

## Antisemitism in Turkey: From Denial to Acknowledgement, From Acknowledgement to Discussion of its Definition

### **The General Mood until the 1990s**

Until the middle of the 1990s both Turkish and international public opinion tended to buy in to the view that “the Turkish Republic was one of those rare countries in which antisemitism had never taken root”. Irregardless of any connection between this notion and the reality on the ground, it is still largely accepted and repeated widely. There are two main reasons for this. The first is simply the needs of *Realpolitik*, while the second derives from the fact that the leaders of the country’s Jewish community believe that an honest discussion of the question in the public sphere is not likely to produce any solution to the problem—on the contrary: the prevailing opinion is that it will likely end up doing more harm than good.

The *Realpolitik* refers particularly to several events in the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1980s Turkish-Israeli relations had reached their diplomatic nadir, due to the Israeli government’s declaration of Jerusalem as the country’s ‘eternal and indivisible capital’ on July 30, 1980 and Ankara’s reaction, which was to lower its level of diplomatic representation in Israel to advisory status. Then Turkey attempted, in the wake of the 1973 Oil Crisis, to diplomatically distance itself from Israel in the hope of thereby securing a greater share of Gulf petrodollars that would allow it to overcome its chronic shortfall in foreign reserves and general economic difficulties. In the face of these negative developments American Jewish organizations, along with Turkey’s own Jewish community and the State of Israel all began, in the second half of the 1980s, to make a concerted effort to restore relations between the two countries to its former level.

Parallel to this development was the beginning of annual attempts by American Armenian organizations and their allies to lobby the U.S. Congress to pass a resolution recognizing the Ottoman Empire’s 1915 Armenian deportations as a ‘genocide’. In order to counter these efforts successive Turkish governments would increasingly appeal to American Jewish organizations for support, a support that the latter would generally give with the expectation of an eventual improvement in

Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>1</sup> These expectations were partially met in December 1991 when Ankara decided to raise its diplomatic relations to both Israel and the PLO to the level of ambassador.

Against this political backdrop all sides found it advantageous to either deny the existence of any trace of antisemitism in Turkey or to portray it as an at best marginal phenomenon. This idiom was dutifully taken up and reiterated by Jewish communal leaders, both in Turkey and abroad. In addition to the political pressures, Turkey's Jewish leaders understood that any discussion of the problem of antisemitism in the public sphere was liable to damage Turkey's image in the eyes of the world and in any case had little chance of actually bringing about any positive change in the situation. As a result, neither Turkish nor American Jewish leaders were willing to discuss the issue publicly, preferring instead to keep all their discussions on the matter with Turkish officials behind closed doors while publicly portraying Turkey as an historical 'haven for Jews from antisemitism'.

As a result, during these decades the mantra of 'traditional Turkish tolerance' would be consistently used as an effective tool of counter-propaganda against the anti-Turkish campaign of Armenian, Greek and to some extent Kurdish groups accusing Turkey and its Ottoman predecessor of, respectively, genocide, the occupation of northern Cyprus and widespread human rights violations. Against these charges, the claim was made that from the 1492 Expulsion from Spain until the Nazi persecutions in Europe the Turks had consistently opened their arms to Jews fleeing persecution in Christian Europe and provided them with shelter and a tolerant environment in which they could live and prosper.

### **The Social and Political Climate in Turkey from the 1990s until the Present Day**

In line with these efforts much time and money was invested in worldwide recognition and celebration of the quincentennial anniversary of the Spanish Expulsion.<sup>2</sup> These reached their peak in 1992, but in the following years a number of untoward developments would appear. While up until this point antisemitism in Turkey had largely manifested itself in word, not in deed, this would now begin to

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<sup>1</sup> For this please see Yair Auron, *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide*, translated from Hebrew by Maggie Bar-Tura, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J. 2003; Rifat N. Bali, *Devletin Örnek Yurttaşları*, Kitabevi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The celebrations were organised by The Quincentennial Foundation, a foundation established in 1989 by Turkish Jewish leaders and businessmen. The foundation established also The Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews which was opened to the public on November 25, 2001. Source: [www.muze500.com](http://www.muze500.com).

change. In 1993 a number of Islamist terrorists would make an attempt on the life of the Quincentennial Foundation President, the well-known Jewish industrialist Jak Kamhi.<sup>3</sup> Two years later it was the turn of Professor Yuda Yürüm, the head of the Jewish community of Ankara.<sup>4</sup> On August 21, 2003 Yasef Yahya, a Jewish dentist in İstanbul, was assassinated by Islamist militants, simply by virtue of his being Jewish, and several months later this trend peaked when a group of al-Qaida sympathizers carried out suicide bombing attacks against two İstanbul synagogues, killing and injuring dozens.<sup>5</sup> Despite these tragic developments the Justice and Development Party, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and numerous Islamist writers would continue to unambiguously declare that there was no antisemitism in Turkey.

