

Zionism in the Ottoman Empire at the End of the 19th and the Beginning of the 20th Century

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FOR AS LONG AS it maintained suzerainty over Palestine (until 1917–1918), the Ottoman Empire was a factor in the evolution of nationalist Jewish politics, before as well as after the foundation of the Zionist Organization in 1897. The history of Zionism in the Empire, however, is not limited to political negotiations in high places. Zionism also developed within local Jewish Ottoman communities.

Istanbul was the first city in the Islamic world to be endowed with an official Zionist agency. Opened in 1908, and directed by Victor Jacobson, it functioned under the aegis of Anglo Levantine Banking Company. From then on, Zionism was to throw the political and institutional life of the community and the local Jewish population into upheaval.

The Zionist movement joined other Jewish organizations, whose roles until then tended to be philanthropic, such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle (hereafter: Alliance),¹ the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden² and the B'nai Brith (after 1911).³ The organizations were imported from foreign lands, and like Zionism, became influential. But Zionism was perceived in certain circles as a new avenue of opportunity, better adapted to local needs. Its function in different strata of Jewish society was as important as the objectives of the movement's leadership.

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- 1 Organization founded in Paris in 1860 for the emancipation of Jews and their "moral and material regeneration." Between 1862 and 1914, it instituted in the Mediterranean basin an important school network.
- 2 German Jewish Organization founded in 1901 to improve social and political conditions of European Jews in Eastern Europe and the Middle East which developed in the Ottoman Empire a small school network to rival the Alliance.
- 3 Jewish organization structured on the model of masonic orders in Lodges and Chapters, founded in the United States, in 1843.

The Question of Palestine

The development of widespread support for Zionism in Istanbul and in the principal Jewish centers of the Empire is inseparable from the question of Palestine and the objectives of the Zionist Organization.⁴

Restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine were imposed in 1882, and limitations on acquisition of land by Jews went into effect in 1892.⁵ The waves of Jewish immigration during the last decades of the 19th century served to reinforce existing Ottoman opposition to Jewish settlement in Palestine,⁶ which had various roots. There was already the knotty problem of the Capitulations,⁷ Ashkenazi Jews who had settled in Palestine before 1882, like other local populations, benefited from outside protection. Their presence favored European encroachment. Ottoman anxieties increased in the face of a new nationality question in the Empire in addition to those already in existence since the 19th century.⁸ There was external pressure on the Ottomans as well. The Russians, for example, wanted to prevent Jewish immigration in order to avoid the concentration of any group in Palestine, which might call into question the *status quo* of the holy places.⁹ Finally, Jewish immigration ran counter to pan-Islamic politics introduced by Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), who wanted cohesion in the Empire in order to compensate for territorial losses and to counteract nationalistic demands of ethnic and religious groups.¹⁰

The restrictions, also influenced by Arab demands, were renewed and strengthened. But they did not produce the desired results. Between 1882

and 1908, the Jewish population in Palestine grew from approximately 24,000 to 70–80,000, and twenty six colonies were founded.¹¹ It is in this unpropitious political context that Theodor Herzl failed in his negotiations on Palestine with the Sultan, in spite of his five visits to Istanbul between 1896 and 1902.¹²

The Young Turk Revolution in 1908 was interpreted by Zionists as the beginning of a new era.¹³ The establishment of the Zionist Agency in the same year in Istanbul was an effort to adapt to new circumstances, including the prospect of renewed diplomatic talks on the Palestine question. These developments prompted a number of young Zionists to learn Turkish and continue their studies in the Ottoman capital.¹⁴

This optimism was encouraged initially by favorable declarations on Zionism by some Young Turk leaders.¹⁵ The Zionist leadership reorientated its separatist politics during the Congress of Hamburg in 1909, then in Basel in 1911, and rallied provisionally to the principle of the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ The questions of immigration and of a national Jewish home which would be part of the Empire were put aside.¹⁷ The Zionists concentrated their efforts on the lifting of restrictions, a *sine qua non* condition for realizing their goal. Ultimately, however, the new regime was not radically different from its predecessor. The Young Turks proposed new areas, like Mesopotamia, Asia Minor or Macedonia, for settling persecuted East European Jews, as they were determined to prevent overall concentration in any one area, particularly in Palestine.¹⁸

