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# Script Charisma in Hebrew and Turkish: A Comparative Framework for Explaining Success and Failure of Romanization\*

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SINCE the downfall of the Soviet regime in 1991, successive Turkish governments have been trying to impress upon the ex-Soviet Turkish republics the necessity of adopting the Roman alphabet.<sup>1</sup> As late as June 2007, for example, a delegation from the Republic of Kazakhstan visited the Turkish Language Institute (Türk Dil Kurumu) for consultations and received briefings on a number of topics, including the history of script change in Turkey, the economic costs and benefits of romanization, and the implications of script change for electronic media and information technologies.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Turkish policy makers are correct when they underline Turkey's role as a model in this regard. Adoption of a Roman-based alphabet in Turkey in 1928 is habitually cited as the textbook example of a successful and lasting case of romanization. The

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth M. Winrow, "Turkey and Former Soviet Central Asia: National and Ethnic Identity," *Central Asian Survey* 11 (1992): 108; Mehmet Saray, *Türk Dünyasında Dil ve Kültür Birliği* (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 2008), pp. 123, 188–190.

<sup>2</sup> "Kazakistan Alfabe Heyeti TDK'de" and "Kazakistan Alfabe Heyeti Anadolu Ajansı ve Hürriyet gazetesini ziyaret etti," press releases from the Turkish Language Institute, <http://www.tdk.gov.tr>; "Orta Asya İle 34 Harfli, Ortak Alfabe Çalışması Başlatılıyor," *Zaman*, 9 December 2007; Mehmet Kara, "Türk Cumhuriyetleri Ortak Lâtin Alfabesinin Neresinde?" *Zaman*, 15 December 2007.

problem with the approach of the Turkish policy makers, on the other hand, is the somewhat naïve conviction that, with a good amount of fortitude, the Turkish success could be easily replicated elsewhere.

This approach is not new, nor is it particular to the Turkish officials. It had been voiced earlier, during attempts at romanizing the Chinese, Indian, and Japanese scripts<sup>3</sup> in the interwar period and the immediate aftermath of World War II at the heyday of an international romanization movement.<sup>4</sup> What is common in all of them is a tendency to strip the question of script from its historical, religious, and political context and to present it mainly as an issue of the expediency of a writing system. It is very telling that Western advocates of romanization were pointing at the Turkish example even then, as Turkish officials still do.<sup>5</sup> The success of the Turkish experiment, though, obscured many other attempts at romanization that ended up as utter failures. If truth be told, the impact of the permanent adoption of the Roman alphabet by a handful of speech communities in the twentieth century is far outweighed by the resilience of non-Roman writing systems in spite of efforts to romanize them. It is impossible to overlook the fact that about half of the world's population today employ non-Roman alphabets or scripts: the *Devanagari* script in India, the *han'gŭl* in Korea, the *kanji* and *kana* in Japan, the *hànzì* in China, the Arabic alphabet in most of the Muslim world, the Greek alphabet in Greece, the Cyrillic in Russia, and the square letters in Israel, just to name a few, show the limits of the expansion of the Roman alphabet in contrast to high expectations in its favor at the beginning of the twentieth century. The image of a victorious Roman alphabet is then probably caused

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Reynolds, "The Official Romanization of Japanese," *Geographical Journal* 72 (1928): 360–362; Wolfgang Franke, "Die Möglichkeiten einer Schriftreform in Japan," *Ostasiatische Rundschau* 16 (1935): 463; J. R. Firth, "Alphabets and Phonology in India and Burma," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 8 (1936): 517–546; Denzel Carr, "The New Official Romanization of Japanese," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59 (1939): 99–102; Edwin O. Reischauer, "Rōmaji or Rōmazi," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 60 (1940): 82–89; Denzel Carr, "Japanese Romanization Again," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (1941): 188–190; John de Francis, "The Alphabetization of Chinese," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 63 (1943): 225–240; John de Francis, "Politics and Phonetics," *Far Eastern Survey* 16 (1947): 217–220.

<sup>4</sup> The drive for romanizing the scripts of a multitude of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union or elsewhere in European colonies in the 1920s and 1930s was promoted even by the League of Nations, which sponsored a report on the benefits of the adoption of the roman alphabet. See, Société des Nations, Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, *L'adoption universelle des caractères latins* (Paris: Dossiers de la Coopération Intellectuelle, 1934). The introduction by the renowned linguist Otto Jespersen is especially representative of that dominant mood.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, "Alphabetization of Chinese," p. 230; Firth, "Alphabets and Phonology," pp. 537–538.

by the paucity of counterfactual data, which could have been gleaned from failed cases, and it also results from the lack of comparative works, especially those that compare a successful case with a fiasco.<sup>6</sup>

What I intend to do in this article is precisely this. By focusing on the Hebrew and Turkish cases, I aim at constructing a theoretical framework for explaining success and failure of romanization. The two cases in question are selected on purpose: adoption of the Roman alphabet in Atatürk's Turkey is the emblematic example of romanization in the twentieth century. Quite the reverse, the feeble movement in the Yishuv—a term that describes the Jewish population and settlement in Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel—in the 1920s and 1930s for writing Hebrew in the Roman alphabet had so utterly failed to impress the Hebrew speakers at the time that there are very few today who even remember that such a bizarre attempt was ever made. Comparing these two cases will help us identify a number of independent variables that facilitate romanization or inhibit it.

## THE ROMAN ALPHABET AND ITS COMPETITORS

Writing, in the classical definition of I. J. Gelb, is a “system of human intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks.”<sup>7</sup> Writing had a revolutionary impact in our lives, according to Jack Goody,

<sup>6</sup> See Charles King, “The Ambivalence of Authenticity, or How the Moldovan Language Was Made,” *Slavic Review* 58 (1999): 117–142; Nanette Twine, “Toward Simplicity: Script Reform Movements in the Meiji Period,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 38 (1983): 115–132; Nanette Gottlieb, “Language and Politics: The Reversal of Postwar Script Reform Policy in Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 1175–1198; Hamid Algar, “Malkum Khan, Akhundzadeh and the Proposed Reform of the Arabic Alphabet,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (1969): 116–130; Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel, “The Question of Romanisation of the Script and the Emergence of Nationalism in the Middle East,” *Mediterranean Language Review* 10 (1998): 179–196; Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of Language in the Ex-Soviet Muslim States* (London: C. Hurst, 2001); Ingeborg Baldauf, *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den muslimischen Russland- und Sowjettürken (1850–1937): Ein Symptom ideengeschichtlicher und kulturpolitischer Entwicklungen* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1993); Frances Trix, “The Stamboul Alphabet of Shemseddin Sami Bey: Precursor to Turkish Script Reform,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 255–272; R. J. Fouser, “Nationalism and Globalism in Transliteration Systems: Romanization Debates in Korea,” *Language Research* 35 (1999): 151–177; Birol Caymaz and Emmanuel Szurek, “La révolution au pied de la lettre: L'invention de l'alphabet turc,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (e-journal) no. 6 (2007), <http://www.ejts.org/document1363.html>; François Georgeon, “Des caractères arabes à l'alphabet latin: un pas vers l'occident?” in *Des ottomans aux turcs: Naissance d'une nation*, ed. François Georgeon (Istanbul: Isis, 1995), pp. 199–221.

<sup>7</sup> I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 12.

who distinguished between oral and literate modes of communication in a number of pathbreaking studies: once invented, it made intra- and intergenerational communication possible without human intermediaries for the first time in human history.<sup>8</sup> Not only did it help preserve data in its original form—in contradistinction to oral cultures, which blend facts with myths—writing also paved the way for accumulation of knowledge. This peculiar way of communication was achieved by associating sound units with graphic units; anyone who had been educated to be able to make the association between the two could break the code of symbols, which are partly or absolutely meaningless to the untrained eye.

Specialists today identify three main ideal types of writing systems, although we usually encounter mixed specimens. In the so-called logographic system, each graphic unit, typically called a logogram or an ideogram, corresponds to a word of the language that it is meant to put down in writing. As exemplified by the Chinese writing system, the number of logograms can exceed several thousands in order to match the things or ideas that need to be expressed. The second type is the syllabic writing system, which associates each graphic unit with a syllable and treats them as distinct units of the language, as in the Japanese *kana* script. Finally, those writing systems that employ alphabets are called cenemic systems and are distinguished from the first two in the dexterity of their grapheme inventory. An alphabet, in all its variant forms, is composed of letters that stand for meaningless but independent sound units that are then assembled in the right order to write down meaningful sound units (the morphemes, as these are called by linguists). Examples include the Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic, Armenian, and Hebrew square alphabets among others.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this article, romanization refers to the process by which a Roman-based alphabet is provided for a language that used to be written with either a nonalphabetic script or with a non-Roman alphabet.<sup>10</sup> It is, of course, crucial at this point to distinguish between

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 53–54; Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Florian Coulmas, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Florian Coulmas, *Writing Systems: An Introduction to Their Linguistic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially chaps. 2–5.

