MINORITIES

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The Ottoman Era

The Ottoman Empire was not a “multicultural heaven,” as Turkish nationalist nostalgia often portrays it. According to the Sharia law, non-Muslims were second-class subjects, and this did not change until the Tanzimat years. The very existence of the millet system as an organizational principle and founding block of the Ottoman Empire has sparked considerable controversy among historians. On the other hand, without being tolerant in the contemporary meaning, the Ottoman Empire was more tolerant toward religious minorities than Christian empires and states contemporary with it. It is worth remembering that refugee waves were crossing the Mediterranean in both directions. While a part of the Byzantine Greek elite fled to Western Europe following the collapse of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, thousands of Sephardic Jews of the Iberian peninsula found safe haven in the Ottoman Empire, following their expulsion in the late fifteenth century. Certain segments of Ottoman administration and trade were open to non-Muslims. For generations, Phanariot (prominent Istanbul) Greeks manned key positions in the Danubian provinces and the foreign service of the Ottoman Empire. Greeks, Armenians, and Jews controlled large parts of Ottoman trade.

The advent of the Enlightenment would transform the empire forever. Nationalism and republicanism spread first among non-Muslims, who enjoyed a closer link with Western and Central European ideological trends due to their commercial relations and large diaspora communities. While early revolutionaries like Rigas Velestinlis envisioned the replacement of Ottoman despotism with a republican “commonwealth” inclusive of all ethnic and religious communities, their project was soon scaled down to liberation from Ottoman despotic rule and the carving out of republican nation-states (Grigoriadis, 2011: 168–69).

The outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821 and the recognition of the independence of a Greek nation-state in the southern Balkans and the Aegean in 1830 were big shocks and milestone events. Nationalism shook the foundations of the ailing empire. Although it had been losing territory to the Russian and Habsburg Empires for more than a century, this was the first time one of its subject populations succeeded in gaining its independence. This led to the intensification of Westernization reform efforts. The comprehensive Westernization reform program, which took the name Tanzimat, aimed to strengthen the ailing empire, as well as win the loyalty of non-Muslims, who would for the first time be treated as equal subjects.
The 1839 Imperial Rescript of the Rose Garden (Hatt-ı Şerif-i Gülhane) and the 1856 Imperial Rescript (Hatt-ı Hümayun) were path-breaking documents. In the Hatt-ı Şerif-i Gülhane, the Sharia-based discrimination of non-Muslims was abolished, and equality for all Ottoman subjects regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation was proclaimed. In the Hatt-ı Hümayun, protection of fundamental human rights and civil liberties and their extension to non-Muslims were specified. The administrative authority of non-Muslim religious institutions was reinforced, and all Ottoman bureaucratic positions became accessible to non-Muslims—at least on paper—while preferential links between non-Muslim and Western European entrepreneurs allowed for the flourishing of a powerful non-Muslim bourgeoisie (Issawi, 1982). Meanwhile, as Enlightenment ideas were rapidly spreading within Ottoman Muslim elites, three alternative state ideologies were adopted at different times. Ottomanism, which gained appeal between 1839 and 1876, promoted a civic version of Ottoman identity, devoid of any religious and ethnic underpinnings. Pan-Islamism, which grew in popularity in the era of Sultan Abdülhamid II, aimed to unite all Muslims under the rule of the Ottoman sultan, who had meanwhile reclaimed his title as caliph. Pan-Turkism aimed to unite all Turkic populations dispersed in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia, and gained impetus in the very last years of the Ottoman Empire, following the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in 1912. While Ottomanism appeared to be the choice of liberal reformers such as Midhat Paşa, the growing appeal of irredentist nationalism among non-Muslims and consecutive military defeats contributed to the derailment of the reform process and the rise of Hamidian autocracy. When pan-Islamism was turned into the official ideology of the Ottoman Empire, interethnic tensions began to rise. The 1894–96 Armenian massacres were the harbinger of a violent “unmixing” of Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

