

## The Jewish Community in Turkey

Throughout its long history, the Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire and in the Turkish Republic has had a strong symbolic dimension. The significant migration of Spanish Jews to the Ottoman Empire, after the Sultan issued a formal invitation in 1492, has often been seen as an example of Ottoman tolerance, and of the better treatment of Jews in Muslim countries rather than in Christian states. With the proclamation of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkish Jews were the first ever to be granted full citizenship by a Muslim State. Even today, the Jewish community in Turkey is the largest in the Muslim world. However, despite these more positive facts, Turkey's Jews today face numerous challenges; some analysts speak of a "dying community."

There are currently between 15,000 and 18,000 Jews in Turkey (among a population of 79 million). They are mainly centered in two cities: Istanbul (14,000 – 17,000) and Izmir (1,000 - 1,500). Five percent of the community is Ashkenazi, the remaining 95 percent is mostly Sephardic.

Since the 1948-1951 Aliyah wave, when 40 percent of the community left for Israel, the number of Jews living in Turkey has steadily decreased due to:

- A negative demographic balance (deaths have outnumbered births since the 1960s ). The most recent statistics available on the community date all the way back to 2001 and 1988, but they still provide important information. In 1988, 40 percent of heads of Turkish Jewish families were more than 50

years old. Since then, the situation has even worsened. In 2001, there were 124 births, 100 Bnei Mitzvah, 67 marriages, and 220 deaths. In the same year, the estimated fertility rate was 1.6, well below replacement rates. All these factors point to the difficult demographic situation of an ageing community.

- A high rate of intermarriage (around 40 percent).
- Emigration (Between 1952 and 2012, 28,454 made Aliyah, to which must be added emigration to other countries).

**Whereas Ladino and French were widespread at the dawn of the Twentieth century, Turkish is today the mother tongue of the vast majority of Turkish Jews**

The Jews living in Turkey today generally hold high-salaried occupations (the poorer part of the community having left between 1948 and 1951), mostly as traders- or businesspeople, independent or liberal professionals, or academics. But a less prosperous group still exists in the community.

Socially and culturally speaking, the Jewish community is strongly integrated into Turkish society. In 1925, the heads of the community renounced the rights, privileges, and protections granted to them under the Lausanne treaty, choosing Turkish citizenship instead, which was conferred to them along with full equality to their Muslim fellow citizens. Even though there are some places where Turkish Jews prefer to live, there

are no Jewish neighborhoods as such in Turkey. All Turkish Jews live in Muslim majority communities. Most young Jews attend Turkish secular schools, but even the Ulus Jewish School in Istanbul must conform to the general Turkish curriculum. Jewish content is limited to a few hours a week, and Hebrew is taught as a foreign language like English or French. The results of this intense Turcification of the community can be seen in the Turkish Jews' linguistic situation. Whereas Ladino and French were widespread at the dawn of the 20th century, the intensive campaign by the Turkish government, as well as the integration policy pursued by the community itself, led to a steep decline of these languages in favor of Turkish, which is now the mother tongue of the vast majority of Turkish Jews. In this context, the high rate of intermarriage is no surprise. In Turkey, intermarriages are in their vast majority between a Muslim man and a Jewish woman (even if the Republic has officially adopted a civil code inspired by Swiss law, the remaining influence of Islamic matrimonial law regarding unions between a Muslim and a dhimmi still makes marriages between a Jewish man and a Muslim woman less accepted), the rabbinate refuses to perform conversions, and the state identifies its citizens according to the religion of their father. Therefore, the effects of intermarriage in Turkey are particularly strong since the children of such homes, although Jewish according to Halacha, are raised in a Muslim (although generally quite secular) culture. For all these reasons, the Jewish community in Turkey strongly identifies itself with the rest of the Turkish society.

