A MODEL MINORITY?
SEPHARDI JEWS IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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A few months after blood libel accusations led to widespread attacks against Jews on the Greek island of Corfu in 1891, a Ladino newspaper of the Ottoman capital published a short notice with the cryptic title “A Curious Report.” Drawn from the Warsaw-based Hebrew newspaper Hatzfira, it described a public announcement recently directed to the Jews of Warsaw by Muslim bakers in that city. According to the article, Warsaw’s Muslim bakers were concerned that their Jewish neighbors had decided to boycott local Greek businesses in retaliation for the violence that Greek Orthodox rioters in Corfu had inflicted upon the Jews of that island. These Muslim bakers did not object to the boycott as a matter of principle, however, but rather to the fact that they were being mistaken for Greeks at a particularly inopportune moment. To clarify matters, they announced their readiness to demonstrate with official documentation that they were in fact “Turkish bakers.” Calling on the Jews of Warsaw to patronize their businesses, they offered further incentives by noting that all of their products were prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws of kashrut and were certified by none other than the chief rabbi of the city. What followed was more striking still: the bakers in question announced that they were “circumcised Mohammedan Turks” and that they ate “nothing but kosher meat.”

As surprising as such assertions and alliances may appear to us from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, in the context of late nineteenth-century political, economic, and social configurations, they were far from inscrutable. If we presume the claims of the piece to be true, Warsaw’s Muslims likely ate kosher meat because it was the closest thing they could get to halal meat in a city with a negligible Muslim community. Similar arrangements were recorded in other contexts in the nineteenth century, from Ottoman Syria to Peabody, Massachusetts, where a sizeable Ottoman émigré community settled. An advertisement placed in a Ladino publication of Salonica in the early twentieth century even advertised a “Kosher Halal” restaurant, suggesting that such arrangements could be formalized and turned into a profitable economic venture.
Seen in this light, it is not entirely surprising that the Muslim “Turks” of late nineteenth-century Warsaw would have seen fit to acquire a kosher certificate: by doing so they opened their business to the city’s substantial Jewish population. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth-century Middle East, it was not uncommon for Jews and Muslims to emphasize their shared practice of male circumcision in order to mark themselves off from Christians who were often referred to as “the uncircumcised” in such discussions. What is intriguing about the announcement of Warsaw’s Muslim bakers is that its authors turned what was no doubt a makeshift arrangement into a virtue. Realizing that—besides Jews—only Muslims would make a point to eat kosher meat exclusively (at least where halal meat was unavailable), Warsaw’s Muslim bakers mentioned Jews’ and Muslims’ similar dietary habits to prove what they were not—namely Christian. By drawing attention to customs Muslims and Jews shared, their appeal also aimed to reinforce Jewish-Muslim economic ties in a local context.

Yet the same announcement made broader political declarations as well. Expressing their sympathy for the Jewish victims of Greek accusations and violence on the island of Corfu, the Muslim bakers of Warsaw took their message of Jewish-Muslim allegiance one step further. Not only did they propose that Muslims never supported blood libel accusations against the Jews, they also suggested that the Ottoman sultan had graciously received the Jewish refugees fleeing Corfu, offering them land on which to settle. Having entered the tangle of a local Jewish boycott, spurred in turn by a foreign event, the announcement of a small group of Muslim bakers of Ottoman origin in Warsaw made claims about a global alliance of Muslims and Jews.

Although the notice first appeared in the Hebrew press of Warsaw, it did not take long for it to find its way to Istanbul, where Sephardi audiences of the Ottoman capital read the story of a distant Jewish boycott of Greek Orthodox Christians and of Muslim-Jewish allegiance. A more telling story could not have been invented for Ottoman Jews interested in forging close ties with their state and their Muslim neighbors in the empire, whom they considered the hegemonic group in imperial politics. Though it had been introduced merely as a “curious report,” the piece would have resonated on multiple levels with the Ottoman Jewish readers who encountered it in their own imperial context. After all, the Muslim bakers it described were their compatriots, and the sultan they invoked with such pride was also their sultan.

