

**A SCAPEGOAT FOR ALL SEASONS:  
THE DÖNMES, OR CRYPTO-JEWS OF TURKEY**

Two authors who deal with the Dönmes are representative of how this group (and its descendents) are perceived in contemporary Turkey. Abdurrahman Küçük, a professor at the Theological Faculty of the University of Ankara and President of the Turkish Association for the History of Religions, wrote his doctoral thesis on this group and penned the article on the "Dönme" in Turkey's *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of Islam). Between 1999 and 2002 he also served as a parliamentary deputy and as a member of the Central Committee, for the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP). In the aforementioned encyclopaedia article, this professor described the "Dönmes" as "a Jewish community which became Ottoman subjects and appeared to adopt Islam in order to be able to more easily attain their religious and political objectives."<sup>1</sup> One frequently encounters this approach to the subject, which depicts the Dönmes as a collective possessing a secret, mysterious political agenda.

The second reference is to one of Turkey's better known Islamist journalists, Mehmed Şevket Eygi. In a recent editorial, he wrote of this group that "the greatest 'unknown' in the Turkish equation is the Sabbateans and other crypto-Jews."<sup>2</sup> In another piece, he describes the power of this group as follows:

The Sabbateans have taken control of all of the street corners, all of the important and strategic points, and all of the vital and fundamental institutions. There is a newspaper that is so militant, so fanatic that it has declared war against Islam, nationalism, the customs [of the Turkish people] and the line of historic continuity. This press organ is 100% in the hands of the Sabbateans. The person at the head of an institution connected with the universities is a Dönme, and his predecessor was a Jew. They are everywhere, their noisy chatter is heard everywhere. A great portion of Turkey's revenue finds its way straight into their pockets and accounts.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand what the author is implying here, it is first necessary to decipher the various terms employed in the text. "Historical continuity" refers to the popular Islamist notion that the secular Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk represented a break with the "historical" order, and has caused Turkey and its people to veer from the path of the Shari'a as the political and social foundation of the state. The reference to the "person at the

1 A. Küçük, 'Dönme,' *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 9 (İstanbul, 1994), pp. 518-520.

2 M. Şevket Eygi, 'Türkiye'nin En Büyük Bilinmeyen,' *Millî Gazete*, 7 June 2003.

3 M. Şevket Eygi, 'Sabetaycılığın ve Sabetaycılarının Öğrenmek Hakkı,' *Millî Gazete*, 22 May 2005.

head of an institution connected with the universities" refers to Professor Kemal Gürüz, ex-Chairman of Turkey's Council of Higher Education, the umbrella organization which is the controlling authority of the Turkish universities. Why does the author focus on this person? Under current Turkish Law and its understanding of the founding constitutional principle of Secularism, female students are not allowed to enter government buildings, and, by extension, to study at the university with their heads covered with a veil. The ex-Chairman of The Council of Higher Education has been one of the most uncompromising defenders of this prohibition. Eygi's mention of this person is meant to imply that the Council Chairman's steadfast defense of Turkish secularism stems from his Dönme origins. Lastly, the author's mention of a "fanatic newspaper" refers to the liberal, secular daily *Sabah*, whose founding family is also of Dönme origin.

The above-quoted lines from two different authors are typical examples of the opinion shared by many people in Turkey who see the Dönmes as a secret, mysterious ethnic group with a secret political agenda.

#### WHO ARE THE DÖNME?<sup>4</sup>

The term 'Dönme' means, among other things, 'one who has changed religions,' or 'a convert,' but in modern Turkish parlance, it refers especially to the followers of Sabbetai Sevi, the 17th-century rabbi who declared himself Messiah in 1666, and their descendants. Sevi himself was born in Izmir, or Smyrna, in 1626. According to Gershom Scholem, Sevi received a "thorough religious and Talmudic training and fully mastered the sources of rabbinic culture." He was ordained as a rabbi at the age of 18, and at the same time began his study of Kabbalah. Sevi came to believe himself the Messiah early on, and began to tell this to those in his milieu. Joseph Escapa, the Chief Rabbi of Izmir, reacted strongly to Sevi's pronouncements regarding his messiahship, eventually prompting the latter to depart from his hometown and embark on a series of journeys that he would take to major centers of Jewish culture, including Salonica, Athens, Cairo, and Jerusalem, among others. While on his way to Jerusalem, another young Kabbalist by the name of Abraham Nathan had a dream in which he later claimed to have seen Sevi and to have been told that he was the long-awaited Messiah. As a result, Nathan, who has become known in history as "Nathan of Gaza," began to proclaim him as such. He became something of a "John the Baptist" to Sevi's "Jesus," earning himself a prominent place in the movement and increasing the number of its adherents as well. After returning to Izmir in 1666, Sevi declared himself the Messiah, giving himself the title "The One who will establish the Kingdom of God" and speaking of the return of the entire Jewish nation to Jerusalem, the rebuilding

<sup>4</sup> This section is based on Scholem's work, see G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah*, transl. by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, 1989).

of Solomon's Temple and of the coming salvation of all nations. His followers' practice of mentioning Sevi as "King" in their prayers began to disquiet the Sultan, and upon his entrance to Istanbul Sevi was arrested and held. He was subsequently summoned to the palace, where, during his questioning before the Imperial Court he was asked to either prove the divinity of his mission or face death; he admitted that he was not actually the Messiah, only a simple rabbi, and agreed to adopt the religion of Islam. He was then given the name "Aziz Mehmet Efendi" and made *Kapıcıbaşı*, or "Gatekeeper" at the Imperial Palace in Edirne (Adrianople). His conversion caused a crisis within the ranks of his followers, with some abandoning him and others following his example and converting to Islam.

