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# THE PERCEPTION OF MINORITIES TOWARD THE TURKISH STATE: THE CASE OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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The relationship between the state and non-Muslim communities has been a delicate issue since the founding of the Turkish Republic, despite the principle of secularism stated in its constitution. Against this background, the association of national identity with Sunni Islam has been the main marker of inclusion in and exclusion from the Turkish national identity. Especially since 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, the debate with regard to freedom of religion and the rights of religious minorities have come to the fore. There are numerous academic and political studies approaching the Turkish state's perspective towards religious minorities which were done mostly in the late 1990s. In approaching the inequalities and state-citizenship relations, these studies mainly employed legal, historical, and political tools. Valuable contributions have been made that question a homogeneous national identity as well as the official historical narrative.<sup>1</sup> With the increase in oral history studies in social sciences, pivotal research has also been conducted focussing on the identity construction process among various non-Muslim communities.<sup>2</sup> Among

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<sup>1</sup> Samim Akgönül, *Türkiye Rumları* (Istanbul: İletisim, 2007); Rifat Bali, *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey* (Istanbul: Libra, 2013); Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London: ZedBooks, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> Marcy Brink-Danan, *Jewish Life in Twenty-First-Century Turkey: The Other Side of Tolerance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Karel Valansi, *The Crescent Moon and the*

these studies, however, little attention has been paid to the role of minority identity in shaping the perception of non-Muslims towards the state, its bureaucracy, and the population at large.

In light of the previous academic debate, there are several questions that need to be raised in order to provide a comprehensive and contemporary picture of non-Muslim minority perspectives towards the state; how do non-Muslim communities and individuals perceive the attitude of the state and the population at large towards non-Muslim minorities and what do they think about the state's *raison de'être* behind its exclusionist approaches? How do these communities apprehend the state's policies against minorities, irrespective of the government in power? After recasting the parameters of freedom of religion in Turkey during the AKP period, do non-Muslims sense any continuities/breaking points, in particular in their relationality with the state, its bureaucracy, and the population at large?

Only through answering these questions, we believe, can one have a general opinion on minority perspectives in contemporary Turkey. To this end, we have benefitted from 41 in-depth interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 with not only individuals who belong to non-Muslim minority communities but also community representatives and civil society activists. The interviewees were found through snowball sampling. The qualitative approach employed provided an outlet in which non-Muslim minorities' experiences were revealed through their own voices. The meaning of citizenship in this context is best understood through individual experience. Therefore, we aim to understand and create meaning from the informants' subjective interpretations and experiences. Acknowledging the fact that it was not possible to achieve a unique perception of various minority communities, we aim to reflect different minority perspectives, all of which are a substantial part of the general picture. The data collected through this fieldwork will be

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*Magen David: Turkish-Israeli Relations Through the Lens of the Turkish Public* (London:Hamilton Books, 2018); Özgür Kaymak, "Being a Turkish Jew in Unwelcomed Public Sphere," in *Turkish Jews and Their Diasporas*, ed. Kerem Öktem and İpek Kocaömer Yosmaoğlu (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming, December 2021); Su Erol, *Mazlum ve Makul İstanbul Süryanilerinde Etno-Dinsel Kimlik İnşası ve Kimlik Stratejileri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2016).

presented in light of the debate in the literature on citizenship, nationalism, and minorities in Turkey.

In this article, we first provide a brief historical perspective of the state's behaviour towards religious minorities from the establishment of the Turkish Republic until today, including the AKP period. In the second part of this study we aim to explore the role and perspective of non-Muslim minorities over the previous decade, taking into account information garnered from our interviews with members of non-Muslim communities. We highlight the respondents' perception of continuity between the Turkish state's policies on non-Muslims, irrespective of the ideology of the political party in power. Moreover, we argue that this perspective plays a crucial role in non-Muslims' relationality with the state, taking into consideration the role of the state in the construction of idea of citizenship. The article also aims to demonstrate the gap between the AKP's promise of restoring freedom of religion and the reality that non-Muslims have been facing in recent years. Finally, the new negotiation fields that have been flourishing among these communities in the past few years will be addressed.

### The Status of Non-Muslim Minorities in Turkey: A Brief History

Although the principle of secularism is enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of Turkey, religion and the activities of religious groups and individuals have been restricted in political, social, and private spheres. In fact, the main objective of Atatürk, founder of the republic, was to introduce the *laïcité* principle in order to separate religion and state as an extension of the modernisation and secularisation processes began in the late Ottoman Empire. However, in practice secularisation in the Turkish context has been twofold: on the one hand, it has distanced itself from all religious beliefs; on the other, it has favoured Sunni/Hanefi Islam over other denominations. This practice has left certain religious groups and individuals in a disadvantaged position and failed to protect their basic rights. Hence, despite the fact that freedom of worship “regardless of one's language, race [...] religion, sect [...] etc” is guaranteed in the constitution as well as in the Treaty of Lausanne, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a bureaucratic

organisation under the Prime Minister's Office designed to oversee religious activities, has promoted a controlled version of Sunni/Hanefi Islam rather than a complete separation of church and state. Consequently, this has not left equal or enough space for non-Muslim faiths in the public sphere.

