

Turkish “Tolerance” of Jews

A Sobering Historical Assessment

By Andrew G. Bostom

The recent tragic synagogue bombings in Istanbul, targeting the small remnant Jewish community there, have been accompanied, somewhat understandably, by hagiographic assessments of Jewish existence under Turkish suzerainty, dating back for over half a millennium¹⁻⁴. Modern strategic alliances between a forcibly secularized, post-Kemalist Turkey, and the state of Israel, however, should not obfuscate a sober analysis of the prevailing conditions for Jews in the Turkish Ottoman Empire during more than five centuries of Muslim theocratic governance under *Shari'a* law. This critical appraisal may be particularly important in light of the burgeoning Islamist movement within present day Turkish society⁵⁻⁷.

Professor Joseph Hacker’s seminal scholarship has focused on the fate of Jews during their initial absorption into the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries. His meticulous research debunks the uncritical view that from its outset the, “..Jewish experience” in the Ottoman Empire “..was a calm, peaceful, and fruitful one..”. With characteristic understatement, Hacker notes:

“...It would seem to me that this accepted view of consistently good relations between the Ottomans and the Jews during the 15th century should be modified in light of new research and manuscript resources.”⁸

Hacker's balanced, objective conclusions are summarized below:

- The Jews, like other inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire, suffered heavily from the Ottoman conquests and policy of colonization and population transfer (i.e., the *surgun* system). This explains the disappearance of several Jewish communities, including Salonica, and their founding anew by Spanish Jewish immigrants. Hacker notes, specifically:

"...We possess letters written about the fate of Jews who underwent one or another of the Ottoman conquests. In one of the letters which was written before 1470, there is a description of the fate of such a Jew and his community, according to which description, written in Rhodes and sent to Crete, the fate of the Jews was not different from that of Christians. Many were killed; others were taken captive, and children were brought to *devshirme* (i.e., the Ottoman system of expropriating, and forcibly Islamizing *dhimmi* male children for service to the Empire, primarily as slave soldiers)...Some letters describe the carrying of the captive Jews to Istanbul and are filled with anti-Ottoman sentiments. Moreover, we have a description of the fate of a Jewish doctor and homilist from Veroia (Kara-Ferya) who fled to Negroponte when his community was driven into exile in 1455. He furnished us with a description of the exiles and their forced passage to Istanbul. Later on we find him at Istanbul itself, and in a homily delivered there in 1468 he expressed his anti-Ottoman feelings openly. We also have some evidence that the Jews of Constantinople suffered from the conquest of the city and that several were sold into slavery."⁹

- Strong anti-Ottoman feelings prevailed in some Byzantine Jewish circles in the first decades after the fall of Constantinople. These feelings were openly expressed by people living under Latin rule and to some extent even in Istanbul.
- Mehmed II's policies toward non-Muslims made possible the substantial economic and social development of the Jewish communities in the empire, and especially in the capital -

Istanbul. These communities were protected by him against popular hatred, and especially from blood libels. However, this policy was not continued by Bayezid II and there is evidence that under his rule the Jews suffered severe restrictions in their religious life.

- The friendly policies of Mehmed on the one hand, and the good reception by Bayezid of Spanish Jewry on the other, cause the Jewish writers of the sixteenth century to overlook both the destruction which Byzantine Jewry suffered during the Ottoman conquests and the later outbursts of oppression in the days of Bayezid II and Selim.

Formally trained as an historian (receiving his Ph.D. in 1924), Serb writer Ivo Andric was awarded the 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature for historical novels (including “The Bridge on the Drina”), short stories, and essays. Andric’s scholarly analysis (i.e., his Ph.D. thesis) “The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia under the Influence of Turkish Rule”, was a detailed examination of dhimmitude during five centuries of Ottoman rule. His assessment of the plight of the Jews in Ottoman Bosnia, governed essentially under the ancient, discriminatory “Pact of Umar”, which was valid for the entire Ottoman Empire, included these specific observations:

“..The Jews, though fewer in number [i.e. than the Christian communities], were well-to-do businessmen and profitable targets for extortion. {Andric includes this footnote from, Levy, Moritz, *Die Sephardim in Bosnien*, 1911, pp. 28,35: ‘..Acts of violence and extortion by the Pashas against the Jews plunged them into the depths of darkest night...There were many unpleasant run-ins with the authorities from time to time, which however were susceptible to settlement by means of money’.}... The *Pinakes*, mentioned above as the account books of the Sarajevo Jews, offer a true picture in many ways of conditions as they were then. The year 1730 saw a disbursement of ‘720 puli for the mutesilim, so as to be spared working Saturdays on the fortification [note: i.e., in unpaid, forced labor ‘corvees’. Andric further indicates that Christians were deployed in such corvees on Sundays]. It was an outlay repeated in the years to come.”¹⁰