After his conversion, Sevi taught his followers the principles which became known as "The 18 Commandments." These principles, such as the belief in Sevi's Messiahship, the prohibition against marrying outside of the sect, the external observance of Muslim custom and religious ritual, the (secret) recitation of the Psalms, and the public observance and celebration of Muslim religious festivals and covert celebration of the Sabbatean holidays: all of these would become the fundamental components of Dönme life for the next two and a half centuries.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, Sevi's continued unorthodox behavior after his conversion eventually compelled the Sultan to distance him from both his followers and detractors, eventually exiling him in 1673 to the city of Ülgün, or Ulcinj, in what is presently Montenegro. He died there three years later.

After Sevi's death, his brother-in-law Jacob - or Yakup - Querido would assume the mantle of leadership of the sect. Thirteen years after Sevi's death, the constant personal and religious tensions within the group finally erupted, and the sect split, at first into two and later three sub-sects: 1) the "Yakubi" sect, which continued to follow Querido and his successors; 2) the "Karakas," who believed that Osman Baba, a child born nine months and ten days after Sevi's death was actually the reincarnated Messiah himself; and 3) the "Kapancis," members of the second group who split off after rejecting Osman's messiahship.

After living in peace in a few neighborhoods of Salonica and, to a lesser extent, Edirne and Izmir for the next two centuries, the community and its insular structure was irreparably damaged by the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and the massive wave of migrations that ensued over the next decade. According to various sources, at the dawn of the 20th century there were between 10-15,000 Dönmes living in Salonica.<sup>6</sup> In order to be able to preserve and continue their own specific culture and social construction, the Dönmes had taken care to marry only within their own sect, to bury their dead in specifically Dönme

5 A. Küçük, *Dönmeler Tarihi* (5th edition, Ankara, 2001), p. 349.

6 G. Saban, 'Residui di Tradizioni Sabbatiane Ancora Presenti in Turchia,' *Annuario del Collegio Rabbinnico Italiano* 3 (1988-1991), pp. 117-118, 131; Küçük, *Dönmeler Tarihi*, pp. 347, 353.

cemeteries and - beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century - to send their children to their own schools, where over the years the education took on an increasingly Western character and flavor, including the teaching of foreign languages. This lifestyle continued in some form or another until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

#### THE DÖNME DEBATE IN THE TURKISH REPUBLIC - PART I: 1923-1945

During the Lausanne peace talks which were undertaken at the end of Turkey's successful War of Independence, the Turkish delegation demanded, among other things, to be rid of much of their own indigenous Greek population, which had collaborated with the Greek invasion forces and was therefore seen as an element of permanent insecurity. For both sides, the most practical way to do this was simply to exchange the Greek population of Anatolia for the Greek state's Turkish Muslim minority. Such a decision was completely in keeping with the desire of the new Republic's leadership to create a Turkish nation-state by homogenizing the population and society of Anatolia. Thus, the "Agreement and Protocol regarding the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations" was signed between the two countries on January 30, 1923, whereby those Turks living in Greece - apart from those in Western Thrace - would be "exchanged" for all the Greeks living in Turkey, apart from those in Istanbul. As the Dönmes of Salonica were considered to be Muslim Turks, they too were subject to the exchange and sent packing to Turkey. The majority eventually settled in Istanbul,<sup>7</sup> with a much smaller number going to Izmir and other major cities. Those going to Istanbul tended to concentrate in the most exclusive neighborhoods,<sup>8</sup> where they established their schools anew.<sup>9</sup> When they died, the new emigrants would be buried in the Bülbüldere Cemetery, across the Bosphorus in Üsküdar. While at first glance it appears no different than any other Muslim cemetery, a closer examination shows that many of the tombstones contain photographs of the deceased, a custom which is prohibited in Muslim traditions.

In regard to their occupations, the Dönmes who settled in Istanbul and Izmir have distinguished themselves in a variety of fields, including journalism, movie theaters, finance, foreign affairs, higher education, commerce and the arts. Nevertheless, worldly success has not been accompanied by popular acclaim

<sup>7</sup> For a study on this subject I suggest R. Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean - An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Namely the neighborhoods of Teşvikiye, Nisantasi, and Maçka, and the Istanbul suburb of Balırcıköy.

<sup>9</sup> These schools which are still operating in Istanbul today are: Feyziye Mektepleri Vakfı Özel İsk Lisesi, Şişli Terakki Lisesi and Boğaziçi Lisesi. The history of the Terakki schools has been published, see M. Ö. Alkan, *Selanik'ten İstanbul'a: İmparatorluk'tan Cumhuriyet'e Terakki Vakfı ve Terakki Okulları 1877-2000* (İstanbul, 2003).

or acceptance. The descendants of this community whose number is around 15,000, are still identified as "Dönmes," or "Salonicians," both of which retain a decidedly negative connotation in popular parlance. The origins of this negative view of the Dönmes stems from the widespread view of them as a community of individuals who are two-faced and unreliable.