Thus, the state-centric modernisation project was reflected onto non-Muslim societies through various cultural, economic, and political practices. The impetus behind these policies was to create a national bourgeoisie and a homogeneous society in which being Sunni/Muslim was defined as the main element of "being Turkish." Just before and during the First World War, the most striking policy towards non-Muslims in the empire was the exile of Armenians from Anatolian lands in 1915. Subsequently, the implementation of the modernisation project materialised through the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923 resulted in a tremendous decrease in the size of the *Rum*<sup>3</sup> Orthodox population. Moreover, the laws passed during the 1930s in order to regulate the economic and societal sphere set "being a Turk" as the minimum criteria for economic participation. The cornerstone of the economic handover was the Capital Tax implemented in 1942. Considering that non-Muslims comprised 87 percent of the payers of this special tax, which was implemented to cover the expenses of the Turkish government during WWII, the financial burden fell disproportionately on non-Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

These policies, which have been called Turkification policies, were not limited to the exclusion of non-Muslims from the economic and societal sphere; they also included spatial arrangements. The 1934 pogrom that took place in Thrace, considered the first antisemitic action in the Turkish Republic, is a primary and striking example.<sup>5</sup> After the 1934 pogrom, the September 6–7 pogrom took place in 1955 target-

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<sup>3</sup> The authors acknowledge the interchangeable use of *Rum* and Greek in the text. *Rum* Orthodox is used in this article in differentiation with Greek Orthodox (denoting those who belong to the Greek nationality) to refer to those who stayed in the Ottoman Empire after 1821 and then automatically became, first, Ottoman subjects and then citizens of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

<sup>4</sup> Ayhan Aktar, "Homogenizing the Nation, Turkifying the Economy," in *Crossing the Aegean*, ed. Renée Hirschon (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Bali, *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*.

ing, notably, Istanbul's Rum community as well as other non-Muslim communities. As a result of these Turkification policies, by 1955 the population of non-Muslims in Turkey dropped below one percent of the total. Turkification policies continued through 1964 when the Turkish government cancelled the "Treaty of Commerce and Navigation," which was signed in 1930 between Greece and Turkey, in parallel to the escalation of the conflict between Turks and Greeks in Cyprus.<sup>6</sup> Greeks residing in Istanbul were deported<sup>7</sup> and Rums of Istanbul who were married to Greek nationals had to leave Turkey, which resulted in the complete vanishment of the Rum Orthodox population in Istanbul.

Besides Rum, Armenians, and Jews, many other non-Muslim populations in rural Anatolia were subjected to displacement policies. For instance, these displacements impacted the non-Muslim population living in south-east Turkey in the 80s and 90s due to the rise of PKK (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê) related activities in the region and the Turkish state's response against it. According to a Chaldean interviewee,<sup>8</sup> both political and economic distress paved the way for the evacuation of villages which resulted in the vanishment of their population in the region.

Apart from the Turkification policies summarised above, non-Muslims have encountered numerous difficulties and extrajudicial practices limiting their civil and religious freedoms since the founding of the republic. The most striking of these violations took place after Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 when Rum citizens were treated as "hostages." The direct reflection of this state attitude became visible in a Supreme Court decision in 1971 that authorised the confiscation of property from non-Muslims and depicted non-Muslims as "local-foreigners." In addition to this decision, provisions of the Law on Foundations, the Turkish Civil Code, and the Municipality Law restricted the properties that Christian communities could possess. Through these laws non-Muslims were prevented from legating their

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<sup>6</sup> İlay Örs, *İstanbullu Rumlar ve 1964 Sürgünleri* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The Treaty of 1923 allowed Greek citizens who were resident in Istanbul before 30 October 1918 to become *etabli*, which means that they were part of the Istanbul *Rum* community without the need for Turkish citizenship.

<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted on April 17, 2021.

properties to religious foundations. Moreover, the state also interfered with the election procedures of both administrative authorities and religious bodies, and teaching religion was restricted for non-Muslim minorities.<sup>9</sup> The Rum Orthodox Theology School was closed by the state in 1971, while Syriacs, Protestants, and Catholics were denied a clergy school throughout the entire republican period. Finally, while state agencies aimed to “monitor” the activities of religious minorities, it became a legal requirement to identify one’s religion on the national identity card, a policy that has remained in practice for decades. Religious minorities were also subject to discrimination in many other fields, from university entrance exams to recruitment in government institutions.

Historically speaking, the second-class treatment of non-Muslim communities in Turkey has remained constant throughout the past century of the republic, regardless of the party in power. Despite the events targeting non-Muslim communities having taken place during the Democrat Party (DP) administration of the 1950s, the DP period was perceived as more tolerant compared to the authoritarian and discriminatory policies of the Kemalist<sup>10</sup> establishment. During the elections that took place right after the September 1955 pogrom, the DP received the vast majority of non-Muslim votes, which reflects non-Muslims’ loyalty to the party. However, this trend, which led non-Muslims to believe in a future in which they will be perceived as equal citizens, was interrupted by the state’s discriminatory policies up until the 1980s as a series of military regimes periodically came into power.

