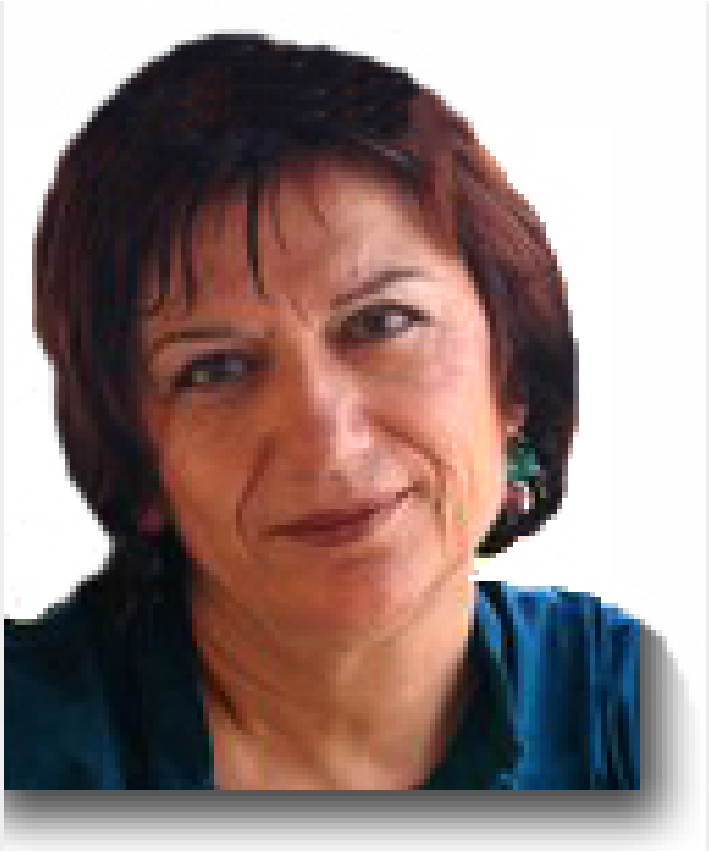
# THE JEWS OF TURKEY AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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**Category:** Opinions

By Ayse Gunaysu,The Armenian Weekly, 20 July 2009

*Ayse Gunaysu is a professional translator, human rights advocate, and feminist. She has been a member of the Committee Against Racism and Discrimination of the Human Rights Association of Turkey (Istanbul branch) since 1995, and was a columnist in a pro-Kurdish daily from 2005–07. Since 2008, she writes a bi-weekly column, titled "Letters from Istanbul," for the Armenian Weekly.*

A groundbreaking book by independent scholar and historian Rifat Bali was published recently in Turkey, unearthing facts and first-hand accounts that unmistakably illustrate how the Turkish establishment blackmailed the leaders of the Jewish community—and through them Jewish organizations in the United States—to secure their support of the Turkish position against the Armenians' campaign for genocide recognition. The title of the book, Devlet'in Ornek Yurttaslari –Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri 1950-2003, can be roughly translated into English as "The Model Citizens of the State–Jews of Turkey in the Republican Period 1950-2003." (I will refer to the book as "The Model Citizens" in this article.)

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The book is a product of the meticulous work Bali carried out for many years at around 15 archives worldwide, including the American Jewish Archives (Cincinatti, Ohio), B'nai B'rith International Archives (Washington, D.C.), National Archives and Records Administration (Maryland), Israeli National Archives (Jerusalem), Central Zionist Archives (Jerusalem), Turkish State Archives (Ankara), public archives in Tel Aviv, private archives (like that of Manajans Thomspson A.S., an advertising agency based in Istanbul), and his personal archives. He also researched hundreds of books, dissertations, and articles in Turkish and other languages, and interviewed numerous individuals. "The Model Citizens" is in fact the complementary volume of Bir Turklestirme Seruveni–Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri, 1923-1945 (A Story of Turkification–Jews of Turkey in the Republican

Period 1923-1945), a reference book Bali published in 1999 that reveals the true picture of the relations of domination between the ruling elite and non-Muslims in general (and Jews, in particular) after the founding of the Turkish Republic.

