into daily life led to a particular way of thinking that served to subdue memory, laying the groundwork for the ideologies still present today.

Because they are among the least desired groups in Turkish society, all of the key ideological movements make use of conspiracy theories about Jewish people. The role of antisemitism in political discourse is to exclude these "others" from the political arena. Scholars like Marc David Baer, Rifat N. Bali, and Marcy Brink-Danan counter the commonly accepted view of Turkish culture as ethnically and religiously tolerant, arguing that discrimination towards

³⁴ Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *The American Journal of*

Sociology 11, no. 4 (1906): 441–98; L. E. Hazelrigg, "A Reexamination of Simmel's

'The Secret and the Secret Society': Nine Propositions," *Social Forces* 47, no. 3 (1969):

323–30.

Jews is deeply embedded in Turkish social and cultural life.³⁵ Brink-Danan's articles and her book *Jewish Life in Twenty-First-Century Turkey: The Other Side of Tolerance*, based on field studies conducted between 2002 and 2009, use anthropological and semiotic methods to give a "thick description" of the tension embedded in the daily life of Jewish people in Turkey. However, when she argues that people's names provide a basis for discrimination, it is not obvious that what Brink-Danan has noticed is antisemitism, but rather, than a more general phenomenon that affects all non-Muslim groups.³⁶

Kerim Balçı, a columnist for the English-language daily newspaper *Today's Zaman*, which is known to adhere closely to a conservative line, argues that these discriminatory acts and events are related to "ignorance" within Turkish society.³⁷ Because people do not know the

³⁵ Marcy Brink-Danan, *Jewish Life in Twenty-First-Century Turkey: The Other Side of Tolerance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Marcy Brink-Danan, "Names That Show Time: Turkish Jews as 'Strangers' and the Semiotics of Reclassification," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 3 (2010): 384–96; Marc David Baer, "Turkish Jews Rethink 500 Years of Brotherhood and Friendship," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 24, no. 2 (2000): 63–73.

³⁶ Marcy Brink-Danan, "Names That Show Time: Turkish Jews as 'Strangers' and the Semiotics of Reclassification," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 3 (2010): 384–96.

³⁷ Kerim Balçı, "Is Anti-Semitism Rising in Turkey?" *Today's Zaman*, 1 October 2009, available online at www.icjs-online.org/index.php?article=2074 (accessed 17 April 2017).

history, they believe that the Jews were always the Muslim's enemies. This is important to understanding the contemporary situation of non-Muslim groups in Turkey. Many Turkish intellectuals who claim that there is no antisemitism in Turkish society argue that Turkish society has a history of tolerance towards the Jewish community. That said, the results of various surveys show that Jews are the least desired and most disliked community in Turkey. When searching for an effective way to start a discussion around these issues, the focus should be on ignorance about Others, rather than on intolerance. Turkish society is simply ignoring the existence of the Others—the non-Muslims and the Jews. Interaction between different groups engenders tolerance, as people are more likely to tolerate each other if they interact socially. In the final analysis, if they are simply ignorant or unaware of each other, they lack the immediate framework necessary for their behaviour to be defined as intolerance. On the other hand, it is not impossible for perceptions of the Others to lead to a level of intolerance that limits or even prevents interaction. This ignorance and intolerance may well represent the impact of populist media and politics.

As well as ignorance, we need to consider the issue of “distrust.” Turkish society is marked by a low level of trust.³⁸ A citizen of the Turkish Republic who is not an ethnic Turk is simply not considered a Turk, which undercuts a sense of national belonging. Because of these attacks, the hate speech, and the language of discrimination, Jews feel increasingly isolated from the Turkish community, which in turn is heightening the level of distrust between the social groups.³⁹

³⁸ Max Roser, “Trust,” *Our World in Data*, 2015, available online at

<http://ourworldindata.org/data/culture-values-and-society/trust/> (accessed 20 April 2016).

³⁹ Bali, “The Slow Disappearance of Turkey’s Jewish Community”; Şule Toktaş, “Turkey’s Jews and Their Immigration to Israel,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 505–19.

