

Jews under the Rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II: Resilience and Coexistence

Rashid Ahmed

Ph.D Research Scholar at International Islamic University Islamabad.

Email: rashid.ahmad@numl.edu.pk

Dr. Riaz Saeed Ahmed

Assistant Professor & HOD DITC NUML University Islamabad.

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Abstract

This research article will examines the Sultan Abdul Hamid II, s attitudes toward Jews during his rule in the late Ottoman Empire Sultan Abdul Hamid II, He ruled from 1876 to 1909, and his rule is viewed differently in the history because of his authoritarian rule and his multifaceted policies toward non-Muslims. The Historians are divided in two group, some historians says the he implemented many restrictions on Jews and it affected the Jewish's social, economic and cultural life but some historian says that his policies towards Jews were very insignificant and positives and he protected the Jews during the political unrest. The researcher will use primary and secondary sources, this study aims to shed light on the complex dynamics and multifaceted challenges faced by Jews under Abdul Hamid II's rule. This research article explore to provide a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between a prominent ruler and a minority group within his reign. This research article will also seek the flux of Jewish life under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, focusing on their resilience, cultural contributions, interactions with other communities, and the broader socio-political context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Keywords: Rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Resilience and Coexistence, Jews, Economic and Cultural Life

Sultan Abdul Hamid II: A Biography

Abdul Hamid II was born in Istanbul 21, September, 1842 and he is considered 34th ruler of Ottoman Empire. He was the son of sultan Abdulmjid I ¹and he studied Quran and hadith and as well as modern subjects such as mathematics, history and French language it shows his interest to modernized ottoman state and following his father rule to bring reforms in education systems²

Sultan Abdul Hamid bin Abdul Majid bin Mahmud, a prominent ruler of the Ottoman Empire, ruled for 33 years from 1876 to 1909, with his mother, Tir Mizkan Afandi, a loving and intelligent woman, making him a prominent figure in the Muslim world.³ Sultan Abdul Hamid II was raised by his father's concubine and second wife due to her barrenness. His mother influenced his personality, shaping him into a calm, religious person.⁴

Abdul Hamid II introduced the concept of pan-Islamism and struggled for the unity of Muslim ummah to make them more strengthen and protect their colonial power.⁵ His foreign policy was to engage European power with each other to divert their intention towards Ottoman but he could not succeed in that plan and finally lost its territorial unification with the independences of Hungary and Austria etc.⁶ He was an authoritarian ruler established secret police to maintain hegemony, imposed freedom of expression, suppressed opinions, and punished violators with jail or deportation from the Ottoman territory.⁷ In 1876, he introduced the Ottoman constitution, the first modernized constitution. However, he dismissed the parliament in 1878, citing political uncertainty and the Russo-Turk war⁸. Regardless of his autocratic reign he modernized the state and enlargement of railway, education telegraph and infrastructure all over in the state he also incorporated the industries⁹. In 1908, the Young Turk's rule ended after he was overthrown and replaced by his brother Mehmed V. After being deported to Salonika, he returned to Istanbul and remained until his death in 1918¹⁰

Historical background of the non-Muslim under the Ottoman Empire

The Quran clearly stated that everyone has religious freedom and no one can be compelled to accept Islam¹¹. In the Islamic State this is the responsibility of the State to protect the Rights of the non-Muslim¹². The word of Millet is used in the Quran for not only for non-Muslim but it is used for any nation, specifically the Ottoman used this term for Religious Minorities.¹³ In the Ottoman Empire, a patriarch was considered the representative of his people like a political leader and he was responsible for his people before the state¹⁴. Non-Muslims, including Jews, Protestants, Unitarians, and Russian Molokans, enjoyed freedom to maintain their cultural and religious identity after expulsion from England in 1390, allowing them to live under Muslim rule¹⁵. So there was a diversity in the Ottoman Empire and that's why the Millet system was introduced after the conquest of Constantinople in 1454¹⁶. The Millet System, consisting of two groups, Millet e Hakimah (Muslims ruling) and Millet e Mahkumah (non-Muslim), was inspired by the Madina Constitution of 622 AD, which provided equal rights to minorities.¹⁷

The Ottomans were granted free management of their educational and cultural institutions, including churches, synagogues, and hospitals, with the Sultan Faith requiring officials to be involved in their affairs.¹⁸ In 1856, the Ottoman Empire granted non-Muslims education rights, including expertise in literature and medicine. However, they were not allowed to hold positions like Prime Minister or Governor, as these positions were reserved for Muslims. In nineteenth some became pashas and ambassadors¹⁹. In 1454, Mehmed II granted more rights to non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman Empire, allowing them more religious and cultural freedom than in the Byzantine Empire. Greeks were appointed to translation offices and held higher positions in the sultan's office.²⁰ Jews in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed special rights due to Quranic injunctions and early Muslim interaction, contributing significantly to the conquest of Constantinople²¹ but when they established the state of Israel in 1948 under the ideology of Theodor Herzl and they started to torcher the Muslim in Palestine then the attitude of Muslim changed towards them.