By 1891, when the report appeared in the pages of Istanbul’s Ladino press, Jewish communal leaders had been engaged for decades in the project of turning their coreligionists in the empire into imperial citizens, teaching them to consider their neighbors as “brothers” and their empire as a sacred homeland. They had originally done so in response to the nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms in the empire, which granted equality to non-Muslims and introduced new, universal definitions of Ottoman belonging. By the late nineteenth century, however, such universal definitions competed with new approaches to imperial politics that focused increasingly on the Islamic nature of the Ottoman state. Many Ottoman Jews responded to the
politicization of Islam in the empire with claims about the inherent compatibility of Islamic and Jewish customs in a way not dissimilar to the language that appeared in the announcement of the Muslim bakers of Warsaw. The Ladino press of the empire also regularly participated in public discussions that drew upon Islamic concepts during this period, such as when it praised Sultan Abdülbaham II’s efforts to create a Muslim-funded railway to the Islamic holy cities in the Hejaz or referred to Muslim soldiers who had fallen in the empire’s wars against Christian powers as martyrs.

Ottoman Jews’ public pronouncements about their relationship with their state in the late nineteenth century also portrayed their empire as a safe haven for persecuted Jews, just as the announcement of the Ottoman Muslim bakers of Warsaw had done. In fact, only a month after the bakers’ note appeared in the Ladino press of Istanbul, a Sephardi journalist of Izmir proposed that Ottoman Jews create a new holiday commemorating the 400th anniversary of their arrival in the empire as a means of demonstrating Jews’ gratitude to their state and sultan. The holiday Ottoman Jews invented in response harked back to the year 1492 when the Ottomans had taken in Sephardi Jewish refugees just as Christian Spain expelled them. Although the holiday itself was new, it suggested that Muslim-Jewish alliances were based on a centuries-long arrangement. Such discussions of Ottoman tolerance and Jewish gratitude also appealed to a growing number of Ottoman intellectuals and politicians, who themselves increasingly invoked the trope of 1492 as a retort against those who portrayed the Ottoman Empire as a place of backwardness and barbarity.

So much of what Jewish and Muslim authors in the empire treated as natural and obvious by the final decades of the nineteenth century had been far from apparent to observers just a few decades earlier, however, when Jews’ place in the political landscape of the empire was very different. To fully appreciate Ottoman Jews’ shifting position within the empire one need only turn back the clock to the mid-nineteenth century, as the reforming agenda of the imperial administration was beginning to take shape. Throughout the early years and decades of the Ottoman Reform era, Ottoman Jewish individuals in various locales publicly bemoaned the absence of their coreligionists from both political discussions and positions of power. As one observer writing in a Ladino periodical of Salonica in 1876 put it: Jews “count for nothing in the Ottoman Empire.” There was little denying that, as he wrote, the vast majority of Ottoman Jews lived in poverty, and without the level of access to the court or lucrative industries members of their community had enjoyed in previous eras. A relatively small community, Jews were also poorly represented—and at times essentially absent—from positions of government during this period. Some two decades earlier, Jewish observers had been dismayed to learn that the original draft of the 1856 Ottoman Reform Decree had only explicitly mentioned granting equality to the empire’s Christians, not its Jews. Nor did the official version that eventually proclaimed the equality of all Ottomans regardless of religion fully resolve this tension. Even in its final form,
the document that legally “emancipated” the Jews of the empire did not mention them directly. Instead, it referred simply to the new equality of Christians “and other non-Muslims.”

Jews’ absence from important political developments was also felt in other arenas, such as when the Ottoman authorities showcased an integrated volunteer unit formed in 1876 in the midst of the empire’s war with Serbia and Montenegro. Although the imperial government promoted the unit to “to dramatize” the new unity of all Ottomans, it was in fact made up only of Muslims and Christians. Its special flag bore the star and crescent of the empire on one side and a cross on the other, thus crystallizing the Jews’ absence from the new formation in symbolic form as well. These regular omissions, which continued for a number of decades, dovetail with the observations of contemporary commentators who suggested that Jews simply didn’t matter enough to drive policy or empire-wide debates during the height of the Ottoman Reform Era.

