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## **Conspiracy Theory Culture in Turkey and the "Crypto-Jews": Dönmes**

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A well-known Turkish sociologist, Şerif Mardin, once remarked that conspiracy theories shape Turkish people's historical perspective. Indeed, conspiratorial accounts are ubiquitous in modern Turkish politics: the Turkish government explained that the Gezi Park protests in 2013 were a foreign conspiracy meant to undermine Turkish economic progress.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, ever since the 1970s, various speakers in the Turkish parliament have claimed that there is a clandestine elite group determined to defend the Turkish state ideology by legal and extralegal means alike, and which is responsible for various conspiracies including, but not limited to extrajudicial assassinations.<sup>2</sup> In this political climate, conspiracy theories about Dönmes (Sabbateans), the followers of Sabbatai Sevi (Shabtai Tzvi), represent a major part of contemporary Turkish anti-Semitism. For example, the conspiracy theory books of Soner Yalçın became best-sellers in the Turkish book market in 2004 and 2006.<sup>3</sup>

The perceived security threats, and prevalent fears about the potential dismemberment of Turkey as had been the fate of the Ottoman Empire, have provided a fertile ground for the conspiracy rhetoric about Dönmes in modern Turkey. Based on the findings of my PhD thesis,<sup>4</sup> this paper will first start by giving a brief historical overview of the Dönme community in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Second, it will discuss the conspiratorial rhetoric about Dönmes in Turkey. Third, it will outline the main findings of interviews conducted among conspiracy theorists<sup>5</sup>, readers<sup>6</sup> and political party representatives<sup>7</sup>. Lastly, it will conclude with an overall discussion.

The word Dönme means ‘convert’ in Turkish. The Dönme community represents the adherents of the self-proclaimed Jewish messiah, Sabbatai Sevi (1626–1676).<sup>8</sup> Sevi, who lived in the Ottoman Empire and managed to attract a group of believers to his messianic claims, was forced to convert to Islam by the Ottoman authorities.<sup>9</sup> This led him to lose the majority of his followers. Those who continued to believe him formed the Dönme community. Although they converted to Islam like Sevi, they maintained their faith. This crypto-Judaic community appeared to be Muslims in public life, and attempted to preserve their secret by avoiding marrying outsiders. The majority of the Dönmes lived in Salonica during the period of Ottoman rule until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the city became a part of Greece, most migrated to Turkey. While there is no official information about the current demographics of the Dönme community, Sisman estimates that there are around eighty thousand people of Dönme origin in Turkey, of which only three to four thousand still believe in Sevi’s messiahship.<sup>10</sup>

Since the early 20th century, conspiracy theories accused Dönmes of secretly manipulating Turkish society and politics. The conspiratorial rhetoric initially emerged after Theodor Herzl wanted to buy Palestine from the Ottoman Empire in 1899 in order to establish a state there. The Ottoman ruler, Sultan Abdulhamid II, did not grant the request<sup>11</sup>, and in 1908, he was toppled by a coup d’etat. Some conspiratorial accounts claimed that the coup was Jewish revenge for his refusal to sell Palestine and used the involvement of Dönme Mehmed Cavid Bey and Jewish-freemason Emmanuel Carosso in the coup as supporting evidence of the conspiracy. We can identify three distinct periods for the conspiracy theories about Dönmes in modern Turkey: the single party era (1923–1950), the multi-party democracy era (1950–1990), and the current era beginning after 1990.<sup>12</sup>

Conspiracy accounts first became widespread following a 1924 petition by Karakaşzade Rüşdü, who was himself a self-proclaimed Dönme. He suggested that the incoming Dönmes from the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1924 should be approved only if they agreed to assimilate fully into Turkish society.<sup>13</sup> This was followed by several weeks of much discussion in the press, and the circulation of various conspiracy theories regarding the Dönme community.<sup>14</sup>

Following the termination of single party rule, the level of censorship on political groups decreased. This enabled right-wing and Islamist groups to circulate conspiracy theories about the community. For example, Nazif Özge accused members of the community of attempting to rape his wife in 1952, and the right-wing journals and newspapers published his claims as well as conspiracy theories about the community.<sup>15</sup> Until the 1990s, the conspiratorial

accounts were confined to marginal right-wing circles, Turkish nationalists and Islamists. During the 1990s and 2000s, the conspiratorial accounts became prevalent once again after the works of a self-acclaimed Dönme, İlğaz Zorlu. He wrote articles about the history of the group and advocated that Dönmes should convert back to Judaism. Zorlu's book *Evet Ben Selanik'liyim (Yes, I am a Salonikan)*<sup>16</sup> increased the public interest in Dönmes. In this period, not only right-wingers and Islamists but also some left-wingers, such as Soner Yalçın,<sup>17</sup> published conspiratorial accounts about the community.<sup>18</sup>

In my doctoral work, I explored the impacts of the conspiratorial rhetoric through in-depth interviews with major political party representatives, some of whom are consumers of the conspiracy theories. To start with, I interviewed the representatives of the political Islamist Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi – SP*), the Kurdish and left-wing People's Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi – HDP*), the conservative and liberal Justice and Progress Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP*) and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – MHP*) with a Turkish nationalist ideological orientation.<sup>19</sup> The interviews showed that the right-wing political parties problematize the secret character of the Dönme community and use the conspiracy theories to express their own perceived insecurities about the possible dismemberment of Turkey. Conversely, the left-wing and liberal parties denounce the conspiratorial rhetoric.

