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## **“Israel is intentionally ignoring Turkish anti-Semitism”**

**Anti-Semitism exists in all of the political parties, and the Turks are no longer afraid to express it / The average [Turkish] citizen believes that the Jews who converted to Islam are striving to take control of his country / When one wishes to besmirch a political opponent, one accuses him of being of Jewish origin / and despite these evil winds, Israel believes that it is more important to do business with the Turkey / This past week when Tayyip Erdoğan won an unprecedented victory in the [national] elections, the Turkish-Jewish historian Rifat Bali isn't cutting either side any slack**

By Eldad Beck [Bak?], Istanbul

Rifat Bali knows that he is taking a great risk by granting an interview to [*Yedioth Ahronoth's*] *Mossaf LeShabbat*—especially during a week in which his prime minister, Tayyip Erdoğan, recorded an historical victory—unprecedented, even—in the parliamentary elections. Erdoğan doesn't like it when others criticize him. He's quick to bring slander suits.

This approach isn't exclusive to the leader of Turkey's ruling party: the 'Justice & Development' Party, which has won three straight general elections and considerably strengthened its hold on the country. The Turks in general do not suffer criticism easily. During the period of democratization and reform as well, anyone who dared to attack Turkey quickly found themselves in prison or lying on the street in a pool of their own blood.

“Many people in Turkey aren't prepared to easily listen to the things that I say and to accept them”, says the Turkish-Jewish historian. “People do not interest themselves in opinions from outside the mainstream, that are construed as extremist. But my opinions are very relevant and logical. There are people on the Left, Liberals and human rights activists who listen to what I say and agree with these things in part, but they do not represent a large of strong voice among the Turkish public, so much that it would be possible to hold an open public discussion on the matter”.

The subject that bothers Bali, an Istanbul native and member of the Paris-based Sorbonne University's Center for the Study of Sephardic Culture, is that of anti-Semitism in Turkey. Bali, age 63, has published numerous books dealing with this issue and with the various conspiracy theories widespread within Turkish society on the attempts by Jews and converted Jews to take control of Turkey and the world. In his opinion, the conspiracy of silence surrounding this difficult issue continues to this day, due, among other things, to the desire of Israel and American Jewry to close their eyes to the phenomenon.

Bali takes pains to clarify that he's not speaking about the phenomenon that has come into existence during the period of Erdoğan and his party's rule. Turkish anti-Semitism, which currently dictates the policy toward Israel, has been deeply-rooted within many different political and cultural streams within Turkish society for decades. “The official Turkish line that everyone accepts is that there isn't any anti-

Semitism within Turkey”, says Bali, “and in regard to Israel, even the Liberals and those on the Left tend to have some or other level of anti-Semitism, to the point that they partially share the opinion of the Islamists on the subject of Israel and the Palestinian problem. What’s more, these two rival camps both share a political aim: the democratization of Turkey and the reducing of the military’s influence on politics. When such a tactical alliance exists the Left and the Liberals cannot attack the Islamists over their anti-Semitism”.

### **Coalition against Israel**

We are meeting in Bali’s offices, which also comprise a library and personal research center, on one of the side streets in the commercial center of Turkey’s cultural capital. Istanbul, which possesses a more European atmosphere, did not rejoice in the streets at Erdoğan’s great victory, despite the fact that the majority of its residents—especially those in its poorer neighborhoods—voted for him. Even though Erdoğan avoided attacking Israel in his victory speech, Bali does not believe that the relations between Israel and Turkey will get back on track any time soon if Israel does not take the initiative to do so.

“Turkey’s fundamental attitude is that Israel needs to issue an official apology for attacking the participants of the Gaza Flotilla and to pay compensation” Bali stressed. “The Turks will not agree to anything less than a full apology. It’s a matter of pride and honor. So that as long as there isn’t one forthcoming from Israel there won’t be an improvement in relations. And another crisis, the next flotilla that is planned, is currently on hold”.

Israel was also made into an issue in the recent electoral campaign. The government and the opposition accused one another of collaborating with Israel. Some of Erdoğan’s opponents expressed criticism over the fact that the government is continuing to maintain good economic and business ties with Israel. One of the government ministers was even accused of arranging business deals between members of his family and Israeli sources. For his part, Erdoğan blamed the secular opposition for collaborating with Israel on everything related to the investigating the part played by Erdoğan’s government in the first Gaza Flotilla.