Although Ottoman Jews and their self-proclaimed allies lamented Jews’ invisibility vis-à-vis the state for decades, most were convinced that the onus for rectifying the situation fell largely upon the empire’s Jews themselves. As one author writing for a Ladino newspaper of Istanbul put it in 1876, his community was some “twenty to thirty years behind” the other non-Muslim communities of their country. If, like the members of other millets, Jews could become better educated and learn the language of their country, he proposed, they would finally “arrive at the level of [their] Christian compatriots” and gain a more significant role in state affairs. It was in this context that Ottoman Jews began their experience of imperial citizenship convinced of their mandate to catch up to members of other recently emancipated groups—particularly Armenian and Greek Orthodox Ottomans—and to earn themselves the title of “loyal millet,” which members of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities of the empire had done before them. By the close of the nineteenth century, Ottoman Jews had managed to do just that—having gained the attention and praise of Ottoman officials, who began to suggest that other Ottomans—and the empire’s various non-Muslim communities in particular—would do well to emulate Ottoman Jews. Within just four decades, the tables had been turned. Ottoman Jews achieved visibility, while the light that shone on them soon began to cast a long shadow on other communities.

This dramatic transformation—on the surface a success story—was not without its own challenges. Ottoman Jews’ awareness of their relative insignificance during the early decades of the Ottoman reform project propelled them toward two broader but contradictory strategies for inclusion within the imperial body politic during the late Ottoman era. The first of these was their support for the newly emerging project of civic Ottomanism, which appealed to imperial subjects to forge horizontal ties with their neighbors and to work for the greater good of the Ottoman collective. Throwing their weight behind this project helped Ottoman Jews demonstrate their active investment in broader imperial initiatives and, thus, also countered their erasure from the political arena. But alongside this approach was a second strategy they developed with
an eye to catapulting themselves into the spotlight: this was their attempt to earn the image of the empire's most loyal community (or millet) and, in the process, not only to catch up with but also outpace other non-Muslim communities in their shows of patriotism. Needless to say, these two approaches existed in tension with one another: civic Ottomanism was predicated on a vision of intercommunal cooperation in which members of each community were to be considered equally Ottoman, whereas Jews' attempts to become a—or later the—model millet of the empire were based instead on a competitive model that was grounded in a corporate and hierarchical understanding of Ottoman society. Each approach entailed its own solidarities and exclusionary impulses, however. Despite its all-inclusive vision of Ottoman society and its focus on cooperation and toleration, the civic Ottomanist approach was, in practice, largely driven by class alliances and exclusions. The competitive model, in turn, reinforced and sometimes even hardened communal boundaries. It is on these two countervailing approaches and the problems they engendered that I will now turn my attention.

There were many forces that pushed Ottoman Jews to lend their support to civic Ottomanism, a project that promoted new expressions of patriotic allegiance to the state, the pursuit of harmonious relations between Ottomans of different religions and a commitment to serving the collective 'good' of Ottoman society as a whole. Various reformist initiatives begun at the mid-century, including those of the Ottoman state and those of the Franco-Jewish Alliance Israélite Universelle, called for Jews to move beyond the confines of their community and to prove themselves worthy of their newfound equality by becoming exemplary citizens of their country. As I have argued elsewhere, numerous lay and religious Jewish leaders from the empire took up this call, appealing to their coreligionists to become Ottoman patriots, and to lend their time, money, and bodies to the Ottoman cause during times of war and peace alike. Much of this effort centered around strengthening and showcasing individual Jews' allegiance to their state and included encouraging Jewish men, women, and children to join patriotic associations—local branches of the newly-founded Red Crescent Society, for example. It was also during this period that Jewish leaders across the empire began to call on Ottoman Jews to volunteer for the Ottoman army—a call taken up by young Jewish men in Istanbul, Salonica, Izmir, and beyond during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 and again during the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897, well before universal military conscription took effect in 1909.

Beyond offering these gestures of identification with their state, Jewish reformers also began to focus their energy on forging new horizontal ties with their neighbors. Members of the different Ottoman religious communities publicly expressed their sense of solidarity by donating to each other's charitable causes and showing up at the balls hosted in honor of different communal initiatives. Earthquakes, fires, and refugee flows
into the empire similarly prompted donations from Ottoman women and men of various backgrounds, while business partnerships across communal and religious lines fostered new intercommunal alliances and philanthropic efforts. Other attempts to create new, semi-neutral spaces also appeared during the second half of the nineteenth century. It was in this context that Ottoman Jews joined Ottoman Muslims and Christians to meet as ‘brothers’ in freemason lodges, in newly founded intercommunal clubs and charitable societies and, in later decades, in the clandestine revolutionary circles that eventually unseated the autocratic sultan Abdülhamid II following the 'Young Turk' revolution of 1908.