While the 1908 Young Turk Revolution raised brief hopes for a restoration of Ottomanism and peaceful coexistence of different religious and ethnic groups on the basis of equal rights, the outbreak of the Balkan Wars and World War I led to the growing appeal of pan-Turkism. Non-Muslims were collectively seen as the “enemy within,” willing collaborators to the partition of the Ottoman Empire and obstacles to the establishment of a Turkish nation-state. The tragic events between 1911 and 1923 that sealed the end of the Ottoman Empire dramatically changed the ethno-religious map of Anatolia. While hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees were killed or fled from lost Ottoman territories in the Balkans, hundreds of thousands of Greeks and Armenians were either killed or forced to flee Anatolia as a result of military operations and atrocities. The 1915 Armenian massacres and the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange agreement were milestone events in that process. While non-Muslims represented more than 20 percent of the overall population of Anatolia in the early twentieth century, their numbers had fallen to approximately 2.5 percent as of 1923 (Aktar, 2003: 87). Nonetheless, their sharp demographic decrease failed to appease fears about the loyalty to Republican Turkey of those who remained. While Republican Turkey attempted to extricate itself from its Young Turk legacy, in effect it followed the Young Turk paradigm when it came to non-Muslims. Non-Muslims were not deemed fit to become full-fledged citizens of Republican Turkey. They were seen as “foreign citizens,” “local foreigners,” or “fifth columnists,” ready to collaborate with foreign powers to partition Turkey. Hence state policies aimed to socially and economically marginalize non-Muslims and eventually force them into emigration. The establishment of a Muslim Turkish bourgeoisie was considered as critical for the success of Turkish state building.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the founding document of modern Turkey, included several articles for the protection of Turkey’s non-Muslim minorities. Indicatively, Article 38§2 declared that:
All inhabitants of Turkey shall be entitled to free exercise, whether in public or private, of any creed, religion or belief, the observance of which shall not be incompatible with public order and good morals.

\textit{(Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924)}

Article 39 stated that:

Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems.

All the inhabitants of Turkey, without distinction of religion, shall be equal before the law.

Differences of religion, creed or confession shall not prejudice any Turkish national in matters relating to the enjoyment of civil or political rights, as, for instance, admission to public employments, functions and honours, or the exercise of professions and industries.

No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings.

Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the Courts.

\textit{(Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924)}

Article 40 protected the rights of non-Muslim foundations, as follows:

Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

\textit{(Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924)}

While the treaty did not refer to any specific minorities and included the blanket term “non-Muslims,” Turkish authorities interpreted it to refer exclusively to Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. All other non-Muslim minorities—Assyrians, Chaldeans, Catholics, Protestants, and others—were denied the most basic minority rights. The situation regarding the three recognized minorities was not much better. Armenians, Greeks, and Jews had maintained a strong presence only in Istanbul.\textsuperscript{10} This and their role, disproportionate to their demographics, in the economy of Republican Turkey raised concerns among republican Turkish nationalists (Aktar, 2003: 92–93). A series of measures was thus aimed at the economic and social marginalization of non-Muslims and the emergence of a Turkish bourgeoisie. Following the introduction of the new Turkish Civil Code, leaders of the three recognized minorities were forced in 1925 to renounce the rights outlined in the Treaty of Lausanne. In 1926 a law imposed the use of Turkish in all business correspondence and transactions. In 1932 a law identified a list of professions that would henceforth be banned to non-Muslims for reasons of national security.\textsuperscript{11} As a result, thousands of non-Muslim professionals had to leave Turkey. In 1934 a series of government-organized attacks against the Jewish populations of eastern Thrace were in line with the anti-Semitic sentiment
prevalent in large parts of Europe at the time. They also reflected atavistic fears that Jews would collaborate with foreign powers in the case that Turkey was again invaded by Western powers. Meanwhile, a “Settlement Law” (İskân Kanunu) was introduced, aiming to bring all non-Muslims to Istanbul. This led to the concentration of the Jewish minority in Istanbul and the acceleration of the emigration toward mandate Palestine (Bali, 1999: 243–64). Linguistic assimilation was another objective. A popular campaign dubbed “Citizen, speak Turkish!” (Vatandaş Türkçe konus) aimed to restrict the use of minority languages in public (Bali, 1999: 131–49). In November 1942 a “wealth tax” (varlık vergisi) was imposed with the alleged purpose of curbing rampant profiteering during the World War II years. Yet when the lists of those liable were published, the anti-minority nature of the measure was amply revealed. Almost 90 percent of those taxed were non-Muslims, while most of the Muslims who were included in the list were classified as “converts (dönme).” Many had to liquidate their movable and immovable assets at heavily discounted prices to pay the levy. Those who could not pay—or refused to—were deported to a labor concentration camp in Aşkale, near Erzurum. They were interred there until September 1943, when the situation attracted the attention of the international press. While the debt of the deportees was forgiven, no restitution was given to the rest (Aktar, 2000).

