

# RIFAT BALI: THE MYTH OF TOLERANCE – TURKISH POLICY TOWARD JEWS BEFORE AND DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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A chance conversation led to a stimulating visit by Rifat Bali, an Istanbul-based scholar of Turkish-Jewish history. Following a trip to Istanbul to research refugee Jews, Rose Professor Debórah Dwork questioned Taner Akçam, the Center's Kaloosdian Mugar Professor, about their reception by the Turkish Republic. "My friend Rifat Bali is the expert on that!" Akçam responded. Students, faculty, and distinguished guests gathered for Bali's candid analysis, "The Myth of Tolerance: Turkish Policy toward Jews Before and During the Second World War."

Bali drove straight to the heart of the subject, identifying a long-held myth about the harmonious position of the Jewish minority under Ottoman rule. This narrative of peaceful coexistence, repeated by both Turkish officials and Jewish community leaders, stands in sharp contrast to what we know about the fate of other religious minorities. But it is a narrative born of *realpolitik*, embraced by Ankara, American Jewish leaders, and the State of Israel. According to this rosy point of view, Jews enjoyed protection and religious freedom under Ottoman and then Turkish rule; German Jewish intellectuals were welcomed at Turkish universities in the 1930s; the Turkish Republic allowed safe passage for Jews seeking refuge in Palestine; and Turkish diplomats saved their Jewish countrymen living in Nazi-occupied countries.

Like many myths, this one carries some truth. Turkey welcomed some German-Jewish scientists and intellectuals who would prove useful to the state. But other threatened Jewish scholars and professionals were turned away, even when recommended by someone as eminent as Albert Einstein. And while Turkey allowed Jewish officials in Istanbul to assist European Jews fleeing to Palestine, they only permitted passage through Turkey to those carrying entry visas. The fate of the 760 refugees without visas on the Romanian ship *Struma* is a case in point. After holding the *Struma* for two months in winter 1942, the Turks towed the disabled ship into the Black Sea where it was torpedoed by the Soviets—killing all but one on board. Finally, while the Turkish Consul General on Rhodes protected the Jewish population on the island, many Turkish Jews perished throughout Europe.



Top: Dr. Rifat Bali, front row center  
Bottom: Bali and distinguished visitors

Indifference to the fate of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust begs the question of how Turkey treated its Jewish citizens. In Ottoman times, Jews were not full citizens. Under the Republic, they were granted citizenship but in practice a policy of Turkification threatened their well-being. Public expressions of antipathy toward the Jewish community included questioning Jewish loyalty to the State and targeting accumulation of wealth. These attitudes culminated in the 1940s with a draft of non-Muslim men into labor battalions and the discriminatory use of a wealth tax. This often onerous tax not only targeted Jews but even Muslims whose ancestors had been followers of the 17th century false messiah Sabbatai Zvi and whom the state suspected of being crypto Jews.

Bali showed that by exaggerating its tolerance for Jews, Turkey deflects world attention from the Armenian Genocide. And in return for Jewish and Israeli lobbying against genocide resolutions, Turkey pursues a policy of friendship with Israel. Thus, historical facts are subverted in favor of political interest. —*Mary Jane Rein*