These initiatives were infused with bourgeois notions of sociability and civility. Sharing social spaces such as libraries, clubs, and dance halls with Ottomans of other faiths was considered a great act of progress, “tolerance,” and imperial brotherhood—or, depending on the context, sisterhood. Without erasing people’s communal affiliations—something that was next to impossible in the Ottoman context—civic Ottomanism had both the goal and the effect of uniting men and women across religious lines by bringing them together, instead, along the lines of class, city, and neighborhood, in addition to their shared membership in the newly imagined Ottoman collective.

Although the proponents of such visions acknowledged that intercommunal tensions and violence continued to condition the relations between different religious groups in the empire, they consistently attributed such conflicts to the failings of those who had not yet understand their duties as citizens or appreciated their common interests. Moments of tension and violence nonetheless continued to disturb reform-minded Ottomans of all backgrounds who sought to unite across religious lines throughout the late Ottoman era. In this context, the Easter season proved a particularly tense time for Jews across the empire, as it often fueled ritual murder accusations against them and led to attacks on Jewish properties and lives. Such blood libel accusations were more often than not made by Greek Orthodox Christians—although Catholics, Armenians, and Muslims also participated in and perpetuated blood libels against Jews on different occasions.

Yet Ottoman Jews were not just passive observers of these trends or of the violence and tensions that beset the empire during this period. Jews were known to get rowdy during Purim, for example, and on at least one occasion, attacked members of local police units brought in to keep the peace during the Jewish holiday. Reports from cities across the empire also record cases of Jews who actively participated in conflicts with members of other religious communities, especially their Armenian and Greek Orthodox neighbors. At times this manifested itself in the preference they gave to their own coreligionists in business dealings—a pattern that by the final decades of Ottoman rule in the region evolved into open boycotts held by members of different religious communities in the empire. In other instances, intercommunal conflicts turned violent, and it is upon a few such moments that I want to momentarily focus our attention.
In the face of intercommunal strife between members of their own community and others, Ottoman Jewish lay and religious leaders complained that the work they had undertaken to unite members of the different Ottoman millets for decades continued to be “undone” by their less enlightened coreligionists. Take, for example, a case that occurred in the imperial capital of Istanbul in 1861, after a group of drunk Jewish men attacked a Greek Orthodox priest on the streets, violently pulling at his beard until—according to reports—only half of his beard remained. After the assault, the injured priest reportedly headed directly to the offices of the Orthodox Patriarch, who in turn relayed the story to the Ottoman chief rabbi. Although the Jewish men accused of the crime were swiftly apprehended and placed in prison, the matter did not end there. The Ladino press of the capital picked up the story, which it reported with indignation. “For our sins,” it read, “these Jews are poor and have no food to eat.” They couldn’t support their families, the report continued, before suggesting that their ignorance had led to their utter disregard for the well-being of their neighbors. Nor had they considered the consequences of their actions for members of their own community, the report suggested. The Jewish journalist who penned these words warned his readers that Jews living in areas heavily populated by Christians would now face retaliation for their coreligionists’ actions. He was particularly concerned for the Jews of Greece and worried that some might even lose their lives in the fallout. His fears were soon confirmed, as the assault sparked new tensions between Jews and their Greek Orthodox neighbors, not in Greece, as he had predicted, but on the streets of the Ottoman capital, where new battles ensued. The same Ladino paper soon reported that gangs of “lower-class” Christians were now targeting Jews across Istanbul. In the city’s districts of Beyoğlu and Tatavla, it noted, ambulant Jewish vendors were being harassed, attacked, and stoned—some so brutally that local porters were called in to carry them to safety.

