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# New Antisemitism – Criticism of Israel or Antisemitism: Turkey

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Dilek Gueven

Until the new millennium, Turkey, being the successor to the Ottoman Empire, was often mentioned as a relatively safe place for Jews to live. Although the status of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire may often have been exaggerated, it is undeniable that tolerance was enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> Under the Millet system they were organized as a community on the basis of religion alongside the other Millets (Armenian, Greeks) In the framework of the Millet they had a considerable amount of administrative autonomy and were represented by the Rabbi. There were no restrictions in the professions Jews could practice analogous to those common in Western Christian countries. Like all non-Muslims, Jews had to pay a "head tax" and faced other restrictions in clothing, horse riding and army service.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Turkey is frequently depicted as a place where antisemitism is seeming to grow. Antisemitism in Turkey is not a recent phenomenon. The roots stretch back to the founding years of the republic.

When the Turkish Republic was founded, nationalism and secularism were two of the founding principles. The leader of the early years of the Republic aimed to create a nation state (Turkish: *Ulus*) from the Turkish remnants of the Ottoman Empire. The Kemalist ideology defines the "Turkish People" as "those who protect and promote the moral, spiritual, cultural and humanistic values of the Turkish Nation". One of the goals of the establishment of the new Turkish state was to ensure "the domination of Turkish ethnic identity in every aspect of social life from the language that people speak in the streets to the language to be taught at schools, from the education to the industrial life, from the trade to the cadres of state officials, from the civil law to the settlement of citizens to particular regions".<sup>3</sup>

The process of forced Turkification continued in Turkish Republic under different policies.

The principal reason for antisemitism in this period was the economic disparity between Jews and Muslim Turks.

One goal of the Kemalist elites and intelligentsia was to nationalise the country's economy. Within this process the country's Jews, along with the rest of the non-Muslim population (Armenians and Greeks), faced discrimination and deportation.<sup>4</sup>

The pogrom in Thrace 1934, the 1942 Capital Tax Law and the Istanbul pogroms of 1955 were all products of this mindset.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*, CUP, 2005, p.127.

2 Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600*, Phoenix Press (2001), p. 140.

3 Findley, Carter Vaughn (2010). *Turkey, Islam, nationalism, and modernity: A history, 1789-2007*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 56.

4 Ayhan Aktar, *Cumhuriyet'in ilk Yıllarında Uygulanan "Türkleştirme" Politikaları*, in *Varlık Vergisi ve "Türkleştirme" Politikaları*, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: İletişim, 2000), p. 101.

5 Dilek Güven, *Nationalismus und Minderheiten. Die Ausschreitungen gegen die Christen und Juden der Türkei vom September 1955*, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012.

A tax was levied on the wealthy citizens of Turkey in 1942, the stated aim being to raise funds for the country's defense in case of an eventual entry into World War II. Those who suffered most severely were non-Muslims like the Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Levantines, who controlled a large portion of the economy. It is argued that one main reason for the tax was to nationalize the Turkish economy by reducing the influence and control of minority populations over the country's trade, finance and industries. Many people who were unable to pay this capital tax of 1942 were sent to labor camps.

Today we can speak about a new and rising antisemitism.

This change in the last years was caused by various internal and external factors.

One is related to the victory of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in the 2002 national elections.

This was the beginning of a still on-going social engineering project, in which Islamic and conservative values have started to gradually replace other ones. We can see that also in the Islamic press and in the behaviour of the NGOs.

AKP's victory gave the Islamic press, known for its antisemitic rhetoric, a huge boost of self-confidence and aggressiveness.<sup>6</sup>

The newspaper Anadolu Vakit, for example, has been instrumental in propagating antisemitism in Turkey, including Holocaust Denial. The reporters of this newspaper are regularly part to the press corps who accompany Erdogan during his travels. The government legitimizes and honours in that way the newspapers and journalists.<sup>7</sup>

The same change is visible also in Islamic NGOs. After the Mavi Marmara incident the NGOs rallied their grassroots and organized a protest in front of Israeli Embassy and the private house of the Ambassador, pressure them day and night for a number of days, which is a rather unusual event in Turkey for protests against Israel.<sup>8</sup>

The external factor mentioned above was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. With this war an endless number of conspiracy theories started circulating within the Turkish media and among intellectuals. The main actors were Mossad and the Zionist state of Israel, both terms having an extremely negative connotation in the Turkish context.

Among the most popular theories were those that claimed that the new government of the Kurdish region was receiving the support of Israel, and that Barzani was a Jew.

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6 Rıfat N. Bali, *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*, Istanbul 2013, p. 356.

7 <http://www.bianet.org/biamag/diger/119223-buyuklere-masallar-1-turkiye-de-antisemitizm-yoktur>

8 <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/israil-buyukelcisi-levi-nin-rezidansi-onundeki-eylem-durdu/siyaset/sondakika/05.06.2010/1246681/default.htm>

## Prime Minister Erdogan and his Rhetoric

One should not underestimate also the role of Prime Minister Erdogan's inflammatory speeches at times of crisis in the region, which indirectly incite and encourage antisemitism in Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Erdogan has repeatedly warned the Islamist activists and protesters, when demonstrating against Israel, to make distinctions between the people of Israel and the government of Israel, saying that he is only critical of the Israeli government and not of the Israeli people.