#### THE "KARAKAS RÜSTÜ AFFAIR"

The first time the Dönme issue became a public debate was during the "Karakas Rüstü Affair," which occurred in January 1924, just after Turkey declared herself a Republic. The name 'Karakas Rüstü' first became known to the Turkish public through a petition submitted by a certain Rüstü, a member of the Dönmes' Karakas sect, to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on January 1, 1924, just as the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange was to come into effect. In his petition, Rüstü claimed that his coreligionists were neither ethnically, racially, spiritually nor morally Turkish, and requested that unless they were willing to fully assimilate and intermarry with Turks they should not be allowed to come to Turkey.<sup>10</sup> The petition was reported in the press the following day, giving rise to an animated debate in the country's press which lasted for a couple weeks, after which it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.<sup>11</sup> During this period, the Dönme population continued to quickly assimilate into the newly-created "Turkish" national identity. Marriages between Dönmes and ordinary Muslims increased apace. In other words, the communal mentality and solidarity of which Karakas Rüstü had complained gradually disappeared. For the ruling cadres of the fledgling Republic, who were in any case determined to "Turkify" the country's various ethnic and religious minorities, this could only be seen as a favorable development. For all purposes, the state appeared to have forgotten about the Dönmes. But with the appearance of the wartime "Capital Tax Law" in November 1942, it quickly became clear that the state had not forgotten them after all.

#### THE CAPITAL TAX LAW

During the winter of 1942, when the fate of Europe still hung in the balance and Turkey, which had only managed with great difficulty to maintain its neutrality, was suffering greatly from the shortages, speculation, and black

10 P. F. Bessemer, 'Who is a Crypto-Jew? A Historical Survey of the Sabbatean Debate in Turkey,' *Kabbalah, Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 9 (Special volume on Sabbateanism) (2003), pp. 121-122.

11 For an investigation of this debate, see M. Baer, 'The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism,' *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* (2004), pp. 682-708.

marketceering created by the wartime conditions, the Turkish Grand National Assembly adopted in November the Capital Tax Law. This was an extraordinary tax, passed with the justified intention of taxing the excessive profits being reaped by those taking advantage of the market imbalances and shortages.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite the fair and reasonable goal of the law, the determination and implementation of the tax was carried out in completely arbitrary fashion, devoid of all pretense of justice or equality.

Turkish taxpayers were divided into three categories<sup>13</sup> - Muslims, non-Muslims and Dönmes - with the percentage of one's capital to be delivered as a tax obligation being determined according to one's membership in one of these groups. Among these three groups, Muslim merchants and industrialists paid at the lowest rate, with the Dönmes paying twice the percentage of other Muslims, and non-Muslims being charged four times that rate. As formulated, the law decreed that those unable to pay the tax, whose assessment could not be appealed, would be obligated to perform physical labor in work camps until they had paid off their debt. However, this stipulation was only imposed on non-Muslims, never on Muslims or Dönmes. In this way, the Turkish Republic, which in its 1924 Constitution had declared that all Turkish citizens would be considered and treated equally before the law, had imposed a system whereby its population was actually divided into first, second, and third class citizens.

Such a policy brings to mind a number of questions. For instance: how, during the implementation of the Capital Tax Law, did the responsible officials know which persons were of Dönme origin? How and where was this information recorded, and why had it been preserved in the nearly two decades between the founding of the Republic and the adoption of the law?

It is difficult to answer these questions from the surviving documentation, because no detailed or in-depth research has yet been carried out in the population registries. A possible and plausible explanation is that, during the population exchange, those among the Turkish immigrants from Greece who were known to be Dönmes were identified as such in the population registries. But if we ask why it was felt necessary to record such information, we find ourselves in a very different field of research. This question ultimately touches on the problem of the Turkish Republic's "minority policies" from its inception until the end of World War Two. During this period the state continually fostered the goal of creating a "Turkish" nation-state, destroying the various sub-state communal structures remaining from the Ottoman period and

<sup>12</sup> For more detailed information on this subject, see R. N. Bali, *The "Varlık Vergisi" Affair. A Study on Its Legacy - Selected Documents* (Istanbul, 2005); A. Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve "Türkleştirme" Politikaları* (Istanbul, 2004); R. Aktar, *Askale Yolcuları - Varlık Vergisi ve Çalışma Kampları* (Istanbul, 1999); F. Ökte, *The Tragedy of the Turkish Capital Tax Levy*, transl. by G. Cox (London, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> There were actually four total categories, but the fourth, the E category (for *Ecnabi*) was for non-Turkish nationals.

forcibly "Turkifying" and assimilating the country's minorities within an overarching Turkish national identity, and a single shared language, culture, and national ideal.<sup>14</sup> But despite this often repeated objective, the state and much of its ruling cadre continued to doubt the "loyalty" of Dönmes and non-Muslims and to view them as a "foreign element" within the Turkish body politic. What's more, the indisputable predominance of these two relatively small groups in the country's economic life was intolerable to them, and they continually strove to transfer the control of the economy to Muslim Turks, who were seen as the true owners of the country.

Ultimately, the two notions which played a role in the discriminatory and unjust imposition of the Capital Tax against the Dönmes - the questionable loyalty of non-Muslims and Dönmes to the Turkish Republic and their control of the nation's trade and industry - are convictions that had long before taken root in the popular mind and still continue down to our day. Indeed, the declaration of Mehmed Sevket Eygi which was quoted at the outset, that "a great portion of Turkey's revenue finds its way straight into their pockets and accounts" is of a piece with those beliefs that allowed for the tax's discriminatory implementation more than six decades earlier. This conviction can be expressed as follows: "Even though Muslims are the predominant element and deserving rulers of this country, it is only the non-Muslims and Dönmes who benefit from its blessings."

#### THE DÖNME DEBATE - PART II: 1946-1980

After the Second World War drew to a close, the Turkish Republic, which had been under single party rule throughout its 22-year existence, now decided to wholeheartedly throw in its lot with the West and accordingly took some halting steps toward multi-party democracy. In the new climate of social and political freedom that followed the ending of the country's wartime economy and its entry into a period of party politics, an Islamist movement, long-suppressed under the trenchantly secularist Republican People's Party, now began to raise its head again. Accompanying this revival was the reappearance of enmity and hatred toward the Dönmes, among others, which could not be expressed openly during the authoritarian single-party period.