4 See David Vital, *Zionism: The Crucial Phase*, Oxford, 1987, pp. 3–85.

5 Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Policy and Restrictions on Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881–1908 — Part 1," *Middle Eastern Studies* 10, no. 3, 1974, pp. 312–332; "Ottoman Policy as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881–1908," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1, January 1975, pp. 33–46; "Turks, Arabs and Jewish Immigration into Palestine, 1882–1914," *St. Antony's Papers* 17, 1965, pp. 77–108. See also, Mim Kemal Öke, "The Ottoman Empire, Zionism and the Question of Palestine (1880–1908)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, 1982, pp. 329–341; David Vital, *Zionism: the Formative Years*, Oxford, 1982, pp. 52–55.

6 Isaiah Friedman, "The System of Capitulations and its Effects on Turco-Jewish Relations on Palestine, 1856–1897," in David Kushner, ed., *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period, Political, Social and Economic Transformation*, Jerusalem/Leiden, 1986, p. 283.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

8 Archives de l'Alliance israélite universelle (hereafter: AAIU), Turkey, I.G. 1, I. Fernandez to Z. Kahn (Chief Rabbi of France), September 6, 1897.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Engin D. Akarlı, "Abdülhamid II's Attempt to Integrate Arabs into the Ottoman Empire," in Kushner, *Palestine*, pp. 74–89.

11 Neville J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1976, p. 224.

12 On these visits, see: Theodor Herzl, *Zionist Writings, Essays, and Addresses, 1896–1904*, New York, 1973–1975, 2 vol., *passim*; Vital, *Zionism*, pp. 56–59, 106, 113, 117, 119; Abraham Galanté, *Abdul Hamid II et le sionisme* (French), Istanbul, 1933.

13 Isaiah Friedman, *Germany, Turkey and Zionism 1897–1918*, Oxford, 1977, p. 141. *Jewish World*, October 2, 1908.

14 David Farhi, "Documents on the Attitude of the Ottoman Government towards the Jewish Settlement in Palestine after the Revolution of the Young Turks, 1908–1909," in Moshe Ma'oz, ed., *Studies in Palestine During the Ottoman Empire*, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 197–198. Michel Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gourion* (French), Paris, 1986, pp. 51, 53–62.

15 *Jewish World*, London, October 2, 1908; November 27, 1908; *El Avenir*, Salonika, January 8, 1909; *Ha'Olam*, Cologne/Vilna/Odessa, January 26, 1909; March 3, 1909; Friedman, *Germany*.

16 See Richard Lichtheim, *History of Zionism in Germany* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, [1951], p. 127; *El Avenir*, June 18, 1909.

17 *Hamevesser*, Istanbul, February 8, 1910; March 1, 1910.

18 *Jewish Chronicle*, London, April 2, 1909; September 7, 1909; October 1, 1909; December 31, 1909; July 15, 1910; *Lloyd Ottoman*, Istanbul, May 29, 1909; *El Tiempo*, Istanbul, June 11, 1909; *Ha-Zevi*, Jerusalem, June 21, 1909; *Univers israélite*, Paris, October 29, 1909, p. 216.

The hostility of the Ottomans to Zionism eased during the months between the fall of 1913 and the summer 1914, when one of the Young Turk parties, the Committee of Union and Progress, seized power in January 1913. The Committee needed financial support that it believed would be forthcoming from European Jews.¹⁹ During this same year some legal constraints against Jews were annulled, largely due to Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum's intervention with influential members of the government.²⁰ But immigration restrictions remained.

During World War I, using various middlemen, Zionist leaders tried to convince Ottoman authorities to accelerate naturalization procedures of foreign Jews in Palestine in order to avoid their deportation. The slowness of Ottoman bureaucracy and the difficulties which followed forced a number of these Jews to leave Palestine for Alexandria.²¹ In Palestine, the anti-Zionist activities of the commander of the 4th Ottoman army, Cemal Pasha, followed one another relentlessly during the years 1915–1916.²² On April 9, 1917, 7,000 to 9,000 Jews of Jaffa were driven north.²³ This evacuation was not only directed against the Jewish population of the city. Nonetheless, the latter was severely hit.