There are 20 active synagogues in Turkey, three of

them are only open in summer; all are under the control of the Turkish Rabbinate , which is led by a chief rabbi (*Hahambaşı*). The community also has a Beit Din and a secular council of 50 co-opted members whose task is to help the *Hahambaşı* . There is a Chabad representative in Istanbul. He was first seen as an interloper by the Turkish Jews as he was a foreigner, Ashkenazi, and more strictly Orthodox than the local rabbis, but he managed to adapt himself to the community and now works, in Turkish, in close cooperation with the local Jewish authorities.

The Jewish community also runs a school in Istanbul and two hospitals (one in Izmir and one in Istanbul) as well as several active cultural organizations. Turkish Jews publish their own newspaper, *Şalom*. International Jewish organizations are also present in Turkey, where there are three JCCs (two in Istanbul, one in Izmir), an influential Bnai Brith , and a vibrant Limmud.

Although official relations between the Jewish community and the state are good, the tiny community has little electoral weight. Turkish Jews rely on the government, which not only provides security for the community, but also, among other things, owns the country's synagogues. The officials of the Jewish community have therefore adopted a low profile, and, since the 1990s and the creation of the *500<sup>th</sup> Yıl Vakfı* (The 500<sup>th</sup> year foundation), an institution founded in 1989 to celebrate Selim II's invitation to the Sephardic Jews, the latter's arrival to the Ottoman empire, and the "500<sup>th</sup> years of tolerance" binding the two people. It is still active today, runs the Jewish Museum in Istanbul, and is responsible for the community's official

historical and political discourse). Taking care of the community has a symbolic importance for the Turkish authorities in their relations with the EU and the United States. The Jewish community leaders have been engaged in supporting the Turkish government in Europe (EU joining process) and in the U.S. (against the recognition of the Armenian genocide), while maintaining relations at home as best as possible. Since its assumption of power in 2012, Erdoğan's government has regularly publicly expressed its will to protect its Jewish minority, while the community has maintained its pro-governmental line, even against Israel during the Mavi Marmara incident. During the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, the community published a statement in support of the AKP government, and is presently raising money for the "martyrs of July 15<sup>th</sup>". On August 7<sup>th</sup>, the Turkish government organized a huge rally to celebrate the "democratization" of the country. Not only did the *Hahambaşı* and the head of the association of Turks living in Israel appear at the event alongside AKP officials, but the Turkish Jewish Community also sent a letter to the American Conference of Presidents inviting them to join in demonstrating support to the Turkish government. All of these last events are fully in the continuity of the traditional domestic and international political

**The security deterioration in Turkey in the wake of PKK and ISIS attacks have created the expectation of increased Aliyah**

position of the Turkish Jewish community. However, even if these official statements may give the impression that the community is entirely pro-government, Turkish Jews have actually no other choice than to publicly support the government, whatever it may be, to survive. Behind the scenes, their feelings are more nuanced, and the latest developments in Turkey have aroused some serious concerns among the Jewish community.

## Aliyah from Turkey

In 2015, 105 Turkish Jews made Aliyah, which is higher than in 2014 (59) or 2013 (71) but quite similar to the years between 2000 and 2012 (an average 102 per year). This number is relatively high compared to the size of the community, and will likely be even higher for 2016. As of July 2016, 75 people have made Aliyah this year, which represents an increase of around 200 percent over the same period last year.

Analysis of Turkish Aliyah shows that push factors are more important than pull factors. Historically, rises in Aliyah always coincide with Turkish domestic events. These push factors include:

- General insecurity: domestic instability and threats in Turkey play an important role in the Aliyah of Turkish Jews. Last year saw a sharp security deterioration with the Turkish government now facing two main threats: intensified fighting with the PKK since summer 2015, along with simultaneously ISIS attacks, which have claimed numerous lives (Suruç, Ankara, Istanbul airport). Recent developments in Turkish politics

may increase feelings of insecurity among Turkish population as both the coup and the consecutive purges by the AKP government have substantially weakened the army and the security forces, which may lead to increased attacks in the country.

- Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism: In the last 30 years, Turkish Jews have suffered several attacks, beginning with the 1986 Neve Şalom synagogue bombing, and reaching a peak with the 2003 bombing of two synagogues in Istanbul. In the aftermath of these attacks, the community became one of the most “securitized” in the world. Turkish media and politicians are almost unanimously anti-Israel, in ways more freely and more violently expressed than in Europe. Anti-Semitism is widespread (about 70 percent of the population has anti-Semitic feelings), and often publicly expressed. Recent developments in the country have been ambiguous. On one side, Erdoğan signed an agreement with Israel in June 2015, which could lower the level of anti-Israeli attacks from the Islamic groups close to the AKP. On the other side however, the political purge currently underway in Turkey is freeing the government from the last of the Kemalists, and from the influence of the moderate Islamist Gülen Confrery, which may open more space for hard line (and more anti-Semitic) Islamists. Moreover, Turkey's protracted and far from certain accession process into the EU could also weaken the position of the Jewish community, whose main card in its relations

with the Turkish government is its support of the latter's European aspirations.

- Socio-economic limitations: Although the Jews in Turkey officially enjoy full equality of rights with their fellow Muslim citizens, they must deal with several un-official limitations. Turkish Jews are precluded from civil service jobs, command posts in the army, and political careers. Moreover, the rise of a Turkish Muslim middle and higher class creates a stronger competition for Jewish businessmen whose position is commensurately weakening.

In light of these push factors, Aliyah is increasingly attractive to Turkey's Jews. One should also add that Turkish olim have maintained strong ties with Turkey and their relatives there, which has created a solidarity network for new immigrants from Turkey.

At the same time, certain factors are impeding immigration to Israel:

- Demographics: The Turkish community is an ageing population, and its more and more numerous elderly members prefer not to face the difficulties of making Aliyah.
- Integration: Turkey's Jews are well integrated in the Turkish society. Economically speaking, a majority of Jews currently run successful businesses in Turkey. Moreover, the effects of almost a century of Turkish secular nationalism has had an influence on the country's Jews who share strong Turkish nationalist feelings and are very secular (the most religious part of the community having left in 1948-1951).

This, along with numerous intermarriages, has created a situation in which Turkish Jews have stronger ties to Turkey than to Israel. There are, for example, only two Hebrew-language courses available in Turkey, and attempts to open additional ones have failed due to lack of interest.

- The public loyalty of the community, which is expressed by the *500<sup>th</sup> Yil Vakfı*, and by the heads of the community assertions that the Jews of Turkey live perfectly peaceful lives. Even if the feelings of the local Jews are quite different, Jewish officials continuously deny the threats the community is facing, and, in order to show their loyalty to the Turkish State, do not publicly support Aliyah.
- For Turkish Jews interested in emigration, Israel is only one possible destination, and apparently not the most attractive one since many more prefer to settle in Europe or in the United States.

Finally, the authoritative turn of the Turkish government following the attempted coup, and the drastic changes in the country's political structure that are resulting from this turn of events will not reverse the trends described here regarding the Turkish Jewish community. Their chief effect will be to increase the number of Jews leaving the country for Israel or other places. This, in turn, will intensify the steady demographic decline that has taken place since World War II. Not much can be done to change this. The community is well organized and already has all the institutions that could mitigate these trends at

its disposal, but which have proved to be of limited efficacy. The Israeli government could, however, do two things. First, it should try to attract the Jews who want to leave Turkey toward Israel rather than other countries. Given the sensibility of the Turkish society and the pressure on the Jewish community as far as Israel is concerned, such an attempt should be made cautiously and discreetly as possible, preferably with the help of the existing associations of Turkish olim; Israel should expect no help from local community officials. Second,

the evolution of Turkish-Israeli relations has an impact on the situation of Turkish Jews. The better these relations are, the easier it is for the Jewish community to be in accordance with the Turkish government's policy, to be accepted as Jews by the Turkish Muslim majority, and to consolidate the different aspects of their identity. In this sense, the Turkish-Israeli reconciliation will have significant positive effects for the Turkish Jewish community, and its value as such must also be taken into consideration in Jerusalem.