As this example illustrates, the Ottoman elites who endorsed an all-inclusive vision of imperial belonging did so not only through the intercommunal alliances they pursued but also through their willingness to indict those members of their own community who did not share their vision. This approach involved both decrying and policing their fellow Jews while also distancing themselves from such individuals, often by referring to them as poor and benighted in turns. It was thus that the Jewish journalist of Istanbul who reported on this attack on a Greek Orthodox priest by his coreligionists in 1861 wrote that he and other members of the Jewish lay council of the imperial capital had concluded that “from that point on they would no longer have any mercy for either the poor or the sick” among them when such individuals dishonored anyone, whether a Jew or a member of any other group. Such people moved society backwards, rather than forwards, he concluded.

Despite the intercommunal conflicts that continued to plague them, those Jewish and other Ottoman elites who endorsed civic Ottomanism remained convinced that enlightenment and civic-mindedness would drive the inevitable march of progress. Their responses to ongoing examples of intercommunal tensions reflect their conviction that they could move society forward by educating their fellow citizens in civility and
imperial patriotism. It was precisely this approach that compelled Greek Orthodox and Jewish journalists in Salonica to issue scathing statements and call on their religious leaders to categorically condemn the members of their own community who were known to participate in weekly rock fights on their city’s streets during the late Ottoman era. According to contemporary reports, such spectacles often involved dozens or even hundreds of young Greek Orthodox and Jewish “ruffians” who had formed the habit of gathering each Saturday and arranging themselves “in the order of battle” before throwing stones at each other. In the words of one observer, these rocks would rain down “with such fury that they [would] leave the site of battle and injure innocent passers-by on the boulevard.” Despite the open contempt they showed for these individuals, however, the journalists who described them were careful to insist that they were still young, and that they hailed from poor families with little education. In so doing, they suggested that the unfortunate pattern might still be “corrected.” Yet, in fact, these stone fights continued for many years, confounding Salonica’s Jewish and Greek Orthodox leaders throughout the final decades of Ottoman rule in that city. In the end, they turned to the Ottoman authorities for help, asking that they arrest the guilty parties, or their parents, in the case that the children involved were minors.

On this and countless other occasions throughout the late Ottoman era, the lay and religious leaders of the different Ottoman millets joined together to reprimand—and often also to punish—those among their coreligionists who incited tensions or perpetrated violence against others. The chief rabbi and the Armenian and Greek Orthodox patriarchs paid each other regular visits and also frequently condemned the behavior of members of their flock who sought to target or attack those of a different religion. Christian communal leaders denounced blood libel accusations lodged against their Jewish fellow citizens, while the chief rabbi swiftly responded when members of his own community were implicated in acts of violence. Elites from each of these groups similarly praised each other for their ‘enlightened’ policies, as did Jewish leaders after the Greek Orthodox patriarch declined the conversion request of a young Jewish girl, referring her case instead to both the Jewish and imperial authorities. In other contexts, members of the different Ottoman millets sought to create new, shared civic institutions such as libraries, social and political clubs, and philanthropic initiatives that bridged religious divides. Their message was one of cooperation and a shared sense of civic belonging.

The idea that Ottoman Jews were in competition with members of other Ottoman communities also continued to structure their discussions about their place in Ottoman society throughout this period, however. Starting already at the mid-century, as different Jewish authors bemoaned their absence in positions of state, they admonished their readers to consider that every other “nation”—that is to say, every other non-Muslim community, or millet—had well placed members in various ranks of government. Initially, such comparisons
functioned principally as a form of self-critique. Ottoman Jewish leaders called on their coreligionists to look to the progress their Christian compatriots had already made—by introducing new, secular models of education, by learning the language of the state, and by finding employment in government posts—all in the hopes that Ottoman Jews would soon follow suit.

Other suggestions that imperial citizenship might function on a competitive rather than wholly cooperative model were arguably more insidious. Take, for example, the words of a prominent Ottoman Jewish journalist of Istanbul from 1877, just a few months after the country had become embroiled in a major war with Russia. “The Ottoman government has always been good to our nation,” he proclaimed, trying to rouse his readers to patriotic action. Indeed, he continued, “[i]t has always allowed us to enjoy our freedom and all the rights of citizens, even more than the other peoples who have found shelter in this vast empire.”1 The author’s anachronistic treatment of the concept of citizenship aside, what is striking here is his claim that the Ottoman authorities had somehow granted their Jewish subjects privileges they had not afforded to others over the centuries. His position was not an anomaly. With increasing frequency, Ottoman Jewish authors and activists began to suggest that, unlike other imperial citizens, they owed their state a “double debt.” According to this interpretation, Jews were beholden to their government not only for granting them equality—a status enjoyed by members of all groups in the empire after 1856—but also for having offered their ancestors refuge from persecution many centuries before in 1492. Switching the focus from prominence to loyalty, this narrative served as an important counterweight to Jews’ continued invisibility in Ottoman political circles throughout much of the nineteenth century.