In the period between the initial resurrection of the Islamist movement in 1946 and the military intervention of 1980, the Dönmes served repeatedly as a scapegoat for both Turkey's Islamists and its ultra-nationalists. This phenomenon was at least partially connected with the country's internal political developments. For example, Ahmet Emin Yalman, the owner of the secular, liberal newspaper *Vatan*, who was a totally assimilated descendant of

<sup>14</sup> For more information on this subject the following book is suggested: R. N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945)* (İstanbul, 1999).

the Dönmes, attracted much of the Islamist's wrath until his death in 1972, largely on account of his fiery advocacy of the principle of secularism.<sup>15</sup> The hateful publications directed at Yalman were even translated into actions in 1952, when a young man by the name of Hüseyin Özmez shot Yalman in an attempted assassination. On a side note, in the 1990s the assailant would reappear in Turkish public life as a lawyer and a columnist for a radical Islamist newspaper.<sup>16</sup>

After Yalman's death in 1972, the Islamists and ultra-nationalists found a new target for their hatred in the editor in chief of *Milliyet*, Abdi İpekçi, another person of Dönme origin who was, however, also completely assimilated. This was a period in Turkish history which witnessed the most violent and protracted struggles between the country's various Islamist, ultra-nationalist, and revolutionary leftist streams. The former entered the political fray as a fully independent movement in 1970 with the establishment of the National Order Party (*Millî Nizam Partisi*, MNP); meanwhile, the revolutionary left was attempting to bring about its own social and political revolution through armed struggle, while the ultra-nationalists fought violent clashes against them in an attempt to prevent Turkey from going communist. As a left-leaning journalist, albeit a moderate, liberal one, İpekçi became a target for both the Islamist and nationalist circles, and he was eventually assassinated in 1979 by the ultra-nationalist militant Mehmet Ali Ağca, who would later be implicated in the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II. According to later statements by İpekçi's daughter, both his Dönme origins and his leftist politics were responsible for hastening his murder, because both the Islamists and the ultra-nationalists have long held the belief that since Karl Marx was of Jewish origin both Communism and Socialism were "Jewish" inventions.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another person who during the 1970s came to symbolize "Dönme influence and power" was Abdi İpekçi's nephew, İsmail Cem [İpekçi].<sup>18</sup> Like his uncle, Cem, who was appointed director general of Turkish State Radio and Television in the late 1970s, was a left-leaning liberal of Dönme extraction, thus causing him to be subject to the most extreme verbal and written attacks from extreme nationalist quarters.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1980s, the subject of the Dönmes would again disappear from Turkey's public agenda. The main reason for this was that, with the military coup by Turkey's Armed Forces on September 12, 1980, the large-scale verbal as well as physical violence between the various armed factions that had

15 Yalman later published his memoirs: *Turkey In My Time* (Norman, 1956).

16 The paper in question is *Anadolu'da Vakit*.

17 H. Eksişil, 'Operasyonun adı gibi umutlanıyorum,' *Yeni Düşün*, 21 May 2000.

18 Due to its association with both his murdered uncle and his Dönme origins, İsmail Cem later dropped his last name.

19 Concerning publications on the İpekçi family the following sources are recommended: A. Muradoğlu, *Selânik'ten İstanbul'a İpekçiler ve İsmail Cem* (İstanbul, 2002) and A. C. Sekmeç, 'İpek Ticaretinden Sinenacılığa İpekçiler,' *Chronicle* (2005), 2, pp. 72-79.



plagued the country for much of the 1970s was brought to an end as all political parties were temporarily abolished and the country was placed under martial law. With the gradual lifting of political and press restrictions over the next seven years and the restoration of multi-party democracy, the increasing social, intellectual, and political freedoms that accompanied them allowed for the subject to once again emerge in public discourse. One individual in particular would act as a catalyst for this phenomenon.

## THE DÖNME DEBATE - PART III: THE 1990S AND BEYOND

### The Ilgaz Zorlu Affair

If one had to choose the most important factor in the return of the Dönme question to the public sphere in the 1990s, that factor would be, without a doubt, the appearance of Ilgaz Zorlu, the only child of a Muslim father and a mother of Dönme origin. Beginning in 1994, Zorlu started publishing a series of articles in several popular history journals, in which he both discussed the Dönmes and their beliefs and stated his own origins. Through these articles and a series of interviews he gave to the Turkish press, Zorlu single-handedly resurrected the debate on the questions of the continued existence of the sect(s) and their influence on Turkish society.<sup>20</sup>

As he clearly stated with a near missionary fervor, both in his writings and in interviews, Zorlu aimed to remind the younger generation of Dönmes of their "true" identity and exhort them to declare it openly, as well as to convince the Jewish religious authorities in Israel to accept the Dönmes as Jews, thereby allowing them to immigrate freely. Because of the credibility and authority that he was automatically accorded as an "inside" member of a secretive and mysterious sect, Zorlu's statements and declarations were usually accepted as authentic and historically accurate explanations - regardless of how exaggerated or inaccurate they were. Zorlu claimed, for instance, that the Dönme community still existed and continued to observe its religion, and insinuated - as well as occasionally "name-dropped" - that numerous important persons in Turkish political, social, economic, and military life were of Dönme origin. In this way he was instrumental in encouraging the exponential growth of the practice of "Dönme spotting," which had long existed in certain quarters and is so beloved of Turkey's conspiracy theorists. In Zorlu's fantastic vision, by following his exhortations, assimilated Dönmes - who according to his own admission represented the great majority - would come to embrace their "Sabbatean" identity and return to Judaism. But such a utopia could only be believed if Zorlu completely ignored the increasingly