<sup>10</sup> Coulmas, *Blackwell Encyclopedia*, pp. 443–444; and Coulmas, *Writing Systems*, pp. 234–236.

script conversion and alphabet making. Romanization is an example of script conversion. The process starts when a speech community adopts a Roman-based alphabet in place of another writing system they used to employ. Alphabet making, on the other hand, is the creation of an alphabet, usually by missionaries or colonial rulers, for an aliterate people.<sup>11</sup>

From its meager beginnings in the Italian Peninsula, the Roman alphabet followed the lead of the Roman legions and left its monumental imprints in the Mediterranean world. The second historical push came with the consecration of Latin for all religious purposes by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> Under the auspices of the Holy See, Western Christendom adopted the Roman alphabet as the writing system for such diverse language families as the Indo-European and the Finno-Ugric. Of course, the original twenty-six-letter Roman alphabet was slightly modified in each of these cases of alphabet making in order to provide a more phonemic system.<sup>13</sup> Until the sixteenth century, the Roman alphabet did not expand out of the boundaries of Western and Central Europe. In the east it bordered on the Cyrillic, which was the alphabet of the Orthodox Christian world; in the south of the Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean the Arabic alphabet reigned supreme, providing a seamless zone of alphabetic unity among the Muslim elite, stretching from Morocco to India and Java. China and India supplied wholly different scripts not only for their own people but also for the speech communities in their peripheries of influence.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the implantation of the Roman alphabet in the Americas and pockets of European colonization in the Far East. The first real conquest of the Roman alphabet outside the boundaries of Western Christendom, however, was the romanization of the Romanian script in 1860, during an atmosphere of cultural revival and independence, which also signaled Romania's growing estrangement from the Slavic and the Orthodox world.<sup>14</sup> A second, less known, case was the gradual adoption in Vietnam of *Quoc-ngu*, a Roman-based alphabet, which was officially endorsed in 1910 but whose spread to the masses took considerably more time and lasted

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Françoise Waquet, *Latin or the Empire of a Sign* (London: Verso, 2003); Nicholas Ostler, *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin* (New York: Walker and Co., 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, eds., *The World's Writing Systems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 312–332, 633–699.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *Russia and the Formation of the Romanian National State, 1821–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

until the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> A more crucial and rather famous decision of romanization was made at the Baku Congress of Turkology in 1926, when representatives from the Muslim-Turkic and Tatar communities in the Soviet Union and from the Republic of Turkey discussed matters of orthography among other cultural problems. The resolution of the congress stressed the need for the creation of a common script based on the Roman alphabet for all Turco-Tataric nations.<sup>16</sup> This particular wave of romanization started with the Yakuts and the Azeris in 1926, while the Uzbeks and the Crimean Tatars followed suit in 1928 and 1929 respectively. The Republic of Turkey, on the other hand, whose initial attitude toward romanization at the congress could best be described as lukewarm, jumped on the bandwagon in 1928 with huge publicity given to the event in world press.

If it is permissible to use Max Weber's notion of "charismatic authority" in a field that he did not intend it for,<sup>17</sup> the Roman alphabet had in effect become a charismatic script by the 1920s and 1930s. It owed its charisma less to its Roman or Catholic background, and more to a rather secular association with the advent of modernity, Westernization, and, later, the ascendancy of English as the global lingua franca. A great historian of the time, Arnold Toynbee, saw in this a trend of world-historical proportions and devoted a section to it in his influential *Survey of International Affairs* for the year 1928.<sup>18</sup> However, he was too quick to jump at conclusions. Subject to the whims of Marxist linguists and the dictatorial rule of Stalin, the Turco-Tatar communities of the Soviet Union were forced to abandon their newly created Roman alphabets toward the end of the 1930s and shift to the Cyrillic, thereby ending that experiment with a complete reversal.<sup>19</sup> In 1958, the People's Republic of China also devised a Roman-based system of transliteration, called *pinyin*, but it has since failed to replace the tra-

<sup>15</sup> Coulmas, *Blackwell Encyclopedia*, p. 543; and George Sheldon, "Status of the Viet Nam," *Far Eastern Survey* 15 (1946): 377.

<sup>16</sup> Theodor Menzel, "Der 1. Turkologische Kongreß in Baku, 26.II. bis 6.III.1926," *Der Islam* 16 (1927): 68–74; Joseph Castagné, *La latinisation de l'alphabet turk dans les républiques turco-tatares de l'U.R.S.S.*, Extrait de la *Revue des études islamiques* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927).

<sup>17</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 241.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs: 1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 215–234.

<sup>19</sup> Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 414–452; S. Wurm, *Turkic Peoples of the USSR: Their Historical Background, Their Languages and the Development of Soviet Linguistic Policy* (London: Central Asian Research Centre, 1954); Michael G. Smith, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917–1953* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998).

ditional *hànxi* script.<sup>20</sup> Finally, we currently witness a renewed bout of romanization in some of the ex-Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Moldova, while a few others, such as Kazakhstan and Tatarstan, have expressed interest in change in a similar direction. Yet, it is too early to give a verdict on the final victory of the Roman alphabet in these countries either, since the very permanence of the new alphabets depends on the long-term stability of local regimes and on their ability to fend off intensifying Russian attempts at regaining Russia's former posture in its "Near Abroad."<sup>21</sup>

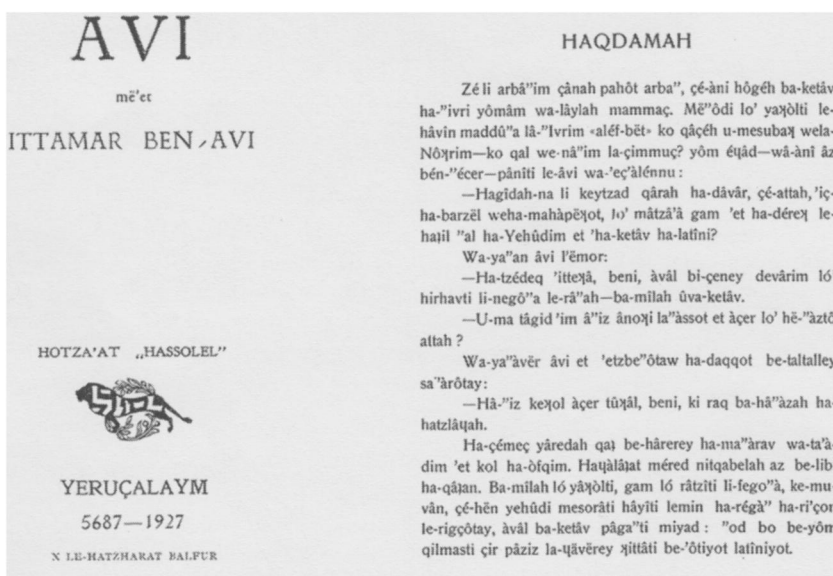


FIGURE 1. The title page and the first page of the introduction from the first Hebrew book printed in the Roman alphabet, Itamar Ben-Avi's *Avi* (My Father), a biography of his celebrated father Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Courtesy of Ms. Rina Ben-Avi Raz.

<sup>20</sup> John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950); Hilary Chappell, "The Romanization Debate," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 4 (1980): 105–118; Minglang Zhou, *Multilingualism in China: The Politics of Writing Reforms for Minority Languages, 1949–2002* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003); Minglang Zhou, ed., *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and Practice since 1949* (Boston: Kluwer, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> The significance of writing systems as symbols of influence in the global balance of power is described in Laurent Murawiec, "Géopolitique de l'écrit," *Pour la Science*, Dossier no. 20, "Du signe à l'écriture" (October 2001), pp. 94–96.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ATTEMPTS AT ROMANIZATION IN THE YISHUV AND TURKEY

An argument in favor of romanization of the Hebrew script<sup>22</sup> was first heard in 1898, but that preliminary shot by Isaak Rosenberg, a Hebrew teacher in Jerusalem, fell on deaf ears and did not make an impact at all.<sup>23</sup> The person who actually catapulted the idea of romanization to short-lived fame and notoriety was Itamar Ben-Avi, the son of the “father of modern Hebrew,” Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Hardly remembered today, Itamar Ben-Avi (1882–1943) was a celebrity in the Yishuv as well as the diaspora world from the first decade of the twentieth century to the 1940s.<sup>24</sup> His father, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,<sup>25</sup> the individual who probably contributed more than anybody else to the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, raised him as the first Jew in nearly two millennia whose mother tongue was Hebrew. Thanks to the publicity given to him since his childhood for this reason, Ben-Avi was a living specimen of the “new Jew,” who could turn dreams into reality by strength of will. Upon completing his university studies in Berlin, Ben-Avi returned to Jerusalem, where he embarked on a journalistic career, first writing in his father’s newspapers, then acting as the Jerusalem correspondent for British and French dailies,

<sup>22</sup> I have already pointed out that failed cases did not attract much scholarly attention, Hebrew being a case in point. The most thorough study on the Hebrew case is Esther Raizen, “Romanization of the Hebrew Script: Ideology, Attempts, and Failure” (unpublished PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1987). The only two articles that are devoted solely to this topic are Joseph Nedava, “Projects for the Latinization of the Hebrew Script,” *Hebrew Studies* 26 (1985): 137–146; and İlker Aytürk, “Attempts at Romanizing the Hebrew Script and Their Failure: Nationalism, Religion and Alphabet Reform in the Yishuv,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2007): 625–645. Also see Shraybom-Shivtiel, “Question of Romanisation”; Jacob M. Landau, “Attempts at Romanization in the Middle-East and Central Asia,” paper presented at 2e Colloque International, Histoire de l’imprimé dans les langues et les pays du moyen-orient (2–4 November 2005, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris); and Gavriel Tsifroni, “‘Deror’—iton ivri ha-mudpas mi-semol le-yamin,” *Kesher* 1 (1987): 65–72.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenberg recommended the use of Roman letters for secular works and correspondence only; see J. Rosenberg, *Hebräische Conversations-Grammatik: Kurzgefasstes theoretisch-praktisches Lehrbuch der modernen hebräischen Conversations- und Schriftsprache* (Vienna: A. Hartleben’s Verlag, 1898), pp. 9 and 58–61.

<sup>24</sup> Itamar Ben-Avi, *Im shahar atsmā’utenu: Zikhronot-hayav shel ha-yeled ha-ivri ha-rishon* (Tel Aviv: Public Committee for the Publication of the Works of Itamar Ben-Avi, 1961), and Hemda Ben-Yehuda, *Nose ha-degel: Hayei Itamar Ben-Avi* (Jerusalem-Talpiyot: Ben-Yehuda Publishing House, 1944).