During the Motherland Party (MHP) government of the 1980s, short-term enhancements of freedom of religion for religious minorities were implemented. With the liberalisation policies of the Özal government (1983–1989) the freedoms that had been limited after the military

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<sup>9</sup> “Annual Report 2021,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed 1 May 2021, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Kemalism refers to the state ideology developed and named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic.

coup were restored. This also had a positive impact on non-Muslim communities such as the reintroduction of the board of elections of community foundations, allowing Rum citizens to reclaim the right to sell their properties, which had been restricted with the 1964 enactment. Last but not least, the Turkish Jewish Museum was established in 2001 following the formation of the Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews in 1989. However, despite these advances, this did not lead to any substantive transformation with regard to the rights of ethno/religious minorities in Turkey. The government began to introduce a reform agenda only after the intensification of Turkey–EU relations following the Helsinki Summit in 1999. Within this context, the government took several symbolic steps, such as inviting the expatriate Syrian Orthodox citizens of Turkey to return to their homeland, as well as changes made to certain laws and the constitution.

Turkey’s European Union (EU) candidacy had been seen as the driving force and main facilitator in enhancing the religious freedoms of non-Muslims. However, despite this perceived shift—as we will see in the coming sections—the conventionalist Kemalist approach towards non-Muslims did not fade away. The state disregarded and ignored many EU-led policies, and by and large non-Muslims claim not to have noticed substantive improvements in their daily lives apart from a short period of time in which they were hopeful. The EU’s impact remained largely limited to formal legislative changes.

### Non-Muslim Minorities and the AKP

When the AKP came to power in 2002, its roots in political Islam raised doubts among different factions of society. Contrary to expectations, however, the AKP continued the EU reform process initiated by the previous government. Declaring a strong commitment to international human rights standards, the AKP passed several reform packages including certain changes with regard to non-Muslim minority communities. These reforms included the demand for the return of confiscated properties as well as the acquisition of new ones. The government’s discourse addressing “human rights” and the “fraternity and richness” of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey turned out to be instru-

mental in dismantling certain aspects of the Kemalist project, of which the AKP has been highly critical from the first days they came to power.

The intense reform process paved the way for Turkey to begin formal accession negotiations with the EU in 2005. As previous studies suggested on the one hand, the AKP's resentment towards the Kemalist–secularist policies that excluded pious Muslims, who had been previously considered a threat to the state, from the public and political spheres provided the “pull” factors enabling reforms until 2005. On the other, EU conditionality, which was seen as a path to an alternative model for religion–state relations in Turkey, functioned as a “push” factor in the negotiation process.<sup>11</sup> One way or the other, the AKP's special interest in recasting the parameters of religious freedoms was welcomed by most non-Muslim minority representatives due to the AKP's positive emphasis on the “richness” of different cultures in comparison to the Kemalist tradition of opposing the enhancement of non-Muslims' rights. After the assassination of the Armenian intellectual and journalist Hrant Dink, the level of empathy for non-Muslims increased to a large extent, which accelerated reform packages passed in parliament. The government's reconciliatory approach to non-Muslims culminated in the reintroduction of the Law on Foundations, which was reinstated by former President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2006.

In reality the AKP's approach to freedom of religion in general and the rights of non-Muslim communities in particular was not fully compatible with the EU's framework of human rights,<sup>12</sup> which have been repeatedly stated in progress reports published by the European Commission. During the height of Turkey's accession process, Turkish lawmakers would reference the Ottoman Empire and its tolerant approach<sup>13</sup> towards non-Muslim minorities. Similarly, the government

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<sup>11</sup> Gözde Yılmaz, “It Is Pull-and-Push that Matters for External Europeanization! Explaining Minority Policy Change in Turkey,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 2 (May 2014): 238–258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2013.838443>.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Maria Beylunioglu, *Freedom of Religion in Turkey between Secular and Islamic Values* (PhD Thesis, EUI, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> In the *millet* system of the polyethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire, religious minorities were all recognised as self-governing units and allowed to impose restrictive religious laws on their own members. The Ottomans allowed these minorities not only the freedom to practice their religion, but a more general freedom to govern themselves in internal mat-

embodied a discourse towards its Ottoman heritage, referring to the *millet* system in which people of different religions coexisted and were tolerated under the superiority of Islam. This shift could also be seen in the parliamentary debate on the Law on Foundations in 2008, in which AKP parliamentarian Avni Erdemir supported the legislative proposal emphasising the fact that “everybody is under the protection of this country.” He included a well-known phrase attributed to the non-Muslims of Constantinople during the Byzantine times: “I would rather see an Ottoman turban in the midst of the city than the Latin mitre.”<sup>14</sup> While these references became frequently visible in the discourses of government representatives, it would be naïve to consider this shift coincidental. Many argued that upon the European Court of Human Rights decision on Leyla Şahin v. Turkey, in which the court found Turkey’s ban on headscarves compatible with the principle of religious freedom, the AKP’s disappointment from the decision led the party to search for alternative models.<sup>15</sup> After this point, the EU began to be perceived as a subpar alternative to the Ottoman model of tolerance for diversity and co-existence.

Although it is possible to observe the continuation of the dialogue process between non-Muslim communities and state representatives through the EU model of freedom of religion, this dialogue slowly lost its focus amid the resurgence of the Ottoman model. While in 2014 the state commemorated the *Struma* disaster<sup>16</sup> for the first time and in 2015 the General Directorate of Foundations decided to build a new church for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic,<sup>17</sup> as well

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ters. The Ottomans accepted the principle of religious tolerance, where that is “understood to indicate the willingness of a dominant religion to co-exist with others.” Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Homes&Meir, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> “Parliamentary Speech of AKP MP Avni Erdemir on 31 January 2008 (Term 23, Session 57),” TBMM, accessed 12 June 2021, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr>.

