



Turkey's Jews eye an uncertain future

Many of Turkey's Jewish community are considering leaving the country for a life in the EU. But the reasons they might want to leave are not as clear-cut as it might seem, says Paul Osterlund

The leafy, affluent Ulus neighborhood of central Istanbul is the most prominent Jewish quarter of the city. Here, you can find one of the last kosher butchers in town, nestled between an Ashkenazi cemetery to the north and a Sephardic cemetery to the south. Nearby is the private Jewish high school, Özel Musevi Lisesi, the last of its kind in the country.

It's just after 11am on a cloudy Thursday morning when I step into Kosher Istanbul Butcher, where about half a dozen men are busy at work, slicing and packaging slabs of meat before wrapping them into parcels emblazoned with a shiny stamp indicating that the meat has been certified by a rabbi and is kosher. But while most of the customers are Jewish, all the butchers working here are Muslim – and they told me it was the same for the other kosher butcher across the Bosphorus, in the Anatolian district of Göztepe.

There are fewer than 20,000 Jews living in Turkey today and its population is ageing. That trend looks certain to continue as young Turkish Jews are increasingly leaving the country. Over the past few

years, they have been heading either to Israel, or settling in Europe, after obtaining EU citizenship from Spain or Portugal. In 2015, those two countries began accepting applications from Sephardi Jews as restitution for their ancestors who were forced from the Iberian Peninsula by the Inquisition in the late 15th century. Many of those exiles settled in the Ottoman Empire, maintaining a historic community in today's Turkey that spans more than half a millennium.

Nesi Altaras is a PhD student of Jewish history at Stanford University, and the author of an academic study, *A Privilege That Cannot be Bought: Jews of Turkey and Citizenship Restitution from Portugal and Spain*. The study features interviews with Turkish Jews who have applied for passports from those two countries. Altaras was born and grew up in Istanbul but has been studying in north America for many years. He was one of the thousands to apply for Spanish citizenship before this route was closed

by Spain in 2019. Speaking to me on the phone from California, Altaras says his citizenship had recently been granted, following a two-year process that involved passing a language exam and swearing allegiance to the Spanish king.

"I want to be able to travel more easily in the EU and I might want to relocate from north America to Europe," he says. Having an EU passport is attractive because it eliminates the red tape that is required when Turkish citizens apply for an EU visa, which is needed to visit EU countries, even for a few days.

Altaras says that, increasingly, older Turkish Jews are no longer envisioning a future for their children in their homeland. "Since the mid-2000s onwards, many parents have been wanting their kids to leave. They have fears both about antisemitism and of economic opportunities decreasing for their families.

"They want them to obtain an EU passport and use it to get an education in Europe, which is now more popular than



ALAMY; PAUL BENJAMIN OSTERLUND

North America. And they want them to stay there," he says, adding that about half of Turkey's Jewish community has procured passports from either Spain or Portugal. A friend of mine applied for both, just in case, and ended up with two EU passports.

"Before 2015, people mostly thought about going to the US or Canada, but being a student in the US doesn't guarantee that you can stay and it has become too expensive to study, even for wealthy Turks. People have been turning to the Netherlands, Italy or Spain – places that offer an English university education but are also in the EU," says Altaras.

A 20-minute walk from Ulus is the Levent business district, with its massive shopping malls and colossal skyscrapers. Tucked away on a nearby backstreet, behind an unmarked grey steel door, is Denet Gıda, the only market selling kosher food in Turkey. Its stock includes kosher-certified meat, cheese, wine and soft drinks. As well as serving the local Jewish community, the shop caters to tourists seeking kosher products.

I chat with a middle-aged Sephardi woman who grew up in Istanbul and works at the store. She didn't want to give her name and glumly told me that she had planned on applying for Portuguese

citizenship, but never got the chance.

Nearly as quickly as Spain and Portugal began issuing passports to Sephardi Jews, the latter unceremoniously canned the initiative. Spain stopped accepting new applicants in 2019, although those who applied beforehand are still having their paperwork processed.

Since the beginning of this year, Portugal has also ended its policy of granting citizenship to those with Sephardi roots, a move linked to the controversy surrounding the granting of a Portuguese passport to the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, who was subsequently sanctioned by the UK after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Abramovich obtained his Portuguese citizenship in 2021, although there is little proof he has Sephardi roots.