On December 9, 1917, the British occupied Jerusalem. The persecutions continued in parts of Palestine still under Ottoman rule.²⁴ In Istanbul, after the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917 and the occupation of Jerusalem, the Sublime Porte began to make apparent concessions. The armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918 put an end to several centuries of Ottoman supremacy in Palestine, and at the same time, to the negotiations in process. But the development of Zionism in Turkey did not come to an end.

19 Mandel, *Arabs and Zionism*, p. 225; Central Zionist Archives (hereafter: CZA), Z3/45, V. Jacobson to N. Mazliah, March 19, 1913; *Ibid.*, [V. Jacobson] to H. Frank, February 28, 1913.

20 CZA, Z3/66, H. Nahum to V. Jacobson, September 26, 1913 (telegram); V. Jacobson to Nahum, September 26, 1913; February 5, 1914.

21 Israel Cohen, *The Turkish Persecution of the Jews*, London, 1918, p. 7; Abraham Elmaleh, *Palestine and Syria during the World War* (Hebrew), vol. 2, Jerusalem, 1929, p. 48; Friedman, *Germany*, p. 218.

22 *Jewish Chronicle*, February 5, 1915; *Univers israélite*, 3, April 9, 1915, p. 76; October 22, 1915, p. 180.

23 Public Record Office (hereafter: PRO), FO 382/1639/98384, from the British High Commissioner in Egypt to the Foreign Office, May 13, 1917; Alex Bein, ed., *Arthur Ruppin: Memoirs, Diaries, Letters*, London/Jerusalem, 1971, p. 164; Friedman, *Germany*, pp. 347–350; *The Bulletin of the Joint Distribution Committee*, New York, 2, no. 4, December 1917, pp. 50–51.

24 *Auswärtiges Amt Akten* (Bonn), *Türkei* 195, K180486, J.H. Berstorff to G. von Hertling, May 28, 1918; *Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères*, Paris, 1918–1929, sub-series Palestine/Sionisme, vol. 10, June 20, 1918.

Zionism and communal politics

Messianic Zionism had had followers in the Sephardic (that is, Iberian Jewish) communities of the Orient. This proto-Zionism developed parallel to the Haskala [the Jewish Enlightenment], which reached the Empire in the 19th century with less impact than it had in Europe.²⁵

The reign of Abdülhamid II did not favor the development of the Jewish nationalist activity.²⁶ Thus, the Congress of Basel in 1897, which confirmed the foundation of the Zionist organization, was also condemned by the local Jewish secular leadership, considered as progressive. Isaac Fernandez, the president of the Regional Committee of the Alliance in Turkey, stated that “the movement of which Dr. Herzl has taken head is very harmful for the interests of the Jews of Turkey, for the work of the Alliance, and for that of the colonization of Palestine.”²⁷

The immediate opposition to Zionism illustrated the attitude of prominent Jews, who felt the need to demonstrate loyalty in order to benefit from Ottoman protection. The majority of well-to-do Sephardic Jews remained resistant to Zionism, fearing that it would damage their relationship with the government and jeopardize their economic interests. Even when the new administration became more receptive following the Young Turk Revolution, the Jewish position did not vary noticeably. Jewish deputies in the Ottoman parliament, elected during the period in which a constitutional government was reestablished in Turkey, were not ardent supporters of Jews or Zionism.²⁸

During the last decades of the 19th century, the Alliance's educational network flourished in Jewish communities of the Empire — a development which gave the Alliance an important place in community politics. The

25 See, for example, the *Kadima* association to Salonica which at the same time filters into this proto-Zionism then in the movement of the *Haskala*: AAU, Greece, I.G.3, J. Nehama to Paris, January 13, 1903.

26 During the last decades of the 19th century, some movements such as the Russian Jewish Nationalists established themselves in Istanbul: les *Bilu'im* (see on this subject): Shulamit Laskov, *Ha Bilu'im*, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 84–158 (*passim*), or *Aqada visr'elit lehit'amlut* [Israel Society of Gymnastics], the future *Maccabi* society. See: David Ramon, *The Maccabi in the Balkans* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1945, pp. 95–123.

27 AAU, Turkey I.G.1, I. Fernandez to J. Bigart, September 6, 1897. Another letter of the same date was addressed to the Chief Rabbi of France Zadoc Kahn to bring to his attention the dangers of Zionism and to make him aware of an eventual support.

