

## THE TURKISH DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES: IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

People of Turkish origin from different national, ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds have been living in the United States since the 1820 s, and are still integrating today. These Turkish migrations may be classified in three distinctive immigration waves: 1820-1921, 1950-70, and post-1970 s. The motives behind each phase are rather complex and were led by economic, training, and educational considerations. Yet, very little is known about the history of these migrations as the Turkish-American community in the United States had largely remained unknown and undocumented. Until recently, very few studies had been undertaken about the historical integration patterns and cultural backgrounds of Turkish immigrants in the United States. In this light, the present paper examines Turkish-American identity formation across generations. As the past always shapes the present, the paper begins with an overview about the history of Turkish immigration to the United States by analysing the main differences that existed between the three migration waves with regard to their acceptance and assertion of their American and Turkish identities. The paper then asks whether Turkish people of different historical, ethnic, geographical, and religious groups could give way to a shared cultural experience that would help construct the Turkish-American identities.

**Keywords:** Turkish-Americans- Diaspora- immigration-identity formation.

### INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful Muslim empires of the modern era. By the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the empire was at the height of its power. Its culture and military expansion crossed over into Southern and Eastern Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa with Egypt and the Maghrib at the forefront. The Ottomans at the peak of their power in land by the sixteenth century also engaged expansion on the sea as well. They were very effective in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the Red Sea, the Black Sea, and the Indian Ocean too. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the Ottomans were also sailing across the Atlantic, challenging in this way the power of the European forces and threatening their trade routes. Nevertheless, despite the Ottomans' interest in the voyages of discovery and the availability of the required naval strength and the types of ships needed for navigation, they had little intention to colonize or develop trade with the Americas as the Europeans intended to do. Being the wealthiest and most prestigious of all empires at that time and already in possession of some of the most strategically and economically important territories in the world, the Ottomans aimed but to protect their acquired territories and the New World was not part of their sphere of influence. In addition, the Sadian regime of Morocco, and revolts on the European Persian, and Southern Arabian fronts of the empire further prevented the Ottomans from accessing the Atlantic. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Ottomans did not explore nor did they reach the Americas.

## The Origins of Turkish Immigration to the Americas

The Ottomans' early attempts to reach the Americas go back to the sixteenth century. As early as 1513, Piri Reis (1475-1554), an Ottoman cartographer and admiral in the Ottoman navy drew the oldest world map that he presented to Sultan Salim I (1512-20) two years later in his book *Kitab i Bahriye* (book of navigation).

The maps and charts drawn in *Kitab i Bahriye* were studied from Arab, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Indian, and Greek charts and maps, including the ones of Columbus. They describe in detail the voyages of discovery and Europeans' techniques of navigation in the era of exploration with a special emphasis on Columbus' first voyage to the Americas and Vasco de Gama's voyage to India. In 1528, Piri Reis drew his second world map which contained descriptions and drawings of Greenland and North America from Labrador and Newfoundland in the North of Florida, Cuba, and parts of Central America and in the South. It is further suggested that Muslim Ottomans reached the Americas centuries before Columbus did in 1492. In his book, *They Came before Columbus* (1976), Historian Evan Van Sertima insisted on demonstrating archaeological, linguistic, and cultural evidence about the presence of Muslims in early America prior to Columbus by showing African influence on Native American Indians in Central and Southern America long before the arrival of the Europeans, destroying in this way the myth of Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492. Furthermore, in his work, *Saga America* (1980), the archaeologist and linguist Barry Fell also introduced solid scientific evidence about the existence of Muslims in various parts of the Americas centuries prior to Columbus. Fell stated that some Native American Indians were using a vocabulary and expressions which seem to have their origins in Arabic, indicating in this way, an explicit link and heritage between the American Indians and early Muslim settlers. Among these Indian words with connections to Islam and Arabic/Turkish origin we find words like *chitlin* of the Turkish Ottoman *citla* meaning a crackling sound, and *Shenandoah* (*sen doga*) meaning happy/ pleasant natural setting. Other words may include *hodjo* which may have come from *Hodja* (*hoca*) meaning wise leader who has been on pilgrimage (*hadj*) to Mecca, and Allegheny (mountains) of the Turkish/Ottoman *Allah genis* meaning God's vastness.

More important, Fell discovered in different regions of the Americas engraved rocks with Arabic inscriptions and alphabet of texts and diagrams covering subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic, religion, history, geography, mathematics, astronomy, and navigation. These writings, drawings and charts inscribed on rocks were written with old *cufic* letters of North African Arabic (then under the Ottomans) representing the elementary and intermediate systems of Muslim education at that time. Further Muslim schools dating back at least to 700-800C.E were also discovered by Fell in different American areas including Valley of Fire, Allen Springs, Keyhole Canyon, Washoe and Hickison Summit Pass (Nevada), Mesa Verde (Colorado), Mimbres Valley (New Mexico), and Tipper Canoe (Indiana).

