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THE SITUATION OF JEWISH STUDIES IN TODAY'S TURKEY

A question which very often I have to answer is "where do you teach?". My answer is always "I don't teach because I have no time". The reason is that, in addition to being an independent scholar and a researcher affiliated with the Alberto Benveniste Center for Sephardic Studies and Culture in Paris, I also run two small but very time-consuming businesses. The first consists of supplying libraries here in the United States (including UC Berkeley) and in Europe with publications from Turkey in the field of social sciences, while the second is a small publishing concern specializing in publishing dissertations in the field of Ottoman and Turkish history, political science and such. However, even if we were to suppose that I was a master of time management and multi-tasking and that, in addition to my present workload, I could also find the time to teach classes in Jewish history in Turkey, no such opportunity would present itself, as there is no curriculum of Jewish studies in the Turkish universities. I have served as a "ghost advisor" to a number of graduate students at Turkish universities who were interested in researching Jewish subjects because their official advisors, having no idea about sources for this or that particular subject, send them to me for advice on sources and questions in Jewish history.

The purpose of my talk today is to give you an overall view of the non-existent field of Jewish studies in Turkey, as well as a view of the present state of Muslim-Jewish relations in the country.

A) General level of interest of the Turkish society about Jews

The overall population of Turkey today is roughly 72 million. The country's unofficial Jewish population count is approximately 18,000, of which 16,000 live in Istanbul and 2,000 in Izmir. The vast majority of Turks living outside Istanbul and Izmir have probably never met a Jew or a non-Muslim in their life. The Jewish communities of inner Anatolia have long since departed to Israel soon after the founding of the state or moved to Istanbul. Those in the Aegean hinterland followed a similar pattern, although often moving to Izmir instead.

In spite of this absence of actual Jews in their lives, people are obsessed with Jews and particularly with the Dönme—the now nearly vanished Sabbatean sect, 'seeing' or suspecting them of occupying practically every key position in the Turkish intellectual, cultural and political arena.¹

¹ Dönme is the term used for the descendants of the followers of 17th century messianic pretender Sabbatai Sevi . After his formal conversion to Islam under pressure, he (and they) secretly maintained their own brand of syncretic heretical Jewish practice and belief. For

In order to substantiate my views I would like to quote from a 2009 study commissioned by the Turkish Jewish community concerning the "perception of different identities and of Jews" in Turkish society.² This will give a much better impression of the aforementioned society's opinion about Jews. Here is a sampling of the questions which were asked in this research and the answers received:

1- Are there any members of the following groups within your close circle of friends or in your work/school district?

Jews - 7%
 Greeks - 18%
 Armenians - 10%
 Atheists - 14%
 Alevis - 53%
 Kurds - 64%

2- How informed do you think you are about the lives and cultures of the following people?

Not informed

Jews - 76%
 Greeks - 74%
 Armenians - 74%
 Atheists - 73%
 Alawites - 40%
 Kurds - 30%

3- which of the families listed below would you not want to have as neighbours?

Atheist	57%
Turkish family of Jewish faith	42%
Turkish family of Christian faith	35%
Family from a foreign country	18%
Muslim family but from a different sect	13%

4- Allegations that Jews have a hidden agenda are seen or heard from time to time in different environments. Did you hear such information about the hidden agenda of Jews among these sources of information listed?

Yes

TV news / programmes	36%
Newspapers	29%
Chat with friends	29%
Books	17%

more on this subject see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*, translated by R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1973. For more about Dönmes in modern Turkey in the first half of the 20th century, see Marc David Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim revolutionaries and secular Turks*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010. For the popular conspiracy theories concerning Dönmes in Turkey, see Rifat N. Bali, *A Scapegoat For All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto - Jews of Turkey*, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2008.

² See: www.turkyahudileri.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/perception for different identities and Jews in Turkey 2009.pdf

Internet		16%
Radio	14%	
Magazines	13%	
Public speech		12%
E-mail	7%	

5- How loyal do you think the following groups are to the Republic of Turkey?

Think that they're loyal

Alawites		54%
Kurds	38%	
Atheists		20%
Greeks		16%
Armenian	15%	
Jews	15%	

6- would you disapprove of feel uncomfortable if non-muslim minorities worked in the following public institutions?

Yes

State Intelligence Agency		57%
Judiciary		55%
Police Corps	55%	
Army	55%	
Senior position political parties		51%
Municipalities		46%
Scientific, research institute		44%
Health services		44%

Despite this depressing picture, Turkish government ministers and high level officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs very often make reference to the Turkish Jews in a positive way, by emphasizing the tolerance shown by the Ottoman Empire to the Jews and the supposedly peaceful coexistence between Turks and Jews for the last 550 years. The reason for this approach is simple: for the past three decades or so Turkey has been undertaking a global public relations campaign to portray the country as a multicultural/multireligious country—two things that demographically it is not. The twin goals of this campaign are:

- a) to support Turkey's candidacy to become a member of EU and to counter criticism that Turkey, as a Muslim country, cannot be part of the organization,
- b) to counter the annual resolutions presented in the U.S. Congress declaring the mass killing of Ottoman Armenians in the 1915 Deportation to constitute a genocide. One of the tactics employed toward this end is to use Turkish Jews as a benchmark to pass on the message that "a country which behaved so tolerantly to the Jews could not commit a crime against humanity to another minority, namely, the Armenians, for which you are accusing us."