28 David Ben-Gurion, *Mémoires, Israël avant Israël* (French), Paris, 1974, p. 45. It refers, for example, to declarations of Jewish deputies towards Zionism at the time of the visit of the Ottoman parliamentary delegation to the seat of the Alliance in Paris (July 15, 1909): *Hamevasser*, August 9, 1910; *Ha-Or*, Jerusalem, August 16, 1910.

Alliance taught the ideology of emancipation and of the integration of Jews in their lands of settlement. The Alliance in France, just as the Consistories and the Rabbinate, formed an important anti-Zionist bastion. Zionism opposed its ideology.²⁹ The erosion of the Alliance in Bulgaria in the face of the rise of Zionism and, in 1913, the closing of the majority of its Bulgarian schools, accentuated anti-Zionist sentiment within the organization.³⁰ It feared a spread of the phenomenon to other Jewish communities. As a result, the Alliance hardened its opposition to Zionism in the Empire, where most of its schools were situated.

The Young Turk Revolution carried the Alliance from the periphery to the center of the Jewish community, when Haim Nahum, its protégé, became *Haham Bashi* [Chief Rabbi] of the Empire.³¹ The progressive elite assured the victory of its candidate with the consent — if not the complicity — of the new Ottoman governing class. They held the reins of communal power.

But re-opening negotiations with the Young Turk government on the Palestine question was not the sole objective of Zionists. They also aimed to win over different strata of Ottoman Jewish society. Zionism could in turn enter into the nationalist arena like other minorities in the Empire, and by virtue of its mass support become a factor in diplomatic negotiations.

By setting up locally (unlike the Paris-based Alliance), the Zionists were able to work within communities of large urban centers, and consequently to realize their policy at a local level. They established a priority list of populations that they hoped to reach. The leaders of the local Jewish communities were their first targets, since some of them carried considerable influence with the Ottoman authorities. This group, however, sided with the Alliance. The Zionists turned to the rank and file of the community,³² who had nothing to lose in supporting Zionism.

29 See on this opposition: AAIU, School Register 104, N. Leven (Vice-President of the Alliance) to I. Fernandez, October 10, 1897.

30 Numerous files in the Archives of the Alliance israélite universelle prove the degree of conflict between the Society and the Zionists. See: AAIU, Bulgarie I.G. 14, [M] Cohen to Paris, August 8, 1898; Central Committee of Zionists of Bulgaria to the Central Committee of Paris, August 2, 1903; *Ibid.*, Bulgarie I.G. 7, G. Arié to Paris, May 14, 1911.

31 He was elected in 1908 Kaymakam (*locum tenens* of the Chief Rabbi), then in 1909 *Haham Bashi*. Cf: Esther Benbassa, *Haim Nahum Efendi, dernier grand rabbin de l'Empire Ottoman (1908–1920): son rôle et diplomatique* (French), 2 vols, Paris, unpublished Doctorat d'Etat dissertation, 1987; *idem*, *Un grand rabbin sépharade en politique, (1882–1923)*, Paris, 1990.

32 CZA, Z2/9, Protocol of the meeting of the Committee of Press of June 27–28, 1910, signed by V. Jacobson, S. Hochberg.

In Western Europe the emergence of Zionism occurred after emancipation,³³ in spite of the hostility it faced, particularly in France.³⁴ Zionism permitted integrated Jews to renew ties with Judaism. But in the Empire, as in Eastern Europe, Zionism appeared at the same time as the local Jewish communities were modernizing, simultaneous with the development of Turkish nationalism. The social groups won over to Zionism had not yet cut off links to Jewish tradition.

Within traditionalist spheres, untouched by the westernizing influence of the Alliance, religious attachment to Eretz Israel, constantly expressed in liturgy, had not disappeared. Without being necessarily decisive, the messianic echoes of Zionism could seduce the social strata of the disappointed, poor population led by an ossified, communal leadership. In Istanbul, it was in this atmosphere that Zionist propaganda, stressing traditional and national dimensions, achieved most rapid success.

On the other hand, in Salonica, the existence of the Federation of Socialist Workers, “the only socialist and trade-unionist Jewish movement in the Sephardic world,”³⁵ became an obstacle for Zionism to overcome among the masses. When the Federation openly combated Zionism,³⁶ the Zionists turned to Salonica's middle class and its intellectuals.³⁷

For its part, the Alliance leaned on the upper class in order to realize its educational program. It expected to contribute, by instruction and education, to the “regeneration” of the Jewish masses. However, the ideology which underscored its action found little success among local populations. Furthermore, the Alliance had neither the means nor the vocation to disseminate an ideology capable of mobilizing a broad population.

