

Book Reviews

Model Citizens of the State: The Jews of Turkey during the Multiparty Period

Rifat N. Bali

Madison, Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012. Pp. xxiii + 515, bibliography, index. \$110 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-61147-536-4

This is yet another book by Rifat N. Bali, the productive historian of Jewish life in Turkey in the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic.¹ An updated translation from the original Turkish,² it focuses on the period 1950 to 2003, with a prologue on the years since the establishment of the Republic in 1923 (pp.1–19) and an epilogue on the years 2003–10 (pp.479–81). The main aim of the work is ‘to honestly and accurately document and record the views of Turkey’s political, bureaucratic and intellectual elites regarding the country’s Jewish population and, to a lesser extent, Jews in general’ (Preface, p.xxi). In other words, this is no less an account of the Jewish community than an examination of official relations with it. The author’s main intention is to show, as his title indicates, that the Jews of Turkey were model citizens, loyal to their country and supportive of government’s policies. On the other side he observes that the attitude of the Turkish authorities towards the Jews has generally been fair but lately has become marred somewhat by increasing trends of nationalism and Islamism.

The chapters are divided according to periods:

1. The Democrat Party years, 1950–60.
2. From the 1960 revolution to the 1971 memorandum.
3. From the 1971 memorandum to the 1980 military coup.
4. The military administration, 1980–83.
5. The Özal years, 1984–93.
6. The ideological transformation of political Islam, 1994–2003.

All the chapters are fully annotated. There is a 20-page bibliography (including many unpublished sources) and a 14-page general index. The English translation by Paul F. Bessemer, himself an expert in Turkish affairs, reads smoothly and fluently.

Perhaps the most interesting discussion is found in the sixth chapter, also the longest (pp.349–478). Titled ‘The rise, fall and ideological transformation of political Islam, 1994–2003’, it presents the main events of those years, following the sudden death of President Turgut Özal on 17 April 1993. The Jewish community, striving to preserve its political neutrality, maintained a low profile but could not avoid being worried by the political victory of Necmettin

Erbakan's Islamist party, the Welfare Party, in the municipal elections of 1994 and in the parliamentary elections of 1995. The party's success resulted, among other matters, in a steady increase of antisemitism in the Islamist press, which continued even after the fall of Erbakan's government in 1997. After a pause of a few years, the Islamist-minded Justice and Development Party, set up in 2001, won the parliamentary elections (it is the governing party at the time of writing). The party's hostile attitude to the State of Israel has increased the concerns of the Jewish community concerning its own future. These anxieties, largely aroused by a part of the Turkish press, were increased by the bombings of two synagogues in Istanbul on 15 November 2003, which were publicly condemned by official circles and by most of the press.

Bali does not consider the Welfare Party and the Justice and Development Party as solely responsible for the rise of antisemitism in some Turkish quarters. Certain elites in Turkey, not only Islamist but also people active on the left and the nationalist right, have expressed antisemitic sentiments in their writings, dwelling on what they consider the near-demonic characteristics of Israel and the Zionist movement. Bali compares such notions to the attitudes of these groups towards the Greek and Armenian communities in Turkey.

Although a large majority of the inhabitants and most of the press were indifferent to antisemitic propaganda during this period, the Jewish community considered antisemitic rhetoric a very real danger. The chief rabbinate and other prominent members of the community registered their displeasure with and criticism of government circles and public opinion abroad, while attempting to present a generally positive image of Turkey in the United States and elsewhere. They emphasized the societal transformations and the spread of the culture of democracy in Turkey during the 1990s and early 2000s. By their lobbying abroad, Jewish community leaders strove to do their country a real service and on some occasions they prevailed. They particularly stressed the spread of information via a free press, the radio, television and more particularly the internet enjoyed by the Jewish and other minorities. In so doing, Bali concludes, the Jewish community attempted, but with little success, to reduce its isolation and its feeling that it was being surrounded and monitored.

To sum up, this is a careful and informative work, prepared by an expert in Turkish affairs, which could profitably be read by everyone interested in the Republic of Turkey, in its Jewish community, and in minorities in the Middle East.

JACOB M. LANDAU
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2012.746557>

Notes

1. See *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.48, No.4 (July 2011), pp.679–80.
2. *Cumhuriyet yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2009).