

COLUMN

UZAY BULUT

How Jews in Palestine were persecuted during the 1915 Armenian Genocide



Ottoman Turkish authorities aimed to Islamize the whole region by eliminating non-Muslim populations: Christians, Jews and Yezidis —groups that continue to be targeted in and outside of Turkey today.

(April 9, 2021 / JNS) April 24 marks the 106th anniversary of the **1915 Armenian Genocide** by Ottoman Turkey. As Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities **notes**,

“On April 24 of 1915, leaders and intellectuals within the Armenian community of Constantinople were detained and interned. This event initiated a longer series of arrests that resulted in the imprisonment, relocation, and/or murder of countless notable Armenians across the Ottoman Empire over the course of the subsequent months. Soon thereafter, Ottoman authorities commenced internment, displacement, and deportation actions against the general Armenian population. For their part, Armenian men were most often put into servitude at a variety of forced labor camps before facing arbitrary executions. Women, children, and elderly members of the Armenian community, by contrast, were made to participate in ‘death marches.’ These forced marches led victims on protracted journeys through what is now the Syrian desert with many subjected to torture and rape in addition to death through attrition.

“While estimates on the total number of those who perished can vary, between 1,000,000 and 1,800,000 Armenians are known to have lost their lives as a result of the genocide. This number amounts to approximately 70% of the region’s Armenian community. The scale and cruelty of the atrocities served as one of the principal inspirations for the creation of the word ‘genocide’ by Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin and, by extension, the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”

A significant but widely unknown fact is that not only Greek and Assyrian Christians of Ottoman Turkey, but many Jews of Palestine were also targeted, persecuted and deported during the Armenian Genocide.

A thoroughly researched book by Dr. Andrew Bostom, *The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History*, **exposes** the persecution and mass expulsions that the Jewish population in Palestine endured as a result of the orders of Djemal Pasha, an Ottoman military leader. He was also one of the three Pashas who ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I and organized the genocide. He **writes**:

“During World War I in Palestine, between 1915 and 1917, *The New York Times* published a series of reports on Ottoman-inspired and local Arab Muslim-assisted anti-Semitic persecution that affected Jerusalem and the other major Jewish population centers. For example, by the end of January 1915, seven thousand Palestinian Jewish refugees—men, women and children—had fled to British-controlled Alexandria, Egypt. Three *New York Times* accounts from January and February 1915 provide these details of the earlier period.

‘On Jan. 8, Djemal Pasha ordered the destruction of all Jewish colonization documents within a fortnight under penalty of death. ... In many cases land settled by Jews was handed over to Arabs, and wheat collected by the relief committee in Galilee was confiscated in order to feed the army. The Muslim peasantry are being armed with any weapons discovered in Jewish hands. ... The United States cruiser Tennessee has been fitted up on the lines of a troop ship for the accommodation of about 1,500 refugees, and is plying regularly between Alexandria and Jaffa. ... A proclamation issued by the commander of the Fourth [Turkish] Army Corps describes Zionism as a revolutionary anti-Turkish movement which must be stamped out. Accordingly, the local governing committees have been dissolved and the sternest measures have been taken to insure that all Jews who remain on their holdings shall be Ottoman subjects. ... Nearly all the [7,000] Jewish refugees in Alexandria come from Jerusalem and other large towns, among them being over 1,000 young men of the artisan class who refused to become Ottomans.’

“By April of 1917, conditions deteriorated further for Palestinian Jewry, which faced threats of annihilation from the Ottoman government. Many Jews were in fact deported, expropriated, and starved, in an ominous parallel to the genocidal deportations of the Armenian *dhimmi* communities throughout Anatolia. Indeed, as related by Yair Auron,

‘Fear of the Turkish actions was bound up with alarm that the Turks might do to the Jewish community in Palestine, or at least to the Zionist elements within it, what they had done to the Armenians. This concern was expressed in additional evidence from the early days of the war, from which we can conclude that the Armenian tragedy was known in the Yishuv [Jewish community in Palestine].’