There are several popular themes related to Israel, Zionism, and Jewish conspiracies in Turkish media that call to mind traditional antisemitic stereotypes—among them: “Israel is not a legitimate State” and/or “Israel’s legitimacy as a nation-state is disputable”; “Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people is no different than Nazi Germany’s treatment of the Jewish people” and/or “Israel is comparable to Hitler and the Nazis”; “The Jews control the American media and Hollywood and constantly feature the Holocaust to stir up sympathy for Israel” and/or “The American Jewish lobby controls Hollywood and the media”; “Israel uses the accusation of antisemitism as a shield against its critics.”⁴⁰ Although in Turkey, we do not see antisemitic cartoons like those in the Arab media, the same themes can be detected in columns and books and on social media.⁴¹ The book *Türkiye’de kim kimdir* (Who’s Who in Turkey), which actually started as an anonymous Twitter account, is an example. It was subsequently published as a book under the alias Oğuz Hakan Göktürk (this name has nationalist implications). In the book, many public figures, including Erdoğan, are presented as crypto-Jews, crypto-Armenians, etc. Many news websites, leftist, and Islamist opposition groups make identical claims.⁴² Posts on social media from members of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; Justice and Development Party) during Israel’s war in Gaza are also of interest. When Turkish singer Yıldız Tilbe said, “May God bless Hitler,” Ankara mayor and AKP member Melih Gökçek, who has millions of Twitter

⁴⁰ See Bali, “Present-Day Anti-Semitism in Turkey”; “Antisemitism in the Turkish Media: Part 1,” *MEMRI—The Middle East Media Research Institute*, 28 April 2005, available online at www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/1365.htm (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁴¹ “Antisemitism in the Turkish Media.”

⁴² Kaya Ataberk, “Tayyip, Pakraduni mi?” *Türk Solu Gazetesi*, 22 November 2015, available online at www.turksolu.com.tr/tayyip-pakraduni-mi/ (accessed 20 April 2016).

followers, responded, “I applaud you!”⁴³ The pro-government newspaper *Yeni Akit* printed a much-debated crossword puzzle in Hitler’s image, with the slogan: “We long for you.” The pro-government newspaper *Yeni Şafak* shared a tweet quoting the director of IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, Bülent Yıldırım, who declared: “If anyone can stop the Israeli operation, it is the Jewish community in Turkey; otherwise very bad things will happen.” AKP MP, Şamil Tayyar, tweeted, “Let your race be finished off, and may Hitler never be too far away.”⁴⁴

In Turkey, direct antisemitic actions are prosecuted by the government; for example, in 2009, a storeowner who hung a banner reading “Jews and Armenians are not admitted!” was sentenced to five months in prison. However, a recent media-monitoring report published by the Hrant Dink Foundation shows the continuing rise of hate speech, with Turkey’s non-Muslim communities—Armenians, Jews, and Christians—being at the receiving end of more hate speech than other groups. Pro-government newspapers and Islamist columnists often use the words

⁴³ “Gökçek’ten Yıldız Tilbe’nin ırkçı Tweetlerine Destek,” *t24.com.tr*, available online at

<http://t24.com.tr/haber/gokcekten-yildiz-tilbenin-irkci-tweetlerine-destek,264024>

(accessed 20 April 2016).

⁴⁴ Louis Fishman, “When the State Sanctions Turkey’s Ugly Anti-Semitism,” *Istanbul-New*

York-Tel Aviv, 23 July 2014, available online at

<http://louisfishman.blogspot.com.tr/2014/08/when-state-sanctions-turkeys-ugly-anti.html>

(accessed 20 April 2016).

“Jews” or “Israelis,” instead of “State of Israel” or “Israel Defence Forces.”⁴⁵ In 2008 during Israel’s Gaza operations, there was a wave of emotional response, in Izmir, nationalists smashed Jewish shops, after which the city closed the synagogue. In Istanbul, there were posters with appeals not to shop in Jewish stores and not to “serve Jews.” In Istanbul, some billboards displayed children’s bloodied shoes, accompanied by the words “You cannot be the children of Moses,” to protest the deaths in Gaza. In Izmir and Istanbul, insulting and threatening graffiti was daubed on some synagogues. A list of local and international Jewish companies was created as part of a boycott.⁴⁶ On 6 January 2009, a basketball match between Bnei Hasharon and Türk Telekom was interrupted by audience jeering and objects thrown at the Israeli players. The Turkish police had to protect the Israeli team from direct physical attack. In Istanbul, some shops put up a banner in June 2010 that read, “Dogs are allowed, Israelis aren’t,” and the door of another shop was covered with a poster saying, “Do not buy from here, this shop is owned by a Jew.” The ADL’s Global 100 Report 2015 opinion poll found that 71% of Turks believe that “Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Turkey.” Naturally, the Jewish community in Turkey feels

⁴⁵ Hrant Dink Vakfı, İdil Engindeniz Şahan, Rita Ender, “Hate Speech and Discriminatory