It also advanced a competitive interpretation of imperial belonging in which each community’s allegiance was to be ranked. The new patriotic holiday that Ottoman Jews dreamt up in 1892 highlights the tensions inherent in this approach. “The 400th anniversary of the arrival of Spanish Jews in Ottoman lands,” as it was called, was eventually celebrated on Passover in April 1892 with great pomp in synagogues across the empire. Its many proponents saw the creation of this invented holiday as the ultimate proof of their community’s imperial patriotism. They never directly acknowledged that the myth upon which their celebration was founded was not one all Ottomans could share. Yet the underlying story of Jewish rescue at the hands of past sultans and the image of the empire as a place of sanctuary were not likely to have been entirely comfortable for the Jews’ Greek Orthodox or Armenian compatriots, for example—however deeply committed they were to the cause of their empire. Being part of communities that identified as indigenous to the lands in which they resided meant that their version of a narrative of first contact with the Ottomans was necessarily one of

1 Emphasis added.
conquest rather than refuge. Focusing on the trope of 1492 was thus not a likely path to fostering a sense of shared imperial belonging among members of the different Ottoman millets.

It was, however, an obvious means to singling out Jews for positive attention by state officials and Ottoman Muslims, particularly during the final years of the nineteenth century. During this period, Ottoman Jews began to find new opportunities open to them in government positions and public life, precisely at a time when relations between the Ottoman state and many of its Armenian citizens became strained to a breaking point during the mid-1890s, which witnessed widespread massacres of Armenians across eastern Anatolia and the Ottoman capital. Tensions also grew between imperial authorities and their Greek Orthodox citizens in this period, as the conflict over Crete turned into a full-scale war between the Greek Kingdom and the empire in the spring of 1897. As historian Carter Findley has noted, it is likely no coincidence that the position of Armenian and Greek Orthodox officials in the Ottoman state bureaucracy began to decline during this period—slowly throughout the decade, in the case of the Armenian civil servants, and precipitously, after the 1897 war with Greece, in the case of Greek Orthodox state employees. It was during these years in particular that Jews encountered a new flexibility in Ottoman public and patriotic spheres, as other groups found their opportunities narrowing.

By this time, Ottoman Muslim and Jewish individuals alike had come to speak about Jews as different observers had spoken of other groups earlier in the century—as the millet-i sadika, or the loyal millet. More important still, this category came to overlap with another—that of the model millet, a group that Ottoman intellectuals and politicians could conjure in order to think through issues of Ottoman modernity, tolerance, and imperial citizenship. Articles praising Ottoman Jews’ patriotism appeared with increasing frequency in the Ottoman Turkish press. Whether implicitly or explicitly, this coverage suggested that Jews’ role within the empire was exemplary—that members of other groups who sought recognition from the state need only follow the Jews’ lead to earn similar recognition. Having been largely absent from public discussions of the imperial body politic just a few decades earlier, Ottoman Jews now featured prominently in discussions of imperial citizenship and patriotism.

Yet, the process of becoming a model millet was fraught with contradictions: as Ottoman Jews attempted to teach other Ottoman Jews how to become imperial citizens, they instilled in them the values of love of homeland, serving the greater good, and fraternity among Ottomans of all faiths. Yet, as they sought to prove to the authorities and to the Muslims of the empire that they were a model community with a special relationship to the state, they often competed with members of other groups for the attention of their government. Gaining visibility brought new complications. On the one hand, moving into the spotlight meant more scrutiny and thus, more pressure to live up to the new expectations of imperial citizenship. On the other hand, succeeding in earning the praise of imperial officials could also put new strains on Ottoman Jews’
relations with others in the empire and beyond, or have negative repercussions for their coreligionists abroad. Over-identification with the state held the prospect of worsening Jews’ already fraught relations with their Christian neighbors and undermining the civic-Ottomanist work their communal leaders had undertaken for decades. At the same time, evidence of alliances with groups deemed suspect by the Ottoman government carried the risk of alienating Jews from the authorities or from the city’s Muslim population, thus jeopardizing their attempts to remain in the good graces of their state.