<sup>15</sup> Marcie J. Patton, “AKP Reform Fatigue in Turkey: What Has Happened to the EU Process?,” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (October 2007): 339–358, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390701622382>.

<sup>16</sup> Uygur Gültekin, “Struma Faciası için ilk resmi anma,” *Agos*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/10682/struma-faciasi-icin-ilk-resmi-anma>.

<sup>17</sup> “First Church of Republican Era To Be Built for Istanbul’s Syrians,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/amp/first-church-of-republican-era-to-be-built-for-istanbuls-syriacs-99389>

as to allow the first celebration of Hanukkah in a public space, signaling an increasing positive dialogue between non-Muslim communities and the government, most of the non-Muslim communities' problems remained unsolved. First of all, reforms outlined in the EU harmonisation packages remained limited and were poorly observed in practice. Although legislation was enacted in order to pave the way for the return of property to non-Muslim community foundations, in practice non-Muslims only received 10–12% of the possessions that they legally demanded in this process. The Protestant community representative stated that the struggle for the reconstitution of the Protestant church in Diyarbakir, which had been confiscated by the state in the 1950s has not yet been returned. Similarly, a member of the Chaldean community reminded us that the building in Taksim, Siraselviler, a district once populated by non-Muslims and having one of the highest property values in the city, was confiscated and the restitution process has not been completed.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the 2008 Law on Foundations, which facilitated community foundation board elections to elect administrative leaders, was suspended by the Directorate General of Foundations (VGM) in January 2013 and this suspension was only nullified in March 2021.<sup>19</sup> Another issue that remains unsolved is the lack of the legal personality of minority foundations.<sup>20</sup> In addition to these, administrative and educational issues for minority schools continue; for example, the Theological School of the Patriarchate that was closed by the state in 1971 still remains shuttered.

Moreover, non-Muslim individuals seek a legal framework that would enable them to be formally recognised and a constitutional protection to secure their religious freedoms.<sup>21</sup> Hate speech was highly visible in the official statements of the *Diyanet* directly targeting le-

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with the Chaldean and Protestant community members on April 17 and 21, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> “Vakıf Seçimlerini İptal Eden Genelge Hükümsüz,” *Agos*, March 23, 2021, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/25481/vakif-secimlerini-iptal-eden-genelge-hukumsuz>

<sup>20</sup> Dilek Kurban and Kezban Hatemi, *Bir ‘Yabancılaştırma Hikayesi: Türkiye’de Gayrimüslim Cemaatlerin Vakıf ve Taşınmaz Mülkiyet Sorunu* [A Story of Abalienating: Problem of Foundation and Immovable Property of non-Muslim Communities in Turkey] (Istanbul: TESEV, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Anna Maria Beylunioğlu, *Freedom of Religion in Turkey*.

gal missionary activities.<sup>22</sup> The statements of government representatives harboured traces of hate speech against non-Muslims.<sup>23</sup> As Türkiye maintains, exclusionary statements indicated provocative phrases about non-Muslim minorities that represented them as potential threats to the country.<sup>24</sup> This exclusionary attitude peaked after 2011 when government representatives began to reference Islamic values and Ottoman heritage. While the most remarkable example of this is then Prime Minister Erdoğan's statement where he referred to "Islam"<sup>25</sup> as the absolute priority of the state, government representatives began to describe "real descendants of the Turkish nation" and labelled non-Muslims as "traitors" and "exploiters."<sup>26</sup>

Last but not least, turning the Hagia Sophia Museum – which was originally built as a church and then converted to a mosque after the Ottoman conquest – in Istanbul into a mosque reveals the AKP intends to prioritise Islam over other religions. After seeing the churches with an identical name in Iznik and Trabzon, which had earlier been converted into museums, become mosques again, Hagia Sophia's becoming a mosque in July 2020 with a court decision revoking the 1934 decree preserving its museum status has caused serious debate in both the national and international media as well as in political platforms. Its reconversion into a mosque was an indispensable dream of Turkey's Islamists. The idea was that opening the Hagia Sophia for prayers would

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<sup>22</sup> Presidency of Religious Affairs, "Basın Açıklaması – Misyonerlik [Press Release - Missionaries]," February 6, 2003, <https://www.diyaret.gov.tr/tr-TR/Kurumsal/Detay/1211/basin-aciklamasi>.

<sup>23</sup> Minister of Defence Vecdi Gönül's statement of 10 November 2008 can be considered in this context: "Could we still be a nation state if Rums and Armenians continued to exist in this land?"

<sup>24</sup> Türkiye Salim Nefes, "Perceived Group Threats and Right-Wing Political Party Membership as Driving Forces of Negative Descriptions in Turkish Parliamentary Debates (1983–2018)," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47, no. 1 (May 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1924051>.

<sup>25</sup> "Erdoğan: Bizim Tek Derdimiz Var, İslam, İslam, İslam [Erdoğan: We Have Only One Concern, İslam, İslam, İslam]," *Bianet*, July 31, 2015, <https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/166454-erdogan-bizim-tek-derdimiz-var-islam-islam-islam>.

