

The 'Unholy' Alliance: Jews, Turks, and Ottomans During the 15th and 16th Centuries

15. ve 16. Yüzyıllarda Osmanlılar, Türkler ve Museviler: 'Kutsal Olmayan' İttifak

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Abstract

More than half of the world Jewry was living within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 16th century. Rather than analyzing the factors lying behind this fact, much scholarly effort in Ottoman/Jewish historiography was spent on whether the Ottoman Jewry were living a "Golden Age" or "Dark Age" under the Ottomans. Instead of this traditional approach, this study focused on the factors that made the Ottoman/Turkish/Jewish possible; the Turkish/Ottoman perception of and approach toward the Jews, and the Jewish approach toward the Ottoman state and the Muslims in general. The study concluded that no other Muslim state, possibly with the exception of Umayyads of Andalusia, welcomed Jews in such large numbers and with such great living space and opportunities in Islam history. Whereas the contacts between the Muslims and Jewish *millet* were limited in nature the pragmatic, rational and flexible Ottoman *raison d'etat* provided the Jews with extensive privileges beyond the confines of dhimmi status. Nevertheless, the presence of the Jews in the Empire contributed significantly in the political and economic success of the Ottoman Empire in becoming a hegemonic power of the pre-modern times.

Keywords: Ottomans, Turks, Jews, Unholy Alliance

Öz

16. yüzyılın sonlarında dünyadaki Musevilerin yarısından fazlası Osmanlı İmparatorluğu sınırları altında yaşamaktaydı. Ancak Yahudi ve Osmanlı tarihyazımında çalışmalar bu tarihsel gerçekliğin sebeplerini incelemek yerine genellikle Museviler'in Osmanlı hakimiyeti altında bir "Altın Çağ" mı yoksa "Karanlık Çağ" mı yaşadıklarına yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bu çalışmada bu ortak veya bir arada yaşamayı mümkün kılan etkenler, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun ve Türkler'in Musevi algısı ve onlara karşı yaklaşımı ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki Museviler'in devlete ve Müslümanlara karşı yaklaşımı incelenmiştir. Varılan sonuç, İslam tarihinde Endülüs Emevileri hariç hiçbir Müslüman devletin veya halkın Osmanlılar kadar Museviler'e karşı müsamahayla yaklaşmadığıdır. Osmanlı Devleti siyasi ve ekonomik pragmatizm, rasyonel ve esnek anlayışıyla Museviler'e zimmi statüsünün sınırlarını aşan ayrıcalıklar tanımış; her ne kadar Müslümanlar ve Museviler'in günlük hayatta birbirleriyle iletişimi sınırlı olsa da Museviler'in varlığı Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun hegemon güç haline gelmesine büyük katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlılar, Türkler, Museviler, Kutsal Olmayan İttifak

Introduction

The Europeans were so preoccupied with the Ottoman threat in the 16th century that they printed 3500 titles concerning the Turks. Most of these volumes mentioned the famous Ottoman sultan Süleyman I "the Magnificent". When Süleyman I died in 1566, most of the world's Jewry was living under Ottoman rule. At that time, whereas European Jews were denied their basic rights, Ottoman Jews could freely live, travel and trade in three continents, north to south from Hungary to Yemen, west to east from Morocco to Persia. Ottoman Jewish communities were materially and culturally the foremost Jewish centers in the world. Although it is difficult to provide an exact figure, it is estimated that at the end of the 16th century there were approximately 150,000 Jews living in the Ottoman Empire, compared to only 75,000 Jews in Poland and Ukrania.¹

In Ottoman-Jewish historiography, rather than analyzing the factors of why most of the world's Jewry lived under the Ottoman rule for more than 200 years, much scholarly effort has been spent on

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¹ Levy 1992, 12-13. Shaw 1991, 40.

whether the presence of the Jews in the Ottoman lands symbolized a “Golden Age” or a “Dark Age”. Because of political and theological considerations, most of the scholarly arguments were shaped by modern day value judgments on the treatment of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire.² In this paper, I will try to analyze the factors that made the Ottoman Turkish-Jewish symbiosis or co-existence possible instead of judging the relationship between the Ottoman Turks and Jews with modern values. Both the Ottoman Jews and the Ottoman authorities developed unique approaches to each other as members of different religions and as occupants of different social and political positions by knowing their social place, and not judging each other in terms of their faith. Seen from this perspective, the instances of mistreatment of Jews by the Ottomans or the flourishing of Jews under Ottomans are actually freed from presentist approaches.

Given centuries of Western bias and theologically concerned Eurocentric history writing about the Ottoman Empire, many modern history readers have difficulties understanding the Jewish preference to live under a “barbaric” empire (i.e. the Ottoman Empire) rather than the European states of the 15th and 16th centuries. Historians from all sides share responsibility in the creation of this problem. First, Turkish historians have been so engrossed in nation-building theories for a long time that they neglected to study basic socio-economic paradigms that made a pluralistic polyglot empire possible. Jewish historians on the other hand, mostly preferred to study the history of Jewish thought and scholarship until the 19th century, and after that they chose to study Ottoman Jewish communities in regional contexts (such as Jews of Egypt, Jews of Istanbul, or Jews of Palestine, etc.) instead of studying Ottoman Jewry as a whole in the broad Ottoman socio-political context.³ It was not until recently that the achievements of Ottoman Jewry were evaluated in the context of Ottoman socio-political realities.⁴ Another group of Jewish historians, who still cling to the Eurocentric perspectives on the Ottoman Empire, try to explain Jewish experience in the frame of the “oppressed” non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empires such as Greeks and Armenians.⁵ Last but not least is the category of the Eurocentric/Orientalist and former-Communist historians, who have viewed the Ottoman Empire through the category of primitive, retrogressive, oppressive, uncivilized, barbaric, militarist and genocidal pre-modern empires. For a long time historians with socialist and communist leanings applied *the Feudal Mode of Production* and *Asiatic Mode of Production* models on the Ottoman Empire on the grounds that the Ottoman state only expropriated the economic surplus and oppressed the people. Therefore, most new nation-states to emerge on former Ottoman territories that have majority non-Muslim populations used this logic to portray their Ottoman past as one long and uninterrupted period of oppression.⁶ On the other hand, 19th and early 20th century British historians (almost all of them, even the most respected ones), motivated by the colonial-imperialist goals of their motherland, promoted various version of the myth of the relentless oppression of non-Turkish elements by the Ottoman Empire.⁷ The logical result of this perspective was that the Turks could not have been tolerant towards Jews, either; since the Jews were non-Muslims. However, the very fact that the majority of the world’s Jewry lived under the Ottoman rule for more than two centuries and achieved great success contradicted the basis of the anti-Ottoman/Turkish theory concerning non-Muslims. This is most likely why the study of Ottoman Jews was ignored for a long time. This attitude was reflected in the scholarly neglect of *Sephardic* (Iberian) Jewry after the *Reconquista*, which in turn made a sound evaluation of the achievements of the Ottoman Jewry almost impossible.⁸

Since it was assumed that the Sephardic Jewry reached its Golden Age in Iberia, 19th century Jewish historians viewed the departure from the Iberian Peninsula as a downfall.⁹ Based on this hypothesis, most Western historians tend to underestimate Sephardic Jewish achievements in the Ottoman Empire.

