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## THE UNSEEN ISRAELIS: THE JEWS FROM TURKEY IN ISRAEL

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**No Visibility -- No Stereotypes / Who and Where are the Turkish Jews in Israel? / When Did They Arrive? / The Jewish Experience in Turkey / Within Israel's Social Structure / An Awakening?**

[Editor's Note: The question of the place of the Sephardim in Israel is one of the great domestic social questions which regularly gain public attention in the Jewish state and abroad. Walter Weiker has made a signal contribution in developing an understanding of the Sephardic Jews from Turkey as part of a middle group in Israeli society, between Eastern European and North African Jews. In his new book, The Unseen Israelis: The Jews from Turkey in Israel, which is being published this month by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and University Press of America, a picture emerges of a group which is the utter opposite of virtually every stereotype about Sephardim that has become part of the conventional wisdom.]

### **No Visibility -- No Stereotypes**

Israel is an ideal laboratory for the study of social adjustment and accul-

turation of groups into a new society. In 1979, 1982 and 1987, this author undertook an intensive study of one Israeli immigrant community -- the Jews from Turkey. During the interviewing process, when asking other Israelis about their image of those from Turkey, with striking consistency there emerged a single answer: "none." That is, while respondents could come up with some characteristics (stereotypes) of virtually every other group, most were at a loss when it came to the community from Turkey.

When pressed, the interviewees eventually described people from Turkey variously (and almost always positively) as having a shrewd business sense, being particularly loyal to their friends and trustworthy in keeping agreements, and being good family members. But on reflection, most agreed that perhaps their most striking characteristic was the degree to which they are not in

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the public limelight. When further comparing them to other immigrant groups, the general conclusion also was that they are "not a problem." This image is supported and made into a quite consistent whole by several other characteristics of the Turkish community, including virtually no role in politics, little public cultural activity, considerable concentration in private occupations, and weak communal associations.

#### **Who and Where are the Turkish Jews in Israel?**

The Turkish community in Israel numbers somewhat over 60,000. In Israel they are both concentrated and dispersed. On one hand, there are several concentrations. Many of the poorer Jews who came in 1948-50 went to Yahud, one of Tel Aviv's eastern suburbs, where they and their children are still found. They have largely done well there, enjoying considerable upward social and economic mobility. The largest concentration of those who immigrated primarily in the 1960s and 1970s and who were and are socially and economically middle class is today found in Bat Yam, a suburban city just south of Tel Aviv, where there are also many Turkish institutions such as clubs and restaurants. Many merchants of Turkish origin have businesses in the Levinsky Street area of south Tel Aviv. The wealthier and most recent immigrants, including many professionals, have clustered around Ramat Aviv and Herzliya, in the more fashionable northern suburbs.

On the other hand, Turkish Jews are also well scattered throughout the country and may be found in virtually every Israeli city. One of the striking characteristics of those who are thus dispersed is that not only do they often retain close personal friendships with others from Turkey, but in addition they usually know where others from Turkey are located in their community, even if those persons are not personal friends.

In several ways the Jews from Turkey are a "private" community. Occupationally,

most are either workers, businessmen or professionals, and the great majority have done well. They are notable for their absence from public positions and offices. For example, since 1948 there has been only one member of the Knesset of Turkish origin. Organizationally, at least until recently, the Association of Immigrants from Turkey has been most notable for its inactivity, certainly in comparison with other immigrant group organizations.

Unlike the experience of many immigrant groups, the Jews from Turkey have generally positive memories of their former country of residence despite some past economic and political hardships. Many still have relatives in Turkey and return often to visit. Yet they are also intensely loyal to Israel and consider themselves Israelis first and foremost. According to all indicators, therefore, they may be considered well-adjusted and are making a positive contribution to the growth and development of Israeli society.

#### **When Did They Arrive?**

The largest numbers of Turkish Jews came to Israel in 1948-50, almost as soon as the state was founded. They have been coming ever since, in response to circumstances both in Turkey and Israel. Periodic increases in aliyah have occurred both in response to crises and hardships in Turkey, and the attraction of Israel, such as the euphoria following the 1967 war.

It is clear, however, that the number who were pulled by Israel far exceeds those who were pushed by conditions in Turkey. In 1948-50 these included many who were poor in Turkey, who had little reason to stay, and who thus responded readily to the creation of a Jewish state. There were also numerous idealists, relatively affluent and educated, who wanted to participate in the building of a Jewish society. Among those who have come subsequently, while it may appear that they responded mainly to crises in Turkey and were thus pushed, most reported that those crises were only the final catalysts for decisions that they had already made and

whose execution waited only for suitable circumstances.

Many of the poor who came in 1948-50 came with few specific expectations and demands. They were also accustomed to a difficult life, so they fit well into the harsh conditions that they found. Their enthusiasm for a Jewish state also helped carry them through, as did the context in which everyone around them was also struggling.

As for those who came later, most came with skills and attitudes from an already modernizing country. They also came into an already established Turkish community. Many had friends and relatives who could help them adjust and become established. They also came in absorbable numbers, so that immigrants from Turkey were never a notably large burden on the resources of the Israeli state.