These two approaches—what I have called here the competitive model of imperial citizenship and the cooperative one—coexisted throughout the late Ottoman era. Often the very same individuals endorsed both positions without acknowledging the tensions between them. Yet neither approach was innocuous. However much it promoted positive exchanges across communal boundaries, the cooperative model was complicated in its own right. Despite the space it created for inter-confessional collaboration and sociability, throughout much of the late Ottoman era, its largely upper and middle-class proponents often hardened or even exacerbated existing social cleavages within their own communities, or within Ottoman society as a whole.

Ottoman Jews’ willingness to engage with the competitive model of belonging, meanwhile, complicated their lives in a number of other respects, including exacerbating tensions between Jews and members of other Ottoman communities. Pursuing a competitive approach to imperial citizenship ran the risk of alienating a host of international actors in the process as well, such as foreign representatives and journalists, who at times suggested that Ottoman Jews had landed on the wrong side of a conflict, particularly in cases in which Ottoman Christians were the target of violent or hateful attacks. In such cases, Ottoman Jewish leaders regularly sought to defend their community’s reputation and to blunt any possible repercussions for their coreligionists elsewhere. Despite their best efforts, intercommunal conflicts often spread across political borders, spurring negative media coverage, boycotts, and even mass violence.

Equally troubling, the competitive approach to imperial belonging had the potential to highlight Jews’ exchangeability in the imperial schema. After all, Armenian Ottomans, and Ottoman Greek Orthodox subjects before them, had once held the title of loyal millet. Living in the shadow of the state’s fraught relations with other Ottoman communities signaled the precariousness of Jews’ own position within society. As one Ottoman Jewish observer reflected in the wake of widespread massacres of Armenians in Istanbul in 1896, “Who was to say the Jews weren’t next?” He was not the last to draw such comparisons. A decade and a half later, as debates about Zionism moved out into the open following the 1908 constitutional revolution in the empire, an Armenian deputy by the name of Vartkes Serengulian offered similar cautions to his fellow deputies. If they persisted in conflating Ottoman Jews with Zionists—and Zionism with disloyalty—he warned, the Jews might suffer a fate similar to the empire’s Armenians.
Such open and sustained debates over Ottoman Jews’ loyalty were new. Of course, Ottoman Jews continued to find receptive audiences among government officials and self-appointed imperial representatives even after this point—as long as they were willing to dissociate themselves from Zionism or to cast it as a pro-Ottoman movement. But there is no denying that something had changed. Jews now came to be associated with the new ruling party (the Committee for Union and Progress, or CUP), which had been brought to power by clandestine revolutionary activity. Globally circulating theories about Jews’ secret machinations and plans to control the world, already plentiful by this time, captured the imaginations of a growing number of interpreters of the Young Turks’ rise to power—this despite the fact that only a small handful of Jewish individuals held positions of prominence within the movement.

Conspiracy theories about Jews’ imagined role in the recent revolution dovetailed with new debates about the ‘Palestine Question’ and whether or not Ottoman Jews who embraced Zionism might be going the way of other communities, whose members had become suspect in the eyes of the state as a potential fifth column in pursuit of national autonomy or independence. Together, these two developments—the new preoccupation with Jews’ purported role as puppet masters behind the revolution, on the one hand, and the explosion of debates about Zionism, on the other—arguably created the first stirrings of a Jewish Question in the empire in the years leading up to World War One.