External events also affected the state of non-Muslims. The sharp deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations due to the rise of the Cyprus question in the 1950s exacted a heavy toll on Turkey’s Greeks, but also affected Armenians and Jews. The effect was compounded by the prevalence in Turkey and Greece of a view linking protection of minority rights with the principle of reciprocity. Hence the respect for minority rights of Turkey’s Greeks was deemed conditional upon the full protection of the rights of Greece’s Turkish Muslim minority in western Thrace. The plight of the minority in western Thrace was often perceived as relieving Turkey of its obligations toward its Greek minority as identified in the Treaty of Lausanne. Minority rights were not perceived as emanating from the constitution and as fundamental for the democratic nature of the state, but as concessions to a foreign state that limited state sovereignty. Minority members were thus considered as second-class citizens or even resident aliens. This often allowed for a “race to the bottom” as far as respect for minority rights was concerned, and had disastrous consequences, particularly for Turkey’s Greek minority. On 6–7 September 1955, on the pretext of a bomb attack on the Atatürk House in Thessaloniki, a pogrom hit Istanbul’s Greek minority. A rampant mob transported from other Turkish cities and equipped for the purpose pillaged and set fire to houses, schools, shops, and churches. While Greeks were meant to be the target of the operation, Armenians and Jews were not left unscathed. Recent historical research has substantiated that the “September events” were an operation organized by the Democratic Party government, which succeeded in instilling fear in non-Muslims and accelerating their emigration from Turkey. Turkey’s non-Muslims had been irrevocably “otherized” (Kuyucu, 2005: 377–78). In the case of Greeks, emigration took on avalanche proportions in 1964. In response to the escalation of the Cyprus conflict, approximately 12,000 Istanbul Greeks who had Greek citizenship and had established their permanent resident status in Turkey according to the provisions of the 1930 Greek-Turkish Friendship Treaty were deported. This measure resulted in the forced emigration of approximately 40,000 Greeks, since the families of the deportees who were Turkish citizens of Greek descent had to follow them (Demir and Akar, 2004). The 1974 Cyprus crisis dealt the last heavy blow to the Istanbul Greek minority, which by the end of the twentieth century had fallen to fewer than 5,000 members. On the two Aegean islands of Gökçeada (Imbros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos), emigration reached even higher proportions (Alexandris, 1980: 28).

Armenians also came under pressure due to the mounting conflict between Turkey and the Armenian diaspora, in particular on the question of recognizing the 1915 Armenian massacres as
“genocide.” The increasing activity of the Armenian nationalist terrorist group ASALA against Turkey added further tension. Turkey’s Armenians attempted to distinguish their position from ASALA terrorism and the diaspora’s maximalist agenda, while also rejecting the official Turkish narrative of the Armenian events. This brought them to the rather unfortunate position of being treated as traitors to the Armenian nation by diaspora Armenians and as a fifth column by the Turkish state. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991 meant that Armenians would have a “brethren” nation-state like Greeks and Jews, albeit not as appealing an emigration destination as Greece or Israel. Yet this proved to be a liability, as the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to the identification of Turkish and Azerbaijani interests. The closure of the Turkish–Armenian border and the interruption of diplomatic relations deprived Turkey’s Armenians of the opportunity to spearhead the development of bilateral economic and societal relations. Nonetheless, the Armenian minority managed to maintain a substantial size of 65,000 and was further boosted by the influx of Armenian immigrants from the former Soviet Union.16