<sup>20</sup> These articles were eventually collected and published in book form as *Evet, Ben Selânikliyim* (Yes, I'm a Salonican). The book became something of a media sensation in its own right, going through as many as nine - albeit small - printings.

powerful Islamic sector's overtly racist approach to the subject of the Dönmes.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, with Zorlu's appearance, the Dönme debate began to be discussed, written about and debated at levels unprecedented since the founding of the Republic. If his exhortation to the country's Dönme population largely fell on deaf ears, his efforts and those of others nevertheless succeeded in popularizing the "Dönme question." Following in his wake were two other personalities who, through their best-selling books managed to bring the issue to an even broader public than Zorlu.

## POPULARIZING THE DÖNME DEBATE: SONER YALÇIN AND YALÇIN KÜÇÜK

### Soner Yalçın

The first of the two figures I would like to discuss here is Soner Yalçın, who is a left-leaning journalist who works for CNN Türk, a joint venture of CNN International and Doğan Medya Group, Turkey's largest media group. In his 2004 book, *Efendi: Beyaz Türklerin Büyük Sırrı* (Efendi: the Great Secret of the "White Turks"), which in its first year of publication went through an unprecedented 59 printings and sold 118,000 copies in Turkey (as of November 2005), Yalçın stated that the overwhelming majority of the "founding fathers" of the Turkish Republic - including all of Mustafa Kemal's close friends - as well as the cultural and political elites of our day are Dönmes, and he insinuated that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself was a Dönme.<sup>22</sup> For him the Dönmes are "White Turks," a clan which, since the establishment of the Republic, rules Turkey. He used the term "White Turk" as an equivalent to the term WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant), which is used to define the traditional ruling class of America. For Yalçın all Dönmes are White Turks, people who have a cosmopolitan education, are fervent partisans of secularism, and despise the conservative religious populace that he defines as "Black Turks" and impose their will on them like Mustafa Kemal who imposed secularism and the Western life style on a conservative Muslim nation.

### Yalçın Küçük

Apart from Soner Yalçın, another important figure who has dealt extensively with the Dönme question is the Marxist economics professor Yalçın Küçük. Basing the theories propounded in his recent books on the "science" of

21 Zorlu later on established his own publishing house Zvi Geyik Yayınları (Zvi coming from Sabbatai Tsevi) and published a number of books on Dönmes. Among them he published a collection of antisemitic articles by M. Şevket Eygi, *Yabudi Türkler Yabut Sabetaycılar* (2000), and co-authored a book with an antisemitic Islamist journalist A. Dilipak, *Sisli Terakki Davaları* (2001).

22 For a review of the book, see R. N. Bali, 'What is Efendi Telling Us?,' *Kabbalah, Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 13 (2005), pp. 109-139.

onomastics, Küçük has attempted to derive meaning from the names of numerous public figures in Turkey in order to show that the Turkish Republic is actually being run by a "clan" of persons of "Hebrew origin."<sup>23</sup> In an interview with one journalist, Küçük stated that he had no particular problem with the Dönmes *per se*, with the following proviso: "it's enough that they do not conspire [against this country], that they work hard and remain loyal to these lands."<sup>24</sup> In Küçük's opinion, the Dönme behave like a clan, and receive support from Israel and the "American Jewish lobby." What's more, they have been able to ascend to very high positions in Turkish society, even though they are not deserving of it. In his own words:

In Turkey, a person who is not of Hebrew origin cannot become foreign minister. I'll concede that there have been a few isolated exceptions, but this doesn't change the [overall] result. Those who are not members of the clan I mentioned cannot get anywhere in Turkey. For example, they cannot become the director general of [Turkish Radio and Television], they cannot become the head of [The National Intelligence Organization]...<sup>25</sup>

One of the many examples the author gives is that of the internationally acclaimed Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, whom Küçük claims has achieved his fame due to the "Jewish lobby," which has lent him its support merely on account of his being a Dönme, not because he is a good writer. The proof that he produces to support this claim is that Pamuk's novel *Red* has been translated into Hebrew, and that it was published by the same publishing house that publishes *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.<sup>26</sup> In the face of such insistent claims, Pamuk has been forced to come out with public statements to the effect that he is not of Dönme origin.<sup>27</sup>

Both Yalçın Küçük's and Soner Yalçın's bestsellers have come at a time in which Turkey is making a great effort to transform itself from an insular, monocultural society into the type of tolerant, multicultural society that would qualify for EU membership; this process has tended to split Turkish society into pro-EU and anti-EU sides. Thus, at such a crucial point in Turkey's history the Dönme debate has been transformed into a part of a larger polemic between the pro-EU part of Turkish society, which advocates the need to redefine the concept of "minorities" in a more comprehensive manner in order to include not merely Turkey's non-Muslim populations, as the Lausanne Peace Treaty proposed, but all of the country's ethnic groups in a more inclusive

23 O. Eğin, 'Kabiliyete hiçbir kapı açık değil. Bu toplum böyle çöker,' *Aksam*, 14 November 2004. Y. Küçük's works on the Dönmes are the following ones: *İsyan 1, İsyan 2, Putları Yıkıyorum, Sırlar, Tekelistan, Tekeliyet 1 and 2, Sebeke 1*.

