

Turkey's Jewish Community and Religious Freedom

Briefing by

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Good morning. I am Barry Jacobs, director of strategic studies for the American Jewish Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to brief the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) on the situation of the Jewish community of Turkey to practice its religion.

I am not Turkish, but for the last eight years I have followed the affairs of Turkey, and the welfare of the Turkish Jewish community, closely. My organization has a cooperative agreement with the Turkish Jewish community; I am a regular visitor to Turkey and a close observer of Turkish affairs.

As a Foreign Service officer, I did not serve in Turkey. I did, however, spend two years in Greece and three years on Cyprus, visited Turkey several times as a tourist, and followed events closely during the four years that my Foreign Service wife and I served in Israel.

I have also consulted with the Jewish community in Istanbul in preparing these remarks.

The 25,000 person Jewish community of Turkey is free to practice its religion as it wishes.

Its synagogues and institutions are protected by the Turkish authorities; its leaders meet regularly with Turkish political leaders and its members live and work as they wish. It is a strongly middle class community, well represented in the professions, with a top level of wealthy industrialists and business executives.

For over five hundred years the peoples of Turkey and its predecessor the Ottoman Empire offered refuge to Jews driven by rampant and murderous anti-Semitism from Europe. In August 1492, when Columbus embarked on his most famous expedition to the New World, his fleet departed from the relatively unknown seaport of Palos because the shipping lanes of Cadiz and Seville were clogged with Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain by the edict of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain.

Sultan Bayazid II's offer of refuge gave new hope to the persecuted Spanish Jews. In 1492, the Sultan ordered the governors of the provinces of the Ottoman

Empire, *"not to refuse the Jews entry or cause them difficulties, but to receive them cordially."*

Moreover, even before 1492, the Jews welcomed the military successes of the Ottomans in the 14th and 15th centuries. When the Ottomans captured Bursa in 1324, they found a Jewish community that had been persecuted during long centuries of Byzantine rule. Over the next decades, the country became a haven for Jews fleeing repression and expulsion from various parts of Europe, including Hungary, France, Spain, Sicily, Salonika and Bavaria. In the liberal atmosphere of Ottoman rule, Jewish activity flourished and many Jews held important positions. Constantinople was the home of great rabbis and scholars and was a Hebrew book-printing center.

This history is important because it sets the tone for Jewish religious practice in today's Turkey. This history is even more remarkable today, in that Turkey is a country that is 99 percent Muslim. It is a tribute to the greatness of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, that the Republic of Turkey is the only secular democratic state besides Israel in a difficult region, a loyal member and the only Muslim state in Nato and was the first Muslim country, and second state overall, to recognize the new Jewish State of Israel in 1948.

During the Second World War, as historian Sanford Shaw writes,

"While six million Jews were being exterminated by the Nazis, the rescue of some 15,000 Turkish Jews from France, and even of some 100,000 Jews from Eastern Europe might well be considered as relatively insignificant in comparison. It was, however, very significant to the people who were rescued, and above all it showed that, as had been the case for more than five centuries, Turks and Jews continued to help each other in times of great crises."

Nevertheless, being a Jew in Turkey is not always easy. In November 2003, on Shabbat, suicide terrorists with ties to Al Qaeda detonated truck bombs in front of two synagogues in Istanbul, killing 25 people and wounding hundreds, most of them Turkish Muslims who happened to be in the vicinity. This was the second murderous attack on Neve Shalom in the past quarter century. The first took place in 1986 when two foreign terrorists tied to the Abu Nidal group entered the temple firing machine guns and throwing hand grenades, killing 22 of the 30 worshipers present that Saturday morning. A large clock stands near the boarded entrance of Neve Shalom, its hands stopped forever at the time the attack occurred. Above it the name of each victim is carved into the wall.

Turkey is currently going through a period of fevered nationalism. Its media and political comment is stridently anti-West, anti-American and anti-Israel, attitudes that frequently bleed into outright anti-Semitism. Mein Kempf is a best seller. My former colleague and long-time friend, Ambassador Eric Edelman, a

distinguished career diplomat who has been our envoy in Ankara these past two years, was greeted by a headline in the daily newspaper Vatan welcoming the “Jew Ambassador.”

Turkey has a free press, but both the American Jewish Committee and friends of the Turkish Jewish community call on the Turkish leadership in the media, in intellectual and academic circles and – most importantly – in the political leadership, to openly and vigorously denounce this rising cacophony of anti-Semitic pronouncements. These create a dangerous and hostile atmosphere, especially towards the community of loyal Jewish Turkish citizens, and stain the tapestry of 500 years of Turkish tolerance for diverse religious communities.

Moreover, much of the worst religious slander pours forth from newspapers that if not official organs of the ruling Justice and Development party, are nonetheless closely aligned with its leadership. Two of the most notorious publications are Yeni Safak and Tercuman (Dünden Bugüne).

Turkey, in line with many European nations, has so-called anti-hate legislation. We urge Turkey’s Prosecutor of the Republic (its Attorney General) to both openly denounce such messages and to employ this legislation to actively prosecute religious slander and libelous articles in the media.

On the positive side, AJC praises the new legislation that brings Turkish jurisprudence more in line with that of the European Union. On an issue of great importance to the Turkish Jewish community, new laws have fundamentally improved the property management of minority foundations. This now permits the Jewish community to buy, sell and rent property belonging to its synagogue foundations and this new system is functioning to the community’s satisfaction. The community has purchased and sold property and has encountered no obstacles.

There is an official list of religious foundations, and the community hopes that its “unlisted” foundations will soon be included.

There is another issue that may appear humorous but is actually quite serious. Both Islam and Judaism include ritual circumcision. Those Jews in Turkey who perform this operations lack the official sanction of their Muslim counterparts. This exposes them to unnecessary legal risk and is a form of blatant, although minor, discrimination.

There is one outstanding issue that is of great importance to the Turkish Jewish community and that is supported by Jews around the world. Synagogues are located in built-up urban areas that are almost impossible to secure without greatly inconveniencing Muslim neighbors and businesses. Even before the November 2003 attacks on the two synagogues, the community had been seeking a plot of land in Istanbul to construct a secure community and religious

center, large enough to accommodate community celebrations including weddings and bar mitzvahs. Both the current AKParti Administration and its predecessors have promised to accommodate this request, but little has been done because of bureaucratic obstructionism. We urge the responsible governments, particularly the Istanbul municipality, to work with the community to solve this grave danger resulting from the lack of a secure location to both worship and celebrate.

We at the American Jewish Committee stress that there are actions we would like to see Turkish authorities take to help secure and ameliorate concerns of its Jewish citizens. These suggestions should not in any way obviate that we believe Turkey's history, and the current situation, deserve greater recognition by those outside its borders for the tolerance it has shown and still shows. This is particularly worthy of praise in time when we see rising and violent anti-Semitism in the rest of Europe.