Discourse in the Media: May–August 2014,” available online at

<http://hrantdink.org/attachments/article/416/Media-Watch-On-Hate-Speech-May-August-2014.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁴⁶ Harut Sassounian, “Major American-Jewish Organizations May No Longer Back Turkey in

Congress,” *The Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, available online at

www.huffingtonpost.com/harut-sassounian/major-american-jewish-org_b_161346.html (accessed 11 April 2017).

increasingly threatened. The obvious relationship between the AKP's antisemitic statements and provocative condemnation of Israel and the rise of antisemitism should not be overlooked.⁴⁷

Although it may appear that Turkish society has been Islamicised under the AKP's rule, it has been a long and complex process related to an overall transformation in the Middle East and to the rising Islamist tendencies throughout the region. Furthermore, the conflict between the AKP and the Hizmet movement, both Islamic groups, reveals a structural and organisational transition that is more complex than a simple ideological secular v. Islamic polarisation.⁴⁸ Some intellectuals see this situation as the mobilisation of the "periphery" into the "centre."⁴⁹ From that point of view, the Gezi movements and related conflicts symbolise the victory of the "Islamic-conservative" periphery over the "secular-Kemalist" centre, something that also indicates the victory of the "local, the national, and the Muslim" over the "non-Turkish and non-Muslim enemies at home and abroad" (effectively linking ideas about global Jewish hegemony with the concept of crypto-Jews inside the country). During the Gezi protests, Erdoğan himself blamed the "interest-rate lobby," a concept generally associated with Jewish

⁴⁷ Simone Wilson, "At a Breaking Point in Turkey: Should Jews Stay or Should We Go?" *Jewish*

Journal, 18 March 2015, available online at

www.jewishjournal.com/cover_story/article/at_a_breaking_point_in_turkey_should_jews_stay_or_should_we_go (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁴⁸ Jenny B. White, "The Turkish Complex," *American Interest* 10, no. 4 (2015): 14–23.

⁴⁹ Ali Murat Yel and Alparslan Nas, "After Gezi: Moving Towards Post-Hegemonic Imagination in Turkey," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 4 (2013): 177–90.

financiers. According to Erdoğan, the lobby was trying to undermine the government and the Turkish economy.⁵⁰

The AKP is the successor to the “Welfare Party,” established by Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), a religious Islamist leader of the *Milli Görüş* (National View) movement who held strong antisemitic views, and who was Prime Minister of Turkey in 1996–97. The AKP inherited their ideological predecessors’ antisemitic discourse. On 15 April 2015, *A Haber* (a pro-AKP, pro-government television channel) showed the documentary *Üst Akıl* (The Mastermind). The film starts with the story of Moses and his people, and then it quotes Erdoğan, who says that “all of the conflicts are not with him or his government, but target the country and the unity of the nation, and are planned by the Mastermind.” Journalist Burak Bekdil argues that an antisemitic stance wins votes among Turkey’s conservative, nationalist and Muslim population.⁵¹ TV series like *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves) that include antisemitic scenes are breaking audience

⁵⁰ Can Erimtan, “Who Was Behind the Gezi Protests and the Dec. 17 Graft Probe?” *RT*

International, 28 March 2014, available online at

www.rt.com/op-edge/gezi-protests-media-attention-897/ (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁵¹ Burak Bekdil, “Turkey’s Supposed Nemesis: ‘The Mastermind,’” *Gatestone Institute*, 27 April

2015, available online at

www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5608/turkey-antisemitism-mastermind (accessed 20 April 2016).

records.⁵² The many fans of the series also have access to forums where people discuss which character represents whom in real life.⁵³

However, as was noted above, the “Islamic v. secular” approach is reductionist; it neglects the broader structural sources of these phenomena and the discrimination against non-Muslims that existed under the secular Kemalist regime. It would be more appropriate to read the current situation in Turkey as an outcome of shifts in social organisation: not the merely

⁵² Cem Özdemir, “Controversy over Turkish Movie: Beyond the Valley of the Wolves,” *Spiegel online*, 22 February 2006, available online at www.spiegel.de/international/controversy-over-turkish-movie-beyond-the-valley-of-the-wolves-a-401565.html (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁵³ Faruk Arslan, “İşte Toplatılan Olay Kitap. Vadi’nin Şifresi Çözülüyor Veya Kurtlar Vadisi Fenomeni. Tıkla Hemen Bedava İndi,” *Faruk Arslan*, 6 March 2016, available online at <http://farukarslan.com/ornek-sayfa/iste-toplatilan-olay-kitap-vadi’nin-sifresi-cozuluyor-veya-kurtlar-vadisi-fenomeni-tikla-hemen-bedava-indir/> (accessed 20 April 2016); “Kurtlar Vadisi Karakterlerinin Gerçek Hayatta Temsil Ettiği İddia Edilen Kişiler,” *Onedio*, 20 September 2014, available online at <http://onedio.com/haber/kurtlar-vadisi-karakterlerinin-gercek-hayatta-canlandirdigi-kisiler-371488> (accessed 20 April 2016).

