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Antisemitism: The “New Normal” in Turkey

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Israel’s harsh military response to Hamas’ barbaric October 7 surprise attack has once again triggered dormant anti-Israel sentiments in the Turkish public arena. However, this time unlike to previous military confrontations in Gaza, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s open support for Hamas - tagging this terrorist entity as an Islamic freedom fighters’ organization¹ - has put an end to the fragile normalization between Israel and Turkey and erased the line between legitimate critique of Israel and despicable antisemitism.

In fact, Turkey was never free of antisemitism. Long before Erdoğan’s ascension to power, the antisemitic incidents from the early republican era, such as the 1934 Thrace Pogroms² and the 1942 Wealth Tax³, among others, are still not forgotten.

Antisemitism can be traced back before the establishment of Israel, however, it has continued since then, and often manifests in conspiracies related to the state of Israel. Public discourse may connect negative incidents affecting the lives of the Turkish public with Jews. Despite lacking evidence, public voices have blamed Jews for a price rise in natural gas⁴ or devaluation⁵ of the Turkish Lira, for instance. The level of antisemitism is indeed alarming. The Anti-Defamation League’s 2015-year Global Antisemitism Report’s findings also reflected this trend. According to ADL, at that time 71 percent of the Turkish population harbored antisemitic attitudes.⁶ In the shadow of the current war, today one can easily argue that the situation is far worse than 2015.

Considering the above, this article seeks to highlight the latest antisemitic trends over different categories, namely, incidents on the street, statements of political parties or figures, and the hate speech that can be seen in both the institutional media and online in social media. Since the Jewish community of Turkey was the main victim of this hate campaign the article will not focus on anti-Israel incidents. This article will explain how recent anti-Israel rhetoric evolved into a hate campaign that has left the Turkish Jewish community feeling threatened.

Just a few days after the war broke out, one could perceive a strong anti-Israel atmosphere in the streets of Istanbul. A yellow taxi driver explicitly announced that he will not allow any Israeli passengers in his car by putting a placard on his back window. The Israelis who can't read Turkish most probably did not understand the offensive message, however, there is no doubt that the rest of the public saw the sign and did nothing to stop the driver and ask him to take the sign down.

However, the second phenomenal incident did not target only Turkish readers and brought more attention to the issue. It was Rağmen Sahaf, a secondhand bookstore located near Istanbul University, in the center of the historic peninsula of Istanbul.⁷ The owner of the store, Özkan Mustafa Küçükural, hung a bilingual placard at the entrance of his shop reading 'Jews are not allowed' (with a crossed out Israeli flag) - reminding the dark days of Nazi Germany. Although the sign was taken off the very next day, Küçükural proudly told his interviewer⁸ that he is determined not to buy or sell anything to the Jews.

Other proudly hung posters, such as the huge Al-Qassam Brigades poster hung on the historic city walls of Edirnekapı in Istanbul cannot be ignored. A giant photo of the spokesperson of Al-Qassam Brigade Abu-Obaida was flying on the walls together with a message: 'Al-Qassam is our honor!' After fulfilling "its mission" of harassing the local Jewish community, the poster that was claimed to be hung by The Islamic Resistance of Turkey later taken away by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality.⁹

Attacking places of worship was another tool that was used by the antisemites. It is important to point out that not only synagogues, but also Christian churches were subject to antisemitic attacks - a sign that the perpetrators were not capable of distinguishing a Jew from any kind of non-Muslim. The first attack took place on October 28 in Izmir's Ets Hayim Synagogue. The perpetrator sprayed the walls and plates of the synagogue as well as leaving a note on it: "Israel the Murderer."¹⁰

On November 8, Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, an ancient church dating back to the Byzantium era and Fener Greek High School – both in Istanbul - were targeted. The message was similar: decorated with Palestinian flags ‘Curse on you Israel’ and ‘Al-Quds is the capital of Palestine.’ However, this time the perpetrators didn’t forget to throw stones as well.¹¹

Another attack targeted a Protestant church in Eskişehir where Christians of Turkish origin attend. On November 25, two men threatened the pastor of the church. They asked him whether he is Jew or Israeli and threatened to burn down the church if he called the police.¹²