<sup>25</sup> Jack Fellman, *The Revival of a Classical Tongue: Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); Yosef Lang, *Daber ivrit: Hayei Eliezer Ben-Yehuda*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsvi, 2008).

and eventually topping his career with the editorship of such important Yishuv newspapers as the *Do'ar ha-yom* and the *Palestine Weekly*. He was to put his oratorical skills in many languages into use following a request from the Jewish National Fund to go abroad on lecture tours for the Zionist cause, a job that further boosted his image abroad, where he rubbed shoulders with the VIPs of the diaspora Jewry.<sup>26</sup>

Of all people, it was this man who proposed to write Hebrew with Roman characters, and put his name at risk and gambled with his financial resources to carry out his plans for romanization. After many adventures along those lines in his youth, Ben-Avi's first concrete action was to publish a biography of his father, titled *Avi* (My Father), in romanized Hebrew in 1927.<sup>27</sup> That initial attempt drew the ire of the Jewish literati in the Yishuv, who nipped the project in the bud by their deadly silence. The following year, no doubt encouraged by the news coming from Turkey, he briefly experimented with offering a Hebrew supplement in Roman alphabet to the *Palestine Weekly*. The first issue of *Ha-shavu'a ha-palestini*, as the supplement was called, appeared on 14 December 1928 and continued until May 1929 in twenty issues altogether. Members of the Revisionist Zionist Organization in the Yishuv rallied round his cause, and the organization's legendary leader Vladimir Jabotinsky emerged as the second best-known advocate for the romanization of Hebrew script.<sup>28</sup> Yet, the supplement failed to create a momentum, with about three hundred copies sold in the Yishuv and abroad, even though a few first issues were distributed gratis. Ben-Avi made a final, and more serious, attempt in 1933, this time by publishing an independent weekly journal in romanized Hebrew. The weekly *Deror* appeared from 17 November 1933 to 25 March 1934 in sixteen issues, and, if we trust Ben-Avi's somewhat inflated numbers, the journal's sales stabilized around 1,400 copies from the third issue onward, several hundred of those being subscriptions from abroad. Not surprisingly, the *Deror* met the same fate as its predecessor and had to be closed down at enormous cost to its owner. The damage done, however, was not just financial. Ben-Avi was compelled to admit defeat, facing the Yishuv's indifference, if not outright animosity, toward his romanization plan

<sup>26</sup> Aytürk, "Attempts at Romanizing," pp. 628–629.

<sup>27</sup> Ittamar Ben-Avi, *Avi* (Yeruḥalaym: Hassolel, 5689 [1927] X Le-hatzharat Balfur). This and following references to Ben-Avi's works follow his original transliteration.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Zeev Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Taryag milim*, autograph manuscript, Jabotinsky Archive, Metsudat Zeev, Tel Aviv, No. ⚭ 1/12/6/1; Zeev Jabotinsky, "Otiyot," *Do'ar ha-yom* (5 April 1929); and Shlomo Haramati, "Ha-lashon ha-ivrit be-mishnato shel Zeev Jabotinsky," *Leshonenu la'am* 32 (1981): 132.

and, apart from a pamphlet<sup>29</sup> he penned later on, did not ever have the courage or the means to push his schemes through again.

The idea of romanization briefly surfaced in Israel one more time during the 1960s and the early 1970s. Its new advocates were the brothers Yonatan Ratosh and Uzzi Ornan, who are also known as the standard-bearers of the Canaanite movement in Israel. Though small in number, the Canaanites made a disproportional impact on Israeli literary and intellectual debates owing to the controversial nature of their ideas. They basically claimed that ancient Hebrews shared the same religious beliefs (polytheism) and cultural values with the Phoenicians and other peoples of the Levant, and only later did a segment of the Hebrew people, the so-called Jews, set themselves apart by adopting a monotheistic belief system. The cultural distinctiveness of the Jews was buttressed in due course by their diasporic existence and, hence, when they wanted to return to the land of their ancestors, they were perceived as alien invaders by the native peoples. The way out of this conundrum, according to Ratosh, was to give up all forms of Jewish particularism, especially Judaism as a religion, then transform Jews into secular Hebrews and blend into the local terrain.<sup>30</sup> Both Ratosh and Ornan wrote articles in the Hebrew press in this vein criticizing the square alphabet as a relic of the diaspora and an instrument of maintaining the hold of religion over Hebraic culture. The square alphabet, they claimed, needed to be replaced by the Roman alphabet, which is the successor to the ancient writing system of the Levant.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, their proposal for romanization was met with wall-to-wall condemnation in Israel, not only as a consequence of opposition to orthographic changes but because the Israeli public considered their ideology as a form of assimilation and Levantinization.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to the Hebrew case, romanization of the Turkish script was not the handiwork of a tiny group of individuals, but as a project it preoccupied two generations of Ottoman and republican intelligentsia. The debate on script reform started in the mid nineteenth century and

<sup>29</sup> Ittamar ben-Avi, *Yeshāyāūt (Isaianism): Toséphet La "Qëraon" Ġmm Pirqë Tanak' b Otiyot Latiniyot* (Natanyah-Hači shëbvet Menashé: n.p., 5699 [1938]). This pamphlet included portions of the Torah in the Roman alphabet.

<sup>30</sup> J. S. Diamond, *Homeland or Holy Land? The 'Canaanite' Critique of Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Yaakov Shavit, *The New Hebrew Nation* (London: Frank Cass, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Raizen, "Romanization of the Hebrew Script," pp. 41–61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

continued almost nonstop until the demise of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>33</sup> While the majority view was predisposed toward the reform of the Arabic alphabet and making it more suitable for writing Turkish, a small but vocal group, the so-called *Garbcılar* (Westernizers), openly advocated a shift to a Roman-based alphabet among other reforms, which were meant to make Muslim Turks look more Western visually and to anchor Turkish identity firmly in Europe.<sup>34</sup> The ideas of this faction can be said to have had a great impact on the Kemalist reform project, which changed the face of Turkey from 1923 to 1938. As part of that reform project, Mustafa Kemal, the founding president of the republic (known as Atatürk after 1934) did not hide his intention to romanize the Turkish script as well. Following intense public debates on this question from 1924 to 1927, and regardless of the hostility of the vast majority of the Turkish intelligentsia and bureaucracy to the very idea, the Language Council was established in May 1928, with its first commission being the preparation of a Roman-based alphabet for Turkish.<sup>35</sup> The working report of the Language Council and its recommended alphabet were endorsed by the president in August 1928. Finally, the Turkish parliament discussed and ratified the new alphabet in November 1928, passing Law No. 1353 on the Adoption and Implementation of the Turkish Letters.<sup>36</sup> In line with the official policy of language planning,<sup>37</sup> the law stipulated a step-by-step but rapid transition to the new alphabet according to fixed deadlines and prohibited the use of Arabic characters for any purpose after June 1930.

Simultaneously, the government took measures to combat the after-shocks of script change: on the one hand, it contributed financially to major newspapers, journals, and publishing houses to keep them afloat as they faced a drastic decline in their readership; on the other

<sup>33</sup> Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, "Arap Harflerinin İslahı ve Değiştirilmesi Hakkında İlk Teşebbüsler ve Neticeleri (1862–1884)," *Belleten* 17 (1953): 223–249; Nathalie Clayer, "Le premier journal de langue turque en caractères latins: *Esas* (Manastır/Bitola, 1911)," *Turcica* 36 (2004): 253–264; Hüseyin Yorulmaz, ed., *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Alfabe Tartışmaları* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1995); Nurettin Gülmez, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Harfler Üzerine Tartışmalar* (İstanbul: Alfa Aktüel, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Şükrü Hanioglu, "Garbcılar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic," *Studia Islamica* 86 (1997): 133–158.

<sup>35</sup> İlker Aytürk, "The First Episode of Language Reform in Republican Turkey: The Language Council from 1926 to 1931," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser. 18 (2008): 275–293.

<sup>36</sup> The exhaustive, but somewhat complimentary, study on the Turkish alphabet reform is Bilâl Şimşir, *Türk Yazı Devrimi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> R. L. Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).



FIGURE 2. In this ironic specimen of Islamic calligraphy, which appeared in the Istanbul daily *Akşam* (8 November 1928), the Turkish cartoonist Cemal Nadir captures the exodus of the Arabic letters from Turkey. The caravan leader, the letter ‘ayn, sports a fez, similarly outlawed in 1925. The cartoon is aptly titled *Hicret*, the Hegira. Courtesy of *Akşam*.

hand, a country-wide literacy campaign was inaugurated in order to create a critical mass of people who could read and write in the new Turkish script. The measures taken to buttress the reform paid off in the long run. The alphabet reform, which started out as probably the most disputed Kemalist reform among many, became progressively the most solid by all accounts. Even extremist right-wingers or Islamists in contemporary Turkey, who occasionally toy with the idea of undoing aspects of the Kemalist legacy, seem to have accepted the Roman-based Turkish alphabet as an unchangeable fact of life.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In a seminal article, Christina Eira analyzed the motivations underlying orthography selection and proposed a model, based on discursive fields such as the scientific, the political, and the religious, that determines the tone and direction of change in script reforms.<sup>38</sup> Eira’s model, however, has a broad spectrum and is meant to apply to a wide-range of cases of orthography selection. The model that I suggest in this article, on the other hand, focuses solely on cases of romanization and departs from Eira’s in its greater emphasis on social, cultural, economic, and religious factors. To put it differently, the aim of this article is to analyze the factors that either create an environment conducive for romanization or make its implementation impossible by convincing policy mak-

<sup>38</sup> Christina Eira, “Authority and Discourse: Towards a Model for Orthography Selection,” *Written Language and Literacy* 1 (1998): 171–224.

ers and/or the masses otherwise. I categorize those factors according to whether they are favorable to romanization or not and also distinguish between what I call technical-infrastructure factors and the political-cultural ones. The factors that facilitate romanization, then, are:

- Technical-infrastructure factors:
  - Harmony between the language in question and the Roman alphabet, which provides economy of writing.
  - Low level of literacy in the rival script, which substantially reduces opposition to romanization and the number of people who are negatively affected by script change.
  - Negligible or tolerably low economic costs of script change.
  - Past experience of script change, which can make it easier to overcome the trauma by reference to precedents.
- Political-cultural factors:
  - Authoritarian or totalitarian regime, which can enforce script change by decree and silence opposition to it.
  - Environment of revolutionary fervor and desire for a clean break with the past.
  - Absence of canonical texts in the rival script, which enjoy national or religious significance and devotion.
  - Desire for rapid Westernization, which implies positive attitudes toward the West within the ruling elite or at least a grudging respect to its culture and influence.
  - Past experience of colonial rule and introduction of the Roman alphabet by missionaries and colonial administrators.
  - Absence of large minority groups, who might otherwise stick to the rival script on nationalistic or religious grounds.

