ENCYCLOPÉDIE D'HISTOIRE NUMÉRIQUE DE L'EUROPE

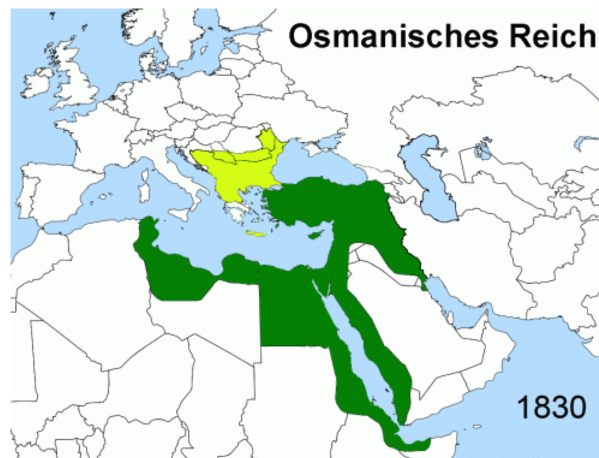
CHANGED BORDERS, CHANGED NATIONALITIES

Immigration and Migration Policy in Post-Ottoman Turkey

Elif BECAN

ABSTRACT

The Muslims of Southeast Europe were subjects of the sultan until the withdrawal and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and became minorities in the nation states that succeeded it. Seen as being undesirable by the new authorities, and deprived of certain social and economic rights, hundreds of thousands of Muslims emigrated to Anatolia. Beginning in the 1920s, the migration policies of the new Republic of Turkey towards these populations became a major issue, in line with the policies developed at the end of the Ottoman period. Turkish authorities implemented specific measures for these populations that were *de jure* foreign, but *de facto* seen as connected to Turkey due to their religion and territory of origin. The welcome received by Muslims from Southeast Europe subsequently depended on a reconfiguration, in post-Ottoman Turkey, of the senses of belonging inherited from the imperial period.



The gradual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Bulgaristandan yeni muhacir geldi

Bulgaristandan gelen ve Tophane medresesine yerleştirilen muhacirler
[Yazısı 3 üncü sahifemizdedir]

"New muhacir have come from Bulgaria" front page of the newspaper *Zaman*, September 3, 1934. Source: *Milli Kütüphane* [National Library], Ankara.

Muhacir from the Balkans in Istanbul (1912-1913). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923 acknowledged Turkey's new borders, and ended a decade of conflict (1912-1922) that brought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Republic of Turkey gradually welcomed nearly 430,000 Muslim men and women from formerly Ottoman Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. These displaced persons were referred to in Ottoman and later Turkish administrative sources as *muhacir*, those who undertook the Hegira in the name of Islam. While the echo of Mohammed's biography is present in the term *muhacir*, the accent is less on the religious allusion than on the idea of a departure and migration, which is also reflected in the historiography surrounding the forced displacements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Three Factors of Immigration

This migratory movement can firstly be explained by the policy of nationalization that the new authorities in Southeast Europe established with respect to Muslim lands, which brought about the stigmatization and exclusion of Muslim minorities. The post-Ottoman states displayed, at each transposition of the border, their desire to mark a break with the preceding imperial regime in the management of the territory and population to the benefit of "real" Romanians, Bulgarians, and Serbs. The new territorial configurations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thus led to policies of colonization and emigration in the

Balkan space. Romanian, Bulgarian, and Yugoslavian authorities confiscated land while facilitating procedures for the granting of passports, and concluded bilateral agreements with Turkey (between 1936 and 1938 for Romania and Yugoslavia) in an effort to hasten the departure of Muslims.