<sup>26</sup> For detailed analysis of the issue, see: Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, *The Erdoğan Revolution in the Turkish Curriculum Textbooks*, ed. David M. Bayer (Israel: IMPACT-SE, 2021), <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Erdogan-Revolution-in-the-Turkish-Curriculum-Textbooks.pdf>.

mark the maturation of Islamist power which had considered its becoming a museum under the early republican regime to be a foreign imposition.<sup>27</sup> While the move by the AKP was criticised as the “Islamisation of stones,”<sup>28</sup> various authorities from the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches voiced their indignation. Meanwhile, while Turkey’s Christian population are bystanders in a debate that ultimately ignores the challenges facing a shrinking community; the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended Turkey for a “special watch list” and the European Commission released its latest report continuing to highlight the need for improvement of the conditions of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey.<sup>29</sup>

### Turkey’s Minority Policies through the Lens of Ethno-Religious Minorities

As the above review of the Turkish state’s approach to non-Muslims demonstrates, despite the fact that there have been enhancements in religious and civil rights, these remain limited and are far from meeting international human rights standards. Minority members interviewed also confirm this finding. The interviewees – regardless of social class, level of education, or gender – hold similar views with regard to the Turkish state’s policies on non-Muslim minorities since the founding of the republic. They all agree that the state’s policy defines non-Muslims as “scapegoats,” “internal enemies,” “the fifth column,” “the other,” “foreigners,” and “less reliable” entities that need to be eliminated through oppression and exclusionary policies. The state’s long-term policies cut across right/left-wing or conservative-religious/secular ideologies. One of our interviewees strikingly highlights this point:

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<sup>27</sup> Selim Koru, “Turkey’s Islamist Dream Finally Becomes a Reality,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/hagia-sophia-turkey-mosque.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier Roy, “Islamising Stones Is Easier than Islamising Souls,” *Qantara.de*, July 27, 2020, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-olivier-roy-on-the-conversation-of-hagia-sophia-islamising-stones-is-easier>.

<sup>29</sup> “Turkey Report,” *USCIRF*, accessed 26 May 2021, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Turkey.pdf>; “Turkey, 2020 Report,” European Commission, accessed 28 June 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/turkey\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/turkey_report_2020.pdf).

It is as if we are like a “stepkid” when, in fact, the “father state” should take care of his children equally. Although we are their own child, we are treated as stepchildren.<sup>30</sup>

There is a deep-seated perception amongst non-Muslim minorities that the state has been violating the rights guaranteed in the Treaty of Lausanne. For example, Rums suffer from the “reciprocity mentality”<sup>31</sup> – that although the founders of the new republic had signed the treaty, they only reluctantly accepted the non-Muslim population. As one interviewee puts it, “There is, of course, a minority policy: the other. If I may put it boldly (the policy is) ‘you are the citizens that we approved reluctantly.’”<sup>32</sup> According to most of the non-Muslims we interviewed, this policy functions along with the *millet* system that was established during the Ottoman Empire and was *de facto* inherited by the Turkish Republic. With the founding of the republic, although contradicted by the aim of the secular state, non-Muslim citizens continued to be defined as minorities with reference to their religious identity and excluded from the national identity, only to be tolerated as second-class citizens and never trusted.

Within this context, for non-Muslims, Turkish governments, including the İnönü (1938–1950), Menderes (1950–1960), Ecevit (1974, 1977, 1978–79, and 1999–2002), Özal (1983–1989), and Erdoğan (2002–present) governments have a common policy over non-Muslim minorities regardless of their right- or left-wing ideologies.

In the memory of non-Muslim communities, the Capital Tax, Turkification campaigns, Thrace pogroms, and the September 6–7 pogrom – for which non-Muslims hold the Republican People’s Party (RPP) responsible – hold a deeply negative place. Adnan Menderes’ term (DP), although from the right-wing party, has a positive connotation in the memory of non-Muslims due to the moderate policies followed by the

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a member of Chaldean Community on April 17, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> The Reciprocity Principle is based on Section Three of the Treaty of Lausanne which refers to the “parallel obligations” of Greece and Turkey on their Muslim and non-Muslim communities. However, from the most negative sense, both Turkey and Greece implemented this principle in order to penalise individuals and use them as a tool to send a message to the respective state. Baskin Oran, *Minorities and Minority Rights in Turkey* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with an Armenian Orthodox interviewee on December 26, 2018.