B) The Level of Interest in the Turkish Academic Sphere

- a) As of May 2010 the total number of universities in Turkey is 146 (95 state and 51 private)³ and the total number of students is 2,419,214. In 2009 317,000 students started undergraduate studies, of which 9,757 students selected one of the following social sciences fields:⁴

Anthropology:	268
Sociology	2,989
History	6,500

Such numbers would suggest that there are enough students to believe that some might be interested in Jewish or other minority studies, but the reality is that there are not.

- b) Ideological divisions within Turkish academia:

The vast majority of state universities (Bosphorus University, the former Protestant-founded Robert College, being the sole exception⁵) have an extremely conservative approach to the question of Turkish minorities, something that is in conformity with the general opinion prevailing in Turkey (see above). This opinion can be summarized as follows: "Christian minorities collaborated with the Entente Forces during their post-WWI occupation of Istanbul and with the Greek Army during their occupation of Izmir. They betrayed us even while we Turks have always acted benevolently towards them. The Jews were--with a few exceptions--loyal to the Empire and to the Republic and therefore Turks and Jews have always enjoyed peaceful relations."

A class of "new historians" and public intellectuals began to emerge in the 1990s. Most of these scholars did their graduate work in the United States and (to a lesser extent) in Europe, and therefore tend to have a more critical approach to the ongoing historical narrative. These "new historians" and public intellectuals are concentrated in three Istanbul universities, one state, the aforementioned Bosphorus University⁶ and the private Bilgi⁷ and Sabancı⁸ universities. The faculty of these universities are now pushing undergraduate and graduate students to do research without respecting the established norms of the Turkish historiography.

The total number of students of these four universities is a paltry 25.000, however, which represents only about

³ www.yok.gov.tr

⁴ www.osym.gov.tr

⁵ For a history of Robert College see John Freely, *A Bridge of Culture: Robert College-Boğaziçi University and How an American College in İstanbul Became a University*, Boğaziçi University Press, İstanbul, 2010.

⁶ www.boun.edu.tr

⁷ www.bilgi.edu.tr

⁸ www.sabanciuniv.edu

1% of the total number of students in all universities in Turkey. As a result, the chances that the conservative historiography concerning minorities will change in the near future is not that great.

The good news is that there are more and more Turkish graduate students in the United States in the field of Turkish/Ottoman history, but the bad news is that they tend to be far more interested in the Turkish-Armenian relations than in Turkish-Jewish relations

c) What is Turkish academia's interest in minorities, and in Jews in particular?

- Given as a whole, faculty knowledge of minority issues can be stated to be practically nil.
- No Jewish, Armenian or Greek Studies Departments exists in any state or private university.⁹
- The existing sources for such history are found in the Ottoman and Republican archives, The Turkish newspaper archives are clearly insufficient for such study. The Archives of the country's Chief Rabbinate are closed to researchers. The Ladino press of the Ottoman or early Republican years is non-existent in the Turkish libraries.
- The only subject for which faculty encourage graduate students to write dissertations is the situation of the Armenians either with critical approach (and then, only at the three aforementioned universities) or with a conservative narrative in all other universities. As a matter of fact, there is an Institute for Armenian Research, established by private funds, with the main purpose of refuting the "Genocide accusations".¹⁰
- Allow me to quantify this for you with some numbers concerning dissertations prepared in Turkey. There is a data base¹¹ produced by the Turkish Higher Education Council, the umbrella organization covering all state and private universities, where all dissertations are registered. It can be searched by keywords. My investigative search of the last 25 years, 1985-2009 produced the following results:
- Dissertation on Jews (1990-2009) : 108 (of which 90% are on theological subjects)
- On Armenians (1985-2009): 236
- On Assyrians (1990-2003): 22
- On Greeks (1986-2008) : 47

C) Topics of research on Jewish Studies in Turkey by graduate students.

⁹ Ladino is taught at the Instituto Cervantes of İstanbul. Hebrew is taught at the Yeditepe (İstanbul) and Ankara Universities.

¹⁰ www.eraren.org

¹¹ <http://tez2.yok.gov.tr>

As mentioned, 90% of the dissertations done on Jewish themes are on theological subjects and largely prepared by graduate students at various divinity faculties. In addition to these there are a few dissertations on the emigration of Turkish Jewry to Israel and linguistics dissertations on the Ladino language.

D) Understudied topics

Because of this situation the list of understudied topics concerning Turkish Jewry is quite long. Among these:

- a. Inter-marriage,
- b. Conversion,
- c. Economic or commercial history,
- d. Cultural themes (press, theater, art, music, movies, architecture, cultural life)
- e. Educational history,
- f. Histories of various Anatolian Jewish communities (based on Alliance Israélite (Paris) archives),
- g. Biographies,
- h. Cartoons,
- i. Non-Sephardic Jewish communities (Ashkenazis, Karaites, Georgians, Arab- or Kurdish-speaking Jews),
- j. Emigration from Anatolia to Istanbul,
- k. Abandoned estates during the war of Independence (*Emval-i Metruke*),
- l. Gender studies,
- m. Relations between Jews and Christian minorities (Armenians and Greeks),
- n. Turkish Jews abroad,
- o. Antisemitism – conspiracy theories,
- p. Jewish urban quarters (*mahalle*).

While there may not currently be much cause for optimism, the hope is that, over time, more faculty members of Turkish universities will encourage their students to work in these fields.