### **The New Millennium Brings a New Climate and Changed Situation**

In comparison with the two previous decades the new millennium was accompanied by a number of changes in this situation, the first of which being the ultimate acknowledgement by the mainstream secular media and a small number of human rights organizations and activists of the existence of antisemitism in Turkish society (for its part the Islamists continued to deny it). The second—and parallel—development was the ‘routinization’ (according to the rules of political correctness) of condemnations of antisemitism by Turkish politicians, scholars and public intellectuals. The most striking example of this was Adnan Oktar. Known to his admirers as ‘Master Adnan’ (Adnan Hoca) as well as by his occasional nom de plume Harun Yahya, a man who in the 1990s authored and funded the publication of some of the most antisemitic books in Turkey, including a work on Holocaust denial.<sup>6</sup> After 9/11 Oktar made a radical public reversal, establishing the website [www.islamdenouncesantisemitism.com](http://www.islamdenouncesantisemitism.com) and making repeated public condemnations of antisemitism.

Yet, despite these last developments there is little reason to hope for improvement in the overall situation, as the whole question of antisemitism in Turkey remains an extraordinarily problematic subject. In order to understand the reasons for

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<sup>3</sup> On January 28, 1993 Jak Kamhi’s car was targeted by Islamist terrorists.

<sup>4</sup> On June 7, 1955 Prof. Yürüm’s car was bombed. For more information on Yuda Yürüm see <http://myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/yyurum>

<sup>5</sup> Yigal Schleifer, “İstanbul synagogue reopens”, *JTA*, July 29, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> For a short biography of Adnan Oktar see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adnan\\_Oktar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adnan_Oktar). For Adnan Oktar’s answer to this article see [www.replytowikipedia.com](http://www.replytowikipedia.com). For an interview with him see “All Terrorists are Darwinists”, 23 September 2008, [www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,580031,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,580031,00.html). For his personal website see [www.harunyahya.com](http://www.harunyahya.com)

this we must first give a brief of the biases and general assumptions that exist in the Turkish press and among the country's intellectuals.

1- A situation has become routine in which the State of Israel is referred to as a "robber", "rogue" or "terrorist" state, or where any and all actions by the IDF are described as "state terror".

2- The term "Zionist" is used almost exclusively as a pejorative.

3- Zionism itself is understood to be a racist ideology. One well-known Islamist writer has described Zionism as an "outpost of fascism".<sup>7</sup>

4- A differentiation is made in the press and among intellectuals between 'good' and 'bad' Jews on the basis of the simple criterion of whether or not they are known as 'Zionist' or 'anti-Zionist'. Those who denounce Israel or argue against the existence of a Jewish state are seen as 'good Jews', whereas those thinking otherwise are placed in the second category. According to this definition, well-known Jewish anti-Zionists such as Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Israel Shahak, the members of the Neturei Karta sect and the late Rachel Corrie are naturally seen as good Jews. As for Turkish Jewry, three members who receive the 'stamp of approval' are business leader İshak Alaton<sup>8</sup>, who vehemently denies the existence of antisemitism in Turkey, Mario Levi,<sup>9</sup> a well known novelist who after the *Mavi Marmara* incident declared to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* that Turkish Jews were feeling in solidarity with the people of Gaza, that there was no antisemitism in Turkey, that Netanyahu was a chovenist, Avigdor Lieberman a fascist and Ehud Barak an idiot,<sup>10</sup> an article which was translated and widely disseminated in the Turkish press<sup>11</sup> and Roni Margulies<sup>12</sup>, the Trotskyist poet, antiglobalization and peace activist and columnist for the leftist liberal *Taraf*<sup>13</sup> daily who frequently denounces Israel as an illegal, racist entity and explains away the frequent antisemitic remarks by the country's Islamist leaders.

5- Turkish writers who in their writings resort to all of the themes found in antisemitic literature will frequently explain that their work is not antisemitic; rather it

<sup>7</sup> Abdurrahman Dilipak, "Faşizm! Yani şu lânet olası ırkçılık!", *Anadolu'da Vakit*, 22 June 2010.