DP government compared to RPP's oppressive and authoritarian regime and discriminatory policies towards religious minorities. Ecevit's term is remembered negatively especially by the Rum minority due to the Cyprus intervention (1974) that took place during his term. The Jews that were interviewed also underlined the fact that the commercial limitations on non-Muslims took place during Ecevit's term. A Jewish interviewee claimed that these limitations continued to transfer the capital from non-Muslims to Muslims underlying the fact that "financial incentives were not given to the firms owned by Jews. They were all given to Muslim firms in order to enrich them."<sup>33</sup>

These traumatic experiences hold a significant place in the memories of senior members of the minority and were inherited by the younger generations through the collective memory of families and communities. According to younger generations, in the 1980s the state pursued a minority policy in order to decrease them in numbers, make them "minorities" and suppress them in order to create a religiously, ethnically, and culturally uniform society in Turkey. They also consider that their decreasing numbers due to the social, cultural, and political oppression and eventual migration create a picture where they are not even enough to be the subject of such a political agenda today. An interviewee belonging to the Rum community narrates these oppressive policies by stating that:

we did not have books in Greek in primary school... Inspectors were a source of fear to me. Because when there was an inspection we were hiding our books. Because our books were coming from Greece, because they were not giving us books here.<sup>34</sup>

After the terms of the RPP, DP, JP (Justice Party), and MP (Motherland Party), for most non-Muslims, the AKP era is considered a period in which significant liberalisation took place as experienced by non-Muslim communities. At first, the non-Muslim individuals interviewed for this study hold more or less common views with regard to the practices that have taken place for the first time since the founding of the republic. In the eyes of those interviewees who hold representa-

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<sup>33</sup> Interview on July 20, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Interview on February 17, 2019.

tive positions of their communities, these changes were “not even possible to dream of.”<sup>35</sup> They argue that it was not possible to engage with politicians before as they underlined the fact that today they can build sincere relationships with ministers and certain bureaucratic steps are more convenient than in the past.

We have a dialogue. We met with the Prime Minister (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), with Bülent Arınç, and Egemen Bağış three times.<sup>36</sup> They have a good approach. Some of our issues have not been solved yet, but their intention is important.<sup>37</sup>

Although most non-Muslims simultaneously declare that they have been ignored due to the paucity of their numbers and that the AKP government returned some of their rights during the EU accession process, they also raise concerns about their being instrumentalised for the political interest of the government as a part of the democratisation process.<sup>38</sup>

They settled old scores at the same time. It led to gains for the minorities, yet what mattered for the AKP was only its own cause. There emerged an environment of emancipation but the Kurdish political movement had affected this too. Over the last ten years, however, there is a deterioration. There is a large gap between what is being said about transition and what actually happens. Gains are important, however many things remain unchanged.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the positive steps taken compared to previous governments, the AKP is also criticised for their political agenda to create a monotypic society with the Sunni-Muslim identity playing the leading role. Non-Muslims today increasingly declare that they are considered “unwanted entities” being kept on the peripheries and their multicultural identity promoted by the government in recent years remained a veneer:

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with a member of Rum Orthodox community on September 16, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Bülent Arınç served as the 22nd Speaker of the Parliament of Turkey from 2002 to 2007 and as a Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey between 2009 and 2015. Egemen Bağış is the former minister for EU Affairs and chief negotiator of Turkey in accession talks with the European Union.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with a member of Rum Orthodox community on May 13, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a member of Rum Orthodox Community on September 26, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a member of Armenian Orthodox community on April 28, 2021.

They tried to say, in the old regime “we made mistakes, we suppressed (non-Muslims) but this country is good with these colors.” [*Author’s note: “colors” here is being used to refer to multiculturalism.*] But today, they do not say this anymore; they do not want us. Yes, they return the properties of Rums and Armenians, but these are political decisions... If their relationship turns bad with Greece again, they would not care about Rums... They want to create a Sunni Muslim country.<sup>40</sup>

The reserved and distant approach of non-Muslims towards the state’s minority policies was frequently expressed with regret and concern during the interviews. As we have mentioned above, throughout the history of the Republic, assimilationist, and discriminatory pressure from state and society has been rife, and, as a result, the population of non-Muslim communities has been shrinking dramatically, so that non-Muslims remained less than 1% of the population at large today. The following quote succinctly describes the negative perception towards the reform process due to the decrease in population:

Do you know how I describe them (the government)? They provide the deadly ill with recovery medicine. Who is going to take care of the community properties they return? Nobody is left! In my (minority) school there were around 5,000 (Rum) students in 1962; in 2004 nobody is left.<sup>41</sup>

Within this picture it is possible to observe a feeling of insecurity developing against the AKP. Some non-Muslim interviewees described their insecure state due to the possibility that “the interest of the government can reverse any time,” citing that Erdoğan had threatened Armenian citizens working in Turkey with deportation in the past.<sup>42</sup> They emphasise the fact that they are affected by the disagreements of the Turkish state with its neighbours such as Greece or Armenia or political crises taking place in the Middle East, which often position Turkey-Israel relations at the centre of the debate. Although they believe that it is not very likely, non-Muslims continue to worry about the possibility of being used as leverage or considered “hostages” within Turkey. In ad-

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with a member of Jewish community on March 13, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a member of the Rum Orthodox Community on March 27, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Ibon Villeda, “Turkish PM threatens to Expel Armenian,” Reuters, March 17, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-armenia-idUSTRE62G2GN20100317>.

dition, non-Muslim youth fear that the anti-Christian or anti-Jewish/anti-Israel/antisemitic speech frequently used by politicians and right-wing media in times of political tension paves the way for society to perceive non-Muslims as “foreigners” or “enemies,” especially in the absence of active legal mechanisms.<sup>43</sup>

According to the representative from the Protestant community, this insecure state is rooted in the Turkish-Islamic synthesis which was recently visible in the AKP-MHP<sup>44</sup> alliance. As the interviewee explains, the mentality adopted which had been rooted in the state cadres for a while perceived the missionary activities of Protestant communities as a threat which led them to engage in activities to stop their expansion:

They consider us to be an external threat, but actually we are an internal threat? Why an internal threat? Because we are causing a transition from within. We are shaking the foundations of the state’s tradition of white-Turkish-Muslim. I am a Turk, I am deeply rooted in these lands, but in terms of faith I am a Christian. This is difficult for the state, something that spoils its DNA. As we are a growing community, they try to block our way. Ways of doing this through democratic means are limited. You have to resort to undemocratic means. They do not want to do this, at least for the time being.<sup>45</sup>

The policies of early AKP governments, along with language that centred on multiculturalism and diversity, raised expectations that it would be more accommodating to Turkey’s non-Muslim communities than its predecessors. Yet these hopes for equal citizenship were soon dashed. Turkey’s authoritarian drift under the AKP intensified after the Gezi Park Protests in 2013 and coup attempt in 2015.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, in the AKP period Sunni-Muslim values have become the core element defining what the “nation” is. Within this sociopolitical context, the future of non-Muslim communities in Turkey appears to be in question. Turkish Jewish community leaders expect the Jewish community to contract to half its size within the next decade.<sup>47</sup> The interviewees

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<sup>43</sup> Özgür Kaymak, “Being a Turkish Jew in Unwelcomed Public Sphere.”

<sup>44</sup> Nationalist Action Party.

<sup>45</sup> Interview on April 21, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a member of Armenian Orthodox Community on May 25, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Information obtained from one of the prominent leaders of the Jewish community in December 2019.

emotionally conveyed that the question of “to go or to stay” was always discussed in their homes as non-Muslims and within their community social circle, that it was not an easy decision, of course, and that they were loyal to their land:

Of course my brothers don't want to stay here. Although I do not want to stay, when I look at the pictures of my village, I prefer to live in the village again, even if I die, I prefer to die there.<sup>48</sup>

The desire to go abroad is lower in the Protestant community than in others. Unfortunately it has increased a lot in the last few years, which is not a good thing. And all the good ones left this country.<sup>49</sup>

Despite all these worries, however, fieldwork reveals that Jewish interviewees prefer to exercise silence on political issues compared to Rums and Armenians. This is a significant finding that needs to be explained. Although this code of silence has been subject to internal criticism amongst Jewish youth, it is acknowledged as the historical continuation that Rifat Bali<sup>50</sup> calls “being the model minority.” Looking at the historical roots of this situation, the Jewish minority was first welcomed by the Ottoman Empire after their exile from Spain during the 15th century Inquisition. These descendents of the Sephardic Jews prefer to picture themselves as the “good minority” or the “tolerated other,” which led them to build a moderate relationship with the Turkish state compared to their Rum and Armenian counterparts. As they are historically a migrant society and do not have property issues from the past, Jews became the minority who best attempted to become culturally “Turkish.” As a part of this historical particularity, the Jewish community felt the need to pay their loyalty and courtesy first to the Ottoman Empire that “welcomed” them and then to the republic. This state of being the “loyal minority” crystallises in their preference not to be in conflict with the state, which from time to time leads them to be apolitical, which is materialised in the following words of the interviewee:

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with a member of Chaldean community on April 17, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with a member of Protestant community on April 21, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Bali, *Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories in Turkey*.

We always described ourselves as a “loyal society.” Throughout history we positioned ourselves accordingly.<sup>51</sup>

### New Fields of Negotiation

As has been observed above through the discourses of non-Muslim individuals, there is a tendency to criticise the relationality of minority community representatives and state authorities. Despite the fact that this tendency cannot be generalised to apply to the non-Muslim population as a whole, it provides insight into the current general perception of state policies. This tendency toward criticism is mainly derived from the passive, moderate, and coherent relationality that non-Muslim communities have built up with government representatives. Non-Muslims mainly criticise the silence of these representatives against the continuous discrimination and exclusionary practices they face in their daily lives as well as administrative issues waiting to be solved. Nevertheless, we also witness the flourishing of alternative, oppositional voices within the communities themselves against this stance. Among these new negotiation fields, we can cite *Avlaremoz* vs. *Şalom*, *Agos* and *Nor Zartonk*, and *Istos*.

*Avlaremoz*, a new online platform, demonstrates the most remarkable shift in the rhetoric of young non-Muslims in Turkey compared to the long-standing *Şalom* newspaper. *Şalom* is a Jewish weekly newspaper, publishing current political and societal issues of the Jewish community in Turkey. Despite its changing face in recent years, this traditional newspaper has been criticised for embracing a state-centric approach and not being critical enough – so much so that in the times of crisis raised between Israel and Turkey, the newspaper abstained from taking a bold stance. Against this background, *Avlaremoz*, which means “let’s speak” in Ladino, began to be published online in early 2016 in order to break down this philosophy of silence, or as they prefer to use the Ladino term, *kayadez* – which represents the “silence,” “having a low profile” tradition of the Jewish community, and to raise conscious-

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with a member of the Jewish community on June 2, 2020.

ness of antisemitism in Turkish Society. A member of *Avlaremoz*<sup>52</sup> explains the *kayadez* embodied mainly at *Şalom*:

We have a complaint against *Şalom*. We call *Şalom* a newsletter (of Chief Rabbinate) instead of a newspaper... We criticise their speaking in the state's language.