It was here that the Alliance failed and the Zionists succeeded. Zionism voiced the aspirations and the dissatisfaction of the casualties of

33 Stephen M. Poppel, *Zionism in Germany, 1897–1933. The Shaping of a Jewish Identity*, Philadelphia, 1977, pp. 85–101.

34 Catherine [Nicault]-Levine, “The French Jews and Zionism from 1896 to 1920,” *Yod* 3, no. 2, 1978, pp. 30–41.

35 Definition given by one of the founders of the movement, Avraam A. Benaroya, “Beginning of the Socialist Movement among the Jews of Salonica,” in: David A. Recanati, ed., *Salonica Memorial* (Hebrew), vol. 1, Tel Aviv, 1972, p. 49.

36 Avraam S. Recanati, *The Maccabi; the Heroic Period of the Zionist Movement in Salonica* (Hebrew), in D. Recanati, ed. *Salonica*, vol. 1, pp. 285–287; Ben-Gurion, *Mémoires*, pp. 48–49. See also: *Journal del lavorador* and *Avanti*, Salonice, numbers forward from 1910; *La solidaridad ovradera*, Salonice, numbers from 1911. These journals linked to the socialist movement frequently expressed their opposition to Zionism. This was also the case under the Greek domination after 1912.

37 Baruh Sivi, *The Movement of the Po'alei Zion in Salonica, in Salonica, Mother City of Israel* (Hebrew), Jerusalem/Tel Aviv, 1967, p. 133; Ben-Gurion, *Mémoires*, p. 49.

westernization preached by the Alliance. The Alliance and the Zionist movement, both importing foreign ideologies, touched a public they had not targeted at the outset. Ottoman Judaism became an arena where the two groups engaged in combat in which they included their respective allies — other opinion groups.

Zionist Politics: Means and Objectives

The success of Zionism in a community which might not otherwise have supported it was the result of activity by political leaders such as Victor Jacobson, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Richard Lichtheim, Arthur Rupp and others who worked locally to elaborate the Zionist program. Propaganda,³⁸ local militancy, the development of a social life situated between tradition and modernity,³⁹ populism, the infiltration of community institutions, coalitions with opinion groups hostile to the Chief Rabbi and the oligarchy around him, constituted the principal aspects of local politics of the Zionist movement.

The formation of a press network aimed on one hand at the Ottoman intelligentsia and at middle officials, and on the other at different social strata of the Jewish community, was one of the first objectives of local Zionist activity. By the purchase of already existing periodicals or by the creation of new newspapers, an important press complex was organized. It was a question not only of making Zionist positions known, but also to neutralize those who were apt to thwart Zionism — Moslems as well as Jews. The financial difficulties journals were experiencing facilitated the job of the Zionists in this undertaking. Some newspapers joined Zionism for ideological reasons while others embraced the cause of the highest bidder.

The Zionists expected to seize community power.⁴⁰ In Istanbul, they established themselves as a party of opposition to the Chief Rabbinate. Nationalism and democratization of communal institutions became principal themes of their demands. By undermining the power of their principal opponents, the Chief Rabbi and the Alliance oligarchy, they hoped to create

38 Mordekhai Eliav, *David Wolffsohn, the Man and His Times* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1977; Esther Benbassa, "Presse d'Istanbul et de Salonique au service du sionisme," *Revue Historique* 276/2, no. 560, October-December 1986, pp. 337-365.

39 Esther Benbassa, "Associational Strategies in Ottoman Jewish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," forthcoming, in Avigdor Levi, ed., *The Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, New Hampshire.

40 AAU, Turkey I. G. 1, Nathan to Paris, January 4, 1912.

political space needed to achieve local aims. This was *Gegenwartsarbeit*, the contemporary, communal activity, of "practical" Zionists.⁴¹ They believed that while waiting for a Jewish national home, there was work to do with the communities of the Diaspora, notably in democratizing their management.⁴²

The Zionists focused their struggle on the Chief Rabbi (despite using him as an intermediary in negotiations with Ottoman authorities). They combated what he represented rather than him personally. This struggle was not dictated by the Zionist Organization; it was even deplored by certain leaders.⁴³ The most virulent opposition was, above all, characteristic of local Zionists, amongst whom certain leaders were motivated by personal ambitions.