“A mass expulsion of the Jews of Jerusalem, although ordered twice by Djemal Pasha, was averted only through the efforts of the Ottoman Turks’ World War I allies, the German government, which sought to avoid international condemnation. The eight thousand Jews of Jaffa, however, were expelled quite brutally, a cruel fate the Arab Muslims and the Christians of the city did not share. Moreover, these deportations took place months before the small pro-British Nili spy ring of Zionist Jews was discovered by the Turks in October 1917 and its leading figures killed. A report by United States consul Garrels (in Alexandria, Egypt) describing the Jaffa deportation of early April 1917 (published in the June 3, 1917 edition of *The New York Times*), included these details of the Jews’ plight:

'The orders of evacuation were aimed chiefly at the Jewish population. Even German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian Jews were ordered to leave the town. Mohammedans and Christians were allowed to remain provided they were holders of individual permits. The Jews who sought the permits were refused. On April 1 the Jews were ordered to leave the country within 48 hours. Those who rode from Jaffa to Petach Tikvah had to pay from 100 to 200 francs instead of the normal fare of 15 to 25 francs. The Turkish drivers practically refused to receive anything but gold, the Turkish paper note being taken as the equivalent of 17.50 piastres for a note of 100 piastres.

'Already about a week earlier 300 Jews had been deported in a most cruel manner from Jerusalem. Djemal Pasha openly declared that the joy of the Jews on the approach of the British forces would be short-lived, as he would make them share the fate of the Armenians.

'In Jaffa, Djemal Pasha cynically assured the Jews that it was for their own good and 'interests that he drove them out. Those who had not succeeded in leaving on April 1 were graciously accorded permission to remain at Jaffa over the Easter holiday.

'Thus 8,000 were evicted from their houses and not allowed to carry off their belongings or provisions. Their houses were looted and pillaged even before the owners had left. A swarm of pillaging Bedouin women, Arabs with donkeys, camels, etc., came like birds of prey and proceeded to carry off valuables and furniture.

'The Jewish suburbs have been totally sacked under the paternal eye of the authorities. By way of example, two Jews from Yemen were hanged at the entrance of the Jewish suburb of Tel Aviv in order to clearly indicate the fate in store for any Jew who might be so foolish as to oppose the looters. The roads to the Jewish colonies north of Jaffa are lined with thousands of starving Jewish refugees. The most appalling scenes of cruelty and robbery are reported by absolutely reliable eyewitnesses. Dozens of cases are reported of wealthy Jews who were found dead in the sandhills around Tel Aviv. In order to drive off the bands of robbers preying on the refugees on the roads, the young men of the Jewish villages organized a body of guards to watch in turn the roads. These guards have been arrested and maltreated by the authorities.

'The Mohammedan population has also left the town recently, but they are allowed to live in the orchards and country houses surrounding Jaffa and are permitted to enter the town daily to look after their property, but not a single Jew has been allowed to return to Jaffa.

'The same fate awaits all Jews in Palestine. Djemal Pasha is too cunning to order cold-blooded massacres. His method is to drive the population to starvation and to death by thirst, epidemics, etc., which according to himself, are merely calamities sent by God.'

"Auron cites a very tenable hypothesis put forth at that time in a journal of the British Zionist movement as to why the looming slaughter of the Jews of Palestine did not occur—the advance of the British army (from immediately adjacent Egypt) and its potential willingness 'to hold the military and Turkish authorities directly responsible for a policy of slaughter and destruction of the Jews—may have averted this disaster."

Jews were not the only non-Christians targeted during the genocide. "In addition to the Armenians," **writes** Dr. Maria Six-Hohenbalken, "demographically smaller groups of Christian denominations, as well as non-Christian groups such as the Yezidi, were targeted by the politics of annihilation. It is nearly impossible to know the number of the victims; about 12,000 Yezidis managed to find refuge in Armenia, where they established a diasporic community in the Soviet realm."

During the genocide, Ottoman Turkish authorities aimed to Islamize the whole region by eliminating non-Muslim populations: Christians, Jews and Yezidis. These groups continue to be targeted both in and outside of Turkey today. An effective way to end these abuses and create a region where persecuted communities are safe and equal is for Turkey and international governments to recognize the 1915 genocide, and honor all of its victims and their descendants.

Uzay Bulut is a Turkish journalist and political analyst formerly based in Ankara. She is currently a research student at the MA Woodman-Scheller Israel Studies International Program of Ben-Gurion University in Israel.