² Anachronistic judgment of historical periods with today’s values is commonly referred as *presentism*. Unfortunately, Ottoman-Jewish studies tend to suffer from presentist approaches (author’s note).

³ “...Ottoman Jewish communities were often represented as if they were living in a vacuum, with an almost disregard of the larger societies and polities of which they were a part.” Lewis 1984, 116.

⁴ Levy 1992, 14.

⁵ Hacker 1982, 117-126. Rozen 2002, 1-15. Angel 2006, 37-46.

⁶ İnalçık 1995, 20-43.

⁷ “The Ottoman Empire has proved itself radically alien to Western Civilization. Where Ottoman rule has spread, civilization has perished.” Toynbee 1917, 17.

⁸ For the critical discussion of this issue, see *Sephardic Studies in the University*, ed. Jane Gerber 1995, passim.

⁹ Cohen 1995, 69.

As Avigdor Levy states “since, in the view of European centered historians, Ottoman Jews lived within a barbaric society, their [Jews’] achievements could not have been very considerable and their experience was not much more than a historical curiosity.”¹⁰ This paper takes the enormous achievements of the Ottoman Jewry as a given and does not attempt to question it. Instead, it will try to draw the big picture in which Ottoman Jews were able to develop a full-fledged partnership with Ottoman Turks and fulfill their potentials. Ottoman Turkish-Jewish partnership was the result of several factors owing to peculiar Jewish characteristics and traditions, Turkish and/or Islamic tradition, dynamics of the Ottoman Empire, and the socio-political milieu of Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries. After describing the factors making the symbiosis possible, the perception and treatment of the Jews by others and the Jewish perceptions of others in the Ottoman Empire will be analyzed. This paper attempts to depict different stages of Ottoman-Jewish symbiosis by analyzing how Ottoman Jews formed a partnership with Ottoman Turks, how the Jewish accommodation to the Ottoman socio-political structure was realized and how peculiar Jews and Turks were in rationalizing their affinity towards each other. European perception of Turkish-Jewish partnership will constitute the last part of the study in order to emphasize the unique nature of Turkish-Jewish coexistence that prevailed as an ‘Oriental’ phenomenon in Christian European minds.

I. Factors Making Ottoman Turkish-Jewish Symbiosis Possible

a. The Turco-Islamic Tradition:

Throughout history Turkic nations have established many states. In most of these states they had the experience of ruling over non-Turkic populations. Moreover, Turkic people embraced many religions in history, and co-habited with people of other faiths. Therefore, when the Turks established the Ottoman State in Anatolia where there was a large Christian population they did not have the problem of adjusting to a multi-religious environment. Even the ruling class of the Ottoman State had many converts from Christianity. In terms of state-building and preserving the states Turks have had the tradition of paying tolerance towards different ethnicities and religions.

Turks began to accept Islam *en masse* starting in the 8th century in Central Asia. The conversion of Turkic tribes to Islam continued as a long and drawn out process. During this process Turks had time to grow familiar with Sasanid, Seljukid and Byzantine state practices in regards to communal autonomy until they established the Ottoman state in Anatolia. This experience impacted their understanding of those aspects of the *Shari’a* that related to the non-Muslim communities. Like all Muslim rulers before them, Ottomans adopted the *dhimma* (protected) system in order to regulate its relations with its non-Muslim subjects. According to this practice, Christians and Jews were protected by the Muslim rulers by *dhimma* (covenant of protection). *Dhimmi* (protected) practice was applied in concordance with *shari’a* in Islamic states throughout history. However, in the application of *shari’a* the Ottomans followed the *Hanafi* rite of jurisprudence, which is the most liberal of the four Sunni rites according to historian Avigdor Levy. Therefore, “in its attitude towards its non-Muslim subjects, the Ottoman Empire was one of the most tolerant Muslim states ever to exist...Their [Ottomans’] system was...more flexible and subject to change, reinterpretation, and the adoption of new elements.”¹¹

Although Ottoman rulers were Muslim, they kept the Central Asian secular Turkic state tradition intact in order to hold absolute authority. Accordingly, besides *shari’a* (*Islamic law*) they preserved *töre* (*yasa*) i.e. a derivative of constitutional law, which became the basis for traditional law (*örfi kanun*) along with customs. In most cases traditional law supplemented *shari’a* a characteristic that made the Ottoman legal system pragmatic and flexible in regards to issues remaining out of Islamic law. For example according to *yasa*, “those who produced wealth for the ruler’s treasury or provided him with luxury goods or with information were believed to be indispensable for his power”.¹² This explains why the Ottoman sultans favored the Jews with certain skills.

¹⁰ Levy 1992, 13.

¹¹ Levy 1992, 15-16.

¹² İnalçık 2002, 7.

b. The Socio-political dynamics of the Ottoman Empire

Right from the beginning the Ottoman Empire had to defend its specific social formation and exclusive cultural and religious complex against “the massive onslaught of a determined foe, Europe”.¹³ In the light of Karl Wittfogel’s *Despotic Bureaucratic Power Theory*, İnalcık argued that the Ottoman Empire needed a highly specialized bureaucratic machine in order to fulfill its ‘despotic omnipotent power’ into effective use while trying to cope with the crusading fervor of the European powers during the Empire’s formation period. “A complex centralized bureaucracy maintaining complete control over land and peasant labor through careful surveying and registration was indeed the basis of the classical Ottoman political system. Historically, the Ottomans, inherited, the system through the Sasanian, Caliphal, Seljukid-Iranian and Ilkhanid-Iranian traditions”.¹⁴ This bureaucratic tradition was strengthened by a unique combination of *shari’a* and *kanun* practices and provided basic uniformity of fundamental laws. The harmony of the political authority, bureaucratic system and the legal system created a political and economic unity that attracted Jews to Ottoman territories.