Local "ethnic" divisions were taken into account in the power struggle. The most active Zionists in Istanbul were Ashkenazi, as were official representatives of the movement until 1919.⁴⁴ But the community in the Empire had a Sephardic majority, and Ashkenazis were almost without representation in community institutions, despite a growth in their community. The Zionists used the dispute between the groups to further weaken the Rabbinate.⁴⁵ Their success in communal institutions permitted Ashkenazi Jews to penetrate there. The rapid rise of Zionism among Ashkenazi immigrants forced their leaders to actively support the national cause.⁴⁶

The communal activities also permitted those without power, the rising middle class, to make its political apprenticeship before taking the direction of community affairs under control. Communal life became the matrix of political socialization.

41 Eliav, *David Wolffsohn*, chaps 7 and 10; Farhi, "Documents," p. 198.

42 Nahum Sokolow, *History of Zionism, 1600-1918*, London, 1919, vol. 2, p. 22.

43 CZA, Z2/9, D. Wolffsohn to V. Jacobson, June 20, 1910; V. Jacobson to D. Wolffsohn, June 23, 1910; Z4/888, M. Dizengoff to M. Ussischkine, T. Zlatopolski, I.A. Naiditch, August 26, 1919.

44 In 1919, the British ratified the nomination of Israel Caleb, Bulgarian of Sephardic origin: PRO, FO 371/4167/56952, Chaim Weizmann to the Foreign Office, April 10, 1919.

45 Refer to the affair of the Convention of 1912 and to the following community crisis: *Stamboul* (Istanbul), February 2, 1912; *El Avenir*, February 9, 1912; February 16, 1912; *El Tiempo*, February 5, 1912; February 19, 1912. On various occasions, the Ashkenazi question emerged in the public arena. See the regulation of the Conseil national juif, PRO, FO 371/4171/47289, R. Webb to the Foreign Office, March 26, 1919 (date of receipt). Also refer to the *Appel/Oufruf* of 1919 which is found in AAU, Turquie XLI. E., A. Benveniste to J. Bigart, February 28, 1919.

46 For the following correspondence of one of the leaders of the Ashkenazi community, David Marcus, also connected to the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, consult: CZA, Z3/44.

The Zionists used the communal sphere to consolidate their alliance with other groups who could help them infiltrate communal institutions.⁴⁷ They adapted to the circumstances of the post-revolutionary period, which favored activism. The associations were perceived as a new "national" sphere of expression. Their impact, from this point of view, was considerable, preparing the popular forces to support the Zionist cause. This associative Zionism developed formidably after the war.

From 1919 on, when Istanbul was occupied by the Allies, the Zionists, under new favorable conditions, founded La Fédération sioniste d'Orient (FSO) — the Oriental Zionist Federation — which regrouped numerous existent associations. The FSO constituted an alternative power base for the Zionists.

On the eve of war, the Jewish community could be described as divided between Zionists and anti-Zionists. The former saw themselves as a constructive force, seeking to rebuild the community and the national ideal, and to revive the Hebrew language. They believed their opponents to be "assimilationists" who were leading the Jewish community to ruin.⁴⁸ Only Jewish nationalism, they believed, was able to save Ottoman Judaism from such a somber fate. In fact, Ottoman Judaism was not touched by assimilation.⁴⁹ Only after World War II did Jews attempt to integrate into Turkish society.

This discourse was progressively charged with a populist message aimed at the poor: combat the rich, the "assimilationists," Frenchified, occidentalized, exploiters of the community's rank and file. After the war, this discourse intensified. Consequently, the Zionists couched their language and action within the context of class struggle.⁵⁰ The Jewish population, bruised by World War I, were receptive to such a message. Furthermore, the Balfour Declaration had given legitimacy to the Zionist enterprise.

While the Zionists were only partially successful in participating in the community before the war, it was only afterwards that they harvested the fruits of their efforts. In 1918, the day after the Mudros armistice which sealed the Turkish defeat, the Zionists, profiting from the absence of the Chief Rabbi, founded the National Jewish Committee, on the basis of Article 12 of January 8, 1918 and of Article 4 of February 4, 1918 of the principles of President Wilson, guaranteeing internal autonomy and the

47 See, for example, their coalition with the rabbis through the *Histadrut ha-rabanim*; *Hamevasser*, April 13–20, 1911; June 1, 1911; *El Tiempo*, April 17, 1911.