Conversely, the factors that persuade policy makers and the masses against romanization, or inhibit its implementation even when such an attempt was made in that direction, are:

- Technical-infrastructure factors:
  - Structural dissonance between the Roman alphabet and the language in question, resulting in inefficiency and preventing economy of writing.
  - High level of literacy in the rival script, in which case large segments of the society are upset should a new script be adopted.
  - High economic costs of adaptation to a Roman-based alphabet.
  - No historical memory of a previous script change.
- Political-cultural factors:
  - Democratic and participatory regime with the typical features of polyarchies, such as a strong civil society, an independent media, and freedoms of speech and protest.
  - Environment of stability, which is legitimized by reverence for national or imperial past.

- Availability of canonical texts in the rival script, wherein the religious or national identity of the speech community is anchored.
- Widespread feeling of distrust toward the West within the ruling elite or a firm belief in cultural parity with it.
- Absence of foreign intervention in whatever form for introducing the Roman alphabet.
- Existence of large minority groups, who refuse to give up the rival script on nationalistic or religious grounds.

All these factors are scraped from a variety of cases, and not all need apply to each and every case. But one can reasonably argue that a combination of some of these factors is at play in all attempts at romanization. Indeed, a particular combination of those factors made romanization of the Turkish script possible in 1928, while another ruled it out in Mandatory Palestine.

#### LANGUAGE AND ITS SCRIPT: FIT OR MISFIT?

Writing systems have always been language-specific. When designing a script for its language, a speech community takes into account morphological peculiarities of its own language and the resulting system clearly reflects this effort. Problems did and do occur, however, if a language-specific script is adopted by other speech communities; problems will be fewer if the adoptive community speaks a cognate of the language of the inventors of the script and more in case the languages in question are structurally different. A new script is less likely to win widespread acceptance if it is not more convenient than its long-established rival. What is meant by convenience is, of course, writing with fewer and simpler characters. This can be achieved in the case of romanization if the language in question lends itself to phonetic writing with great ease. The economy of writing has obvious advantages, such as reducing the time schoolchildren devote to learning the writing system and facilitating the job of publishers, who now use fewer characters. It would also be especially helpful if the new writing system is more condensed and can cut back on the space necessary for writing compared to its rival.

The current Hebrew alphabet, the so-called square script, has been in continuous use since around the sixth century B.C.E., when it replaced the Old Hebrew writing system.<sup>39</sup> The square script is a defec-

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Paleography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982).

tive alphabet, or more precisely, a consonantal script. All of its twenty-two letters are consonants, whose exact pronunciation has been passed on from generation to generation by oral tradition.<sup>40</sup> The consonantal character of the alphabet is probably derived from the peculiarity of the Hebrew verb, which always appears in the form of three- or four-consonant roots.<sup>41</sup> However the verb is conjugated and whatever grammatical shape it takes, the consonantal alphabet would always lay bare the skeleton at its core, making it much easier to recognize the root of the verb. In contrast, a full alphabet with vowels, such as the Roman, conceals the consonantal root. One is hard put to discover the affinity between the verbs *ibed*, *avad*, *ne'evad*, and *hit'abed* when different constructs of the root אבד are romanized. The same root, however, sticks out in the square alphabet and cannot fail to catch the eye: אבד, אבד, נאבד, התאבד. This is one of the reasons why the square alphabet is structurally more suitable to the Hebrew language than the Roman alphabet. Furthermore, bringing in the vowels usually doubles the space needed for writing most words.<sup>42</sup> One final advantage of the square alphabet is that, in being a consonantal alphabet, it allows room for a variety of pronunciations, while maintaining the visual uniformity of the text at hand. The Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish communities, for example, had different traditions of pronunciation (שבת as *shabbes* or *shabbat*), and a plan for romanization in the 1920s would have imposed an uncomfortable decision about the “correct” way to pronounce.<sup>43</sup> Keeping the square alphabet, in other words, made it possible to tiptoe around this question and preserve the textual unity among all Jewish communities around the world.

The vast majority of the Turkic-speaking communities, dispersed from Inner Asia to the Balkans, adopted the Arabic alphabet after

<sup>40</sup> Page H. Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 1–3; Marc Zvi Brettler, *Biblical Hebrew for Students of Modern Israeli Hebrew* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 5–15.

<sup>41</sup> E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982); Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Ben-Avi was an amateur linguist only and had no mastery over principles of phonology. He therefore experienced enormous difficulties in assigning graphemes to Hebrew phonemes and was compelled to change his system of transliteration much too often. The title of the supplement he published, for example, was changed several times, appearing as *ha Šavu'a ha Palestini*, *ha Šavuja ha Palestini*, *ha Shavuaj ha Palestini*, *ha Shavuaa ha Palestini*, and *ha Shavua ha Palestini*.

<sup>43</sup> This point was raised by one of Ben-Avi's critics in the diaspora; see “Press Extracts: Hebrew Transliteration Again—From the ‘Jewish Chronicle,’” *The Palestine Weekly*, 5 April 1929, p. 364.



their conversion to Islam from the ninth century onward.<sup>44</sup> While their previous scripts were more harmonious with Turkish phonemes, the Arabic alphabet, adopted for religious reasons, functioned as a straight-jacket that smothered the Turkish phonetic repertoire. Turkish is distinguished, for instance, by its wide range of vowels—eight in modern Turkish: *a*, *e*, *ı*, *i*, *o*, *ö*, *u*, *ü*—but those had to be expressed with only three characters from the Arabic grapheme inventory, making it quite difficult to read a text accurately. The word اولو, to cite one example, can be alternatively read as *ulu* (great), *avlu* (courtyard), or *ölü* (dead); the correct pronunciation is to be decided each time from the context. A further problem was the complete redundancy of quite a few Arabic characters in the Turkish writing system, even if they had to be retained for writing words of Arabic and foreign origin.<sup>45</sup> In the face of these problems, it was impossible to justify the preservation of the Arabic alphabet for writing Turkish on grounds of expediency.

The very impreciseness of the Arabic alphabet when writing Turkish, however, was perceived as an asset, ironically, by the pan-Turkist opponents of the alphabet reform in Turkey at the time. Especially the pan-Turkist émigrés from Russia aimed at uniting all branches of the Turkic world under the same political umbrella one day and, hence, tried to project an image of cultural unity as the first step toward political unification. Just as the Hebrew alphabet camouflaged the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic pronunciations, the Arabic alphabet, too, bridged the vernacular gap between the Western and Eastern branches of the Turkic world, whose dialects bifurcated in the eleventh century C.E. Pan-Turkists, such as Zeki Velidî Togan and Musa Carullah, considered the Soviet policy of romanization in the 1920s and 1930s as a communist conspiracy, whose real aim was to destroy the alphabetic unity of Muslim Turks in the Soviet Union and to elevate each ethnic community to the level of a recognized nationality, distinguished from each other by their disparate writing systems. If a newspaper published in İstanbul, on the other hand, should still be comprehensible in faraway Ufa or Tashkent, the pan-Turkists con-

<sup>44</sup> Gülmez, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e*, pp. 4–10; Ahmet Bican Ercilasun, *Bugünkü Türk Alfabeleri* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, n.d.).

<sup>45</sup> How the Arabic alphabet led to many equivocal readings is described in detail in Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 27–28. There is an overall agreement in the field on the incongruity between the Arabic alphabet and the Turkish language; see Kâmile İmer, *Türkiye'de Dil Planlaması: Türk Dil Devrimi* (Ankara: T. C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 2001), pp. 55–62.

tended, the Arabic alphabet had to remain in use with a few modifications at most.<sup>46</sup>

When they spoke out against romanization in Turkey, however, their arguments fell on deaf ears, because policy makers in Turkey had a totally different vision of what constituted the Turkish nation. Both the trauma of the loss of empire in 1918 and the necessity of maintaining good neighborly relations with the irritable Soviet Russia had caused the Kemalist-republican elite in Turkey to be extremely circumspect in its relationship with the so-called outside Turks and to concentrate nation-building efforts within the borders of Turkey proper only.<sup>47</sup> The pan-Turkist case for preserving the Arabic alphabet, therefore, did not make an impact precisely because the Kemalist definition of nationhood had already left Turkic communities in the Soviet Union out, respecting the dictates of Realpolitik.

### THE LITERACY LEVEL

The second independent variable that has an effect on the success of romanization is the level of literacy. Since the invention of writing, the ability to read and write has always been interpreted as a form of social power, which bestows a special status on the literati.<sup>48</sup> The byproduct of this special status and a subjective belief in the sophistication and refinement of one's own script is usually a type of conservatism that favors the established system against orthographic innovations and wholesale changes. As Florian Coulmas put it, "Once written norms are established, they attract emotional attachment"; this attachment is so strong indeed that "discussions about the reform of a given orthography or script often resemble a religious war more than a rational dis-

<sup>46</sup> Zeki Velidi, "Türklerde Hars Buhranı," *Türk Yurdu*, no. 24 (1926): 494–509; Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Kadimle Cedit Arasında Musa Cârullah: Hayatı, Eserleri, Fikirleri* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2005), pp. 113–114.