The 1948 establishment of the state of Israel boosted the emigration of Turkey’s Jews. About 40 percent of the Jewish community emigrated to Israel from 1948 to 1951 (Toktas, 2008: 514). In contrast to Greece and Armenia, Turkey’s generally good relations with Israel meant that Jews did not have to bear—until recently—the brunt of bilateral conflict. Yet anti-Semitism was present, in particular in the discourse of Turkish Islamism. One of its most extremist strands referred to the Sabbatean (Sabetay or dönme) community and its alleged influence on Turkish modernization and secularization (Bora, 2002: 915). Jews and Sabbateans were considered as having “infected” Turkish society with liberal, cosmopolitan, secularist, and communist ideas. The sharp deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations since 2006 has also led to increased anti-Semitic rhetoric, on the pretext of defending Palestinian rights. The population of Turkey’s Jews has recently been estimated at around 27,000, concentrated primarily in Istanbul and Izmir (Içduygu et al., 2008: 380).

Another method to limit the social and economic influence of non-Muslims involved the control of their pious foundations (Kurban and Hatemi, 2009). Having been established under the Ottoman legal regime, these foundations enjoyed full protection under the Treaty of Lausanne. Nevertheless, a series of laws and court decisions ignored the treaty’s provisions and equalized their status with that of foreign foundations, in order to deprive them of their assets. Court decisions referred to non-Muslims not as citizens of the Republic of Turkey but as “local foreigners” (yerli yabancı) or “guest citizens” (misafir vatandaş) (Oran, 2004: 74–76). A dubious decision of the Court of Cassations in 1971 annulled the right of non-Muslim foundations to acquire property after 1935 (Kurban and Hatemi, 2009: 13–18). All property acquisitions that took place between 1935 and 1971 were declared void, and the immovable assets in question were liable to confiscation. The dwindling population of non-Muslims also served as pretext for taking over control of foundations and their assets, including church and school buildings, in cases where the administration would identify inability of the foundation to serve its purpose. Under these circumstances, thousands of immovable assets came under state control. The Armenian children’s camp in Tuzla and the Greek orphanage on Büyükada (one of the Princes’ Islands off the coast of Istanbul) are two of the most prominent examples. Moreover, three churches and their foundations in Galata were occupied in the late 1920s by the so-called “Independent Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate” (Bağimsız Türk Ortodoks Patrikhanesi) led by Zeki Ereneler (Papa Eftim) and remained under the control of his family members.

Violations of non-Muslims’ human rights also extended to religious freedom. In 1971 the Greek Orthodox seminary on Heybeliada (Chalki, another of the Princes’ Islands) was closed,
following a law that banned private higher and vocational education. This seminary had operated since its foundation in 1844 under both Ottoman and Republican Turkish rule and trained thousands of clergy and laymen. While a decision was made in the 1950s to allow the opening of an Armenian Gregorian seminary in Turkey, this never materialized. In addition, the Turkish government has continued to reject the “ecumenical” status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, despite its worldwide recognition, and accepts it solely as the religious authority of the country’s dwindling Greek minority. In addition, it has posed several administrative obstacles to the performance of its operations, such as control over the composition of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate and the requirement that candidates for the position of patriarch must be Turkish citizens. Last but not least, respect for minority religious freedom was understood to be conditional upon the rule of reciprocity. In other words, Turkey reserved the right to curtail the religious freedom of its own minority citizens, if their “mother countries” acted against Turkey’s national interests or violated the religious freedom of their own minorities (Grigoriadis, 2009: 170).

Recent developments

The profound social and economic changes that have shaped Turkey since the 1980s have inevitably had an impact on non-Muslim minorities. On the one hand, the country’s rapid population growth and urbanization have led to their demographic marginalization. Non-Muslims count for little more than 0.1 percent of Turkey’s population and 0.5 percent of Istanbul’s population. On the other hand, Turkey’s steps toward democratic consolidation and liberalization have resulted in significant improvements, as far as respect for minority rights of non-Muslims is concerned. Some of the most restrictive legislative and administrative measures, such as those freezing property rights of expelled Greeks, had already been lifted during the 1980s. Following an interval in the 1990s, minority rights reform was linked with the progress of Turkey’s European Union (EU) candidacy. Protection of minority rights is included in the Copenhagen criteria, which Turkey had to fulfill to become eligible for membership. The democratization wave that swept Turkish politics from 1999 to 2005 could not leave the status of non-Muslim minorities unaffected. Considerable reforms were noted in several fields, while deadlock prevailed in others (Kurban, 2003).