Second, the migratory movement was influenced by the fact that Turkish authorities saw these Balkan Muslims as nationals who had lost their rights as Muslim subjects of the Empire. This vision is present in the 1931 declaration made by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) (1881-1938), an Ottoman officer and later president of the Republic, who himself was from Salonika, and saw “the *muhacir* as the dear memory of lost territory.” Migration thus had a symbolic connotation, for it evoked the loss of the former homeland. The Turkish government subsequently implemented a migration policy that encouraged the immigration of these populations by relaxing administrative procedures and granting new arrivals the lands of displaced, exchanged, or persecuted non-Muslims. Finally, it implemented a procedure of collective and rapid naturalization.

Third, migration also depended on processes of self-identification and networks. In most cases, Balkan Muslims migrated to Turkey because they identified as “Turks,” even though “Turk” meant “Muslim” in this context. This confusion was the card that was played by countries of emigration, host countries, and by the immigrants themselves while crossing the border. While confessional attachment prevailed over linguistic attachment until the first half of the twentieth century, the decision to immigrate to Turkey was also formed through networks that facilitated certain administrative procedures, as well as by waves of earlier migration, as forced displacements toward Asia Minor had already begun in the wake of territorial losses, especially after the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The emigration of the Muslims of Southeast Europe and their welcome in Turkey were connected to the interrelated issues arising from a new territorial configuration, national economic interests, and ethnic and confessional identifications.

Continuities with Ottoman Migration Policy

The question of welcome arose beginning in the mid-nineteenth century when the Ottoman administration took in Muslims from the territories conquered by the Russian Empire, especially those from Crimea (1856) and Southeast Europe after the Russo-Turkish War. The republican government pursued the same logic of welcome, limiting itself strictly to Muslims.

This choice corresponded to a demographic and economic logic. Ottoman migration policies sought to increase the demographic weight of Muslims in the Empire, and to implement a kind of social engineering in border regions, especially beginning with the Balkan Wars. Muslims replaced Christians: the Armenian genocide (1915) and the welcome of Muslim migrants were closely linked, because the latter were settled in the villages and homes of the persecuted, with the same administration being tasked with deporting some and welcoming others.

The same logic was pursued during the republican period, albeit less categorically. Migrants demanding governmental aid were sometimes settled in the homes abandoned by the Christians of Asia Minor, especially the *Rum* (Greek Orthodox), who were massacred as Hellenic forces withdrew during the war of independence, or who were part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey under the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923). During the interwar period, the settlement programs for Balkan migrants also included the Kurds from Central and Eastern Anatolia, and saw to their assimilation, which is why they are sometimes

settled in the same villages, especially in the region near the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. The Muslim populations of the Balkans were also used as instruments for the economic and demographic recovery of this new country ruined and depopulated by a decade of war.

The Balkan *muhacir* were welcomed by republican authorities primarily because they were Muslim. Despite the criterion of religion, they were also welcomed during the interwar period as “Turks” based on criteria relating to “culture” (*hars* and/or *kültür*), “ancestry” (*soy*), and “race” (*irk*). These criteria evoked a broad categorization ranging from language to genealogical family, biological attributes, and geographical and religious references. While obtaining the status of migrant depended on these three notions, the latter did not have a clear and stable definition. This intentional lack of precision left leeway for interpretation for government civil servants and other local and administrative institutions with regard to the admission of Balkan Muslim migrants. The imperial terms for welcome were woven within the fabric of republican public policies.

A Familiar Strangeness

While the Muslims of Southeast Europe that migrated during the interwar period were legally foreigners, Turkish authorities rarely used this notion in connection with them. The absence of these terms depended on how Turkishness, Islamity (Sunnite), and especially Ottomanness were used as tools in administrative, political, and diplomatic processes. The notion of foreigner was partly built through the renewal of past categories. There was thus a tension between the objective category of legal foreignness and the subjective category of familiarity, which was connected to memory and emphasized by the regime.

Migration policies were not solely connected to a purely post-imperial ambition. The procedure was connected to policies for the homogenization of populations, as well as demographic and economic needs. Belonging was not determined by territory, but by criteria established by the administration under the cloak of faith and a common past.

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