<sup>47</sup> Füsün Üstel, *İmparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği: Türk Ocakları, 1912–1931* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1997), pp. 321–384; Günay Göksu Özdoğan, "Turan'dan 'Bozkurt'a: Tek Parti Döneminde Türkçülük, 1931–1946" (İstanbul: İletişim, 2001), pp. 89–177; Süleyman Tüzün, *İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türkiye'de Dış Türkler Tartışmaları, 1939–1945* (İsparta: Fakülte Kitabevi, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> James Collins and Richard Blot, *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Roger Chartier, "The Practical Impact of Writing," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 3, *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Roger Chartier et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1989), pp. 111–159.

course. . . ."<sup>49</sup> The backlash against the very modest reform of German orthography after 1996, for example, attests to the resilience of such feelings in the German-speaking world.<sup>50</sup> As a rule, therefore, it is possible to argue that the higher the level of literacy in a speech community, the lower the likelihood of any kind of script or orthography change being implemented successfully.

Hardly any two speech communities could be as different in this regard as the Hebrew speakers in the Yishuv and the Turkish speakers in Turkey in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Jewish communities in the diaspora had historically been more literate compared to their neighbors as a result of the Talmudic directive<sup>51</sup> to study the Jewish sacred texts; Jewish religious services at home or at the synagogue, too, demanded at least a basic level of reading and writing skills, which could be attained free of charge at community-sponsored schools.<sup>52</sup> As a result of this communal emphasis on education, an almost universal level of literacy in Hebrew (and maybe Aramaic) was achieved among Jewish males, with relatively high percentages among females, as well. In addition to those in the diaspora who were well versed in Hebrew letters, a new generation of native Hebrew speakers arose in the Yishuv, whose numbers probably exceeded 100,000 by the early 1930s. Indeed, the Jewish community under the mandatory regime established a comprehensive framework of Hebrew educational institutions, ranging from kindergartens and gymnasiums to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup> In other words, romanization of the alphabet entailed a

<sup>49</sup> Florian Coulmas, *The Writing Systems of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 241.

<sup>50</sup> Nils Langer, "The Rechtschreibreform: A Lesson in Linguistic Purism," *German as a Foreign Language* no. 3 (2000): 15–35; Sally Johnson, "On the Origin of Linguistic Norms: Orthography, Ideology and the First Constitutional Challenge to the 1996 Reform of German," *Language in Society* 31 (2002): 549–576.

<sup>51</sup> Baba Batra 21a.

<sup>52</sup> David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe, 1789–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 130; Shaul Stampfer, "Heder Study, Knowledge of Torah, and the Maintenance of Social Stratification in Traditional East European Society," *Studies in Jewish Education* 3 (1988): 271–289; Iris Parush, "The Politics of Literacy: Women and Foreign Languages in Jewish Society of 19th-Century Eastern Europe," *Modern Judaism* 15 (1995): 183–206; Colette Sirat, *Writing as Handiwork: A History of Handwriting in Mediterranean and Western Culture* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), pp. 82–88.

<sup>53</sup> For an extensive overview of the Jewish education in Mandatory Palestine, see *The System of Education of the Jewish Community in Palestine: Report of the Commission of Enquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies* (London: HMSO, 1946); Aharon F. Kleinberger, *Schools and Progress in Israel* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969), pp. 1–37; and Rahel Elboim-Dror, *Ha-himukh ha-ivri be-erets yisra'el*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsvi, 1990), pp. 311–385.

reversal of the entire system and re-educating a generation of fully literate native Hebrew speakers in the new alphabet. This was definitely a nonstarter from the point of view of the speech community.

The level of literacy in the Republic of Turkey was certainly lower on the eve of the alphabet reform. Being a premodern, agricultural society, the Ottomans did not feel the need to equip large masses with the ability to read and write, a quality that is generally associated with industrialization and modernity.<sup>54</sup> Attempts at modernization during the long reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) and the establishment of a significant number of schools based on Western models, alongside the traditional education system, increased the percentage of literate Ottoman citizens considerably, but still did not leave an admirable legacy to the young Turkish republic.<sup>55</sup> The accurate percentage of literate citizens in the first decade of the new regime is difficult to guess, because such detailed statistics were not prepared at the time. According to the first general census of the republic in 1927, some 1,111,000 people out of a total population of approximately 12,000,000 were registered as having reading skills only in the Arabic alphabet.<sup>56</sup> Thus, it is safe to argue that only 3–8 percent of the total population was fully literate, having reading and writing skills simultaneously, while the percentage of literate women within the aggregate number was definitely miniscule. Under those circumstances, the romanizers could easily claim that a fresh beginning with the Roman alphabet would not hurt the vast majority of the public; on the contrary, the argument went, the low level of literacy was caused by the difficulty of learning the Arabic script, a situation that could be improved greatly with the adoption of the more suitable and easier Roman letters.

## PAST EXPERIENCE OF SCRIPT CHANGE

Continuous use of a nationally or religiously significant writing system, without historical breaks or interventions, is a factor that consolidates

<sup>54</sup> For new developments in the study of literacy in the Islamic societies, see Nelly Hanna, "Literacy and the 'Great Divide' in the Islamic World, 1300–1800," *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007): 175–193.

<sup>55</sup> Osman Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif Tarihi*, 5 parts in 3 vols. (İstanbul: Osmanbey Matbaası, 1939); Necdet Sakaoğlu, *Osmanlı'dan Günümüze Eğitim Tarihi* (İstanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2003); Benjamin Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, Education and the State in Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Başvekalet İstatistik Umum Müdürlüğü, *Millet Mektepleri Faaliyeti İstatistiği, 1928–33* (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1934), introduction.

the symbolic power of the script and its resilience over the long run. This is probably one of the main reasons why romanization has faced such stiff resistance in India, China, and Japan, all three being countries with an unbroken historical record of local scripts. Conversely, past experience of shifts from one writing system to another has the opposite effect of detracting from the symbolic value of the writing system in use and relegating it to the role of a tool only for expressing one's thoughts, especially if those shifts are recent and etched in the memory of the speech community.

Historically, both Hebrew and Turkish have been written with multiple scripts. From the eleventh to the sixth centuries B.C.E., ancient Israelites employed what we today call the Old Hebrew script, a derivative of the Old North Semitic alphabet.<sup>57</sup> This was then replaced by the present square alphabet under the influence of Aramaic, spread by the advancing Assyrians.<sup>58</sup> After the change, the former characters had a limited function in ritual texts only, and one could occasionally glimpse them until the first century C.E. When Itamar Ben-Avi suggested romanization of the Hebrew writing system in the 1920s and 1930s, however, more than two millennia had passed since that previous script change, and the Jews of the Yishuv and the diaspora had only a dim memory of the event. Likewise, the first documents in any Turkic language, the Orkhun Inscriptions of the eighth century C.E., were written with Turkish runes, which were abandoned in the next few centuries.<sup>59</sup> Between the seventh and eleventh centuries Turkic peoples experimented with a number of scripts, adopting the writing systems of lands that they inhabited.<sup>60</sup> From the tenth century onward, however, the majority came to use the Arabic alphabet as a result of their conversion to Islam.<sup>61</sup>

This relatively late adoption of the square and Arabic alphabets did not prevent them from enjoying unparalleled authority among both the

<sup>57</sup> Ada Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy and Design* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1997); R. Gonen, *Toldot ha-ketav ha-ivri* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1970); David Diringer, *The Story of the Aleph Bet* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960).

<sup>58</sup> Nicholas Ostler, *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 78–86.

<sup>59</sup> Marcel Erdal, *A Grammar of Old Turkic* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), introduction and pp. 37–136.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., and Hatice Şirin User, *Başlangıcından Günümüze Türk Yazı Sistemleri* (Ankara: Akçağ, 2006), pp. 26–84.

<sup>61</sup> User, *Başlangıcından Günümüze*, pp. 97–101.

Jews and the Turks. Reverence for the square characters was ingrained in the Talmud and Jewish lore, as many examples attest.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet had become significant in Jewish mysticism, in which the kabbalistic tradition attributed secret meanings to every letter. Each was assumed to represent a spiritual essence, an emanation from God, and their particular combinations therefore were expected to bring about changes in the cosmos and alter the course of life.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet served as numerical signs since there is no separate Hebrew numeral system. This gave birth to gematria, a tradition of associating words whose numerical values are the same, to reveal information about the future and the coming of the messiah.<sup>64</sup> Correspondingly, the Arabic alphabet commanded the respect of the Turks in being the “letters of the Koran.” Men and women were named after Arabic letters or combinations of them, for example, Elif, Mim, Taha, or Yasin. Calligraphy became the most respected branch of art in the Ottoman Empire, as calligraphers of repute ranked high in terms of social prestige.<sup>65</sup> Numerical values associated with the Arabic letters—similar to gematria—paved the way for the unique art of *tarih düşürme*, that is, marking dates of births, deaths, or inaugurations of public buildings by composing chronograms.<sup>66</sup> Generally speaking, the Hebrew square and the Arabic alphabets had indeed come to fulfill an important social role in the daily lives of Jews and Turks. Even though one could point at previous changes of script in both societies, those precedents did not make it easier at all to heal the trauma of a prospective romanization, given the very embeddedness of the traditional writing systems in the social reality of the Jews and Turks.

<sup>62</sup> Examples from the Talmud can be found in Sanh. 21b, Ber. 55a, Pes. 87b, Av. Zar. 18a, Sanh. 102b; and Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews: From the Creation to Jacob*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 5–6.