The Jews under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II

The Ottoman Empire, one of the longest in history, ruled a diverse society comprising Jews and Christians. They introduced the Millet system and had full autonomy in private matters, allowing minority rule over majority.²² The Reformists struggled for egalitarian society in Ottoman Empire and they got success in their struggle and finally Gulhane Edict was issued in 1839 which aimed to modernize the state's military and administration systems and to make it more strengthen and improve the governance and encounter the propaganda of European powers through internal stability²³. The following reforms were enacted before the Sultan Abdul Hamid's rule, The Hatt-i-Humayun (1856), which expressed that everyone is equal before law regardless of his religion, color and race, they founded new commercial and civil laws influenced by western legal systems. They revisited the tax system²⁴. He focused on military reforms and established new form of training programs to make them stronger and increase their efficiency and brought them parallel to the western military power by acquiring modern weapons, that why 60 % of the total budget was used to spend on military.²⁵ He also brought reforms in education by introducing new state schools and integrating ottoman history, Islamic education with modern education to emphasizing loyalty to the state and religion²⁶. The media and press had no right was not free and he was imposed censorship and observed publication attentively to stop spreading any propaganda against the state, he also used the press for the promotion of his reforms and ideologies²⁷. He also brought up reforms in fiscal system and imposed taxes to generate revenue for the state and stopped corruption²⁸ Before his rule the administrative and legal reforms were stated but when he hold the office he looked for design a fused legal system based on Hanafi Fiqh that balance the both modern and Islamic systems that why he founded joint courts for the Muslims and non-Muslims to provide a fair trial to all and protect the non-Muslims from discrimination²⁹. He appointed his faithful administrator in the provinces to ensure and supervise the security, education, public work and stability of the state, the state also tackled to appoint "intelligent, pious, seasoned, just, Moderate, loyal, and honest" governors, and to avoid candidates who "were Ignorant of the state apparatus, unqualified, feudal lords, leaders of irregular cavalry, and unknown"³⁰.

Contributions of the Jewish community under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II

Sultan Abdul Hamid's rule marked a significant transformation in the Ottoman Empire, modernizing the state and allowing Jews to play a significant role in socio, economic, and cultural life.

1: the Jewish involvement in commerce

Despite their small number, Jews significantly contributed to the Ottoman Empire's economic life during its golden period. Immigrants from Spain and Portugal, who became bankers and money lenders, took over the Ottoman economy, acquiring wealth and controlling the financial system.³¹ The Ottoman Empire divided Jews into four groups: Rabbanites and Karaites, Ashkenazim from Germany, and Sephardim from Spain. The Sephardim, originally from Spain, held dominant trade positions in Balkan, Basra, Istanbul, and Salonika³². Professor Halil Inalcik states that Jewish immigration in the 16th century increased control of the money market without introducing new trade patterns.³³ In the 15th

and 16th centuries, Jews were expelled from Spain and retreated to the Ottoman Empire. They were welcomed by Sultans Mehmed II and Bayezid II, and allowed to trade in various countries like Persia, Armenia, Egypt, India, Poland, and others. They developed strong connections with Europe, Africa, and Asia.³⁴ Jews migrated from Spain and Portugal, adopting trade professions and promoting Ottoman state's domestic and foreign trades. Establishing trade ports and centers, particularly in Balkans, significantly enhanced trade.³⁵ The Ottoman Empire participated in the international silk trade, primarily centered in Bursa, Anatolia. They sent ships to Venice, India, and China, creating major markets for Ottoman goods and raw materials. They exported drugs, woolens, dried fruits, silk, hides, cement, cotton, and other important articles.³⁶ Jewish peddlers lived in towns and sold goods in villages, with Gallipoli being their main center. They sold silk and linen cloth, participated in fairs, and participated in Moskolor, Alasona, and Yeni Bazar.³⁷

2: Jews Political Engagement and Representation in the Ottoman Empire

After Istanbul's conquest, the Ottomans established the Millet System, involving Millet, Jews, and Ottoman officials in political and economic stability. They managed domestic issues, legal, religious, philanthropy, and education, and connected them with Ottoman officials.³⁸ The government officials were not permitted to interfere in their matters. After the capture of Istanbul, Sultan Fatih declared that none of the State officials were going to involve the affairs of non-Muslim schools in their programs.³⁹ The Tanzimat and Islahat Declarations in 1839 and 1856 established equal rights for all Muslims and non-Muslims, including taxation and military service.⁴⁰