There were other targets, as well. On November 20, a strange video circulated on social media. A group of young men who claimed to be physicians were gathered in a park close to the Or-Ahayim Jewish hospital and shot a video to call other physicians and medical personnel for a protest to be carried out in the outskirts of the Jewish hospital against Israel. After reading out their manifesto the group painted their hands in red to resemble blood and printed them on each other's aprons to demonstrate the massacre. It is likely that this event was organized and carried out by a nationalist group which has no affiliation with any medical school or hospital.¹³

Yet another antisemitic poster was claimed to be found on a pro-Palestine rally in Istanbul. The claim appeared on the social media site, Reddit, with no further details. The poster was more likely an A4 print out containing slogans claiming to belong to Sultan Abdulhamid II: *‘Death to Jews, let a new hunt against the Jews in Turkey begin, Jewish blood is halal for us, everything is for Palestine.’* Bearing in mind that there is no proof that these words belong to Sultan Abdulhamid II, the grammatical mistakes in the poster made it very doubtful whether these slogans were translated or if the perpetrators were even native Turkish speakers.¹⁴

These examples could be interpreted as separate incidents; however, we should recall that media and political figures are very influential in the rise of antisemitic discourse and notion.

Hitler and his book *Mein Kampf* are very popular in Turkey among the younger generation, in particular. Once the copyright protection ended in 2015, the book was published by numerous publishing houses in Turkey. Unlike the scholarly German edition, the Turkish *Mein Kampf* has no footnotes added by the publisher to draw attention to the historical context, but it is rather translated to Turkish as is. The book is being sold not only in bookstores or online platforms but also in supermarkets¹⁵ and sometimes with additional discounts.¹⁶

Like in many other countries, antisemitic images and discourse are often associated with the Holocaust and Hitler. These tropes are often supported by political actors in Turkey. For example, Süleyman Sezen, the member of the district council of Atakum, Samsun and who is a member of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) commemorated Adolf Hitler with God's mercy and grace; and added that the world will only reach peace and serenity once it will be cleaned out of Jews. More interestingly Cemil Deveci, the mayor of the district, a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP) who was chairing the meeting did not stop or condemn him but rather said that these are humane sentiments.¹⁷ This, of course, was not the only Hitler reference during the war. Recently Erdoğan himself addressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "Hitler"¹⁸ or "Führer"¹⁹ – leading to the banalization of the Holocaust.

Another bold move was made by Nimet Özdemir, a member of the parliament from IYI Party (Good Party). On October 19 she sent a set of parliamentary questions to the Minister of Interior Affairs and incriminated the Jews in Turkey with acts of treason.²⁰ She clearly wanted to launch a witch hunt against Turkish citizens of Jewish origin who were called to serve as reserves in Israel and also against Turkish citizens who traveled to Israel after the war broke out. In short, all Turkish citizens with dual Israeli citizenship became her open target. She also requested sanctions, namely revoking Turkish citizenship for those who participated in the war in any manner.

Unsurprisingly, Özdemir was not the only political figure hunting against Jews. According to a news outlet in Turkey, Free Cause Party (HÜDAPAR), a Kurdish Islamist Party having strong ties with Hezbollah terrorist organization, plans to propose a new law in Parliament which will allow the authorities to extradite the dual citizens, to confiscate their property, and to jail Turkish - Israeli dual citizens on the allegation they may have been party to the genocide. Although there is no significant potential that this law shall pass, this kind of stance and discourse harms the Jews in Turkey by placing a negative perception on them.²¹

Extradition of dual citizens has been a hot topic ever since the war broke out. Not only the political figures but also the media has promoted this idea. Yeni Akit, one of the most well-known antisemitic, Islamist newspapers in Turkey wrote: 'Extradite the Zionist Servants'.²² Differently from Özdemir's claims, Yeni Akit claimed that all the Jews are natural citizens of Israel and thus those taking part in the massacre must be tried. Yeni Akit went further and claimed that Turkish

Jews were recruited directly into the ranks of Israel Defense Forces even without becoming Israeli citizens.