<sup>63</sup> “Alphabet, Hebrew, in Midrash, Talmud, and Kabbalah,” *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*; Johanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), pp. 129–158.

<sup>64</sup> “Gematria,” *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

<sup>65</sup> Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 4–7, 476–533; Ali Alparslan, *Osmanlı Hat Sanatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: YKY, 1999); İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Son Hattatlar* (İstanbul: Maarif Basımevi, 1955), pp. 1–7.

<sup>66</sup> İsmail Yakıt, *Türk İslam Kültüründe Ebced Hesabı ve Tarih Düşürme* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 1992); Muharrem Mercanligil, *Ebced Hesabı* (Ankara: Doğu Matbaası, 1960).

## REGIME TYPE

The political system in a country where romanization is being contemplated is arguably one of the most important independent variables that determine the future course of the project. We may safely assume that there is an inverse relationship between democracy and the success of romanization. It would be infinitely more difficult to romanize the script in regimes that are closer to the polyarchical model, with separation of powers, free and fair elections, a strong civil society, and all appertaining freedoms and liberties.<sup>67</sup> In polyarchies, even minor changes in the received orthography would be met with resistance on the grounds that spelling or the writing system is a private affair and that the state or any other public committee cannot be permitted to make an authoritative decision about them. If such official attempts would nevertheless be made, opposition to them would not be confined to a few eccentrics, but large segments of the public would make use of their right of organization and protest, and challenge those attempts either by civil disobedience or through legal procedures.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, nondemocratic regimes with authoritarian or totalitarian governments do not take public opinion into account and can compel their citizens to accept romanization by fiat.

During the period when romanization of the Hebrew script was proposed, the Yishuv had a very intricate system of government. After its takeover of the region from the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain received the mandate to govern Palestine, and the mandatory charter was approved by the League of Nations in 1923. The charter designated Great Britain as the mandatory power, but allowed local Jewish and Arab communities to organize in a communal fashion.<sup>69</sup> As per the requirements of the charter, the Jewish community of the Mandate of Palestine held regular, multiparty elections from 1920 onward to elect

<sup>67</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Langer, "Rechtschreibreform"; and Johnson, "On the Origin of Linguistic Reforms."

<sup>69</sup> Hanah Weiner, "Ha-mediniyut ha-tsiyonit be-turkiyah ad-1914," in *Toldot ha-yishuv ha-yehudi be-erets yisra'el me-'az ha-alijah ha-rishonah: Ha-tekuifah ha-otmanit*, pt. 1, ed. Israel Kolatt (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1989), pp. 257–349; Israel Kolatt, "The Organization of the Jewish Population of Palestine and the Development of Its Political Consciousness before World War I," in *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 211–245; Moshe Burstein, *Self-Government of the Jews in Palestine since 1900* (Tel Aviv: Bloch, 1934); J. C. Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950), pp. 17–26, 38–50.

an assembly (Knesset Yisra'el), which in turn selected an executive committee (Va'ad Le'umi) from within its own ranks. Alongside those national organs, the Jewish Agency was founded in 1929 for the representation of all parties in the Yishuv, Zionist or non-Zionist, and this institution assumed decisive importance after 1936. At the same time, these local Jewish institutions of the Yishuv had to collaborate with the World Zionist Organization, founded in 1897 by Theodor Herzl and located in the diaspora. Therefore, the emerging Jewish polity in Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s was bicephalous and weak: having two centers of power, one in the diaspora and the other in the Yishuv, the emerging state was based on a convoluted power-sharing mechanism, which checked its authority and capabilities. Furthermore, the Yishuv authorities had to report to the British High Commissioner in Palestine and cooperate with the Arab sector, as well. All things considered, it would be best to call the Jewish system of government from the 1920s to 1948 a quasi-state<sup>70</sup> or a state-in-the-making. Combined with respect for democratic procedures and the multiparty system, the relative weakness of this political structure paved the way for a strong civil society in the Yishuv. These factors made it an unlikely atmosphere for romanization, for in order to succeed in the consensual politics of the Yishuv, romanization had to be accepted by all factions and parties, a condition that did not obtain.

In contrast, the republican regime of Turkey was at its strongest on the eve of romanization in 1928. First, the republic was founded on the remains of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues from the Ottoman military and bureaucracy. The new regime was the heir to the Ottoman institutions that it took over intact with a smooth administrative transition after the dissolution of the empire.<sup>71</sup> Second, although Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues wanted to portray the new regime as a fresh beginning and a clear departure from the past, the republic also inherited a strong state tradition<sup>72</sup> from its predeces-

<sup>70</sup> Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, *Origins of the Israeli Polity: Palestine under the Mandate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> See the collection of articles in L. Carl Brown, ed., *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>72</sup> Metin Heper, *The State Tradition in Turkey* (n.p.: Eothen Press, 1985); Engin Deniz Akarlı, "The State as a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon and Political Participation in Turkey," in *Political Participation in Turkey: Historical Background and Present Problems*, ed. Engin Deniz Akarlı and Gabriel Ben-Dor (İstanbul: Boğaziçi University Publications, 1975), pp. 135–138; Ergun Özbudun, "The Continuing Ottoman Legacy and the State Tradition in the Middle East," in Brown, *Imperial Legacy*, pp. 133–157.



sor. Characteristics of this state tradition since the Tanzimat period had been a tendency toward centralization, elimination of rival authorities and institutions, and a desire to bring uniformity and standardization. Third, the Ottomans' strong state tradition regarded modernization and Westernization as the only means of survival in a Darwinian international system. Kemalist Turkey inherited those very same characteristics in the early republican period: Atatürk's Turkey did not resemble the fascist regimes of the interwar period, but it certainly inclined toward authoritarianism.<sup>73</sup> Turkey held parliamentary elections from the beginning of the republic, but apart from two brief intervals, only a single party, the Republican People's Party, was allowed to participate in them. There was effective state control over the civil society and the press, and opposition to the regime and the Kemalist ideology was punished if it became too loud and attracted too many adherents. The nature of the political system thus facilitated the transition to a Roman-based alphabet by silencing widespread opposition to it. Arguments to the contrary were allowed to be expressed and published between 1926 and 1928, but once the official decision to romanize the Turkish script was announced in 1928, the opposition evaporated almost overnight.

#### TRADITION VERSUS REVOLUTION AND THE WESTERN MODEL

There is no incentive for broad orthographic change or script conversion in societies in which there is no desire for profound rejuvenation. All successful cases of romanization were preceded or accompanied either by deep social transformation, religious conversion, or secularization of the speech communities. Revolutionaries aim at the comprehensive transformation of their societies and might target language and script, as well, if those two are blamed for the society's problems and perceived backwardness. More precisely, romanization as a form of script change is an outcome of revolutionary ideologies. If the ideologues of change want to abandon an unwanted past and reorient their nation toward the Western world, as some African and Asian nationalists did, for example, then romanization might gain momentum for

<sup>73</sup> Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Tek-Parti Yönetiminin Kurulması, 1923–1931* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1999); Levent Köker, *Modernleşme, Kemalizm ve Demokrasi* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1993), pp. 211–237; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 274–276, 290; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 52–71.

providing more efficient channels of cultural exchange and Westernization. On the other hand, if the revolutionaries identify degeneration of their former civilization as the source of present-day problems and work forcefully to revive the nation's golden age, then transformation might take an entirely different path. In the latter case, Western powers or civilization are not necessarily regarded as models to be emulated; rather, revolutionaries would hark back to the nation's past to find or often invent national symbols to establish a new order. In the process of formulating the new cultural ethos, indigenous, so-called authentic symbols should be expected to take precedence over the markers of Western culture. In the time period under consideration, both the Jewish community in the Yishuv and republican Turkey were gripped by revolutionary fervor; but a closer examination shows that vectors of change in the two cases were widely divergent.

The Zionist Jews of the Yishuv were trying to bring their nation back onto the political map and recreate a Jewish polity after a hiatus of nearly two millennia. An essential component of this political transformation was the social transformation of the Jews, or rather the diaspora Jews, into "new Jews" or Hebrews.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the Zionist movement foresaw a political as well as an individual restoration of the Jews to their former, ancient self. The "new Jews" were supposed to be the antithesis of the Jew in the diaspora: they would be strong and masculine,<sup>75</sup> would live in rural settlements and cultivate the land,<sup>76</sup> would not submit to other nations but take their fate into their own hands,<sup>77</sup> and, finally, would speak the language of their ancestors. Return to the language of the Israelites, which was accomplished at the beginning of

<sup>74</sup> Shmuel Almog, *Zionism and History: The Rise of a New Jewish Consciousness* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), pp. 84–176; Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chaps. 1–2.

<sup>75</sup> George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Hanover, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 1993), pp. 161–175; Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), pp. 118–144; Michael Berkowitz, *The Jewish Self-Image in the West* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 71–79.

<sup>76</sup> Henry Near, *The Kibbutz Movement: A History*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 7–57; Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 369–386.

<sup>77</sup> Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Jacob Katz, *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), pp. 89–103; Michael Walzer et al., *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1, *Authority* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 463–523.

the twentieth century with the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, was an essential component of this transformation.<sup>78</sup> Yet, the Zionist revolution, a sociopolitical and cultural movement that made Hebrew the daily language of the Yishuv, spared the traditional square script and did not consider it an obstacle before nationalist aspirations. This was not because the proponents of romanization, Itamar Ben-Avi and Vladimir Z. Jabotinsky, were marginal figures who could not disseminate their views effectively. On the contrary, both were well-known, if controversial, figures in the Yishuv and the diaspora, one as a prominent journalist and the other as the leader of one of the main currents of the Zionist movement. Thus, if their propaganda for romanization was not taken seriously, we must attempt at understanding why their message failed to convince the Zionist elite and decision makers on the one hand, and could not win hearts and minds of Hebrew speakers in the Yishuv on the other.