24 Cf. "yeter ki kast olmasınlar, kabiliyetleriyle bir yere gelsinler ve bu topraklara sadık olsunlar," in S. Seymen, 'Hoca ve ötesi,' *Aksam*, 11 January 2005.

25 A. Arman, 'Yalçın Küçük... Deli mi, Dahi mi?,' *Hürriyet Pazar*, 6 June 2004.

26 'Maskesini indiriyoruz,' *Ortadoğu*, 12 February 2005.

27 C. Kalyoncu, 'Valla Yahudi Değilim,' *Akşyon*, No. 392, 10 June 2002, pp. 42-45.

manner; and their opponents, who argue for Turkey's complete independence from all international organizations and the abandonment of any effort to obtain EU membership, and for the perpetuation of Turkey's current monolithic social and political construct.

This latter faction is comprised of three main groups. The first of these is represented mainly by the Nationalist Action Party (*MHP*) and its youth auxiliary, the "Idealist Hearths" (*Ülkü Ocakları*); the second group are the Kemalist old guard, and the third group, the nationalist but left-leaning Worker's Party (*İP*).

### THE DÖNMEs IN THE EYES OF THE ULTRA-NATIONALISTS

The ex-President of the *MHP*'s youth organization, the Idealist Hearths, had the following to say about the Dönmes, which is a diatribe of the classic antisemitic variety:

Over time, one group that directed the modernization within the [Ottoman] empire and the relations between production and consumption multiplied and flourished. Shortly after the transition to a republic, this group (the Sabbateans) took control of the Republic's modernization [process]. They transferred to their own community the means and privileges that the state had created for the development of local industry and modern commercial activity. This community sent its children to the best educational institutions, and was influential in determining who would be selected for scholarships to study abroad. During the single party period, they acquired - without exception - control of all the relevant party cadres for themselves. They created and controlled all of the alternatives in one place. During the multi-party period we have seen them among the founding cadres during the establishment of all of the parties competing for power. In recent times this community has not only been frequently acting in a manner in which one could discern a clear racial solidarity. Instead, it is a unity of interests that is based upon seizing more power... They do not feel any connection to most of the national questions of the Turks, [such as] the Kirkuk question, the Turkish language [question], relations with the Turkic Republics [of Central Asia], the Turkish Republic [of Northern Cyprus], etc... On the other hand, the majority are great fans of the [United States] and the EU... This community wishes never to share the portion of production in Turkey that they took, or even to take part in their share of [Turkey's] debts. We go into debt as a country, we give [the money] to them and they eat it up... They have international connections. They have an absolute monopoly over the vehicles for public communication. They control almost all of the influential so-called "civil society" organizations. If they meet with some difficulty, they begin a powerful and vocal campaign via the press and so-called "civil society" organizations.<sup>28</sup>

28 A. Satılmış, 'AK Parti - AK Budun İlişkileri,' 17 July 2004, [www.ulkuocaklari.org.tr](http://www.ulkuocaklari.org.tr)

## THE GOAL OF THE DÖNME DEBATE

### **The Nationalist View**

In the view of the ultra-nationalists, the aim behind the ongoing debate over the Dönme question in Turkey is, by disseminating the idea within Turkish society that Mustafa Kemal was himself a Dönme, to erode and debase Turkish identity and the “official version” of Turkey’s War of Independence, and thereby to sow division within the nation-state. Doğu Perinçek, the Chairman of the aforementioned Worker’s Party and one of the leading names in its nationalist wing, made the following statement regarding Soner Yalçın’s book in his party’s official organ *Aydınlık*:

[It] was ordered to be written in order to corrupt the history of Turkey’s revolution, and to eat away at Atatürk[‘s reputation] in particular, to intimidate Turkey’s revolutionary intellectual[s] and to create a climate of insecurity and doubt within [Turkish] society. These books alone are sufficient [evidence] to form the opinion that Soner Yalçın is in the control of those [secret] services tied to Israel and the states of the West and that he has provided them service.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Kemalist view**

Surprising as it may seem at first glance, the explanations for and descriptions of the Dönme debate are not so different from those of the nationalists. For instance according to Democratic Left Party member Uluç Gürkan, a columnist at the *Star* newspaper, the ultimate target of this debate is the person of Atatürk himself, or, in his words, “the weakening of the belief in the Turkish Republic and Turkish existence.”<sup>30</sup> What those who encourage these debates really hope to create is “a massive campaign to exalt [the] ethnic and religious sub-identities [of Turkey’s citizens] at the expense of the overall national identity.” The ultimate goal is “to try and reclothe Turkey in the Ottoman garb that is, in its foundations, a federation of ethnic and religious communities, in parallel with a moderate Islamic role” as the United States had proposed as a model.<sup>31</sup>

## HOW DO THE KURDISH NATIONALISTS VIEW THE DÖNMES?

The imprisoned PKK Chairman Abdullah Öcalan has mentioned the Dönmes in the following terms: “They have imposed [themselves] in order to detach the Turks from Islam. They have done this in order to isolate them, in order to [be able to more easily] pressure them from abroad.”<sup>32</sup>

29 ‘İP Genel Başkanı Doğu Perinçek’in Açıklaması,’ *Aydınlık*, No. 884 (27 June 2004), pp. 24–25.

30 U. Gürkan, ‘Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene...,’ *Star*, 25 May 2004.

31 U. Gürkan, ‘Bilinçli mesajlar,’ *Star*, 24 August 2004.

32 [www.pwdnerin.com/not40825.htm](http://www.pwdnerin.com/not40825.htm) - Öcalan’s conversation with his attorneys, 25 August 2004.