For some, the concept of joining the Israeli army became a nightmare. According to the Cabinet Decree numbered 93/4613 and dated July 25, 1993, dual citizens of Turkey and Israel are exempt from the army service if they already served in Israel under certain circumstances. Still, an investigation was initiated by the Istanbul Prosecutor's Office in November 2023 against two social media accounts which claim to have left Turkey to combat voluntarily on Israel's side. Although it was initially not prosecuted, Istanbul Third Criminal Court of Peace requested further investigation.²³

As can be seen, the pressure on Turkey's Jewish community grew steadily. A great burden lay on the Jewish community while the masses insistently wanted to see their condemnation of Israel. Social media users weren't the only ones who pushed for such condemnations of Israel, but also traditional media figures demanded them even on the national TV. Murat Özer, a columnist of Akşam Newspaper, appeared on live stream²⁴ and targeted the Jews of Turkey, accusing them of not standing against the brutal violence taking place in Gaza. He repeated the old Turkish narrative of Sephardic Jews being the guests of Ottoman Empire and even did not hesitate to threaten them by speaking of them as hostages and targeting their synagogues.

Targeting the Jewish community was never as easy as targeting them on social media. On October 12 the Jewish community posted on "X" that Avi Avraam Zakuto²⁵ who was also a Turkish citizen, was killed by Hamas during the October 7 attack. Instead of showing empathy, Turkish social media users left hundreds of ugly and antisemitic remarks. Despite this negative trend, the Jewish community sought to lower the public tension by posting Peace Prayers on social media throughout the war.²⁶ However, this constructive approach was generally received with ugly comments targeting the whole Jewish nation.

Turkey has never been wholly successful in restraining antisemitism and the Palestinian cause has always been an emotional spot of the Turkish public. From the beginning of the war the Turkish public did not stand on Israel's side, even on October 7, but rather chose to follow Hamas. Erdoğan's initially statement embracing Hamas, tagging it as an Islamic freedom fighter organization rather than a terror organization eased the way for the masses to create antisemitic

discourse and frighten the Jewish community.²⁷ In other words antisemitism and expressing anti-Israel sentiments became the new normal.

Thus, recently, the decision of detention and extradition of the two Israeli football players Sagiv Yehezkel and Eden Karzev - who sought to raise awareness for the Israeli hostages in the Hamas captivity - was justified within the so-called “Turkish national values.”²⁸

With the outbreak of war, antisemitism became visible not only on the streets and in the institutionalized and social media but also in the parliament. For the first time ever, the legislative branch was misused to deter Turkey’s Jews. The threat of extradition was taken very seriously by the Jewish community. The rising tension in the public discourse gave the Jewish community no choice but to lower its profile. In this framework, all scheduled activities were frozen due to increasing threats. Indeed, in retrospect, since the synagogues and the Jewish hospital became targets of antisemitic acts the decision of lowering their profile indeed proved to be the right decision.

Apart from that, Holocaust reference and its banalization has become a powerful way to create antisemitic discourse in this new era. The blunt antisemitic acts such as Rağmen Sahaf’s ‘Jews are not allowed’ banner, Murat Özer’s comments as well as the Israeli football players’ affair indeed functioned as the symbol of this “new normal.” It seems that the war is set to continue and so are the antisemitic incidents in Turkey.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors’ alone.

Adv. Betsy Penso is the co-editor of Avlaremöz - an internet-based platform aims to raise the voices of Turkey's Jews as well as raising awareness on antisemitism and the affairs of other ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey.

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Notes

¹ “Erdoğan ' Hamas terör örgütü değil, kurtuluş ve mücahitler grubudur' dedi, İsrail tepki gösterdi”, *BBC Türkçe*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51xzenk981o> [Accessed: January 23, 2024].

² Rıfat N. Bali, *Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni*, (Istanbul, İletişim, 1999) pp.243-265.

³ Rıfat N. Bali, *Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni*, (Istanbul, İletişim, 1999) pp.424-497.

- ⁴ “Doğalgaz Enflasyonu Üzerinden Antisemitizm Dalgası”, *Avlaremoz*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.avlaremoz.com/2019/01/27/dogalgaz-enflasyonu-uzerinden-antisemitizm-dalgasi-nesi-altaras-2/> [Accessed: January 23, 2024].
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