Ottoman Empire had a large non-Muslim population. For the well-being of the state, Ottoman rulers had to show a certain degree of religious tolerance towards their non-Muslim subjects, and for many observers “compared with contemporary Christian Europe, the Ottoman Empire afforded its religious minorities an unequalled degree of tolerance.”¹⁵ Ottoman rulers, starting with Osman I, were rational enough to see that in order to build and preserve a strong state they had to adopt a flexible political system that “allowed for considerable self-government of the various groups in the population along ethno-religious and cultural lines, rather than territorial lines.”¹⁶ Ottoman sultans were aware of the fact that “in order to govern effectively a heterogeneous society, principles had to be accommodated with reality.”¹⁷ They avoided the strict applications of the *shari’a* principles related to non-Muslims and modified the tone of their absolute rule according to the conditions of the territories they conquered. Rather than suppressing or converting non-Muslim subjects, sultans were concerned to organize and control them so that they obey the law and pay their taxes. For this reason they left most of the local customs and traditions intact. Therefore, when the Jews arrived in the Ottoman lands they found it easy to set up their own autonomous communities and fit into the Ottoman system.

Even before European Jews began to settle into the Ottoman domains, the *Romaniot* (Byzantine Jews) Jews of Bursa and Ankara welcomed the Ottoman rule. Later the Ottoman conquests of the major Byzantine cities of Edirne and Salonica attracted more *Romaniot* Jews as well as *Ashkenazi* (Central and East European Jews) Jews from Europe. The Ottoman conquest of İstanbul accelerated the degree of Jewish immigration to the Ottoman Empire. Besides the resettlement of Romaniot Jews from other parts of the Ottoman Empire to İstanbul by Mehmed II (1451-1481), the *Sephardim* began to immigrate to the Empire as well. After İstanbul’s conquest Ottoman Empire became one of the strongest states of Europe owing to its rapid expansion, military and political power and fresh dynamism. Such a strong empire needed a sound economic, financial and commercial system running smoothly with an international network. The system necessitated an economically active, politically reliable population possessing economic, financial, commercial, scientific and technological skills and much needed capital.¹⁸ Moreover, increasing diplomatic relations with the European powers required people with knowledge of European languages and connections. Since Ottoman Empire provided religious tolerance and great economic opportunities, when the European countries began to persecute Jews in the 15th century European Jews started immigrating to Ottoman Empire in large numbers. In the absence of Jewish alternatives because of relentless purges after the *Reconquista* and in intensified Ottoman search of people with managerial and entrepreneurial skills, the coming together of the Turks and the Jews was just a matter of timing.¹⁹ It was a classic ‘push-pull’ of migration.²⁰

¹³ İnalcık 1995, 48.

¹⁴ İnalcık 1995, 50.

¹⁵ Levy 1992, 15.

¹⁶ Baron 1983, 17.

¹⁷ Baron 1983, 16.

¹⁸ Lewis 1984, 122.

¹⁹ Levy 1992, 24.

²⁰ Goffman 2002, 26.

Ottoman social organization structure allowed for the peaceful settlement of the Jews in large numbers. Ottomans organized their subjects in religion-based communal organizations. These communities were called *taife* (group of people) or *cema'at* (community), later in the 19th century *millet* (religious community).²¹ “In such a multireligious and polyethnic society, the tensions of majority-minority relations were more relaxed, compared with most European societies, and social attitudes and interactions more flexible and open.”²² Jews became Ottoman subjects by their own free choice to live under the peaceful domain of the Ottoman sultans, especially on the advice of their co-religionists. “For centuries Jews in great numbers continued to travel from various parts of Christian Europe into the Ottoman lands, attracted by the reports they had heard about the greater tolerance and greater opportunity offered by the Ottoman government.”²³ One such example is the letter of the chief Rabbi of Edirne, Itzhak Sarfati dating from the 1450s inviting the European Jewry to come to the Ottoman Empire.²⁴ The famous letter was one of the strongest evidence of Jewish appreciation of Ottoman rule. In the letter the Rabbi praised the Ottoman rule and tolerance, and encouraged European Jewry strongly and enthusiastically to immigrate to the Ottoman Empire. Historians concur that implicitly or explicitly the Ottoman authorities were aware of the contents of this invitation letter. Some historians assume that Ottoman authorities might have supported the dictation of the letter based on the fact that a developing Ottoman Empire, which needed politically reliable and economically able people like European Jews, would encourage such initiatives.

c. The Socio-Political Conditions in Europe from 14th to 16th Centuries

The emergence of the Ottoman Empire as a strong Muslim political power in Southeastern Europe kept Europeans' crusading spirit alive in the first centuries of Ottoman rule. Despite several unsuccessful attempts to push the Ottomans out of Europe, Christian Europe kept forming Christian alliances against the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, European monarchies directed their crusading energies also towards their populations. Since European Jews were the first and easiest targets for persecution by Christians, their position deteriorated significantly. One by one European states began to expel the Jews. In 1290 England; in 1306, 1394 and late 15th century France; in 1360 Hungary; between 1478-1492 and in the following decades Iberian monarchies (*Reconquista*); and finally 1555 to 1593 Italian principalities either banished Jews from their territories or forced to convert Jews into Christianity. In some places Jews were massacred, tortured or sold into slavery.²⁵ All these resulted in the immigration of the Jews to the Ottoman lands starting in the 14th century.²⁶

The picture was no different in the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire. The *Romaniot* (*Benei Romania*) Jews who lived under Byzantine rule were frequently victims of persecution and conversion like their European coreligionists. Orthodox Greeks, and the Kingdoms of Serbia and Bulgaria, were no harsher than Catholic Europe when it came to the persecution of Jews.²⁷

The hatred against Jews in the Christian world was not a new thing. Popularly the hate of Jews was based on the myths that Jews caused the death of Jesus and occasionally drank the blood of Christian children in their rituals. Theologically influenced and motivated by the teachings of the Church Father Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.), Christian Europe, panicked by Ottoman advance in Europe made the

²¹ “This Ottoman institution constituted a self-governing organization based on religious affinity and directed by religious leaders possessing both secular and religious authority. The old-established Middle Eastern tradition developed long before Islam, but continued in the classical Islamic empires as well as that of the Ottomans, was that the small Ruling Class elite around the ruler existed only to defend and expand the state, to keep order and security, and to exploit the wealth of the empire to support itself and its members.” Shaw 1991, 43.

²² Levy 1992, 17.

²³ Lewis 1984, 121.

²⁴ Epstein 1980, 21-22. Lewis 1984, 135-136. Shaw 1991, 31-32.

²⁵ Baron 1983, 6-7.

²⁶ Epstein 1980, 20-21.

²⁷ Shaw 1991, 16-24; Goffman 2002, 16. Occasionally there was good treatment of Jews under the Byzantines, but it was exception rather than the rule. The times of Julian the Apostate or the Iconoclast period were the times when the Jews were treated relatively better. For detailed examples, see Elli Kohen, *passim*, 51-63, 83-85, 137-143.