<sup>8</sup> İshak Alaton (1927-) is the president of Alarko Group of companies  
<http://www.alarko.com.tr/indexeng.asp>

<sup>9</sup> Mario Levi (1957-) biography can be accessed at <http://www.mariolevi.com.tr/MLmainpage.htm>

<sup>10</sup> "Noi, ebrei di İstanbul solidali con la gente di Gaza", *La Repubblica*, June 2, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Bulaç, "Antisemitizm ve İslam", *Zaman*, June 9, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> His biography can be accessed at [http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roni\\_Margulies](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roni_Margulies)

<sup>13</sup> For more information on this newspaper see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taraf>

is simply criticism of Zionism and Israel. These same writers will reference the statements of the aforementioned Turkish and foreign Jews in order to shield themselves from charges of antisemitism.

6- Turkish journalists and public intellectuals who claim that statements or writings that meet the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) working definition of antisemitism<sup>14</sup> should be considered as such, are frequently accused of being 'Zionists', 'Mossad agents' or 'the Israelis among us',<sup>15</sup> a term used for defining some sort of foreign body or Israeli 'fifth column' within the Turkish body politic. A great number of journalists have openly admitted to being hesitant if not entirely unwilling to raise their voices in the face of this intense social pressure that permeates Turkish society in this regard.<sup>16</sup>

7- Despite the widespread antisemitism within the Turkish Islamic press, the leading politicians and public intellectuals of this sector continue to argue that, in contrast to Christianity, the religion of Islam does not allow for antisemitism, and therefore it is impossible for Turkey's Muslim society to be antisemitic. The centuries of tolerance and protection afforded to its Jewish population by both the Ottoman Empire and its successor state, The Turkish Republic, are frequently submitted as proof of this claim.

8- Despite their acknowledgement of the indisputably racist character of antisemitism, a very large part of the leftist and Islamist press and intelligentsia tends to hold to the opinion that the State of Israel and its supporters—i.e., 'Zionists'—attempt to counter all lawful and legitimate criticism of the country with charges of antisemitism; in essence, they see the term "antisemitism" as an ideological weapon to shield them from all criticism while they continue to perpetrate their crimes. To get an idea of just how widespread this notion is it will be sufficient to take a look at entries on 'antisemitism' of two on-line dictionaries that are most popular with Turkish university students.

First entry:

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<sup>14</sup> [www.fra.europa.eu](http://www.fra.europa.eu)

<sup>15</sup> <http://icimizdekiisrailliler.blogspot.com> "The Israelis among us" is a relatively new term used in the Turkish political jargon. It has been started to be used after the *Mavi Marmara* incident by the ruling AKP government. It was used against the mainstream secular press and journalists who were critical of AKP's behaviour after the flotilla incident.

<sup>16</sup> Nuray Mert, "Korkuyorum!", *Radikal*, 10 June 2010; Ertuğrul Özkök, "Ben korktum başkası söyledi", *Hürriyet*, 16 June 2010.

The people that Israel loves more than any other are the antisemites. Israel is an artificially contrived state that produces fear and then feeds on it. Antisemitism only benefits Israel. Antisemitism is an ideology that is produced, reinforced, iterated, expressed and nourished by Israel with the intention of legitimizing its actions.<sup>17</sup>

Second entry:

The term [antisemitism] is the Jews' best ally. If someone says that 'Israel has made a mistake' the response is immediate from the country's representatives: "So-and-so is reviving the Nazi period by using antisemitism". For the Jews, there's no difference between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Anyone who opposes Zionism is thought to be an antisemite. In such a situation as this, the logic is that all Jews are Zionists. But that's not the case.<sup>18</sup>

9- Just as the problem of a 'working definition of antisemitism' has never been discussed the term itself is often interpreted by Turkey's intelligentsia as a 'pretext created by the Zionists' to prevent criticism of the State of Israel. The very rare instance where the definition has been discussed was in June 2010 when Yunus Emre Kocabaşođlu, a wine expert living in Holland and who wrote a series of online articles on antisemitism in Turkey,<sup>19</sup> brought to the attention of the Turkish intellectuals the working definition of antisemitism and stated that both Roni Margulies', (one of the "good Jews" mentioned earlier), writings and Prime Minister Erdoğan's statements were antisemitic rhetorics which complied with the working definition of FRA.<sup>20</sup> This op-ed was heavily criticised by Y. Hakan Erdem, a leftist-liberal professor of history of the prestigious Sabancı University, who wrote as follows:

For example, according to the FRA document it is antisemitic "to draw comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis". Please take note! The FRA document does not say "to reach positive [or] negative result" rather, it prevents the use of comparison--a time-honored tool of analysis! In the name of preventing antisemitism it categorically shields [from criticism] any and all of Israel's current and future policies. Do not these mindless definitions equate to telling Israel "You're different; you can carry out ethnic cleansing--even genocide. If anyone

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<sup>17</sup> Entry: "antisemitizm", <http://sozluk.sourtimes.org>.