At the international level, the Turkish parliament ratified, after decades of procrastination, the United Nations (UN) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, but only after adding reservations to articles protecting minority rights. While non-Muslims benefited from constitutional amendments that improved the protection of fundamental human rights and liberties, their legal status also improved through the amendment of Article 90, which clearly resolved contradictions between international treaties and subsequent domestic laws in favor of the first. It became possible to broadcast programs in minority languages, and the freedom to erect a place of worship regardless of religion and belief was recognized. Regarding religious foundations, a new law repealed the ban on the acquisition of property. It also became possible to claim inmovable assets that had been confiscated by the state under the previous regime. A legal instrument for the reopening of closed civil and criminal cases was granted. On the other hand, there was no provision of restitution or compensation for the bulk of the inmovable assets that were confiscated by the state and later sold to individuals. The restitution of the foundations to their confiscated properties remained limited and rather problematic.

Some administrative practices also changed. For the first time in decades, bishops of dioceses outside Turkey were allowed to join the Patriarchate’s Holy Synod. Moreover, 13 bishops,
members of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, were awarded Turkish citizenship. Given that Turkish citizenship has been considered one of the eligibility criteria for the Patriarch’s office, this increased the pool of potential candidates for the position. On the other hand, this decision neither established a permanent procedure for awarding Turkish citizenship to bishops of the Patriarchate’s dioceses, nor removed the citizenship requirement for the eligibility of an individual’s candidacy.

A noteworthy change was also present at the discursive level. A debate was raised advocating a civic definition of Turkish national identity. According to this view, the basis of Turkish national identity should not be ethnic Turkish descent (Türk), but origin from the territory constituting the Republic of Turkey (Türkiyeli). Whereas the main aim of the initiative was to bridge the gap between the Turkish state and its biggest minority, the Kurds, this new definition of citizenship remained highly significant at the symbolic level for non-Muslims, as well. While the initiative met with fierce nationalist reaction, which led the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government to distance itself, it enriched the public debate about the integration of non-Muslims into the Turkish people (Grigoriadis, 2007: 427–32). It also resuscitated discussions on the reconciliation of minority rights and full citizenship in Turkey (Kurban, 2006). The wave of public sympathy following the assassination of journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007 was unprecedented. Thousands of Turkish citizens attended his funeral, declaring, “We are all Hrant, we are all Armenians” (Hepimiz Hrant’ız, hepimiz Ermeni’yız). This was the strongest public demonstration to date against the killings and intimidation campaign of Turkish nationalist extremists against non-Muslims. Moreover, official contacts between the government and minority leaders intensified. In August 2009 Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met the religious leaders of the Armenian, Greek, Jewish, and Assyrian minorities in Istanbul. In January 2011 Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç paid a visit to the premises of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This was the highest-level visit of a Turkish official since the visit of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in 1952.

Turkey’s new “zero problems with neighbors” policy and “democratic opening” (demokratik açılım) also relieved some of the burden from its non-Muslim minorities. The ongoing rapprochement between Greece and Turkey that began in 1999 may have failed to lead to the resolution of diplomatic disputes in the Aegean or the Cyprus question, but it has contributed to a blossoming of economic relations and stronger links at the civil society level, which have benefited the Greek minority. In the case of Armenia, Turkey engaged in unprecedented steps in terms of dialogue. The signature of the first-ever bilateral agreement between Turkey and Armenia in October 2009, with the aim of restoring diplomatic relations, raised hopes about the opening of the land border between the two countries and a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, as well as a common understanding about the 1915 Armenian massacres. A normalization of the relations of the two countries would be to the benefit of the Armenian minority. Yet there was no follow-up by any side, and the process was allowed to stall. The presence of a sizable immigrant Armenian community in Istanbul has resulted in an additional dimension. On the one hand, it has boosted the demographics of Istanbul’s Armenian community. On the other hand, Turkish nationalist parties have occasionally suggested the deportation of these immigrants as leverage against Armenia.