Jews easy victims, since after the expulsion of Spanish Muslims Jews were the only remaining non-Christian elements in Europe.²⁸

d. The Jewish Tradition and Characteristics

There were small *Romaniot* and *Karaite* Jewish communities in Anatolia and the Balkans before the arrival of the Ottomans. When Ottomans encountered Jews, it was not difficult to incorporate Jews into autonomous structures because of the Jewish historical experience of autonomy. Although Byzantines forbade Jews hold public offices or enjoy public honor, Byzantine Jews enjoyed certain autonomous privileges. In 14th century Anatolia and the Balkans, whether it was a territory acquired from the *Seljuks*, the Turkic principalities or from the Byzantines “in every town the central and local Ottoman authorities always found the elected Jewish leaders to be responsible for their members and willing to implement the authorities’ orders and requests.”²⁹ “Therefore, the establishment of Jewish autonomy in the Ottoman Empire had a precedent because Jews had been highly experienced for almost two thousand years in organizing themselves as a religious-ethnic minority.”³⁰

With Ottoman conquests small *Ashkenazim* communities from Central and Northern Europe and other Romaniot Jews began to immigrate to the Ottoman lands. First of all, these Jews did not have many alternatives on where to settle because of fierce persecution going on in the Byzantine Empire and in Europe. Secondly, there was not an established social and political system defining specific space for Jews in these new Ottoman lands. Therefore, with the negative experience of “harsh treatment at the hands of the Ottomans’ Byzantine predecessors [the Jews] had to find the economic and social cracks and crevasses in an emerging [Ottoman] kingdom and exploit them.”³¹ Jews made use of the Ottomans’ ‘distrust of their Christian rivals’ and used their ability to “leap across cultural and religious boundaries and compete in all spheres and with virtually all groups” when accommodating to the Ottoman social structure.³²

Jews did not oppose Ottoman conquests and they sometimes helped Ottomans in their war efforts. “Jews had sided with the besieging Turks, ... Turkish methods of warfare seem to have been less damaging to Jews than to their non-Jewish neighbors.”³³ Like the small Jewish communities of Bursa and Edirne, the Jews of İstanbul welcomed the Ottoman conquest. In return for their help in the conquests of Buda, Rhodes and Belgrade in the 16th century Ottoman sultans granted Jews privileges in construction of synagogues or exemption from taxes.³⁴ Jewish rationality to side with the powerful conquering state rather than the oppressor decaying power gave them the advantage to win the hearts of the Ottoman sultans during the Ottoman wars against the Christian Europe.

Ottomans saw Jews as productive and reliable urban elements. Jews, especially Sephardic Jews were intellectually, economically and scientifically very advanced. They “had extensive experience in banking, commerce, tax-farming, management of ports and custom houses, and the purveying of large quantities of foodstuffs, clothing, and arms for the government and army.”³⁵ They had capital, knowledge of European languages, sciences, medicine, printing, new methods of production, manufacture of textiles, arms, munitions and other products.

Distinguished Jewish scholars and religious authorities who came from Europe revitalized Jewish culture on Ottoman soil. “In the 16th century, Salonica, Istanbul, and Safed had replaced Toledo, Cordova, and Barcelona as major centers of Jewish scholarship and intellectual life.”³⁶ Their

²⁸ “Augustine proposed that the Jews serve a purpose in Christendom because they are a living witness to the truth of the Christian faith...Augustine thought that Jews should serve their function by being scattered and downtrodden among the nations-but not killed. Clearly the overall purpose here was to allow Jews to live among Christians but never to wield any domestic or political power over them or become socially close with them.” Goldish 2008, 3. St. Augustine quoted this verse to refer Jews. ‘Slay them not, lest they should at last forget Thy law.’ (Psalm 59:11).

²⁹ Schmuelevitz 1984, 26.

³⁰ Schmuelevitz 1984, 17.

³¹ Goffman 2002, 17.

³² Goffman 2002, 18-19.

³³ Baron 1983, 14-15.

³⁴ Schmuelevitz 1984, 18. Shaw 1991, 26-27.

³⁵ Levy 1992, 25.

³⁶ Levy 1992, 37.

adaptation of laws to the new conditions made *halakhah* (Jewish law) not to confront *shari'a* in cases when contact between the two legal systems was unavoidable. "...The long experience of being dispersed and maintaining an autonomous existence by making every effort to preserve cordial relations with the ruling powers in the host states, influenced the Jewish legal scholars to make concessions towards the state laws. Following the conquest of Babylon by the Sasanids, the *halakhic* rule of *dina de-malkhuta dina* (*the law of the kingdom is the law [and is binding]*) was adopted and in certain cases took precedence over Jewish law."³⁷ This principle was widely respected by Ottoman Jews in their legal dealings in the Empire.

II. Ottoman Muslim/Turkish Approach towards Jews: Perception, Attitudes and Rationalization in Theory and Practice

The Ottoman authorities generally treated the Jews in a favorable and supportive manner. In theory although Jews were *dhimmi* people no different in legal status than Christians, in practice Ottoman authorities usually treated Jews more favorable than Christians. Ottoman authorities had several rationalizations for their preference of Jews over their Christian subjects. First, Jews helped with many Ottoman conquests; they surrendered without fight during the Ottoman conquests.³⁸ Pragmatically, in the eyes of Ottoman authorities well-being, proper functioning and religious freedom of the economically dependable and politically reliable Jewish communities meant proper flow of taxes without social and political unrest. "The Ottoman authorities, in general, protected the Jews, and for good reason. In the first place, as an imperial power it was in their best interest to maintain law and order. Additionally, the Jewish community discharged important services of an economic and administrative nature, and it was, therefore, in the interest of the state to assure that these activities proceed uninterrupted."³⁹ Because Ottoman authorities saw Jews complementary to the Turks and not in competition with them; and as Ottoman Jews were not treasonable like Christians, Ottoman attitudes towards Jews became very positive. Moreover, unprecedented degree of power held by Jewish court physicians and advisors close to the sultans prevented mistreatment of Jewish communities during the 15th and 16th centuries. Last but not least, theological affinities played some part in bringing the Muslim and Jewish communities closer. "The Jews were generally respected in the Empire because they were considered as the oldest (*kadim*) people of the book (*ehl-i kitab*)."⁴⁰

"While in Islam Jews, like Christians, were classified as 'unbelievers', or *kafirs*, and as 'protected subjects', or *zimmis*, the Ottomans for the most part applied the term only to Christians."⁴¹ This difference in treatment is also emphasized in official language. Ottoman cadastral surveys and imperial orders from the 15th and 16th centuries distinguish between Jews and Christians. Whereas Christians were addressed as *kefere* (*infidels*) or *zimmi*, etc... Jews were commonly referred as *Yahudiler* (*Jews*) or *Yahudi Taifesi* (*Jewish Community*).⁴² Other terms used to describe the Jews in the official Ottoman documents were *Sürgün* (transferred) and *Kendi Gelen* (those who came voluntarily), which denoted the place of origins.⁴³ Volunteer immigrants from Europe were provided every kind of incentives for their well being in the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman documents this kind of volunteer immigration by Christians was not present.