<sup>18</sup> Entry: "antisemitizm", [www.ihlsozluk.com](http://www.ihlsozluk.com).

<sup>19</sup> Serie of his articles, between 19 December 2009 – 27 February 2010, [www.bianet.org](http://www.bianet.org).

<sup>20</sup> Doç. Dr. Yunus Emre Kocabaşođlu, "Ne antisemitizmdir", *Taraf*, 16 June 2010.

compares your policies to those of the Nazis, I'll call them an antisemite, I'll protect you". Don't they effectively mean giving Israel a license to kill?"<sup>21</sup>

### **The Legal Struggle Against Antisemitism**

A new eruption of antisemitism appeared in the Islamist press in response to Israel's 'Cast Lead' operation against the Hamas regime in Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009. In reaction, Silvyo Ovadya, the President of Turkey's Jewish Community submitted a request to President Gül to add a passage to Turkish Penal Code article 216, which currently prohibits incitement and differentiation of linguistic, religious or racial differences.<sup>22</sup> Ovadya argued that the paragraph, as currently phrased, was not sufficient to prevent expressions of antisemitism, and should instead punish the "expressions and deeds intended to create hatred, discrimination, hostility or violence" and not evaluate them as simply freedom of thought.<sup>23</sup> This action, when reported in the press, produced a strong reaction. In one piece, the Islamist journalist Nureddin Şirin<sup>24</sup> wrote that:

First, you must arise and openly declare that, since their genocidal attacks, the Zionist Israeli regime are the most profound enemies of humanity, that they are gangs of murderers; [this way] we can assume that you are a decent person, then we will say loudly that it is in no way correct to be hostile to such persons.

Şirin then hinted that since the establishment of the Turkish Republic the country's Jews have, on the one hand, been opposed to the establishment of a Shari'a state and on the other hand, supported Kemalism and concluded as follows:

Somehow, you would like that the country's prosecutors act on their own initiative against antisemitism. By all means: file a complaint with one or other of the prosecutors; let's have our day in court. Don't send your attorney, though. Instead, come yourself, so that we will personally have the chance to spit in your ugly face....

In conclusion, let's call you what you are in diplomatic terms: Silvyo Ovadya - persona non grata.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>21</sup> Y. Hakan Erdem, "Ne antisemitizm değildir", *Taraf*, 23 June 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Aydın Hasan, "Gül "Antisemitizme ceza" talebine sıcak", *Milliyet*, 26 February 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Turkish Chief Rabbinate Archive, Legal advisor of Turkish Jewish Community Ester Zonana's study dated February 5, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Editor-in-chief of the pro-Hamas [www.velfecr.com](http://www.velfecr.com) website.

<sup>25</sup> Nureddin Şirin, "İsrail işbirlikçisi gizli Siyonist Yahudi cemaati sizleri kuşatamaz", 27 February 2009, [www.velfecr.com/yazi\\_detay.php?yazi\\_id=16770yazar=19](http://www.velfecr.com/yazi_detay.php?yazi_id=16770yazar=19)

Under present conditions, there is no chance that the current anti-discriminatory bill before the Turkish Grand National Assembly, known as the “Law for the Struggle against Discrimination and for the Establishment of Equality”, will pass, or that the draft itself will even contain the so-called Working Definition of Antisemitism.<sup>26</sup>

In a country like Turkey, where the level of public education is so low, where books, newspapers and public discussion has for decades reflected the antisemitic sentiments of popular culture, where the overwhelming majority of public intellectuals express the opinions found in popular antisemitic works, where not a single serious Western work on antisemitism has ever been translated into Turkish, one should not nurture the unreasonable hope that a topic such as antisemitism would ever come up for a serious intellectual treatment. For such conditions to change it would first be necessary for the current regime—or any Turkish regime—to muster the political will to first acknowledge the existence of antisemitism in Turkey and the seriousness of the problem in the country, and then resolve to contend with it in a serious fashion. But instead we have in recent years witnessed the elimination of various political and public opposition streams, a marked increase in xenophobia, anti-Western and anti-American hostility, chauvinism and antisemitism, Prime Minister Erdoğan’s frequent reiteration of antisemitic stereotypes in his speeches and declarations, and the prevailing opinion among the greater public that there is no such thing as antisemitism in Turkey. Such conditions should persuade us that it is entirely unreasonable to expect such decisiveness from the Turkish polity in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>26</sup> “Ayrımcılıkla Mücadele ve Eşitlik Kurulu Geliyor”, *Star*, 16 February 2010.