The JDP “democratic opening” policy also led to an historic decision to permit the holding of a mass in two of the most historic Greek and Armenian religious sites in Anatolia, for the first time in the history of Republican Turkey. On 15 August 2010 a mass took place in the Sumela Monastery near Trabzon, a major pilgrimage site for Black Sea Greeks. This brought thousands of visitors from Greece, Russia, and other parts of the world, most of whom were descendants of Black Sea Greeks who had had to leave their ancestral lands in the 1912–22
conflict or according to the terms of the 1923 Population Exchange Treaty. Some weeks later, on 19 September 2010, a similar mass was held in the Akhtamar Holy Cross Church, situated on an island in Lake Van and one of the most important Armenian monuments in Turkey. This mass also brought to Turkey thousands of visitors, many of whom were descendants of Armenian expellees. The decision to allow these two masses met with the fierce opposition of the far right,\textsuperscript{17} which, however, failed to mobilize public opinion against the government. The JDP government decision was in striking departure from the unease with which Republican Turkey has usually dealt with its non-Muslim heritage.

Consequently, there was a nationalist backlash against the recognition of non-Muslim minority rights. As such rights improved in the context of Turkey’s EU accession process, non-Muslims were portrayed as the West’s “fifth column” in Turkey. This was a view with strong roots throughout Republican Turkish history (Bora, 2002). The number of attacks against non-Muslim leaders by nationalist and/or Islamist terrorist groups rose alarmingly. Two of the biggest synagogues in Istanbul, Neve Shalom and Beth Israel, became targets of bomb attacks on 15 November 2003, killing 27 persons, six of whom were Jewish. These attacks were attributed to Turkish affiliates of al-Qaeda. The murder of Hrant Dink, Turkey’s most prominent Armenian journalist, on 19 January 2007, shocked Turkish public opinion, yet it was not an isolated case. Two Catholic priests, Andrea Santoro and Luigi Padovese, were murdered in Trabzon and İskenderun in February 2006 and March 2010, respectively. In April 2007 one German and two Turkish Protestants were murdered in the eastern city of Malatya for their alleged missionary activities.

The limits of progress regarding the protection of non-Muslim minority rights were also highlighted by European institutions. A series of decisions of the European Court of Human Rights recognized the violations of the rights of foundations and demanded the return of the confiscated assets or payment of compensation. In some cases, property deeds were returned to the foundations, while in other cases compensation was accordingly paid. In the case \textit{Yedikule Surp Pusig Ermeni Hastanesi Vakfı v. Turkey}, the court ruled in 2007 that Turkey had violated the European Convention of Human Rights and that compensation was due the Armenian foundation. What came as a surprise, though, was the decision of the Turkish government to close the case not by paying compensation but by restoring to the foundation its confiscated property. This was the first time in the history of Republican Turkey that confiscated immovable property was returned to a non-Muslim foundation (Kurban and Hatemi, 2009: 31–32). In one of the most publicized cases, the \textit{Ecumenical Patriarchate (Fener Rum Patriklığı) v. Turkey}, the Court stated that the confiscation of the Greek orphanage on Büyükada was a violation of the Treaty of Lausanne. Similarly to the previous case, while the Turkish government could have paid compensation and retained the building, it opted instead for reinstatement. The building was returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and is planned to be operated as an environmental center. This was considered to be a goodwill gesture.

Turkey has continued to insist on denying the use of the term “ecumenical” in connection with the Patriarchate. A 2007 decision of the Turkish Court of Cassations (Yargıtay) reiterated the official Turkish position. It was stated that:

\begin{quote}
The Patriarchate, which has been allowed to remain on the Turkish territories, is a religious institution which has no legal personality and which has religious powers only over the members of a certain minority in the Turkish Republic … there is no legal basis for the claim that the Patriarchate is ecumenical.
\end{quote}

\textit{(CNN Türk, 2007)}
The position of the Court highlighted the fact that the Turkish state continued to interfere in the religious affairs of non-Muslims. Despite public statements of Prime Minister Erdoğan that alluded to a policy shift in the framework of the “democratic opening,” no official change was noted. In a March 2010 opinion, the Venice Commission pointed out the spiritual and ecclesiastical nature of the term “ecumenical” and added that any interference by the Turkish state with the right of the Patriarchate to use the term constitutes a violation of the European Convention of Human Rights (European Commission for Democracy Through Law, 2010). Similarly, the Heybeliada (Chalki) Seminary has remained closed.