3: Social Contributions (Contributions in Education and Philanthropy)

Jews significantly contributed to education and social welfare by establishing Jewish schools and collaborating with international organizations like the AIU (Alliance Israelite Universelle), which aimed to protect human rights and promote responsibility among Jews worldwide. "The Universal Israelite Alliance focused on education and welfare for the Jewish community worldwide. They founded the first school in Ottoman Empire in 1867 and expanded to Palestine in 1870. The alliance opened sixty more schools in the Ottoman Middle East, Iran, and North Africa, providing children's and vocational training to poor Jewish families".⁴¹ Alliance schools in Ottoman Empire taught trades and French to students, initiating an upward movement among Jews that continued into the twentieth century.⁴² The Jewish community of Salonika sent a statement to the Paris-based Bulletin in 1893, highlighting local conditions.⁴³ Both schools and synagogues focused on the children to teach them Hebrew's reading and prayers, the prominent students were admitted to special Talmud classes and the wealthy and learned people were used to support and maintain those institutions partially.⁴⁴ Ottoman Jewry organized their educational system in Safed, Istanbul, and Salonika, fostering strong intellectual development and fortifying Judaism until the seventeenth century.⁴⁵

In 1890, the Jewish community in Izmir organized a lottery for fund raising, which was approved by the governor but closely supervised to avoid for political purposes.⁴⁶ According to Ebiizziya Tevfik, for instance, the lottery was an open form of gambling, a social disease that caused numerous harms to the social body.⁴⁷ The Hamidian government's morality-

based policy suggests it did not use direct repression, but remained flexible, especially regarding non-Muslim community leaders' activities like lotteries. From 1887 to 1906, Hamidian governments granted permission for various such activities, despite the elite's disapproval.⁴⁹ In the 1890s, the patriarchate held annual public fund-raising concerts at Beyolu-Tepebasi, which the regime generally approved, with the mayor's supervision and attendance being required between 1904 and 1906.⁵⁰ The Ottoman Empire fostered a humanitarian society, promoting modern education, vocational training, intellectual development, literacy, and social mobility among Jews through various fundraising campaigns.

3: Contributions in the Culture

Sephardic Jews significantly influenced Ottoman society, as they were Westerners with significant European connections, language proficiency, and advanced technology skills, expected to bring updated knowledge.⁵¹ And they served for ottomans as secret agents during the Christian war and as diplomats, coordinating between European powers and the Ottoman Empire.⁵² During the colonial period, popular artisans among the Jews in major cities they were skilled in various trades, including smiths, wheelwrights, sail makers, rope makers, fishermen, Jewish painters, shoemakers, precious metal workers, locksmiths, and masons.⁵³

The print media played an important role in the flourishing of jewish culture in ottoman society and They established news agencies and published newspapers to protect their heritage, highlight social issues, and preserve their rights. Notable newspapers include Şarkıye ("The East"), Zaman ("Time"), Ceridei Tercume ("Translation Journal"), Ceride-i Lisan ("Language Journal"), El Tiempo (Ladino language newspaper), and Hamevasser (1909-1911).⁵⁴

Jews and Muslim coexistence and resilience in the Ottoman State

In the 8th century, the Turks accepted Islam and established a diversified society in Istanbul. They proposed a Dimmiah system, making the Ottoman Empire one of the most tolerant Muslim states. They adopted the Hanafi School of thought, which was more liberal and accepting.⁵⁵ The Ottoman Empire, with a large non-Muslim population, required high religious tolerance for prosperity. Despite this, it displayed more tolerance than Christian Europe, with unequal tolerance towards minorities'.⁵⁶ During the formation of the ottoman state they had to encounter the assault of the European power and to main their own social, cultural and religious systems from their influence.⁵⁷ Inalcik emphasized the need for a robust bureaucracy to maintain Ottoman supremacy and combat European aggression. This bureaucratic system, combining kanun and sharia, created a harmonious society, attracting Jews to the newly established Ottoman state. This system was derived from Quran and Hadith.⁵⁸ Ottoman rulers adapted their ruling system to accommodate the diverse society they governed, modifying Sharia to include minorities and allowing them to pay taxes and surrender before the law. They also resisted the application of their domestic traditions to maintain control and harmony, For that purpose they assented to withdraw from the application of their some domestic tradition which were enacted earlier⁵⁹. During Mehmed II's reign, the Jewish population in Istanbul increased, necessitating a stronger political and

economic state, diplomatic ties with European powers, and religious tolerance for non-Muslims.⁶⁰