The answer to this question can be found in the Zionist ideology: the strongest claim of Zionism was to fashion Hebrews out of the diaspora Jews and to make them a living nation once again on their ancestral land. This meant the rejection of the diasporic existence of the Jews and creation of a Hebraic speech community and government in Erets Israel. The persistence of this powerful theme of national revival obliged nearly all Zionists to be respectful toward the cultural symbols of the past, which certainly included the square script. If Jews, or rather Hebrews, were to return back to diplomatic history one more time, the traditional characters of the Hebrew alphabet would serve as one of the most potent symbols of the connection between the nation's present and its past and help Zionist Jews lay claim to the riches of Jewish heritage as well as legitimize their return after a long period of absence. In this respect, the religious texts that dated back to the ancient Israelites and the square alphabet that has traditionally been used to put them in writing enjoyed great prestige among the observant as well as

<sup>78</sup> Natan Efrati, "Tehiyat ha-lashon ha-ivrit ve-ha-tenu'ah ha-tsiyonit," *Leshonenu la-'am* 48 (1997): 93–134; Shlomo Karmi, *Am ehad ve-safah ahat* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1997); Benjamin Harshav, "Masah al tehiyat ha-lashon," *Alpayim*, no. 2 (1990): 8–54; Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993); Ron Kuzar, *Hebrew and Zionism: A Discourse Analytic Cultural Study* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001); Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt, eds., *The Great Transition: The Recovery of the Lost Centers of Modern Hebrew Literature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985); Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988); Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 1–61; Eisig Silberschlag, ed., *Eliezer Ben-Yehuda: A Symposium in Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1981).

secular Jews, albeit for different reasons. From the perspective of the Zionist decision makers, thus there could be no ideological motivation or practical reward for parting with them.

In a similar fashion, early republican Turkey experienced a set of reforms that were meant to modernize and Westernize the country and to secure its long-term existence as an equal member of the international community. Atatürk's generation was one that witnessed the Allied occupation of the Ottoman capital and dismemberment of the empire by the Treaty of Sèvres. The immediacy of the extinction of the last independent Turkish state was the main problem that occupied their minds, and Westernizing Kemalists were prepared to go at great lengths to reassert full Turkish sovereignty over whatever could be salvaged from former Ottoman territories. From 1923 to 1937, Turkey first underwent a regime change and became a republic.<sup>79</sup> Then, Atatürk and his followers abolished the caliphate;<sup>80</sup> adopted Western codes;<sup>81</sup> changed the Turkish clock, calendar, headgear, and garb;<sup>82</sup> disestablished Islam as the state religion;<sup>83</sup> and finally abandoned the Arabic alphabet.

The Kemalist revolution in Turkey was very different in terms of its objectives and source of inspiration when compared with Zionism. Maintaining equilibrium between nationalism and Westernization in their discourse, Atatürk and his followers paid their respects to the pre-Islamic past of the Turkish people, but did so only to be able to disown the Islamic portion of their history. To put it differently, Kemalist version of Turkish nationalism did not seek to return to a Turkish golden age. The Kemalist obsession with bizarre theories on Turkish history and language<sup>84</sup> did not, for example, lead them to adopt the runic characters of the Orkhun Inscriptions, nor did it encourage them to invent an authentic, Turkish path of modernization. As much as the Kemalists were nationalists, the Westernizing impulse in the movement, which can be regarded as the continuation of a two-hundred-year-old Otto-

<sup>79</sup> Ahmad, *Making of Modern Turkey*, pp. 52–57; Mete Tunçay et al., *Türkiye Tarihi*, vol. 4, *Çağdaş Türkiye*, 1908–1980 (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1992), pp. 91–93.

<sup>80</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 457–460.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 467–473.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis, *Emergence of Modern Turkey*, pp. 267–271.

<sup>83</sup> Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, pp. 477–500.

<sup>84</sup> Jens Peter Laut, *Das Türkische als Ursprache? Sprachwissenschaftliche Theorien in der Zeit des erwachenden türkischen Nationalismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000); Etienne Copeaux, *Espaces et temps de la nation turque: Analyse d'une historiographie nationaliste*, 1931–1993 (Paris: CNRS-Éditions, 1997).

man policy in an utterly radical format, dominated policy making at all crucial junctures. Every one of the symbolic reforms of the period from 1926 to 1938, such as the adoption of the Roman alphabet, the Western numerals, the Gregorian calendar, the metric system, the top hat and Western garb, the Turkification of the Islamic call to prayer, and the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a museum were all meant to convince the international society as well as the citizens of the republic that the new Turks did not belong to the Asiatic, oriental, and Islamic cultural realms any longer. Romanization in Turkey, therefore, should also be set into the wider framework of switching civilizations (*tebdil-i medeniyet*), as a reform that removed probably the most visible marker of Islam from Turkey. That this was perceived precisely in this way is all too clear from contemporary statements. Celâl Nuri, for instance, a well-known journalist and the leading supporter of romanization in the Turkish press, argued that "Let us reiterate [this point]: the adoption of the Roman alphabet is a phase in the Turkish revolution, of Gazi's revolution. With this [step], the Turkish nation is departing from the Asiatic bloc, of which it was an integral part so far. It is leaving forever the past to which it has been attached. As a result of this revolution, the Turks, being a member of the Ural-Altaic nations, are definitely joining the European world, like the other Ural-Altaic nations, the Hungarians, the Finns and the Estonians, who have progressed much."<sup>85</sup> Another proponent of romanization, Mustafa Şekip, professor of psychology at the İstanbul Darülfünûn, expressed his doubt about arguments in favor of the Arabic alphabet, insisting that he did not feel the need to retain them "for the sake of medieval, deficient Ottoman culture."<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Fâlih Rıfıkı, columnist in the semiofficial newspaper *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, a close confidante of Atatürk, and a member of the Language Council that prepared the new Turkish alphabet, revealed the fact that "[t]he new script was not [essentially] a problem of script, but one of language, mind and mentality."<sup>87</sup> Finally, a similar line of reasoning can be found in a statement by the MP Fazıl Ahmet, which he made at a meeting of the Turkish parliament in 1933: "Gentlemen, I would also like to

<sup>85</sup> Celâl Nuri [İleri], "Latin Harfleri Meselesi," in Yorulmaz, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e*, p. 299.

<sup>86</sup> Mustafa Şekip Bey, "Yeni Harflerimize Dair," in Yorulmaz, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e*, p. 307. For later expressions of the same view, see the discussion in *Harf Devrimi'nin 50. Yılı Sempozyumu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1991), pp. 137–138.

<sup>87</sup> Fâlih Rıfıkı Atay, *Batış Yılları* (İstanbul: Dünya Yayınları, 1963), p. 164. Ahmet Cevat Emre, a member of the Language Council like Fâlih Rıfıkı, agreed with that interpretation. See Ahmet Cevat Emre, *İki Neslin Tarihi* (İstanbul: Hilmi Kitabevi, 1960), pp. 322–324.

express that the alphabet reform in Turkey is a very important reform. Please do not consider a blessing of this magnitude merely a matter of facilitating reading and writing. In the [modern] world, scientific methods for [teaching] reading have advanced so much that this is no longer a serious problem. The main benefit [of the reform] is to prevent the transfer of dangerous and harmful superstitions from the past to the generations that from now on will come under the influence of our ethical principles . . . .”<sup>88</sup>

### CANONICAL TEXTS

The association between writing systems and religions is an instantly recognizable phenomenon. Most Christian churches, large or small, developed their peculiar scripts, such as the Roman, Greek-Cyrillic, Amharic, Armenian, Assyrian, and Coptic, which acted as visual barriers that separated their folk from others. So was the case in the Muslim world and in Asia. In each and every case, association with a particular sacred or authoritative text elevated a script to a privileged position, whose influence almost always reached beyond the boundaries of specific languages.<sup>89</sup> Instead of describing this phenomenon by referring to the cliché word “civilizations,” we might as well use David Damrosch’s term “scriptworlds.”<sup>90</sup> Damrosch’s argument that scripts create a world of shared values and culture is bold but sensible especially if we take into consideration technologies of learning and schooling: “Scripts may illustrate the classic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis better than language does: writing systems profoundly shape the thought world of those who employ them, not for ontological reasons grounded in the sign system as such but because scripts are never learned in a vacuum. Instead, a writing system is often the centerpiece of a program of education and employment, and in learning a script one absorbs key elements of

<sup>88</sup> T. B. M. M. Zabıt Cerideleri, *Devre*: 4, *İçtima Senesi*: 2, *Cilt*: 15 (17 May 1933), p. 144.

<sup>89</sup> This kind of a tripartite relationship between a religion, a language, and a script guaranteed the long-term survival of each in almost all of the cases. Nicholas Ostler describes this phenomenon as “the shield of faith”; see his *Empires of the Word*, pp. 86–93, 256. Also see John F. A. Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts* (London: Routledge, 1999); and William Safran, “Language, Ethnicity and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008): 171–190.

<sup>90</sup> David Damrosch, “Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68 (2007): 195–219.

broad literary history: its terms of reference, habits of style, and poetics, often transcending those of any language or country.”<sup>91</sup> This partly explains why a voluntary script change occurs very rarely and, even when it does, it seldom lives on. In this sense, conservatism that favors an established system of writing is a universal phenomenon.