In the Balkans, Ottomans had the practice of selecting the children of Christian peasants with the consent of their parents to train for the military and the bureaucratic ranks of the state. For the absolute loyalty and service for the sultan this children were also converted to Islam. This system, called

³⁷ Schmuelevitz 1984, 42.

³⁸ Although Rozen assumes that Jews of Istanbul fled during the conquest, she contradicts herself by stating that the Ottoman authorities granted Istanbul Jews special privileges for their part in Ottoman conquest of Istanbul. Rozen 2002, 18.

³⁹ Levy 1992, 41.

⁴⁰ Schmuelevitz 1984, 18.

⁴¹ Shaw 1991, 77.

⁴² Epstein 1980, 26-27. Gülerüz 1993, 52-53. Levy 1992, 28.

⁴³ Ottomans transferred populations to newly conquered, economically and politically more strategic centers like Istanbul as part of their imperial state policy. This policy, called *sürgün* in Turkish, was not enforced to punish any particular segment of the society. It was applied to Muslim and non-Muslims alike. However, there is a strong tendency among modern Eurocentric historians to evaluate this policy as an oppressive feature of the Ottoman Empire. For a typical example of this view based on circumstantial evidence, see Hacker 1982, 117-126.

devşirme (recruitment) was never applied for the Jews.⁴⁴ Another special treatment was in terms of holy buildings. According to the *dhimma* system, construction of new synagogues or churches were prohibited, however, starting with Mehmet II many exceptions were made for Ottoman Jews for the construction of synagogues through special imperial orders (*irade*). Ottoman authorities also overlooked other *dhimma* law restrictions. Restrictions such as prohibition from dressing like Muslims, riding horses, owning slaves, building houses taller than Muslims' houses, etc... were not strictly applied by Ottoman authorities for the Jews and other minorities.⁴⁵ However, in terms of protection of their life and property, and freedom of religion Ottoman Jews acquired an unparalleled guarantee that the *dhimma* law provided.

In regards to the attitudes of the sultans towards Jews, tolerance was the rule and restriction from privileges was the exception. After Mehmet I (1413-1421) reorganized Ottoman state, Murat II (1421-1451) came to power and continued Ottoman conquests interrupted by a period of interregnum. When he conquered Edirne and Selanik, he welcomed Ashkenazi Jews who were fleeing Habsburg persecution. His personal physician was a Jew called Ishak Pasha whose descendants Murat II exempted from taxes. It was after Mehmet II (1451-1481)'s conquest of Istanbul, and after his full scale encouragement and application of settlement policies that the Jewish population of the Ottoman Empire substantially increased. His religious tolerance towards non-Muslims and his rational policies increased immigration of European Jews into the Empire. When he conquered Istanbul, he "assured the Jews remaining in the city that they would be allowed to practice their religion and occupations freely and without the hindrances to which they had been subjected by the Byzantines."⁴⁶ He attempted to create a post of permanent representative for the Jewish community like that of Orthodox Greeks and provided incentives for that aim, however, after the selection of two chief Rabbis for Istanbul that practice ended because of the disputed within the Jewish community.

Bayezid II (1481-1512) was stricter in the application of *dhimma* rules; however, he continued tolerant policies of his father by decreeing that "all Jews fleeing from Spain and Portugal should be admitted to his dominions without restriction, and with the same inducements that had been offered during the reign of his predecessor."⁴⁷ He encouraged, forced and even punished Ottoman authorities to make sure for the proper settlement of more than 100,000 Iberian Jews. Selim I (1512-1520) was so preoccupied with his Eastern campaigns that his primary religious concern was the threat of *Shi'i* Safavid Empire. When he defeated the Mamluks and thus got in possession of the Caliphate and the Holy Lands of Palestine, Mecca and Medina, his victories were celebrated among Ottoman Jews because he put an end to the 'law of no return' to Jerusalem, a law first enforced by the Romans in 60 B.C. E. and continued by other nations for centuries thereafter.⁴⁸ The reigns of Süleyman I (1520-1566), Selim II (1566-1574) and Murat III (1574-1595) were zenith of Jewish power in the Ottoman Empire thanks to the influential court figures and the sultans supporting them. As some Jewish advisors became the sultans' closest confidants, affected most of the decisions of the sultans, and prospered to a large extent, some Muslim factions became discontent. But the sultans did not give up on their Jewish favorites. The emergence of the Mendes family, Dona Gracia and her cousin Joseph Nasi marked the Jewish prominence both in financial and foreign affairs of the empire.⁴⁹ Joseph Nasi acquired the Dukedom of several islands in the Aegean Sea from Selim I, an honor which in theory not granted to a non-Muslim unless he converted to Islam. A similar concession was granted to Dona Gracia. She acquired the taxing rights and almost independent rule of Tiberias province. With the influence of Dona Gracia Süleyman I actively involved in protesting the Papal States when they tried to expel the Jews in Ancona. During Murat III's reign there were more than 40 Jewish physicians in

⁴⁴ Schmulevitz 1984, 18.

⁴⁵ İnalçık 2002, 6. Shaw 1991, 79-82.

⁴⁶ Mehmet II is famous for his proclamation to all Jews: "Who among you of all my people that is with me, may his God be with him, let him ascend to Istanbul the site of my imperial throne. Let him dwell in the best of the land, each beneath his vine and beneath his fig tree, with silver and with gold, with wealth and with cattle. Let him dwell in the land, trade in it, and take possession of it." Shaw 1991, 29-30.

⁴⁷ Shaw 1991, 33.

⁴⁸ Ojalvo 1999, 62.

⁴⁹ For detailed analysis of the extent of the power of the Mendes family in the Ottoman Empire, see Cecil Roth, *passim.*, 83-122, 134-176.

the palace.⁵⁰ In brief, the approach of Ottoman sultans to Jews was more than pragmatic. It was a deeper partnership extending beyond the confines of a practical relationship between the people of two different faiths.