In the eyes of many Kurdish intellectuals the anti-Kurdish, Turkish nationalist line of *Hürriyet*, Turkey's most popular mainstream newspaper, stems from the fact that its founder was a Dönme. In fact, the paper's founder, Sedat Simavi, was not a Dönme, but a great many Kurdish nationalists refuse to acknowledge this truth, preferring instead to persevere in their belief that he was. A good many Kurdish intellectuals have also expressed themselves to the effect that Turkey is controlled by the Dönmes. They are believed to be the elite bourgeoisie.<sup>33</sup> One such Kurdish thinker, the formerly imprisoned former Kurdish parliamentarian Abdülmelik Fırat gave an interview after his release in which he was asked whether he had been contacted by the famous expatriate Kurdish-Turkish novelist Yasar Kemal while in prison. In his reply, Fırat made reference to Kemal's late Jewish spouse and to the power that many of his fellow Kurdish intellectuals attribute to the Jews:

Yasar Kemal didn't seek [me] out [in prison]. He could have [had he wanted, but] Yasar Kemal's wife is a "sister" of the Prophetess Miriam of the children of Israel [i.e. the Jews]. She didn't allow it so Yasar Kemal didn't seek [me out]. I think that he can't get out from under her control. He should break free a bit. Out in the world, the children of Israel have anti-Kurdish lobbies. Yasar Kemal is our own Kurdish intellectual, but a [daughter] of Israel has collared him [so] he doesn't seek us out.<sup>34</sup>

#### HOW DO THE ARMENIAN NATIONALISTS VIEW THE DÖNMEs?

When we pass from the Kurdish nationalists to their Armenian counterparts, both within Turkey and abroad, we encounter a similar view of the Dönmes. In the view of many Armenian nationalists, those responsible for the Armenian genocide were certain Dönmes who controlled the Committee of Union and Progress. The motivation for such action, in their view, derives from the historical competition between the Armenian and Jewish bourgeoisies to attract the interest and favor of the Palace. The Jewish bourgeoisie, via their crypto-Jewish partners in the government, subjected the Armenians to genocide in order to free themselves from their competitors. The late editor in chief of the Turkish Armenian newspaper *Agos* shared this view.<sup>35</sup> In an interview from 2005 he repeated his view as follows:<sup>36</sup>

**Question:** There is such a thesis. A group called today Sabbateans was to a large extent in control of the Committee of Union and Progress leadership. Another

33 R. N. Bali, 'Another Enemy: The Dönme or Crypto Jews,' *Kabbalah, Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, vol. 9 (2003), pp. 77-108, 88-95.

34 N. Akman, 'Boynumuzda suç gülleri,' *Sabah*, 17 March 1996.

35 H. Dink, 'Gerçek maskaralık,' *Agos*, 20 October 2000.

36 Interview with H. Dink in A. Vatanas, *ASALA Operasyonları Açında Ne Oldu?* (İstanbul, 2005), pp. 110-111.

analysis is that there was Jewish capital behind the German Army. What do you say?

**Answer:** It is not a new thesis. I also wrote on this matter a few times. You can add the Baghdad Railways project, too. I can say something from Armenian sources or the way Armenians see the history. However there could be people who will evaluate our talk as a kind of antisemitism. I should say right now that it will be unjust. If you look to the history accepted by the Armenians, you will see indeed that behind the Committee of Union and Progress there was the German military power and besides the German military power the Jewish capital of Germany. This is a subject to be researched. If there are any documents, any information, it will come out. At the end the German archives will be the most important witnesses and the Germans have started to question their own history. In the future there will be a much clearer vision. I do not want to go too much into this Sabbateanism thing because, yes, there are views which claim that among the Committee of Union and Progress leaders that you listed, there are certain leaders such as Dr. Nazım who were Dönmes.

I do not want to say that Jews were the enemies of the Armenians. Yes, such things can exist. It doesn't make any difference. I should say this here. An Armenian could be also inside the Committee of Union and Progress. (...) You know there was the question of the Serail between the Jews and the Armenians living in the Ottoman period. The question of who will dominate economically the Serail was an important point. Sometimes it was the Jews who would dominate, sometimes the Sultan was angry with the Armenians and would decree that from that moment on Armenians would be prohibited to participate in the tenders. It is a fact that such a competition existed between the Armenians and the Jews about who would dominate the trade. The economists will find out. However it is not my job to find out how much this competition has or has not affected what has happened [in 1915]. However frankly speaking the Armenians say such a thing: "In fact the Jews had their finger in what happened to us."

This view would come to be shared by at least one Islamist journalist in Turkey, who has written the following about the subject:

Essentially, a good researcher sees that the proper address for accusations of genocide is neither the Ottoman State nor the Turkish Republic. The role of those Unionists of Jewish-Masonic-Sabbatean origin in the [Committee of] Union and Progress is a well-known truth.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION - WHY ARE DÖNMES HATED SO MUCH?