Conclusions

Given Turkey’s exponential demographic growth since the 1950s, along with the emigration of many members of their own communities, Turkey’s non-Muslims today represent a tiny fraction of the country’s population. Nevertheless, their symbolic significance remains very powerful and disproportionate to their demographic weight, especially in Istanbul. As Turkey’s biggest city has grown in size and transformed into a “megapolis” of more than 13 million residents, nostalgia about the “diverse, old Istanbul” of 1.5 million residents has grown among the Turkish intellectual elite. Non-Muslims comprise the living legacy of a diverse, cosmopolitan city, which Istanbul is no longer, but could again be. While some of these attempts may fall into the trap of “exoticization,” they also represent an attempt to reposition non-Muslims in the canvas of Republican Turkish history.

In 2005 Turkey and Spain became the sponsors of the UN Secretary-General’s “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative, with the two countries looking to spearhead an attempt to bridge the gap between the West and the Islamic world. The key aim of this initiative was:

... to promote a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religion ... to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus.

(UN Alliance of Civilizations, 2005)

This meant that the position of non-Muslims in Turkey became a touchstone of Turkey’s commitment to the principles it aspired to promote on a global basis. While their demographic and economic influence has diminished in the Republican era, Turkey’s non-Muslims remain one of the bellwethers of the process of democratic consolidation. The improvements of recent years and the steps still not made reflect the progress as well as the limitations of Turkey’s efforts to come to terms with its rich historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage.

Notes

1 Although Turkey’s non-Muslims include Assyrians, Bulgarian Orthodox, Catholics, Chaldeans, Protestants, and other smaller groups, the scope of this study is—due to space limitations—to cover the three non-Muslim minorities as understood in the Treaty of Lausanne, namely Armenians, Greeks, and Jews.

2 For example, see Braude (1982).

3 To study the extent to which Tanzimat declarations were really implemented, see Findley (1982).

4 For a seminal treatise on these three ideologies, see Akçura (1904).

5 On this, see Ahmad (1982).

6 Such terms were even found in court decisions, highlighting the prevalence of discriminatory policies. See Oran (2004: 74–76).
7 This was stated in an aptly coined nationalist slogan demanding that non-Muslims either “love Turkey or leave it” (ya sev, ya terk et). The implicit assumption was that Armenians, Greeks, and Jews could never love Turkey, hence they had to emigrate.

8 On this, see Aktar (2006).

9 Despite the “sacrosanct” status of the Treaty of Lausanne, several of its articles were in fact violated. For example, the semi-autonomous status guaranteed by Article 14 of the treaty for the Aegean islands of Gökçeada (Imbros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos) was never implemented. Neither was Article 39, which guaranteed the freedom of all Turkish citizens—Muslims and non-Muslims—to use the language of their choice in their everyday lives.

10 In 1927 there were 61,000 Armenians, 125,000 Greeks, and 79,000 Jews living in Turkey, almost exclusively in Istanbul. See İçduygulu et al. (2008: 369).

11 Even those who attempted to convert to Islam in order to maintain their positions were deterred. These were members of the Sabbatean (Sabetay) community, consisting of Jews who had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century. On them, see Bali (2004: 369–410).

12 The Atatürk House had hosted Turkey’s general consulate since the 1930s. The attack was later proven to be orchestrated by the Turkish government.

13 On this, see Güven (2006).

14 For more information on the fate of Turkey’s Greek minority, see Alexandris (1983).

15 On the current state of Turkey’s Armenians, also see Ors and Komsuoglu (2007).

16 In reaction to the government decision, the far-right Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) organized a Muslim prayer service in the ruins of the cathedral of the medieval Armenian capital Ani, which had been converted into a mosque during the conquest of Anatolia by the Seljuks.

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