In administrative and legal functioning of the society Ottoman authorities were in harmony with the Jewish authorities, having trust in their ability, reliability and knowledge. Most frequent contacts concerned the swearing of the oaths in the courts. *Qadis* (the Muslim judges) used to send Jews to take their oaths in the Jewish courts. It was not uncommon when Ottoman administrative and legal authorities, mostly *qadis*, consulted Jewish religious scholars or rabbis. There were even cases “when the Muslim law court gave a judgment and then referred the Jewish litigants to the Jewish court, which was directed by the Muslim court to endorse its decision in order to ensure its implementation within the Jewish community.”⁵¹ In legal system the tolerant and rational application of Islamic law was combined with assistance and ratification by the Jewish courts. This cooperation was directed at avoiding the possibility of confrontation of *halakhah* and *shari'a*.

Although Jews were perceived as weak people and seen as easy targets in times of distress by other segments of the society, they were never under constant threat as they were in other societies. “...Open persecution and violence remained infrequent. When there were attacks against Jews, they were almost always instigated by Christians, and were due to rivalries between the competing *dhimmi* communities rather than to any pressure of hostility from the Ottoman state or the Muslim majority. An example is the occasional appearance of the blood libel.”⁵² The urban Jews were subject to blood libel attacks particularly by their Christian neighbors. Especially Greeks were generally hostile to Jews, accusing them with ritual murder and often physically assaulting them. Therefore, Jews often chose settling close to secure Muslim neighborhoods.⁵³

As a result of *dhimma* understanding, although respecting protected legal status of Jews, Muslims did not perceive Jewish subjects as equal to themselves. Turks addressed Jews as *Yahudi* or *Çifüt* that might have been considered derogatory in popular vernacular. The popular perception of Jews was combined with the ‘humble and downtrodden’ role of the Jew dealing with money matters. This superficial perception of Jews occupied the Muslim folklore. The ‘demiurgic subversive’ characteristic perception of the Jew which has been ‘omni-present’ in Christian Europe did not come to the surface in the Ottoman Empire except in extreme times of social and political turmoil when people tended to add some Jewish elements.⁵⁴ Other than that, there were not hostile attitudes against Jews from Turks except occasional attacks by the Janissary Corps.⁵⁵ However, not all Muslim attitudes were same. Muslim Arabs were more hostile to Jews than Muslims of Anatolia and the Balkans. The hostility of Arabs was not only because of religious difference. According to Arabs, Jews “were also perceived as a prosperous and privileged minority under the protection of, or allied with, the Turkish-speaking Ottoman rulers who, although Muslim, were also regarded as a foreign element.”⁵⁶ Another place “where discrimination was regularly practiced against Jews was in the Kurdish areas of Eastern Anatolia, where Kurdish tribes controlled by feudal leaders regularly ravaged settled areas, Muslim, Christian and Jewish alike.”⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Ojalvo 1999, 78.

⁵¹ Schmuelevitz, 1984, 48-49.

⁵² “While accusations were rare, they had been of sufficient importance for Sultan Mehmed II to issue an imperial decree that such cases should not be tried by governors and judges but be brought before the Imperial Divan in Istanbul, where, presumably, the high officers of state would be less subject to bigotry and superstition and less open to local pressures. A revival of these accusations during the reign of Suleyman I brought a new ferman, repeating and confirming the earlier one and making the same requirement. Similar orders were issued by several later sultans in the 16th and 17th centuries.” Lewis 1984, 147.

⁵³ Levy 1992, 40. Shaw 1991, 44, 58, 83-85.

⁵⁴ In the religio-political revolt of Şeyh Bedrettin in the early 1400s, interdenominationalist historiography accuse him having a certain Samuel (Torlak Kemal), a so-called Jewish convert, as a close associate. Lewis 1984, 104. Also cited in Baron 1983, 13. Epstein 1980, 35.

⁵⁵ “Jews played important role as contractors and purveyors for the military and as private bankers for senior military officers.” Levy 1992, 40.

⁵⁶ Levy 1992, 41.

⁵⁷ Shaw 1991, 85.

III. Jewish Approach toward the Ottoman Muslims: Theory and Practice

A popular belief among Ottoman Jews was that the Ottoman sultans were “the God’s wrathful rods that were to bring order in the world.”⁵⁸ “In the *responsa* (written decisions and rulings of Jewish scholars) high Jewish esteem and admiration for the Ottoman state and its rulers were accompanied by the demand to obey the laws and rules of the sultans. The reasons given for obedience were usually two: the will of God and the benevolent protection granted by the sultan. The state was generally referred to as: ‘the Ottoman Kingdom, our Kingdom, gracious Kingdom’.”⁵⁹ This view was further strengthened in the Jewish Cabbalist circles especially after Sultan Selim I’s conquest of Palestine, resulting in the belief that the redemption of the Jewish people was near. This was in part related to the messianic teachings brought from Spain. As a result Jewish messianism gained a new momentum in the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁰ Considering the sorrowful experiences of the *Reconquista* it is no surprise that Ottoman Jews perceived the Ottoman rulers imbued in their belief system. In the *responsa* the Ottoman sultan was not referred as *Gentile*, although he was not a Jew. Jewish perception of the Ottoman sultans, combined with Islam’s common points with Judaism, brought Ottoman Jews closer to the Ottoman Muslims. “The use of the term *uncircumcised*, to describe Christians certainly pointed to a bond, at least in the mind of Jewish writers who saw themselves as allies of Islam against Europe.”⁶¹

According to the long-standing Middle Eastern tradition, in the Ottoman social system each religious group rarely left its own quarter except for going to the market. In theory, most rabbis discouraged “all contacts between Jews and Muslims because many evils could result from that, and Israel is a holy people.”⁶² However, in practice Jews and Muslims shared many parts of the social sphere. Although not common, Jews did not hesitate to form partnerships with Muslims in trade and tax farming.⁶³ Because of their suspicion of Christians, Jews preferred to submit legal cases against Christians to the Muslim law courts. And there were times when Muslims brought cases against Jews before Jewish courts especially for business dealings, where the rabbis insisted on a fair trial and denied the preference of their co-religionists.⁶⁴

Two major factors contributed to Jews’ good opinion of the Ottomans: “a) the fact that the Ottomans left their gates open to Jews and enabled them to re-establish a prosperous community, not only economically but also culturally; b) the fact that they could count on those Jews who served as physicians or financial advisors in the sultan’s Court, or in the courts of high dignitaries, to be influential enough to prevent any acute deterioration in the favorable attitude of the authorities.”⁶⁵ Starting with the reign of Mehmet II, Jews became so influential in the Ottoman palace that the sultans protected and favored the Jews of the Empire with the influence of the palace Jewry to an extent that angered other factions. The rule of Selim II, and the extraordinary power of the Mendes family in the Ottoman Empire gave the Ottoman Jews the perception that no other nation would grant Jews such privileges.