48 *El Judio*, Istanbul, September 3, 1910.

49 CZA, Z4/888.

50 *La Nation*, Istanbul, March 12, 1920.

realization of the national aspirations of various populations of the Empire.⁵¹ This Committee absorbed and usurped the appointed bodies of the community. It was dissolved in 1919. But between 1920 and 1922 the Zionists continued to hold the reins of communal power.⁵²

Zionism or Jewish Nationalism

It is important to distinguish between the aims of the leaders of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), those of Ottoman leaders, and what Zionism represented for the local Jewish population. This helps to explain why Turkish Zionism led neither to a massive wave of immigration to Palestine nor to the demand for national independence at this time.

The Zionist movement in the Ottoman Empire was not a homogeneous entity. From the first, local leaders dominated the movement. In effect, they appropriated an imported ideology. Furthermore, different tendencies of the official Zionist movement manifested on the Ottoman communal scene. Beside political and practical Zionism, David Ben-Gurion, during his stay in Salonica, tried to create a branch of the socialist Poale Zion.⁵³ The project failed, but the presence in Istanbul of the movement's leaders indicates that they attempted to introduce their program in Istanbul among potential Zionists, in particular among Russian immigrants, who were largely proletarianized.

After 1919, besides the approximately 4,000 local Zionists affiliated with the FSO⁵⁴ and vaguely linked to the WZO in London by a minor representative,⁵⁵ there were groups such as *Hit'ahdut*⁵⁶ and the sports group *Maccabi* that did not recognize the authority of the FSO.⁵⁷

Between the Young Turk Revolution and the Republic in 1923, the communal arena was occupied not only by various Zionist partners but also by other groups, in favor of or opposed to Zionism. Istanbul, considered the seat of the Chief Rabbinate, was the most important center. Their presence and their conflicts distorted the usual stakes between communal actors, until then small, without succeeding in constructively restructuring the institutions.

51 *Le Journal d'Orient*, Istanbul, November 16, 1918; November 19, 1918; January 16, 1919. For the complete text of the project of the regulation of this Committee, see: PRO, FO 371/4171/47189, loc. cit. For more details, cf: Benbassa, *Haim Nahum*, pp. 589–626.

52 *La Nation*, July 28, 1922.

53 Ben-Gurion, *Mémoires*, pp. 48–49.

54 Number for the year 1920 advanced by the Zionists themselves: *La Nation*, July 23, 1920.

55 CZA, Z4/888, M. Dizengoff to M. Ussishkin, T. Zlatopolski, I.A. Naiditch, August 26, 1919.

56 Abbreviation of: *Hi'ahdut shel Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir u-Zeh'irei Zion*, Worldwide Union of *Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir* and *Zeh'irei Zion*, a leftwing group founded in 1920.

57 See on these two groups: *La Nation*, June 3, 1921; April 14, 1922; March 24, 1922.

From Official to Spontaneous Zionism

The establishment of an official agency in Istanbul in 1908 did not lead to the institutionalization of the movement within the community. It was perceived by the community as an alternative force, and by community leaders as a formidable opposition capable of seizing power if they did not combat it. It is precisely this perception of Zionism as a peripheral movement which contributed to its rapid expansion until the war. However, the presence of the Zionists in communal proceedings was of a short duration and without real importance.

After World War I, official Zionism was nearly absent from politics. With the foundation of the FSO, Zionism became institutionalized. It was in principal an agency of the London-based WZO. But owing to international and national circumstances, the WZO no longer had control locally. Henceforth, a popular movement emerged which was not linked to the FSO. Zionism had impact as an anti-institutional group, which is how it was perceived even after its institutionalization. This prompted Meir Dizengoff, the Zionist leader and future mayor of Tel Aviv, to note that "[t]here are here [in Istanbul] several Zionists and the great majority of Jews from Constantinople call themselves Zionists but there is no Zionism."⁵⁸

A Conjunctural Nationalism

Zionism furnished Jews in the Empire with self-identification consistent with the perception non-Jews held, which was associated with the principle of their official organization as a semi-autonomous community. They were regarded, in fact, first as Jews and then as Turks, and did not have equality with Moslems, in spite of 19th century reforms that bestowed on them equality in principle. Zionism inspired a certain national and political consciousness relatively compatible with the interests of the Empire, as it harbored no separatist aims.