“...In the year 1794 the Jews of Sarajevo won permission through an imperial firman to rebuild their synagogue, which had recently burned down. It hardly need be said that the usual stipulations applied. ‘No more than any of the confessions are they allowed to enlarge such a structure by so much as a jot or a tittle in the process of reerecting it’. And to the imperial firman were attached the usual formalities- permission of the vizier, permission of the kadi, two separate commissions, and so on. All this took more than two years and cost a tidy sum.”¹¹

Professor Moshe Maoz has summarized the conditions of those Jews (and Christians) living under Ottoman rule for centuries within their indigenous homeland of (Syro-) Palestine, as follows:

“...the position of the Jews was in many ways precarious. Like their Christian fellow subjects, the Jews were inferior citizens in the Muslim-Ottoman state which was based on the principle of Muslim superiority. They were regarded as state protégés (*dhimmis*) and had to pay a special poll tax (*jizya*) for that protection and as a sign of their inferior status. Their testimony was not accepted in the courts of justice, and in cases of the murder of a Jew or Christian by a Muslim, the latter was usually not condemned to death. In addition, Jews as well as Christians were normally not acceptable for appointments to the highest administrative posts; they were forbidden to carry arms (thus, to serve in the army), to ride horses in towns or to wear Muslim dress. They were also not usually allowed to build or repair places of worship and were often subjected to oppression, extortion and violence by both the local authorities and the Muslim population. The Jews in Ottoman Palestine and Syria lived under such ambivalent and precarious conditions for a number of centuries...”¹²

And these prevailing conditions for Jews did not improve in a consistent or substantive manner even after the mid 19th century treaties imposed by the European powers on the weakened Ottoman Empire included provisions for the Tanzimat reforms. These reforms were designed to end the discriminatory laws of dhimmitude for both Jews and Christians, living under the Ottoman *Shari'a*. European consuls endeavored to maintain compliance with at least two cardinal principles central to any meaningful implementation of these reforms: respect for the life and property of non-Muslims; and the right for Christians and Jews to provide evidence in Islamic courts when a Muslim was a party. Unfortunately, these efforts to replace the concept of Muslim superiority over "infidels", with the principle of equal rights, failed. For example, in his comprehensive study of the Jews of Palestine during the 19th century, Professor Tudor Parfitt observed:

"...Inside the towns, Jews and other *dhimmis* were frequently attacked, wounded, and even killed by local Muslims and Turkish soldiers. Such attacks were frequently for trivial reasons: Wilson [in British Foreign Office correspondence] recalled having met a Jew who had been badly wounded by a Turkish soldier for not having instantly dismounted when ordered to give up his donkey to a soldier of the Sultan. Many Jews were killed for less. On occasion the authorities attempted to get some form of redress but this was by no means always the case: the Turkish authorities themselves were sometimes responsible for beating Jews to death for some unproven charge. After one such occasion [British Consul] Young remarked: 'I must say I am sorry and surprised that the Governor could have acted so savage a part- for certainly what I have seen of him I should have thought him superior to such wanton inhumanity- but it was a Jew- without friends or protection- it serves to show well that it is not without reason that the poor Jew, even in the nineteenth century, lives from day to day in terror of his life'." ¹³

"...In fact, it took some time [i.e., at least a decade after the 1839 reforms] before these courts did accept *dhimmi* testimony in Palestine. The fact that Jews were represented on the meclis [provincial legal council] did not contribute a great deal to the amelioration of the legal position of the Jews: the Jewish representatives were tolerated grudgingly and were humiliated and intimidated to the point that they were afraid to offer any opposition to the Muslim representatives. In addition the constitution of the meclis was in no sense fairly representative of the population. In Jerusalem in the 1870s the meclis consisted of four Muslims, three Christians and only one Jew- at a time when Jews constituted over half the population of the city...Some years after the promulgation of the hatt-i-serif [Tanzimat reform edicts] Binyamin [note: from "*Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1846 to 1855*", p.44] was still able to write of the Jews- 'they are entirely destitute of every legal protection'...Perhaps even more to the point, the courts were biased against the Jews and even when a case was heard in a properly assembled court where *dhimmi* testimony was admissible the court would still almost invariably rule against the Jews. It should be noted that a non-*dhimmi* [eg., foreign] Jew was still not permitted to appear and witness in either the mahkama [specific Muslim council] or the meclis." ¹⁴

During World War I in Palestine, the embattled Young Turk government actually began deporting the Jews of Tel Aviv in the spring of 1917 - an ominous parallel to the genocidal deportations of the Armenian *dhimmi* communities throughout Anatolia. Indeed, as related by Professor Yair Auron,