Alignment with the ruling regime after 1908 thus brought its own set of challenges. During the nineteenth century, over-identification with the Ottoman government had often driven a wedge between Jews and members of other non-Muslim millets, particularly during moments of politicized violence within the empire. Following the revolution of 1908, Jews’ association with the new regime, whether real or imagined, drew the ire not just of Ottoman Christians but also of a growing number of Muslim observers. For many such individuals, hostility toward the government, toward Jews, and toward other Ottoman non-Muslims went hand in hand. Increasingly, opponents of the new regime came to suggest that Jews were part of a larger, sinister web of ‘secular’ and even godless interests working to undermine the Ottoman state. The appearance of Zionism on the scene also meant that both conservative Muslim activists and members of other millets who believed themselves to be in competition with Jews could now find a point of overlap in their claims about Jews’ political disloyalty and deviousness—even when they agreed on little else.

I would like to conclude my talk today by suggesting that—in the context of a multi-religious, multi-ethnic state like the Ottoman Empire—Jewish-Muslim relations were always only part of the equation: recognizing Jews as part of a larger web of shifting social and political relations allows us to move beyond portrayals of Muslim-Jewish relations as natural and timeless, as so many late nineteenth-century observers would have had it. Even when they spoke about the inherent kinship of their communities, the solidarities Muslims and Jews expressed in various contexts and moments throughout the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries were often based on their perception of their shared interests. They also tended to hew to the competitive model of imperial belonging and—whether implicitly or explicitly—took shape against the foil of a shared opponent, usually a Christian one. Muslim-Jewish cooperation was invariably part of a triangular relationship, in other words, and thus regularly entailed not only positive relations but also carefully nurtured exclusions. Yet, if taking this view complicates the claims of Muslim-Jewish solidarity that were prevalent in the late Ottoman era, it also challenges the assumption—more common in our own day—that conflicts between Jews and Muslims are somehow inevitable or built into the religious heritage of each group.

The prevalence of Jewish-Muslim collaboration in a not-so-distant past serves as a reminder of the historically contingent—and thus potentially fleeting—nature of political partnerships and social arrangements. Indeed, it may be difficult for most people today to picture Jews and Muslims participating collectively in a boycott against Christians, to imagine Muslims declaring publicly that they eat nothing but kosher meat, or to understand a world in which Jews would participate in discussions of a Muslim holy war against a Christian power. Although the myriad individuals who spoke of Muslim-Jewish bonds of brotherhood gave the impression that such relationships were both timeless and self-evident, they now reach us as little more than a “curious report” from a distant past. Ultimately, even those political alliances and social coalitions that appear at particular historical junctures to be obvious and immutable are prone to the amnesia of later generations and new political alignments.
Averroës is the Latin name of ibn Rushd, the 12th century Andalusian polymath whose philosophical works integrated Islamic traditions with Ancient Greek thought. Over subsequent centuries, his commentaries on Plato and Aristotle came to influence Jewish and Christian thinkers throughout Europe, among them Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and Baruch Spinoza. The choice of Averroës as the name for the Lecture Series is significant because it points to a history of Cordoba’s Jewish-Muslim relations and the connections between Averroës and Maimonides, both of whom were committed to intellectual exchange and communal life across religious boundaries.

The Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES), founded in 1957, is one of the earliest research centers at a U.S. university promoting interdisciplinary studies of the Middle East and the Islamic World. Over the decades, the Center has attracted an outstanding faculty and developed a world-class multi-lingual library collection for Middle East research. We offer an intellectual home for scholars from all over California, along with independent scholars from around the world who contribute to our lively programs of colloquia, lectures, conferences, teacher workshops, and public events.

The Series. Underwritten by a generous anonymous donor, this lecture series focuses on Jewish communities living in Muslim lands prior to the 20th century. In addition to shedding light on this often-neglected history, the lectures will serve an important outreach role to local community colleges and high schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan region, inviting students interested in the topic to attend the discussions.

Organized by the Center for Near Eastern Studies, the Averroës Lecture Series is cosponsored by UCLA’s Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies and Center for the Study of Religion. The program offers quarterly lectures over two years by experts from around the world, publishes an occasional paper series, and culminates in a major conference featuring young scholars engaged in cutting-edge research on the topic.

The series builds on UCLA’s strength in having a large number of faculty across disciplines whose research touches on this topic, as well as a number of research centers interested in a series exploring the experiences and legacies of Jewish communities in the Muslim world.

CNES is extremely grateful for the vision, innovation and generosity of this donor whose valuable contribution has enabled us to expand programming at the Center.