Rifat Bali's books are the richest sources of information for anyone looking to study the history of the non-Muslims in Turkey during the republican period. These books differ from others by their sheer wealth of archival references, details from daily life, and insights into the political, social, and cultural background. They are the result of arduous and untiring work carried out in both the public and private archives, in addition to a very detailed scanning of the daily press—which, apparent in both volumes of the history of the Jews of Turkey, significantly sheds light on how the "establishment" in Turkey, an organic system covering not only the state apparatus but also the representatives of the "civil society" from business organizations to the press, operated as a whole to treat the non-Muslims in Turkey as hostages and not as equal citizens. Although the history of the minorities in Turkey has become a topic of interest among the dissenting academia and a limited circle of intellectuals (especially after the turn of the millennium simultaneously with Turkey's prospective membership to the European Union), as far as I can see, none of the works in this field is supported by such a comprehensive press scan, which includes cartoons in addition to news items and articles.

**Turkish Jews lobbying against the Armenian Genocide**

In his 670-page book, Rifat Bali gives a detailed account of the Turkish government's efforts to mobilize its Jewish subjects to win the support of the Jewish lobby in the United States against the Armenian campaigners. At the same time, Bali shows, how the Turkish authorities played the Israeli government against U.S. policymakers for the same purpose, by making use of its strategic position in the Middle East, at times promising rewards (i.e., raising the level of diplomatic relations with Israel), at times overtly or covertly making threats (i.e., cutting off Israel's vital military logistical resources by hindering the use of U.S. bases in Turkey).

The book also offers rich material about how Turkish diplomats and semi-official spokesmen of Turkish policies, while carrying out their lobbying activities, threatened both Israel and the U.S. by indicating that if the Jewish lobby failed to prevent Armenian initiatives abroad—Turkey might not be able to guarantee the security of Turkish Jews. Such Armenian initiatives included the screening of an Armenian Genocide documentary by an Israeli TV channel in 1978 and 1990; Armenian participation in an international conference in Israel in 1982; Armenian genocide bills up for discussion in the U.S. House of Representatives, and so on. It has been a routine practice for Turkish authorities to invariably deny such threats. However, Bali's industrious work in the archives reveals first-hand accounts that confirm these allegations.

But this is not all. Rifat Bali throughout his book unfolds the entire socio-political setting of the process of making the Jewish community leaders active supporters of Turkish governments' struggle against the "Armenian claims" in the international arena.

Now let us look at this background. From what Bali brings to our attention, we can see that there has always been a frantic, extremely vulgar anti-Semitism freely expressed by Islamic fundamentalists and racists, and openly tolerated by the government and judiciary. Such anti-Semitism—escalating at times with the rising tension between Israel and the Muslim countries of the Middle East—often went as far as warmly praising Hitler for doing the right thing and exterminating the Jews; declaring Jews the enemies of the entire human race; listing characteristics attributed to Jews as the worst that can be found in human beings; in one instance, putting up advertisements on walls in Jewish-populated neighborhoods in Istanbul; and in another case, sending letters to prominent members of the Jewish community threatening that if they didn't "get the hell out of Turkey" within one month, no one would be responsible for what happened to them.

Whenever Jewish community leaders have approached the authorities for a determined stance against such open anti-Semitism, the answer has been the same: These are marginal voices that have no significant effect on the general public; and there is freedom of expression in Turkey.

**The eternal indebtedness of Jews to Turks**

An important fact about such violent anti-Semitism is that it goes hand in hand with the widespread official and public conception of the Jews as guests who are indebted to their hosts; it is a debt that cannot be paid no matter how hard the debtors tried. This view isn't only shared by extremist elements in Turkey, but by the entire society—from the elites to the average person. It is a conviction purposefully designed and maintained by the establishment. And it enables the perpetual, unending, and unrestricted generation and regeneration of the relations of domination in Turkey between the establishment and non-Muslims in general, and Jews in particular, manifested in the treatment of the latter as hostages.

There are regular manifestations of this relationship. The most unbearable is the shameless, extremely offensive repetition by both top-ranking government officials and the mainstream media of how Turkey generously offered shelter to the Jews in 1492, when they were expelled from Spain, and how the Turkish people have always been so "kind" to treat the Jews with "tolerance" throughout history. This theme is repeated on every occasion but is voiced more loudly and more authoritatively whenever pressure on Turkey regarding the Armenian Genocide increases abroad. Another theme has been the obligation of the Jews to show material evidence of their gratitude to Turkey on account of the latter's welcoming of German Jewish scientists right after the Nazis' ascension to power. (Readers of Bali's first volume instantly will remember how Turkey declined thousands of asylum requests by German Jews; how 600 Czeckoslavakian Jews on board the vessel "Parita" were turned down; and how 768 passengers on the Romanian vessel "Struma," after being kept waiting off Istanbul for weeks in poverty and hunger, were sent to death in the Black Sea by Turkish authorities, with only one survivor in the winter of 1942.)