In the Turkish political reality, which is replete with anti-Semitism, there are even those who claim that both Erdoğan and his foreign minister are “secret Jews”—descendants of the *dönme* (Sabbateans) who converted to Islam. “This accusation is quite widespread in Turkey”, Bali claims. “The Islamists, the ultra-nationalists and the secularist-Kemalists all take part in this [phenomenon], employing it in their own disagreements and disputes. When you want to besmirch someone’s reputation, you say that he’s got Jewish, Armenian or Greek roots. Non-Muslim origins are thought of quite negatively in Turkey. Such claims are used as a curse. So that Erdoğan’s critics charge him with having Jewish blood. The problem is that he doesn’t respond by identifying these accusations as racist or by somehow stating that there isn’t anything wrong with being of Jewish origin. He simply adopts a dismissive and disparaging stance toward the accusations”.

Nevertheless, Bali does not believe that the question of relations with Israel is merely being exploited by Erdoğan for internal purposes [alone]. “There are many who claim that all his anti-Semitic rhetoric derives from the needs of domestic policy. It’s true that it is extremely popular to attack Israel and to

criticize it—the overall attitude among the Turkish public is anti-Israel and anti-Zionist—but Erdoğan is so popular that he doesn't need to adopt anti-Israel stances in order to receive more votes. His position in the matter is sincere. He gives expression to his true feelings, and this is more serious”.

“He comes from an Islamist background and from the ranks of the religio-nationalist party [i.e., stream] *Millî Görüş*, that has taught its activists and followers the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and an anti-Israel stance, so that Erdoğan indirectly sees the Palestinians as victims and the Israelis as oppressors. Any and every incident in the area merely reinforces these sentiments in him and causes him to blow up at Israel”.

### **Herzl's Revenge**

Bali's researches have revealed that the anti-Semitism of the Islamist movement in Turkey is based on an old conspiracy theory that connects the visit of Theodor Herzl to Constantinople at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Herzl asked Sultan Abdulhamid to give Jewish immigrants permission to settle in the Land of Israel, which at that time was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and the Sultan refused. Some years later, in 1908 (*sic*) the Sultan was deposed by the Young Turk movement.

“The Islamists see in this deposition the revenge of Herzl and the Zionists”, claims the scholar of Turkish anti-Semitism. “In their eyes, the deposition of the Sultan caused the collapse and partition of the Ottoman Empire, and that, too, is connected with the Zionist plot. The Islamists see Palestine as Muslim land that was taken by the Jews. This is a basis sentiment that exists among them that has been spread more widely since 1969 with the birth of [Necmettin] Erbakan's [movement of] political Islam—a movement in which Erdoğan first participated as a young politician.

“All of the political layers that are connected some way with this movement have found inspiration from these ideas that find expression in the Islamist dailies and in the popular literature that they publish. There have already been three generations of Turks who read these things—the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other anti-Semitic tracts and blood libels. Many Turks truly believe what they read”.

### **In other words, Erdoğan doesn't believe that Israel even has the right to exist?**

“I wouldn't say that. I believe that he is smarter and more pragmatic than your average Islamist anti-Semite. At emotional moments his true feelings come to the surface. Nevertheless, he believes that Israel is a legitimate state that needs to exist. Beyond that, he also wants to act as a mediator”.

### **Is it possible to trust a mediator like that?**

“Personally, I don't think so. In my opinion he isn't neutral, due to his emotional side and his Islamist mentality”.

### **In that case, was it perhaps a mistake at the time to ask him to mediate between Israel and Syria?**

“[Sometimes] You have to try things and to give opportunities. Everything is possible in politics. But I think that the Israelis understood that they made a mistake here”.

Erdoğan's close associates claim that former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was responsible for the dramatic change in Erdoğan's public stance on Israel. On the eve of Israel's "Cast Lead" operation Olmert visited Ankara, among other things in order to support and advance the Turkish mediation initiative between Israel and Syria. Erdoğan asked Olmert not to undertake any military action that might endanger the negotiations with Damascus. Olmert returned to Israel without informing Erdoğan of the operation that was planned against the Gaza Strip.

"Erdoğan was very hurt that Olmert was here and didn't say a word about the planned attack on Gaza, that began a day after he left Turkey" says Bali. "Olmert, of course, didn't have to inform him, but Erdoğan took it personally. He and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, are both very egocentric. They think highly of themselves and of Turkey. There's a lot of emotion tied up in their entire foreign policy".

Three years ago, when the International Court in The Hague issued an arrest warrant against the President of Sudan for crimes against humanity, Erdoğan came to his defense and stated that "a Muslim cannot commit genocide". This week Erdoğan attacked the Syrian regime with the harshest words possible for its 'barbaric' military operations against the popular uprising taking place on the border with Turkey that caused thousands of refugees to stream across the border. Erdoğan found it appropriate to say that the Syrian regime didn't tell Ankara the truth about what was going on in its territory. That sounds like a sense of personal betrayal, similar to what Erdoğan expressed to Olmert, but it's likely that the decision to voice such harsh words against Damascus was also connected to the fact that the loyalists of Asad's regime are harshly suppressing the Syrian members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

"Erdoğan is reacting more calmly to what is taking place in Syria", Bali believes. "We haven't seen the same level of anger against Syria that he showed against Israel. It's true that he is criticizing Syria for human rights violations, but this is being done without the same angry outbursts that were made vis-à-vis Israel. Syria is a Muslim country and therefore the emotional dimension is absent in his reaction".