As the most learnt men of their communities, the rabbis of the Ottoman Jewish communities mastered both Jewish laws and customs, and Ottoman religious and secular laws and customs. The rich intellectual atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries provided the rabbis with flexible minds to perceive and adjust their understanding of the other communities. This vision of the Ottoman rabbis was reflected in their writings. The *responsa* of the 16th century reveal that the rabbis had great respect and admiration for the sultans and the institutions, and they showed all means to cooperate with and obey state authorities. Although the rabbis did not want state interference in

⁵⁸ Schmuelevitz 1984, 31. “They declared the Ottoman leaders to be scions of the ‘righteous Cyrus’, the ‘anointed of God’, and firmly believed that at the head of the warlike Ottoman hosts the angel Gabriel himself strode with sword in hand to bring near the end and prepare the way for the glorious Messiah.” Shaw 1991, 34.

⁵⁹ Schmuelevitz 1984, 33.

⁶⁰ Shaw 1991, 100.

⁶¹ Epstein 1980, 43.

⁶² Shaw 1991, 49.

⁶³ “[this] case from the *responsa* proves the close co-operation, mutual understanding and confidence prevailing in the commercial relations between merchants from the two communities [Muslim and Jewish].” Schmuelevitz 1984, 143, 153.

⁶⁴ Schmuelevitz 1984, 46-47.

⁶⁵ Schmuelevitz 1984, 32.

communal affairs, they operated on the principles that the law of the state was the law and should be obeyed and ‘custom could override a law’ (even if it conflicts *halakhah*). The way Ottoman authorities handle an affair should be taken into consideration in various decisions; and legal decisions of Muslim courts should be accepted and even be requested in which two parties are Jews.⁶⁶ Sometimes Jews brought cases to the Muslim courts for the disputes among themselves, in such instances a flow of communication between the Muslim and Jewish courts were required.⁶⁷ “The *responsa* indicate a limited but important scope of co-operation between the Ottoman and the Jewish legal authorities, but reveal no co-operation between the latter and the Christian legal system...the *responsa* stressed the need for the Muslim law court’s help not only in matters of ownership, inheritance and the like, but also in enforcing the Jewish law court’s verdict. This led to a far-reaching discussion of the reliability of Muslim law courts, and especially whether *qadis* and Muslim witnesses were trustworthy or corrupt.”⁶⁸

There are scarce, but some contemporary sources about Jewish discontent of their treatment by Ottoman authorities. The negative feelings of Jews center around the resettlement policies of Mehmet II (transfer of Jews from Anatolia and the Balkans to İstanbul), devastation of Jewish quarters during the conquest of İstanbul⁶⁹, blood libels against the Jews by Christians in Anatolia and the Balkans, and strict policies of Bayezit II such as forcible conversion and closure of new synagogues built contrary to shari’a.⁷⁰ In general, however, the Ottoman Jewry was happy under the rule of the sultans. Between 1400s and 1600s there was no recorded mass conversion, expulsion, banishment, massacre or imprisonment of Ottoman Jews. “The widespread Jewish perception of the Ottoman Empire, under the rule of the sultans of the 15th and 16th centuries, was that it was a very powerful state, generous and tolerant towards its Jewish subjects.”⁷¹ This view was supported by the fact that compared to the situation of their co-religionists in Europe Jews lived in a far more secure environment in the Ottoman Empire. “Jews strongly supported the continuation of Ottoman rule because of the certainty that they would be subjected to renewed persecution if the Empire came to an end.”⁷²

IV. European Perception of Ottoman-Jewish Cooperation

Ottoman Jews traveled freely all over Europe as merchants, tradesmen and diplomatic consuls under Ottoman protection. As merchants it was always safer and more prestigious to have Muslim attires that made Jews alike from Muslims in the eyes of Christian Europeans.⁷³ On the diplomatic level, Jewish financiers or diplomats representing the interests of the Ottoman sultans made Europeans see Ottoman Jews almost as same as Turks. “Confirmation of the commonality of interests between Muslims and Jews is also indicated by the fact that European Christians perceived the Jews as allies of Islam and were well aware of Muslim-Jewish cooperation.”⁷⁴

A Spanish traveler, Vicente Roca in 1556 wrote: “Here at Constantinople are many Jews, descendants of those whom the Catholic King Don Ferdinand ordered to be driven forth of Spain, and would that it had pleased God that they be drowned in the sea in coming hither. For they taught our enemies the most of what they know of the villainies of war, such as the use of brass ordnance and of firelocks.”⁷⁵ Combination of religious hatred and Christian perception of Ottomans Jews possessing certain knowledge that can be used against Europeans was a common theme of European observers in 16th century Europe. “In addition, it appears that Christian pirates plundered Turks and Jews, their sworn

⁶⁶ Schmuelevitz 1984, 181-182.

⁶⁷ Lewis 1984, 105.

⁶⁸ Schmuelevitz 1984, 182.

⁶⁹ According to Islamic tradition, the soldiers were allowed to loot the city since it had resisted the conquest rather than conquering. However, most of the Jewish sentiments of 17th and 18th century about the destruction of İstanbul were based on Greek chronicles, which clearly exaggerate the events. Actually, Mehmet II prevented his soldiers to cause more damage by limiting the looting to one day, because in his plans İstanbul was to become a big vital capital. Shaw 1991, 27. For atrocity myths of the Ottomans against the Jews during the conquest of İstanbul, see Rozen 2002, 1-15.

⁷⁰ Schmuelevitz 1984, 31.

⁷¹ Schmuelevitz 1984, 30.

⁷² Shaw 1991, 84.

⁷³ Schmuelevitz 1984, 158.

⁷⁴ Epstein 1980, 42.

⁷⁵ Lewis 1984, 135.

enemies, and that Europeans considered the Jews to be agents who regularly reported to the Ottomans.”⁷⁶ Both Ottoman and Jewish sources reported instances where the lives were put in danger by pirates. “According to the *responsa* Christian pirates took Jewish merchandise and killed the Jewish merchants or sold them into slavery”⁷⁷ in several occasions. The worst were the *Hospitaller* Knights in Rhodes⁷⁸ and the Portuguese ships in the Persian Gulf. In many cases Portuguese suspected Jews of being former *Marranos*. “They [the Portuguese] asked every Christian merchant whether he had suffered any injustice or damage from Turks, Arabs, or Jews...If a Christian had been murdered, then three or four of them (Turks, Arabs or Jews) must suffer or lose their lives.”⁷⁹ It is interesting to see how Turks, Arabs and Jews were combined into a common enemy.