If we compare the Hebrew and Turkish cases from this perspective, the discrepancy is again striking. The significance of Jewish religious literature in this context is self-evident: the Tanakh and the Talmud<sup>92</sup> were the scriptures that united the Jews in the diaspora, who remained essentially as a stateless ethno-religious group from the second century C.E. down to the twentieth. Recognizing this fact, Heinrich Heine once referred to the Hebrew Bible as “the written fatherland” or “the portable homeland of the Jew.”<sup>93</sup> From the end of the eighteenth century onward, especially when classical Hebrew was modernized to become a literary language for the European Jews,<sup>94</sup> it is possible to argue that a Hebrew Republic of Letters came into existence, heralding the establishment of the State of Israel. What was particularly significant in the Hebrew case, however, was the fact that the sacred texts were considered national assets apart from their religious import. As much as they were significant from the religious point of view, particularly the Hebrew Bible could alternatively be read as the national saga of the ancient Israelites and hence its appeal to the nonobservant or even agnostic Jews among the Zionists. Thus, the square alphabet, which had historically been associated with those texts, was doubly legitimized in the eyes of the speech community.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>92</sup> Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym which stands for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The Talmud, on the other hand, is the fundamental text of Rabbinic Judaism and is composed of the Mishnah and Gemara, containing rabbinic discussions and opinions on law, history, and Jewish theology.

<sup>93</sup> S. S. Prawer, *Heine's Jewish Comedy: A Study of His Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 239, 348, and 622; David Aberbach, “Nationalism and the Hebrew Bible,” *Nations and Nationalism* 11 (2005): 223–242.

<sup>94</sup> Isaac E. Barzilay, “National and Anti-national Trends in the Berlin Haskalah,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21 (1959): 165–192; Yosef Yitshaki, “De'oteihem shel sofrei ha-haskalah al ha-lashon ha-'ivrit ve-darkeihem be-harhavatah u-ve-hidushah,” *Leshonenu* 35 (1971): 287–305; Moshe Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah: Studies in Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 73–90; Frederick M. Bernard, “Herder and Israel,” *Jewish Social Studies* 28 (1966): 25–32; Yaacov Shavit, “A Duty Too Heavy to Bear: Hebrew in the Berlin Haskalah, 1783–1819, between Classic, Modern and Romantic,” in *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*, ed. Lewis Glinert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 111–128.

So great was the charisma of the square alphabet, indeed, that Itamar Ben-Avi was forced to invent a Hebraic pedigree for the Roman letters as the only solution to circumvent the authority of the texts.<sup>95</sup> Inspired by the newly born Canaanite ideology, Ben-Avi started to champion the view in the 1920s that the term “Roman alphabet” was a misnomer and that the correct name for this alphabet ought to be the “Hebrew alphabet.”<sup>96</sup> The first alphabet in the history of humankind was not a Phoenician invention according to him. The alphabetic writing system, he asserted, was revealed on Mount Sinai, when Yahweh gave Moses the tablets of the Decalogue. The letters on the tablets became the national writing system of the Israelites, and it was the tribe of Zebulun, who inhabited western Jezreel Valley, that passed the alphabet over to the Phoenicians in Lebanon. Ben-Avi hastened to announce to his readers that what was called the Roman alphabet by mistake “[was] actually nothing but the slightly modern version of the ancient Hebrew script.”<sup>97</sup> Ben-Avi’s aim in his quest for romanization, in other words, “was not to romanize the Hebrew script, but to hebraicize the Roman alphabet.”<sup>98</sup> Although Ben-Avi’s attempt at associating the Roman alphabet with the Sinai Covenant and wrapping his romanization plan in a shroud of authenticity failed quite miserably, it was still a testimony to the power of tradition and sacred texts in sustaining writing systems.

The role of sacred or national texts in Turkish romanization is more complicated, since no such text of comparable weight could be found in the pre-Islamic history of the Turks. Despite their lofty language and proto-nationalistic message, the Orkhun Inscriptions of the eighth century c.e. were discovered only in the eighteenth century and were going to be deciphered still later at the very end of the nineteenth, thus limiting their audience to a small group of academics and nationalist intellectuals.<sup>99</sup> For the Islamic half of their history, the Koran and a huge body of religious and secular literature in the Arabic alphabet provided the Turks with a nonnationalistic but equally authorita-

<sup>95</sup> Ben-Avi was not the first to make this argument. Nathan Birnbaum, as well, had already made a similar point in 1902; see Raizen, “Romanization of the Hebrew Script,” p. 20.

<sup>96</sup> An extensive presentation of his views on Canaanism can be found in Itamar Ben-Avi, *Kena’an artsenu: 5000 shenot yisra’el al admato le-lo hafsakah* (Tsiyon [Jerusalem]: n.p., 1932).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Vilhelm Thomsen, *Inscriptions de l’orkhon déchiffrées* (Helsingfors: Imprimerie de la Société de Literature Finnoise, 1896).



tive scriptworld. However, the nationalist rulers of the republic after 1923 could not reach a consensus on the “worth” of this literature. The numerically dominant group among the nationalist intelligentsia, the so-called Gökalpists,<sup>100</sup> wanted to retain the established literary canon and most of the foreign material in the Turkish language, which they considered long Turkified. The Gökalpists also opposed romanization on the grounds that it would cause national culture to bleed to a slow death.<sup>101</sup> Treasures of the Turkish literature numbered too many, according to the Gökalpists, to allow for a speedy romanization of all prereform corpus; the result would hence be the impoverishment of the Turkish culture as new generations could not have access to the Turkish literature in the Arabic alphabet. One of the leading opponents of romanization, Köprülüzade Fuad, struck a similar note when he said that a nation might give up its writing system and adopt a new one only and only if it did not have *hars*, that is, a national culture.<sup>102</sup>

Ironically, the Westernist faction within the nationalist camp agreed totally with Köprülüzade Fuad; that was precisely why they advocated romanization in the first place. The Westernizers believed that Turkish culture under Islam atrophied and was assimilated by the “backward” and “nomadic” civilization of the desert Arabs. The Gökalpist infatuation with treasures of national literature was misplaced according to this view, because Turks under Islam did not create anything comparable to the achievements of the Western world. Celâl Nuri, again, the arch-romanizer and Westernizer, expressed his contempt for the Islamic-Ottoman episode of the Turks thus: “Our libraries are empty, they are obsolete . . . As a matter of fact, those antiquarian volumes had led us to this dead-end . . . Had we possessed enormous treasures like the French, [and] British libraries, this problem could have led us to think twice, and might have even bothered us. But what is it that we have in our hands? Three thousand archaic, inaccurate, deceptive

<sup>100</sup> Gökalpists were named after Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), the most important ideologue of Turkish nationalism in the twentieth century. Gökalp had a pragmatic approach to Islam and reserved a place for it in his detailed remapping of the Turkish national identity. See Uriel Heyd, *Foundations of Turkish Nationalism: The Life and Teachings of Ziya Gökalp* (London: Luzac, 1950), pp. 82–103.

<sup>101</sup> From March to April 1926 the İstanbul daily *Akşam* first sent a questionnaire to important Turkish authors and intellectuals of the day, asking their views on the question of romanization and started to publish their replies. What distinguished this group was that the majority of the respondents belonged to the nationalist camp—that of the Gökalpist version—and almost all opposed the romanization project. See Yorulmaz, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e*, pp. 194–232.

<sup>102</sup> Köprülüzade Mehmed Fuad [Köprülü], “Harf Meselesi,” in *ibid.*, pp. 233–236.

volumes of books or pamphlets at most. To destroy them is more beneficial than keeping them.”<sup>103</sup>

## CONCLUSION: WHITHER ROMANIZATION?

The research on the Hebrew and Turkish cases shows that romanization is a complex sociocultural phenomenon and its success is determined by the concurrence of different independent variables at work in each context. In the case of the romanization of the Hebrew script, Ben-Avi's failure did not and does not surprise anyone. Hebrew in the Roman alphabet was more difficult to read and write; the exceptionally high level of literacy among Jews in the Yishuv increased the number of “victims” of reform; the Yishuv did not have an independent government or a centralized state structure and, therefore, could not have undertaken such a profound script change; and, finally, the Zionist movement embraced the Israelite history and tradition and was not willing to sacrifice parts of it, including the square letters, for the sake of Westernization. The Turkish case, however, was the opposite in every respect. The Roman alphabet made it incomparably easier to read, write, and publish in Turkish; the much lower level of literacy in Turkey confined opposition to reform to pockets of literary and bureaucratic elites; even those few voices of protest could be silenced without trouble because of Turkey's strong state tradition; and the Kemalist reform movement towed Turkey to Europe, burning the bridges that connected the nascent republic to its oriental predecessor.

Other independent variables might also apply in different attempts at romanization. Romanizers happened to be colonial rulers in the cases of Vietnam, Nigeria, and Somalia, who wanted to shape local education according to models from colonizing nations. When the Roman alphabet was inevitably tainted by memories of colonial rule, its continued use after the departure of colonial powers depended on the attitude of the new leadership and the shifting balance of power in international politics. Likewise, the fate of romanization in some of the newly independent former Soviet republics will ultimately be decided by the degree to which they would be subjected to Russian influence in the future. Another factor we have to take into consideration in those republics is the resistance to the Roman alphabet on the part of larger

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<sup>103</sup> Celâl Nuri, “Latin Harfleri Meselesi,” in *ibid.*, pp. 298–299. The spiteful tone of his statement reminds us of the excesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

minority groups of ethnic Russians, who still defend the Cyrillic as a visible symbol of their group identity.

The evidence at hand is far from being conclusive in proving a unilinear evolution to and inevitable adoption of the Roman alphabet as a global trend. For the most part, what we are witnessing is a process of what sociolinguists call “domain invasion,”<sup>104</sup> that is, partial romanization in select fields: the Roman alphabet has become a serious rival to local scripts in e-mail and text messaging, for example, or it is becoming increasingly commonplace to register company and brand names in Roman characters for reaching the maximum number of consumers in a globalized world economy. Nevertheless, the Roman alphabet could hardly make inroads to local usage in fields other than those and is unlikely to do so in the future. The ever-increasing percentage of literacy in non-Roman scripts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well as the emergence of Chinese, Indian, Russian, Arabic, and Japanese “scriptworlds,” just to name a few, are powerful centrifugal forces that arrest the romanizing current.

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<sup>104</sup> Florian Coulmas, *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 161–164.