Zionism appeared as a remedy to the lethargy of a formerly flourishing community, which now had to accept financial aid from foreign Jewish philanthropic societies. Even though Zionism was imported, it made the community aware of its responsibilities and re-energized it.

All those who followed Zionism were motivated by the same reasons. Zionism took advantage of the dissatisfaction of the masses, of certain groups

within the middle classes, of some intellectuals, and of those "semi-enlightened," half-educated, and half-westernized by a European-type education of short duration. This explains the existence among Zionist ranks of Alliance teachers and the number of former Alliance students.

The Zionists gave these groups the possibility to express themselves, offered them training opportunities, considered them as the fully-fledged participants able to have impact on an institutional level, and gave them the illusion of power to play an active role in community life.⁵⁹ Even if local Zionist leaders aspired only to seize power, they were more convincing than the rich and elitist notables. The silence traditionally observed by the Ottoman Jewish population gave way to unusual activism. The national ideal conferred to the community a renewed sense of dignity. This recruitment, above all in the midst of the less Europeanized of the Jewish society, was not unique to the Empire. After 1920, a similar phenomenon was apparent in Egypt.⁶⁰ Zionism brought an ideal to poor youth who were without education or qualifications, who had an uncertain future, and who lived in areas uninhabited by well-to-do Jews. These youths were able to identify with a nation; their condition as Jews became more than a source of disgrace. They were no longer mere minorities in a Moslem land, nor were they lagging behind the westernized elements of the Jewish bourgeoisie.

The immediate demands of local Zionists, democratizing community institutions, aiding the poor, combating the rich — these themes increased enthusiasm. In sum, following the Balfour Declaration and the collapse of the Empire, Zionism offered the prospect of an egalitarian society in a Jewish land. Their pandering, socialistic rhetoric captivated the Jewish masses.⁶¹

After the war, Zionism cushioned the effects of popular discontent which would have emerged with more specific demands. Perhaps it allowed the Jewish community to avoid more serious social tensions. The war had further impoverished poor families and enriched the middle classes. Political instability in the country occupied by the Allies, and the economic difficulties which resulted, would have provoked communal crisis exceeding the strict scope of the community's institutions. In fact, the absence in Istanbul of an organization similar to the Worker Federation of Salonica, and

59 The propaganda led in this direction by the Zionists during the elections in the communities of 1910–1911 is an example. See: Benbassa, *Haim Nahum*, pp. 361–381.

60 Robert L. Tignor, "Egyptian Jewry, Communal Tension, and Zionism," in Amnon Cohen and Gabriel Baer, eds., *Egypt and Palestine, A Millennium of Association (868–1848)*, Jerusalem/New York, 1984, p. 347.

61 About Libya, see: Renzo de Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo. Gli Ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo nazionalismo arabo e sionismo (1835–1970)*, Bologne, 1978, p. 151.

a less proletarianized Jewish population promoted a Zionism which acted as a social safety net.

Zionism established itself as a result of the difficult conjuncture within the country and within the communities. The disappointment which followed the Young Turk Revolution and the defeat of the hoped-for integration; the vicissitudes of the post-war years, coincided with strong support for Zionism. A similar phenomenon occurred in Salonica when the Greeks took the city from the Ottomans in 1912. Fear of occupying forces with whom relations were poor from the beginning, the fragile political situation and relative uncertainty of the city's fate gave rise to renewed interest in Zionism.⁶²

Zionism, as an organized movement, wanted Ottoman Judaism to serve its "proper" objectives, and towards that end, utilized the community and its networks in the same way certain local groups and individuals made use of Zionism. They did not implement their program. For the majority, Zionism remained a form of Jewish nationalism. The borders between this nationalism and an autochthonous, "social" and "cultural" Zionism were not clearly defined.

The republican period in Turkey saw Zionism operate clandestinely. Less affluent Jews constituted the substantial part of Turkish emigration to Israel from the early years of statehood.

62 AAIU, Greece I. G. 3, Nehama to Paris, May 19, 1916.