### **Erdoğan claims that there isn't any anti-Semitism in Turkey**

"He's not the only one saying this. The Kemalists and the Leftists say the same thing. This is one of the myths about Turkey: that it is a tolerant country that welcomes foreigners in from all nations and peoples. But it's not true that Turkey is a multi-cultural, tolerant country. There is anti-Semitism here, just as there is in other countries—both in the past and today".

### **And it's gotten worse in the wake of the crisis in relations with Israel?**

"I think that it has today become a more overt phenomenon. The level of anti-Semitism was more or less the same for the past few decades, apart from clear rises during periods of military tension [in Israel]: the Six Day War, Yom Kippur War, the Intifada. But in the past Twitter and Facebook didn't exist, and you didn't see it as much. Today, it exists and it's easy to see on the Internet. The new means of communication have increased the [level of] anti-Semitism and help to spread incitement".

### **And the Jews don't say a thing...**

The film series “Valley of the Wolves”, anti-Semitic action films that have been screened on Turkish television and at theaters, are, in Bali’s view, clear proof of popular anti-Semitism. “They wouldn’t have made them if there wasn’t a market for them. There’s anti-Semitism in other countries as well, but in other places there is generally a desire on the part of the political and legal establishment or the clergy to fight against the phenomenon. In Turkey there is no such will, even among the clergy. The Jews in Turkey are alone. No one stands up for them, and in the new spirit of free expression people can say whatever is on their minds and hearts”.

### **Does this make life more difficult for the Jews in Turkey?**

“Jews have always lived here without keeping too high a profile. They kept a low profile and were careful not to make too many waves. This is a small community that feels threatened by the Islamist movement. In 2003 we saw that this movement was able to be violent, with attacks on synagogues and the murder of a Jewish doctor. The community doesn’t make a big noise, it responds to expressions of anti-Semitism only through quiet diplomacy, not publicly. If it were to do that, the members would find themselves trapped in a corner, they would be accused of being Zionists. In Turkey [i.e., in the eyes of the Turkish public] it is a high crime to be Zionist or sympathetic toward Israel”.

The Jews are quietly leaving Turkey. “There was always an immigration to Israel”, says Bali, “and it grew when there were economic and political problems, or when young Jews didn’t see a future for themselves or for their children in this country. Personally, I’m not optimistic regarding the future. It’s a big problem that there is no political will to fight anti-Semitism in Turkey.”

### **And Israel prefers to ignore this anti-Semitism?**

“Until recently, yes. And also the American Jewish organizations with whom Turkey kept up close ties due to the question of recognizing [the Armenian] genocide. The Jewish organizations assisted Turkey in the past with preventing the U.S. Congress from such official recognition. They [the American Jewish organizations] thought that from a political viewpoint the maintenance of good diplomatic, economic and military relations between Israel and Turkey was more important than fighting anti-Semitism in Turkey.

“Until now, and despite the political tension, there are good economic ties between the two countries. The Israelis thought that to tell the proud Turks that they have a problem with anti-Semitism wouldn’t be the right approach to continue doing business to the tune of one billion dollars [annually]. So they didn’t speak about the problem publicly, only behind closed doors. The Turkish government responded by saying that the Jews are their citizens and entitled to all protection.

“But if you wish to solve the problem, you can’t behave like that. You need to put the matter on the table and demand that it be dealt with, that solutions be found, but I don’t think that this will ever happen. The Israelis are currently preoccupied with the question of how to return to the ‘Golden Age’ of relations between the two countries and to increase economic cooperation. Anti-Semitism is at the bottom of the agenda for them. From their standpoint, if the Jews of Turkey have a problem—they should immigrate to Israel.

“The Turkish government needs to understand that the struggle against anti-Semitism is important for Turkey, even if there isn’t a single Jew left here”, Bali concludes. “You can’t be proud of a country in which anti-Semitism is normal, and you can find copies of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion at the major bookstores. This problem can only be dealt with by means of changing the mentality and the education of the populace, but first of all you need the political will and a legal system that acts against people who spread racist propaganda. At the moment, you can wind up in prison if you disparage the Turks, but nothing will happen to you if you disparage the Jews”.