The difference between the right and left-wing disappears when it comes to the readers' perceptions. The interviews demonstrate that while right-wing readers react to the Jewish origins of the Dönmes, the leftists demonize them as members of the bourgeoisie. That is to say, left and right-wingers use the conspiracy theories in line with their political views and insecurities.<sup>20</sup> Further, I interviewed prominent authors of the conspiratorial accounts: Islamist Abdurrahman Dilipak, and left-wing intellectuals, Yalçın Küçük and Soner Yalçın. The authors portray the Dönme community in different manners, while Dilipak underlined the Judaic character of the community and the conspiratorial account that the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, the others associated the community with the ruling class in Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

The research found that conspiracy theorists, most readers and some political parties respond to their insecurities and frustrations by scapegoating Dönmes. While doing so, their demonization of the community varies in line with their political identities and interests: on the one hand, secular individuals and organizations view Islamists as a part of the conspiracy theories. On the other, Islamists see the Dönme community as promoters of secularism. The study demonstrates that the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are important symptoms of the perceived threats in Turkish politics and society, and while relieving insecurities, they

promote ethno-religious hostility against Jews. Consequently, the popular conspiratorial accounts about Dönmes neither transform people into anti-Semites by themselves, nor have they led to the creation of any anti-Semitic political movements in Turkey. However, they do ensure the continuity of anti-Jewish stereotypes among different groups and feed hostility towards the local and international Jewish communities. One of the common remarks in my interviews with the readers of the conspiracy theories was that ‘I never knew any poor Jews.’ Sadly, when I further inquired how many Jews they personally know, they either say none or mumble.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2017) ‘[The impacts of the Turkish government’s conspiratorial framing about the Gezi Park Protests](#)’, *Social Movement Studies* 16(5): 610-622.

<sup>2</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2019) ‘[The conspiratorial style in Turkish politics: discussing the deep state in the parliament](#)’, in J. Uscinski (ed.) *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, New York: Oxford University Press: 385-395.

<sup>3</sup> Yalçın, S. (2004) *Efendi: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı*. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap;

Yalçın, S. (2006) *Efendi 2: Beyaz Müslümanların Büyük Sırrı*. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap.

<sup>4</sup> Nefes, T.S (2010) [Towards a Sociology of Conspiracy Theories: An Investigation into Conspiratorial thinking on Dönmes](#). Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Kent.

<sup>5</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2015a) ‘[Understanding the anti-Semitic rhetoric in Turkey through the Sevres syndrome](#)’, *Turkish Studies* 16(4): 572-587.

<sup>6</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2015b) ‘[Scrutinizing impacts of conspiracy theories on readers' political views: a rational choice perspective on anti-Semitic rhetoric in Turkey](#)’, *British Journal of Sociology* 66(3): 557-575.

<sup>7</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2013) ‘[Political parties' perceptions and uses of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Turkey](#)’, *The Sociological Review* 61(2): 247-264.

<sup>8</sup> Scholem, G. (1971) *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Sprituality*. Allen & Unwin.

<sup>9</sup> Şişman, C. (2008) *Sabatay Sevi ve Sabataycılar: Mitler ve Gerçekler*. Aşına Kitaplar: İstanbul.

<sup>10</sup> Sisman, C. (2010) ‘Cortijo de Sevi: Kültür mirası Sabetay Sevi’nin evi’nin geçmisi, bugünü, geleceği’, *Toplumsal Tarih* 196: 14–25.

<sup>11</sup> Bali, R. (2008) *A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey*. İstanbul: ISIS.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bali, R. (2002) ‘Bir Dönmenin hikayesi: Nazif Özge kimdir?’ *Tarih ve Toplum* 38(223): 15–21.

<sup>16</sup> Zorlu, I (2001) *Evet, Ben Selanikliyim*. Zvi-Geyik Yayınları.

<sup>17</sup> Yalçın, S. (2004) *Efendi: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı*. İstanbul: Dogan Kitap; Yalçın, S. (2006) *Efendi 2: Beyaz Müslümanların Büyük Sırrı*. İstanbul: Dogan Kitap.

<sup>18</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2012) ‘[The history of the social constructions of Dönmes \(converts\)](#)’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25(3): 413-439.

<sup>19</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2013) ‘[Political parties' perceptions and uses of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Turkey](#)’, *The Sociological Review* 61(2): 247-264.

<sup>20</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2015b) ‘[Scrutinizing impacts of conspiracy theories on readers' political views: a rational choice perspective on anti-Semitic rhetoric in Turkey](#)’, *British Journal of Sociology* 66(3): 557-575.

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<sup>21</sup> Nefes, T. S. (2015a) '[Understanding the anti-Semitic rhetoric in Turkey through the Sevres syndrome](#)', *Turkish Studies* 16(4): 572-587.