Over the past century, Turkey's Jews have lived relatively comfortably in the country. The most difficult period for the community was in the 1940s, when a wealth tax imposed on non-Muslims resulted in financial ruin for many Jews, causing hundreds to leave the country – along with large numbers of the country's

Armenian and Greek communities.

As two of the non-Arab states in the region, Turkey and Israel have also traditionally enjoyed close ties. But over the past two decades under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, relations have been prickly. One issue that unites practically the entire spectrum of Turkish politics is support for Palestine, whether it is Erdoğan's Islamist ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), its far-right coalition partner in the National Movement Party (MHP), the main opposition centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP) or the left-leaning, pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM). These parties and their constituents are overwhelmingly pro-Palestine, as are the country's more fringe far-left and right-wing Islamist parties.

In 2010, a Turkish flotilla tried to break the blockade of Gaza, leading to years of a chilly stand-off between the two countries. Although Turkey normalised relations in 2022, they have dramatically worsened since Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023 and both countries have recalled their ambassadors. Despite this, and recent

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Kosher-certified meat at Istanbul Kosher Butcher. From far left: Jewish women holidaying on Princess Islands, Istanbul; Nesi Altaras in California; A barber store lists companies that are allegedly supporting Israel, with the warning: "Don't buy these products"



Left from top: Palestinian flags line an Istanbul street. The sign above the restaurant reads: "Israeli products are not sold here"; A pro-Palestine rally in Istanbul, October 2023

2003 al-Qaeda attack on two synagogues in Istanbul, which claimed the lives of 28 people. One of the synagogues, Neve Shalom, had previously been attacked in 1992 and 1986. In 2017, a mob stoned the walls of the building.

For Turkey's staunchly pro-Israel Jewish community this has all led to questions about the country's Jewish future. Altaras' parents and grandparents, who still live in Istanbul, want him to establish his life abroad and would be shocked if he returned to live in Turkey.

But he says the situation is not so clear cut. "There have definitely been feelings of unease about possible further attacks but how much of it is to do with the possibility of a real threat? The Turkish Jewish community is self-contained and closed-off and all this media coming in from Jewish and Israeli sources is heightening the atmosphere [of fear]."

Altaras and many of his friends who applied in time to get an EU passport from Spain and Portugal largely regard it as "something to keep in the back pocket," with a view to job opportunities as well as fears that antisemitism might ramp up.

Hemi Behmoaras, an Istanbul-based musician and event manager, was granted Portuguese citizenship in 2021, but he is not planning on leaving his hometown. "My ancestors have been here for 531 years. I am Jewish and a minority but I feel Turkish as well and I am tied to the land."

Behmoaras said his motivation for getting the passport was logistical as he performs internationally and spends part of the summer in Berlin. Altaras has other Jewish friends who are determined to stay in the country. Some are quite wealthy and could not match their lifestyle living in Europe. Others are lower-middle or working class and could not afford to start their careers from scratch.

Despite concerns – especially by older Turkish Jews – of a growth in antisemitism, Altaras remains sanguine. "Antisemitism is there in the background, but if things are going well at work, you're going to ignore the politics and the antisemitism and try to get on with your life. But if there is a bad political situation, worsening antisemitism and your business is failing, then you are going to want to leave." The problem now is that if Turkish Jews do want to leave, their route to do that has just got much harder. ■

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announcements about restricting trade with Israel, Turkey remains one of Israel's most important trade partners.

But on the streets in Istanbul, anti-Israel banners and graffiti, along with Palestinian flags, have become commonplace. One bookshop put a sign in its window banning Jews from entering the shop and a taxi driver put up a sign in his cab banning rides for Jewish passengers. Some shops display lists of goods from Israel or countries connected to Israel and asks customers to boycott them. Tensions have also been exacerbated by the media; one headline from the Islamist daily Yeni Akit read: 'Deport the Zionist Servants

"I am Jewish and a minority but I feel Turkish too and I am tied to the land"

from Citizenship'. In the Aegean coastal city of Izmir – which has recently been undergoing a small-scale Jewish revival – a synagogue was defaced with graffiti that read 'Murderer Israel'.

Yet there has, so far, been nothing like the violence of the past. Synagogues and Jewish cemeteries are heavily guarded and fortified in Turkey, largely owing to the