The practice of *kayadez* is not just a type of behaviour belonging to the Turkish Jewish community. Since the foundation of the Republic, the traumatic collective memory mentioned above has pushed all non-Muslim societies to live in a closed circle. On the other hand, it is possible to see a similar perception in the statements of the Protestant interviewee. The interviewee stated that this strategy of introversion brings more harm than good; considering the point that communication technologies have reached today, and that integrating into the wider society is of vital importance in reinforcing communication between communities, recognising and respecting differences, and fighting hate speech.<sup>53</sup>

In comparison to the keen difference between *Avlaremoz* and *Şalom*, the coherent relationality between *Agos* and *Nor Zartonk* is remarkable. Voicing the problems facing Armenians in Turkey to the public and focussing on issues of democratisation and minority rights, *Agos* – founded by Armenian journalist and intellectual Hrant Dink and his friends – underlined its oppositional stance by touching upon sensitive issues with regard to coming to terms with the past such as raising awareness of Islamised Armenians. *Nor Zartonk*, on the other hand, was initially established as a political and intellectual e-mail group and then turned into an online platform with the contribution of Turkish and diaspora Armenians. A representative of *Nor Zartonk* explains their founding purpose to create a common platform for Armenians to voice and demand their collective rights.<sup>54</sup> According to them, their attempts to speak politically and act collectively are the two features that differentiate them from *Agos*. The Hrant Dink court case is one event to which *Nor Zartonk* has actively contributed. The outlet aims

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with a representative of *Avlaremoz* on October 3, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a representative of the Protestant Community on April 21, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with a representative of *Nor Zartonk*.

to create public awareness, collective organisation, and visibility, which is reflected in the regular posts on their websites as well as in their press releases. As their representative mentions, although their main aim is to create collective action among Armenian society, they do not isolate themselves from the atmosphere surrounding them. In this regard they consider the Gezi Park resistance that took place in June 2013 to be a milestone in their collective action. Nor Zartonk also played a prominent role in the Kamp Armen resistance which took place in 2015 aimed at blocking the demolition of a summer camp for Armenian children which had been confiscated by the state by gathering all non-Muslim citizens as well as leftist groups empathising with their cause to take back this confiscated property.<sup>55</sup>

Istos publishing house is in a different line with the other platforms mentioned above. Istos, which is a startup by a group of people from the Istanbul Rum community aiming not only to commemorate the city's nostalgic Rum culture, but to join this nostalgia with everyday life practices. As their representative mentions,<sup>56</sup> a significant factor in the choice of books to publish has been to demonstrate the multilayered and hybrid structure of Rum society which contains various sociocultural and class-based differences in addition to its nostalgic and cosmopolitan character. Within this background Istos aimed to create a non-conservative alternative public space that does not hold an organic connection to the church; hence underlining the multi-voiced aspect of the society. Filling an important intellectual void, books released by Istos continue to grow its political, intellectual and oppositional stance.

New fields of negotiation began to arise in the late 2000s, creating a new dynamic in the political and social spheres of non-Muslim communities wherein individuals began reconsidering the tradition of remaining silent on issues related to politics and the state. Despite their shrinking numbers, young non-Muslims are experiencing hopeful moments and were empowered through their collective action gathering with other marginalised groups, especially during the 2013 Gezi Park protests.

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with a representative of Nor Zartonk.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a representative of Istos.

## Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that there has been an increase in studies focussing on the daily practices of non-Muslim communities in Turkey in recent years, there is still much more work to be done in this field. This study has focussed on non-Muslim community members' and representatives' perception of the state, especially the AKP. In this study, revealing non-Muslim minorities' experiences through their own voices, we aimed to explore non-Muslims' perceptions through interviews with members of the communities.

One of the main findings from the fieldwork was the perception of continuity in state policies from the establishment of the republic until today, irrespective of the governments' ideological character. Non-Muslims agreed that the state's policy defines religious minorities as "scape-goats," "internal enemies," "the fifth column," "the other," "foreigners," and entities that need to be eliminated.

Despite this continuity, which has also been present during the AKP's term, non-Muslims considered Turkey's EU candidacy to be the driving force in the attempts to enhance the religious freedoms of minorities. However, as the government replaced its EU motivation with its discourse on Ottoman heritage, the expectations of non-Muslims have not materialised. As reflected in the discourses of many interviewees, they perceived the government's democratisation attempts to be a part of *realpolitik* and their approach to non-Muslims as instrumental. Many non-Muslims remained doubtful about the real intention of the AKP to create a monotypic society in which Sunni-Muslim identity plays a key role in defining Turkishness. We also argue that a feeling of insecurity is developed against the AKP among non-Muslim communities. As political Islam and authoritarianism is on the rise, the social tensions non-Muslims face in daily life highlight the dilemma between being a citizen and a minority.

Last but not least, the flourishing of new negotiation fields in the late 2000s created a new atmosphere in the political and social spheres of non-Muslims. All of these examples demonstrate the fact that it is still possible to be in solidarity with other non-Muslim communities as well as the society at large in different fields, such as politics and even

literature and other intellectual works. These new negotiation fields appear to be an ideal alternative in order to negotiate minority rights and rights in general.

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