The first and foremost reason for the Islamist movement's loathing of the Dönmes is their belief that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the abolition of the Caliphate and the establishment of a secular Turkish Republic in its place are all the result of a Jewish-Dönme-Freemason conspiracy. The logic for such

37 A. Dilipak, 'Sabetaycılık ya da soykırım iddiaları üzerine,' *Akit*, 25 September 2000.

a fantastic conclusion is as follows: Theodor Herzl came to Istanbul in 1899 as the head of the World Zionist Organization in an attempt to persuade Sultan Abdülhamid II to grant him permission to purchase the lands of Palestine and settle Jews there. His request was refused. The Jews took their revenge through the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. By means of the Committee of Union and Progress, in which Jews, Dönmes, and Freemasons together held great influence, the Jews took their revenge on the Sultan by having him deposed and exiled to Salonica. The presence of the Salonican Jewish parliamentary deputy Emanuel Carasso in the delegation sent to inform the Sultan that he was being deposed is, for many in Turkey, proof positive that Abdülhamid II was brought down by a Jewish-Dönme-Freemason plot. According to the Islamists' ideology, the process of taking revenge for Abdülhamid's refusal to grant Palestine to the Zionists reached its conclusion in the abolition of the Caliphate as a whole by Mustafa Kemal, and by the establishment of the secular Turkish Republic in its place.<sup>38</sup>

Another fundamental pillar of this theory, concerns the city of Salonica, which in the Islamist view is twice-cursed. First of all, Salonica was the birthplace of the Committee of Union and Progress, which is believed, like the city itself, to have been under the control of Jews and crypto-Jews, and which carried out the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, a turning point which they believe signaled the beginning of the end of the Ottoman Empire. Second, it is the city to which the "Great Ruler" (*Ulu Hakan*) Abdülhamid II was exiled after the failed Counter-Revolution of 1909. Lastly, Salonica was the birthplace of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the central figure in the founding of the secular Republic of Turkey, who is widely considered to have been a Dönme himself. In fact, Islamist ideology views the Republic of Turkey itself as a Jewish Republic. In a not-so-subtle allusion to this conviction, one Islamist writer, the aforementioned Mehmed Şevket Eygi, writes the following:

Five years ago, a famous Dönme in Turkey made the following statement in New York: "In the 20th century we Jews have established two Jewish states..."<sup>39</sup>

Nor are Turkey's Islamists the only ones to hold such views. There are a number of Marxist intellectuals in Turkey who also embrace such a view, one at least partially deriving from their opposition to the nation-state. According to one of them, it is among the Sabbateans that one finds the most ardent Turkish nationalists. As with the Islamists, Atatürk, too, is thought by many to have been a Dönme. After making such claims, the same person goes on to say:

<sup>38</sup> Bali, 'Another Enemy,' pp. 77-108, 98-99.

<sup>39</sup> M. Şevket Eygi, "Dönmeler Muamması," *Millî Gazete*, 27 June 2004.

<sup>40</sup> D. Küçükaydın, 'Sabetaycılar, Yahudiler, Anti-semitizm ve Kemalizm,' [www.comlink.de/demir/](http://www.comlink.de/demir/), 15 June 2004.



It could be said that the Jews have created two nations in the world, that they have established two states. One of these is the nation and state of Israel, the other is the nation and state of Turkey.<sup>40</sup>

Such views are reiterated by others, such as the aforementioned Marxist economics professor Yalçın Küçük, who has claimed that “those of Hebraic extraction have had a very great part in the establishment of the Republic. It is [the result of] one people’s secretly establishing a reserve state [for itself, i.e., after Israel].”<sup>41</sup>

In short, the ideology of most of Turkey’s Islamists views the Dönmes as the greatest obstacle to their aim of transforming the current, secular Republic of Turkey into an Islamic republic.

The second reason for the Islamists’ unrelenting hostility to the Dönmes rests in their belief that it is them who have forced an essentially conservative Turkish society to become more westernized and cosmopolitan. This belief is based on the largely cosmopolitan and western-leaning lifestyle led by the Dönme communities, first in Salonica, and then, after the population exchange with Greece, in Istanbul and other cities of Turkey. This conviction is reinforced by the fact that the first Turks to import American and European movies into Turkey were of Dönme extraction. They believe that this was not coincidental, but part of a conscious effort to transform the structure of the Turkish family.<sup>42</sup> This specious belief that the Dönmes were trying to “destroy the Turkish family” or “corrupt Turkish morals” found corroborating evidence in *Vatan* owner Ahmet Emin Yalman’s efforts to get a Turkish girl to compete in the Miss World competition.<sup>43</sup>

The third reason for the Islamists’ anti-Dönme hostility is their belief in the latter’s control of the Turkish press. Just as the Turkish Republic is actually a “Jewish Republic,” the country’s press is likewise a branch of “the Jewish press.” This belief derives in part from the fact that in the 1930s and 1940s, many of the most prestigious liberal and left-leaning newspapers and journalists of Turkey, such as Ahmet Emin Yalman, Sabiha Sertel, Halil Lütfü Dördüncü, and the Bilgin family, were all of Dönme extraction.<sup>44</sup>

The fourth reason is that the history of the Turkish Republic since 1960 has been one where countless unsolved murders, ever-present but rarely exposed corruption, and four military coups have been present. In such a climate of violence, intrigue, and injustice, theories of conspiracy, “hidden hands,” and “secret powers” are bound to flourish, and have indeed become a large and vital part of Turkish popular culture.

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41 O. Eğin, ‘Kabiliyete hiçbir kapı açık değil. Bu toplum böyle çöker,’ *Aksam*, 14 November 2004.

42 The movie importers in question were the İpekçi and Sirman families.

43 Bali, ‘Another Enemy,’ pp. 77-108, 100.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103.

The debate about Dönmes which has been getting so much attention in Turkey is the most important indication of the presence in today's Turkey of a conspiracy oriented mentality impregnated by antisemitism. Turkish ultranationalists, radical leftists, and Islamists conviction that "foreign powers" are always conspiring against Turkey has resulted in the fact that a broad part of the country's population believe in fantasies about the immense power of the Jews, and, by extension, about secret Dönme cabals running Turkey.

*Translated from Turkish by Paul Bessemer*