Another aspect of their move to Israel involved what Israeli demographer Moshe Sicion has called "selective transfer." That is, unlike some other communities such as that of Bulgaria, the Turkish Jews did not come as a whole, and thus did not bring with them an intact set of communal institutions and structures. They also did not need to fashion new ones because many functions such as welfare, certain rites of passage, and religious education were taken care of by the Israeli government. It is also important that those who had been community leaders in Turkey in the sense that they had had organizational experience, only began to come to Israel during the 1960s.

### **The Jewish Experience in Turkey**

It is noteworthy that in the 500 years since the Sephardic Jews arrived in Ottoman Turkey after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal, they developed the same general instincts which the Turkish Jews have later displayed in Israel, being productive, loyal and quiet. The Jews of Turkey were able to survive in the diaspora without the threat of either extinc-

tion or expulsion, under circumstances often better than tolerable, by contributing productively to the Ottoman and later the Turkish economy, by displaying loyalty to the Ottoman and Turkish states (in contrast to the separatist ambitions of the Greeks and Armenians), and by refraining from displaying their Judaism in very public ways.

The reasons for the Jews' ability and willingness to behave in these ways are complex. One was the millet system which allowed them a large measure of self-government in the spheres of personal status, religious observance, and even in many aspects of economic and commercial life, with the result that they were in many ways a "closed community" that did not display themselves publicly. Thus they were also seen as "keeping in their place" and not challenging the Muslims who were the first-class citizens. There is little doubt that the connection between these characteristics of Turkish Jews in their old and their new countries exists both instinctively and consciously in the minds of many Israelis from Turkey.

### **Within Israel's Social Structure**

Customarily, any analysis of the Israeli social structure begins with the concept that it is composed of two large categories, labelled either Ashkenazi - Sephardi or European/American - Afro-Asian. However, on several important demographic characteristics, one can also hypothesize the existence of a third broad grouping composed generally of non-Afro-Asian Sephardim, which includes Turkey, the Balkan communities, and possibly several others. These communities fall most distinctively into a statistical category near the mid-point between the two more usually cited groupings on such social indicators as age at marriage, numbers of children, residential proximity to either the European/American or Afro-Asian communities, intermarriage (marriage outside one's continent of origin and/or country of origin group), and certain cultural characteristics.

The Jews from Turkey seem to have a foot in both camps, bridging what was often regarded, at least in the earlier years of the Jewish state, as a social and political fissure of some depth. That is, the Turkish community as a whole had enough demographic, economic and cultural similarity with the European or Ashkenazi parts of the Israeli population that they were able to feel that they were regarded with approval by what many saw as the dominant segments of Israeli society. Yet at the same time, the Turkish group was able to appreciate the problems of the lower strata and be well regarded by the Afro-Asian Jews, yet not share with them the need to publicly express feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction. In other words, members of the Turkish community were often able to feel comfortable among many segments of Israeli society and so to blend in well.

#### **An Awakening?**

As noted earlier, one of the ways in which the Turkish community has remained unseen has been in failing to develop what might be called a "public" associational life. That is, the few organized institutions which existed were overwhelmingly "inward" oriented, mainly providing familiar social activities for their members. The Association of Immigrants from Turkey seldom reached out into the larger Israeli society either by organizing cultural programs or working together with other immigrant associations. This was understandable given the needs of the Turkish community and their accustomed ways of behavior.

In 1987, however, there were clear signs that their unseen nature was no longer sufficient or satisfying to those from Turkey. On the contrary, there are now at least three organizations which seek to bring the richness of Turkish-Jewish culture to the attention of the Israeli public and to make it part of the multi-faceted Jewish culture which is

Israel. These include a revitalized Association of Immigrants from Turkey; MORIT, a foundation for the establishment of a center for Turkish-Jewish culture in Israel; and an active Turkish B'nai B'rith lodge.

There are a number of reasons for this development. One is that in Israel generally the preservation of its many cultures has moved higher on the list of priorities. Another is that enough well-educated, energetic and organizationally experienced leaders have now arrived in Israel who have the resources to serve community needs.

The term "awakening" is one used by the new association leaders themselves, and they are planning an impressive series of cultural events directed toward the general Israeli public as well as for themselves, the publication of a journal, and cooperation with other ethnic associations.

The Jews from Turkey in Israel are a population that has established itself well in Israel and ranges across the entire socio-economic spectrum, albeit concentrated in the middle. It does not engage in political protest nor, indeed, is it much involved in political activity. It is a population moving along with the Israeli mainstream in almost every respect; yet also one that maintains close connections with Turkey, a country which they left not so much under duress as because of their shared religio-Zionist vision. Clearly, the Jews from Turkey have been among the best of the scores of immigrant groups at integrating and adjusting to a new life in Israel.

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Walter F. Weiker is Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University. He has written extensively about contemporary Turkey and is currently working on a history of the Jews of Turkey. His book The Unseen Israelis will soon be available from the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.