He also insisted on making a difference between the state of Israel and the Turkish Jews. In that way he affirmed that Turkish Jews are Turkish citizens under the protection of the Turkish state.

However, while appealing to the public to make these distinctions, he continued to frequently incite anti-Jewish activists by simply repeating antisemitic stereotypes.

Before his Davos outburst in January 2009 there were advance signals of the forthcoming crisis. Twelve days before Davos he made this following statements :

"There is a world media under the control of Israel. This has to be especially pointed out. As a matter of fact, if the media were objective, then the conflict would be seen in a very different light, but nobody raises their voice. Nobody says stop to this inhumanity."<sup>10</sup>

In another of his statements Erdogan again referred to the Jews. He intended to make a compliment, but in fact repeated another antisemitic stereotype. In his opening speech in October 2009 at the Yıldız Technical University he said the following:

"I believe that there are three important aspects of success:

- Managing people
- Managing knowledge
- Managing money

If we are successful in all these we will obtain well-being, we will create good scientists, we will manage our money well. The Jews for example have very serious inventions. They print money from wherever they are. You can see it in the history of the telephone and the light bulb. They are still deriving the benefits of them. When I was the mayor of Istanbul I studied the Jewish citizens of Istanbul. Most of them do not own buildings but are tenants in the best places, because owning a building locks the money into one place, but if you are tenant you can earn money from your cash."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/turkish-mp-erdogans-anti-semitism-difficult-to-reverse/>

<sup>10</sup> Bali, p. 354.

<sup>11</sup> Bali, p. 354.

## AKP and Erdogan's Ideological Roots

In order to understand why Erdogan's statements concerning Israel and Jews are repetitions of antisemitic stereotypes, we only need remember that Erdogan's and his party's ideological roots lie in the National Viewpoint movement. The movement's rhetoric is full of antisemitic themes and theories. According to this movement even the Ottoman Empire collapsed due to a Zionist Dönme conspiracy.

This theory claims that Dönmes or Crypto Jews were the real ruling elite in the beginning years of the Turkish republic and also those dominating the Republic currently.

They are seen as the most fervent advocates and guardians of militant secularism, and for that reason they represent the major obstacle to the rule of Islam in the Turkish Republic.<sup>12</sup>

### Other popular and oft repeated topics are:

- Zionism is a racist and imperialist ideology targeting even the lands of Anatolia.
- the state of Israel is an illegitimate state.
- the Jews are dominant in the media and in Hollywood.

Other sources are the left-wing anti-Zionism (Israel as an instrument of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East) and nationalist right-wing section with a lot of sympathy toward the Nazis.

In summary, the reasons for the growth of antisemitism in Turkey are as follows:

- Antisemitic publications and conspiracy theories that have been circulating widely in the Turkish society for decades and that gained strength within the government of AKP and after the invasion of Iraq.
- The journalists and authors who propagate these conspiracy theories and antisemitic rhetoric, and who have been respected as researchers and intellectuals in Turkish society.
- The tolerant and forgiving attitude of the government towards the antisemitic manifestations.
- To a lesser measure and perhaps more excusable, the denial of antisemitism by the Turkish Jewish community itself. The formal and informal leadership of the Jewish community long maintained a policy of publicly denying the existence of antisemitism, while in private complaining about it and asking for intervention at the highest government levels in

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<sup>12</sup> Jacob M Landau, *Politics and Islam. The National Salvation Party in Turkey*, Middle East Center University of Utah 1976., p. 76.

Ankara. The logic behind this strategy was the following: The Turkish Jewish community should adopt a policy of supporting the lobbying activities of the Turkish republics, presenting and promoting of a positive Image of Turkey, especially in the USA.<sup>13</sup>

For example, the leaders of the Turkish Jews were and are engaged in persuading the US congress not to pass the annual Armenian genocide resolutions. They are continuously propagating the message that first the Ottoman Empire and then the Turkish republic was and has always been a haven of tolerance for its minorities. Because of this policy of publicly denying the existence of antisemitism, the Jewish community distanced and isolated itself from the very few human rights activist who are sensitive to antisemitism. They also isolated themselves from other minority groups like the Greek, Armenian and Kurdish communities, who are fighting for minority rights and criticizing the past and current Turkish governments publicly.<sup>14</sup>

Since 2009, a fall in the Jewish population has been registered. By September 2010 the Jewish population had dropped to 17,000 people, due mostly to emigration to Israel, which has been explained by security concerns stemming from rising antisemitic sentiments following incidents such as the 2006 Lebanon war, the 2008-2009 Gaza War and the Mavi Maramare incident in May 2010.<sup>15</sup> Antisemitism is a worldwide phenomenon. The fundamental difference between the situation in other countries and that in Turkey is that in Europe and the United States, the nation's opinion makers and governmental officials are actively fighting against antisemitism and are not passive like those in Turkey.

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[www.jmberlin.de/antisemitism-today/Gueven.pdf](http://www.jmberlin.de/antisemitism-today/Gueven.pdf)



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<sup>13</sup> Bali, p. 96.

<sup>14</sup> Bali, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.hasturktv.com/israilde\\_gundem/6427.htm](http://www.hasturktv.com/israilde_gundem/6427.htm)