In 16th century Europe, Muslim meant Turk, Turk meant ‘Oriental’. European conception of ‘oriental’ also included ‘Jews’ in pre-modern times.⁸⁰ The popular level identification of Jews with Turks was also present on the intellectual level. In 1650, one of the most influential Jewish writers of all times, Menasseh ben Israel wrote a book titled *Mikveh Israel (The Hope of Israel)* in Amsterdam. The influential book spared extensive space to the analysis of the closeness of Jewish-Turkish ties, power and influence of Jews in Islamic lands and the influential position of the Jewish court physicians, merchants, diplomats and tradesmen in the Ottoman Empire. About 50 years after the publication of *Mikveh Israel* came the *Entdecktes Judenthum* (Judaism Exposed) by Johann A. Eisenmenger. Eisenmenger’s work was the most scholarly attack on Judaism ever published in Europe until that time. In order to address his central problem of why the Jews were so resistant to Christianity, Eisenmenger cited “very passages in Menasseh’s book that supported the idea of Jewish-Turkish affinity and Jewish power in the lands of Islam.”⁸¹ Therefore, Turkish-Jewish affinity was commonplace among European observers Christians and Jews alike.

Eisenmenger’s *Judaism Exposed* was so influential that it printed more than 3000 copies in the 18th century, and it even inspired the Nazis in the later centuries. “Given the influence of Eisenmenger’s work, it is no surprise that Jews came to be identified with Turks in the European imagination”⁸² for centuries to come. ‘Darlings of the Sultans’, an expression used for Jews, was a popular joke among Europeans for a long time. In the 18th century some Italian newspapers created fictional war reports putting Russians and Greeks on one side, Turks and Jews on the other side. This not only shows Turkish-Jewish affinity but also inherent exclusion of the Jews and the Turks by the Europeans by putting them both in the category of ‘oriental’ and ‘Islamic’. In 1879 German historian Heinrich von Treitschke wrote: “There will always be Jews who are nothing but German-speaking Orientals.”⁸³ Along the same lines German thinker Wilhelm Marr argued that Palestine had to be the ideal destination for the Jews, since they were racially close to the Muslims. “The comingling of religion, language, race, and culture evident in that [above] statement, along with the confusion of Jew, Arab, and Turk to be found in the earlier decades was characteristic of the 19th century and should not surprise us. It reflects the deep rootedness of the notion of Turkish-Jewish affinity which permeated European thought under the influence of *Khazar* conversion to Judaism and the *Sefardi* settlement in Ottoman lands.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

First of all, one of the reasons making the Jewish presence possible in the Ottoman lands indeed makes this presence unique. As İnalçık states, “the Ottomans demonstrated an exceptional interest in

⁷⁶ Epstein 1980, 42.

⁷⁷ Schmuelevitz 1984, 163.

⁷⁸ Goldish 2008, xxxiii.

⁷⁹ Schmuelevitz 1984, 163-164.

⁸⁰ Epstein 1980, 42.

⁸¹ Braude 2001, 18-20.

⁸² Braude 2001, 21.

⁸³ Treitschke always had clear reservations for ‘oriental’ nations in Europe, whom he thought had no place in Europe. Braude 2001, 22. “A near future will, it is to be hoped, blot out the scandal that such heathendom should ever have established itself on European soil. What has this Turkish Empire done in three entire centuries? It has done nothing but destroy.” Toynbee 1917.

⁸⁴ Braude 2001, 23.

European Jewry, an interest that was indeed without precedent or equal in Islamic history.”⁸⁵ As a result of this interest, in their cooperation and coexistence with Jews the Ottoman Muslims functioned beyond the confines of the *dhimma* tradition. In the height of its power the Ottoman Empire overlooked, adjusted or simply ignored the *dhimmi* restrictions on the Jews for the welfare of the state. The pragmatism and rational approach of the Ottoman rulers in its theological understandings was one of the factors that made the Ottoman Empire survive for more than six hundred years. No other Muslim state, possibly with the exception of Umayyads of Andalusia, welcomed Jews in such large numbers and with such great living space and opportunities, a fact that made many other Jews followed the first comers. This peculiarity distinguished Ottoman Jewish experience from Jewish history under other Islamic states.

The Ottoman understanding of political and economic affairs minimized the role of kinship and religion and encouraged merit and service to the sultans. This rational and flexible system made it possible for Jews to infiltrate the ruling elite and become loyal subjects of the sultan. On the popular level, Jews recognized the absolute authority and legitimacy of the sultan and showed loyalty. When the Ottoman Empire began to lose its power Ottoman Jews always remained loyal to the state, whereas other ethnicities and religious minorities rose against the Ottoman authorities. This loyalty and alliance continued until modern times. This unique relationship has its seeds in the first large scale Turkish-Jewish co-existence in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Another important aspect of Ottoman-Jewish cooperation was the contribution it made to the rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire in its claim to world hegemony. With the help of the financial and diplomatic ties and efforts of the immigrant Jews from Iberia, the Ottomans continued their supremacy in Europe until the end of the 17th century. For Jews, the cooperation revived the Jewish communities of the Eastern Mediterranean lands. Small Romaniot and Karaite communities of the former Byzantine Empire were mixed with Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews that came to the Ottoman Empire. This mixture created a vibrant, distinct and distinguished Jewish population after a couple of centuries. The codification of Jewish laws by Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) in the Ottoman Empire has been used as a reference for many centuries among the Jewish legal scholars.⁸⁶ The safe social and political atmosphere provided by the Ottoman sultans made it possible for Iberian Jewry to continue its intellectual, economic and scientific supremacy among the world Jewry for centuries to come.⁸⁷

Last but not least, the co-existence of Ottoman Muslims and Jews was a peaceful cohabitation of limited contact because of the pre-modern social organization of corporate autonomous congregations based on religions. During the 15th and 16th centuries, when the Ottoman Empire was functioning well, the authorities monitored the autonomous communities and institutions carefully and made sure the system functioned properly. In their attitudes towards each other, Jews and Muslims did not have serious issues to cause tensions. Instead both sides developed harmonious relations towards each other in trade, commerce, law and social issues to adjust themselves to the needs of the day. This cooperation, both on popular and state levels, led Christian Europeans to associate and identify Ottoman Jews closely with Turks and/or Muslims and to channel their negative cultural and religious biases towards Turks, Ottomans and Jews interchangeably. This attitude prevailed in the Western world for centuries until the end of the Ottoman Empire.

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⁸⁵ İnalçık 2002, 3.

⁸⁶ Schmuelevitz 1984, 14.

⁸⁷ Lewis 1984, 113.

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