"...Fear of the Turkish actions was bound up with alarm that the Turks might do to the Jewish community in Palestine, or at least to the Zionist elements within it, what they had done to the Armenians. This concern was expressed in additional evidence from the early days of the war, from which we can conclude that the Armenian tragedy was known in the Yishuv [Jewish community in Palestine]." ¹⁵

Auron cites a Reuters press release regarding the deportation which states that,

"on April 1 [1917] an order was given to deport all the Jews from Tel Aviv, including citizens of the Central Powers, within forty-eight hours. A week before, three hundred Jews were expelled from Jerusalem: **Jamal Pasha** [one of the triumvirate of Young Turk supreme leaders, Minister of the Navy, and commander of the Fourth Army in the Levant] **declared that their fate would be that of the Armenians**; eight thousand deportees from Tel Aviv

were not allowed to take any provisions with them, and after the expulsion their houses were looted by Bedouin mobs; two Yemenite Jews who tried to oppose the looting were hung at the entrance to Tel Aviv so that all might see, and other Jews were found dead in the Dunes around Tel Aviv.”¹⁶

Although Auron remains neutral as to why the looming slaughter of the Jews of Palestine did not happen, he cites a very tenable hypothesis put forth at that time in a journal of the British Zionist movement suggesting that the advance of the British army (from immediately adjacent Egypt) and its potential willingness “.to hold the military and Turkish authorities directly responsible for a policy of slaughter and destruction of the Jews” may have averted this disaster.¹⁷

Ultimately, enforced abrogation of the laws and social practices of dhimmitude required the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, which only occurred during the European Mandate period following World War I.

Conclusion

By any standard other than the dismal record of the countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, particularly the Arab state members, Turkey’s progress since 1924 toward full implementation of normative human rights standards (such as the US Bill of Rights and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), has been glacial. Yet important, discernible advances have been achieved under the protective umbrella of Kemalism. These hard won gains- critical to the socio-political advancement of post-Kemalist Turkey, its neighbors, and the international community at large- are undermined by ahistorical, hagiographic accounts of the “ecumenism” and “tolerance” of the Ottoman Empire with regard to its subjugated *dhimmi* communities living under the *Shari’a*- both Jews, and the much more numerous Christian populations, in particular. Such distorted narratives, whether they appear in lay or “scholarly” writings, are corrosive, and abet only the irredentist agenda of Turkey’s Islamist movement.

Notes

1. “Istanbul synagogue bombings leave American travelers in disbelief” The Salt Lake Tribune, November 16, 2003. <http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Nov/11162003/utah/111462.asp>
2. Presidential Statement on Istanbul Synagogue Bombings. November 15, 2003 <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2003&m=November&x=20031115154446ebneergb0.9068415&t=usinfo/wf-latest.html>
3. “The attack on Istanbul Jews is an attack on hope itself” The Guardian, November 17, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/turkey/story/0,12700,1086870,00.html>
4. “In Turkey, a History Lesson in Peace”, The New York Times, November 18, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/18/opinion/18BENH.html>
5. “The Old Turkey”, National Review Online, April 14, 2003 <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-eibner041403.asp>

6. "Turkey's Radical Turn" The New York Post, August 5, 2003, <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/1185>
7. "Militant Islamic Groups Active in Turkey", The Guardian, November 18, 2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,1280,-3401826,00.html>
8. From, "Ottoman Policy Toward the Jews and Jewish Attitudes toward the Ottomans during the Fifteenth Century", by Joseph Hacker, pp. 117-126, in, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman empire : the functioning of a plural society* / edited by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York : Holmes & Meier Publishers), 1982, p. 117.
9. Hacker, "Ottoman Policy", p. 120
10. Andric, Ivo "The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia under the Influence of Turkish Rule" 1924, English translation by Zelimir B. Juricic and John F. Loud, Duke University Press, 1990, p. 37
11. Andric, "Spiritual Life in Bosnia", p. 29
12. From, "Changes in the Position of the Jewish Communities of Palestine and Syria in the Mid-Nineteenth Century", pp. 142-163, by Maoz, Moshe, in Moshe Maoz (Editor), "Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period", The Magnes Press, 1975, p. 142.
13. Parfitt, Tudor, "The Jews of Palestine, 1800-1882" The Boydell Press, 1987, p. 168.
14. Parfitt, "The Jews of Palestine", pp. 172-173.
15. Auran, Yair, "The Banality of Indifference", Transaction Publishers, 2000, p. 75
16. Auran, "The Banality of Indifference", p. 77
17. Auran, "The Banality of Indifference", pp. 82-83