An illustrative example is the story of the fury that broke out in Turkey in 1987 when the U.S.

Holocaust Memorial Museum Council in Washington, D.C. decided to include the Armenian Genocide—as the first genocide of the 20th century— in the Memorial Museum that was going to be built.

The mainstream media, and not only the ultra-nationalist extremists, started a campaign that would last for years. Melih Asik from Milliyet (which has always positioned itself as a liberal and democratic newspaper), in his article on Dec. 20, 1987, accused "Jews" for being "ungrateful." After observing the regular ritual of reminding the Jews of the Turks' generosity in 1492 and during World War II, he wrote: "We treated them with utmost kindness for many years and now these same Jews are preparing to present us to the world in the Holocaust museum as genociders. Before everything else this behavior should be exhibited in the museum of 'historical displays of ingratitude and disgrace.'"

Melih Asik, as can be seen, is so confident that his readers would not question the use of the words "these same Jews," nor ridicule the identification of those Jews who sought shelter in the Ottoman Empire in 1492 with those sitting in the Holocaust Memorial Museum Council in 1987. He is that confident because he knows that such identification and essentialization is a regular, daily pattern internalized by the readers of the Turkish press.

Another very liberal and democrat anchorman of Turkey, Mehmet Ali Birand, known as a taboo breaker in recent years, joined—and even surpassed—Asik in his Dec. 29, 1987 article that appeared in Milliyet. In it, he publicly called on the Jews of Turkey to fulfill their "duty of gratitude" and do their best to prevent the Armenians from including the Armenian Genocide in the museum. He added: "Isn't it our right to expect from every Turkish citizen?" There's hardly any need to mention that just before this call to duty, Birand paid tribute to the routine of mentioning the Turks' generosity towards the Jews back in 1492.

**Not an apologist at all**

Yet, it is important to note that Bali is by no means interested in justifying the Jewish lobby's vigorous efforts to please the Turkish authorities. While he puts forth a wealth of evidence of the huge pressure the Jewish community in Turkey is subjected to, that evidence does not prevent him from giving a critical account of how the Jewish leadership in Turkey has displayed an eagerness to advocate Turkish views and to support official Turkish policies. There are numerous accounts in the book of how the Turkish chief rabbinate confirmed the Jewish community's happiness and well-being in Turkey, opposing the promotion of the Armenian Genocide thesis, and how the Quincentennial Foundation, established by Turkish Jewish leaders in 1992 to celebrate the 500th year anniversary of the arrival of the Jews to Ottoman lands, actively championed Turkish official theses.

It is clear from the book that Bali does not like to make comments on the meaning of his findings; rather, he puts the facts together like a scientist, avoiding to make personal comments, draw conclusions, or speculate about the reasons or outcomes of certain facts and events. What he

exposes is clear enough to make the picture complete in the eyes of the reader. It's up to the reader to acknowledge, for example, the fact that those who criticized Turkish Jews for their submissiveness had no right to expect bravery—when none of them raised their voice against the rabid anti-Semitism freely displayed by fundamentalists, or against the innuendos from government officials, or against the quite obvious threats from opinion leaders who kept asking the Jews to prove their loyalty to the Turkish state or relinquish their right to be treated as equal citizens.

A last word about Rifat Bali's book "Model Citizens." It should definitely be translated into English for those who are interested in the Jewish factor in Turkey's struggle against Armenian initiatives to recognize the genocide. It would be impossible for anyone either in Turkey or elsewhere to make a realistic, objective, and complete evaluation of Turkey's success in securing the support of Jewish leaders both in Turkey and abroad without reading this book. Not only that, but the "Model Citizens" is a guide to understanding how deeply rooted anti-Semitism still is in Turkey that claims to be a European country knocking on the door of the EU. It also shows how powerful it can be when mobilizing a country's human resources against its Jewish citizens—to make the leaders of the Jewish community act as they are told. Turning the pages of Bali's book, the reader is made to see that anti-Semitism has a historical context so horrifying and so vivid in the collective memory that it can be very instrumental in manipulating victims, and very successful in carving out "model citizens" as the voluntary executioners of government policies.

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