Islamisation of public and political life, but rather the politicisation of Islam.⁵⁴ Islamic groups, Sufi orders (*tarikatlara*), and social movements adapted to the State's bureaucratic administrative structures as part of adjusting to modern public life, a process that started long before the establishment of the AKP. Islamist intellectuals and activists, such as Necip Fazıl (1904–83), Nurettin Topçu (1909–75), and Erol G ng r (1938–83), have played an important role in this transformation and the emergence of political Islam in Turkey. This trend has also been influenced by the Egyptians Hassan al-Banna (1906–49) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) and by the Pakistani Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79); we should take note of the antisemitism embedded in their discourses. Secularism, the State, society, and Islam are all undergoing a transformation in Turkey. In the case of antisemitism and hatred towards Others, the authoritarian culture and patrimonial political structures are important factors that adhere to specific forms of religious interpretation. Today, the AKP makes expert use of the established political nationalist-Islamist discourse to win votes. An analysis of current political discourse uncovers a recurrent terminology. The “hero” and “traitor” concepts have a long historical place in Turkish memory. In the AKP government's usage of these concepts Erdoĝan becomes the “hero” and the Hizmet movement represents the “traitor.” In the past, this framework was used against the *D nmeh*, “crypto-Jews” and “crypto-Armenians.”⁵⁵ Both pro-AKP intellectuals and many leftist thinkers present the Hizmet movement as a “traitor” attempting to build “a State within a State” (the “parallel State”) and cooperating with the enemies of the State (namely the US, Israel, and a global Jewish conspiracy). This notion of the “parallel State” is subsequently extended to include all forms of social chaos, any instability, bombings and the PKK conflict, as well as any

⁵⁴ White, “The Turkish Complex,” 14–23; Yel and Nas, “After Gezi,” 177–90.

⁵⁵ White, “The Turkish Complex.”

economic difficulties. All of these phenomena are associated with a “Jewish conspiracy”—planned by the Jewish lobby, by Israel, or by the Mossad.⁵⁶

Concluding Remarks

The Jewish population dropped from more than 100,000 in 1927 to just 23,000 in 2010, and Jewish emigration has increased again in recent years. The Mavi Marmara incident, a conflict between the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and activists from the *Free Gaza Movement*, also known as the “Freedom Flotilla,” which took place off the coast of the Gaza on the night of 30 May 2010, was another turning point for Jews in Turkey. Six ships from the convoy approached the coast of Gaza, trying to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, and were detained by Israeli border commandos. Nine Turkish activists were killed. It was the first time in Turkish history that Turkish citizens were killed by forces outside of Turkish territories. When people started to ask whose side they were on, Jews in Turkey grew concerned about the increasing antisemitism and began to fear for their safety. By 2011, only 17,300 Jews remained in Turkey.⁵⁷

The Jews have never been as few in number in Turkey as they are today. They do not play much of a role in political and economic life either. Why, then, are there so many conspiracy theories about this small community? Turkish society emerged from a long historical tradition of

⁵⁶ “Turkish PM: Ruling Party Will Not Give in to ‘Jewish Lobby,’ ” *The Jerusalem Post*, 9

February 2015, available online at

www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Turkish-PM-Ruling-party-will-not-give-in-to-Jewish-lobby-390459 (accessed 20 April 2016).

⁵⁷ Bali, “The Slow Disappearance of Turkey’s Jewish Community.”

tolerance, but since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, it has been unable to build a truly cosmopolitan society. It has failed to overcome ethnic and religious discrimination against “non-Turks” in political and social life, and authoritarian state repression has created ongoing divisions between Turkish social groups. There has been very little study of antisemitism in Turkey, and the resultant lack of knowledge increases anxiety and fuels controversy by creating a vacuum that is filled by media debates that lack both a scientific methodology and a theoretical base. It results in discussions that merely reproduce the prevailing conspiracy theories about Jews in Turkey, reflecting the need for a deeper appreciation of the issues at hand. Much more needs to be done in Turkey to return to a much fairer time in history, politics, and society. Otherwise, Turkey risks drifting towards forms of authoritarian antisemitism which already exist in the complex and much-troubled surrounding region.