Due to that tolerance policies the chief Rabbi of Edirne, Itzhak Sarfati (1450) appealed the Jews to leave Europe and migrate to the Ottoman Empire to the Ottoman Empire.⁶¹ the ottomans faced resistance from the eastern Europe in the 1st century of their rule and they kept their crusading spirit to push the ottomans and they tried to make alliance against the ottomans, in the meanwhile they European kings targeted and tortured their own population and the Jews were more easiest target and they decided to expel the Jews from their territories such as they were exiled from England in 1290, from France and hungry between 1478-1492 and finally they were expelled from Italy in between 1555 to 1593 either deported from their countries or they were converted to Christianity forcefully, in areas they were sold and slaughtered⁶² so all of the above reason that the Jews migrated to the ottomans empire in 14th century⁶³.

The hatred sentiment against Jews were injected by the church father saint Augustine in 354-430 C; E) and this narrative was very popular in the Christian world that the Jesus Christ was crucified by Jews and they drink the blood of the Christian children in the rituals ⁶⁴ the Jews were used to help the ottomans in war as the Jewish of Bursa and Edirne, the Jews of İstanbul warmly welcomed to the Ottoman conquerors. After that victory the ottoman rulers permitted to the construction of their place of worships (synagogues) and they were also spared from paying the taxes in the 16th century⁶⁵ The ottoman were well aware that the Jews are dependable and good specially the Sephardic Jews they were expert in manufacture the textile, languages, medicine custom house, commerce and banking system⁶⁶

Systematization and restrictions regarding Dress Code

There were no strict laws regarding cloth regulation until the end of 15th century, but in the rule of Murad III and salim II the clothing regulations were sever in the empire. And it was mandatory for all non-Muslims including Jews⁶⁷. The Jews were also not permitted to ride on the horse they allowed to ride on the mules actually they want to reinforce the social order see them distinguished from the Muslims in the diversified society⁶⁸. however, the Rabbis were also prohibited their community members to not wear the classy and luxury and luxurious dresses bas they intended to make their identity different from the Christians and did not want to create any jealousy⁶⁹ Donald Quataert's research reveals that Mahmut II disallowed a special dress code for non-Muslims in America and Europe until the 18th century. However, economic and social changes led to the lifting of clothing regulations, while the Ottoman Empire sought unity instead.⁷⁰ the ottoman empire were issued instructions regarding building of houses they were directed to not build their houses higher than Muslims houses, the height of the Muslim houses were 12 Ziras while the Jews houses height was 10 ziras⁷¹, they were also not allowed to build their houses without using the bricks apparently to risk of fire, they were also directed to not buy the houses near Mosque and shrine when some complaint were reported that they have bought houses near ortakoy mosque⁷² the Jews were not also allowed to build their synagogues and houses near the mosque , seemingly for their involvement in illegal activities for examples the Muslim reported to the central administration that the Jews opened taverns and committing the sins so the Muslim were instructed to dislodge them from your neighborhood⁷³.

So as to near the 16th century, the ottoman rulers started to change their policies regarding the settlement of Jews, they face different challenges such as facing natural disasters ,epidemics and as well as edicts from the government so all the above mentioned reason forced the Jews to move in the new settlement.⁷⁴

Regulations regarding Slaves

Another restriction inflicted on Jews that they were not allowed to keep Muslim as a servant in their houses and as well as they were not allowed from keeping Muslim as a slave, according to the royal order issued during the reign of sultan suleiman, Jews were not permitted from keeping servants and odalisques (a Turkish word it means female attendant).⁷⁵ The Rozen argued that the prohibition of Jews and non-Muslims keeping slaves was to prevent conversion to Judaism, and that the palace's primary buyer was Jews, leading to a decrease in slave demand and low prices.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Sultan Abdul Hamid II, a ruler of the Ottoman Empire from 1876 to 1909, promoted pan-Islamism and modernized the state. The Millet system, established in 1454, allowed various ethnic and religious groups, including Jews, cultural and religious freedoms. Jews played a significant role in the economy, holding important positions and contributing to trade and banking. The Ottoman Empire's approach was tolerant, allowing Jews to thrive economically and socially, and promoting community welfare through educational and social institutions.

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⁷⁵ NeJla DOGAN, Limits of Tolerance: Legal Relations Between Early Ottoman Jews and Central Authorities (15th-18th Centuries),middle eastern studies, 13-3)2021(: 447-463, Ortadogu Etutleri Press,2021,pg, 457

⁷⁶ Ibid,pg,458