In addition, Columbus also reported in his papers that during his second voyages to the New World, he could see a mosque on the top of a hill near Gibara on the north-east of Cuba, and ruins of mosques and minarets with inscriptions of quranic verses were also found in Cuba, Mexico, Texas, and Nevada.

Interestingly, there is significant linguistic, cultural, and historical evidence about the presence of the Ottomans in the Americas as early as the 1600's when the first European

settlements were being established. Some early Ottomans visited the New World by paying for their passage as the Europeans did. Hanna-El-Mawsuli, a Syrian priest visited the Americas in this way and reported his trip (1668-83) in a journal that was published in 1906. Other Ottomans historically referred to as “the Melungeons” came to early America as workers and labourers. And yet, another group of Ottomans came to the New World against their will. They were captured during the Sea wars and sieges. When they were not sent back to the Ottoman Empire in exchange for European captives, those captured Ottomans were hence transported as slaves across the Atlantic for work in the Americas. Some could then later return back to their native lands whereas others did not. Following his success in raiding several Spanish possessions in the Americas, the English sea captain Francis Drake (1540-1596) liberated a great number of Turkish, Indian, and Negro prisoners. He took them with him to the English colony at Roanoke for reinforcement of the colony and promised them freedom and repatriation. Indeed, when he went back to England he repatriated with him about 100 Turks from different ethnicities including Turkish, Arabic, Berber, Slavic, or Greek, the majority of whom did return to the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, repatriation was not always possible and many Turks had remained in the New World.

Despite this early linguistic, cultural, and historical evidence about the existence of the early Ottomans in America, very little is known about these early settlements which remained largely unknown and undocumented. It was not until the nineteenth century that the first documented studies about the historical integration patterns and cultural backgrounds of Turkish immigrants in the United States started to be seriously undertaken.

### **The First Documented Immigration Wave: the Ottoman Turks (1820-1921)**

The first documented wave of immigrants to come from the Ottoman Empire and maintain their Turkish identity goes back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It is extremely difficult to get a reliable number of the Turks who came to the United States prior to World War I (1914-1918) as the American statistics did not classify the immigrants by race but country of origin. Moreover, a great number of immigrants coming to the United States in this period got away from the Ottoman lands to settle in North America without legal permission from the Ottoman authorities. US official statistics hence classified all immigrants from Ottoman lands as Turks or classified them as being from Turkey. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (1976) indicates that 291,435 immigrants came to the United States from 1900 to 1920 (see table one).

**Table one: immigrants Admitted to the US by Region and Country of Birth: Turkey**

Years	Number	Years	Number
1821-1840	27	1921-1940	34,889
1841-1860	142	1941-1960	4,317
1861-1880	535	1961-1965	4,330
1881-1900	34,207	1966-1975	18,744
1901-1920	291,435	1976-1985	20,865

**Source:** 1975 Annual Report: immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976; and 1996 Statistical Yearbook of the immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1997.

According to the official U.S. statistics about 1.2 million people fled Ottoman lands and settled in North America during the period between 1820 and 1920. About 200.000 of those immigrants were Muslims including 50.000 ethnic Turks. According to David Altschiller and Frank Ahmed (1986) only 45.000 to 65.000 of those 200.000 Muslim immigrants were Muslim Turks. The others were non Turkish Muslims being Arabs or Kurds. However, it is difficult to get an accurate number of the Turks who landed in North America at that time. To avoid discrimination and to facilitate their access to the American ports, most of the Muslims, including Turks either registered under a Christian name or identified themselves as Armenians or Christian Syrians (Karpas, 1995). Other Turks from the Balkans also registered as Serbians, Albanians, or Bulgarians.

Those early Turkish immigrants were for the most part unsophisticated rural villagers and farmers. Having little skills and speaking no English, they came to the Americas chiefly for economic reasons and were essentially supported by the American College at Harput who helped about 10.000 workers to access the New World. Although the school's primary mission was to help the Christians, the Muslims could also benefit from its services as well. Most of them came from Anatolian cities such as Harput, Elazig, Akcadag, Antep, Trabzon, Dersim, Siverek, Mersin, Izmir, Rize, and Samsun. Others, however, came from Ottoman regions such as Macedonia, Albany, or other cities such as Beirut.

In America, they settled for the most part in urban areas such as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, the North Shore communities of Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and Detroit (Ahmed, 1986). Prior to World War I Detroit received the biggest number of Ottoman Muslim community estimated according to available sources to 2000 Turks. The Ohio archives reported that there were about 500 Turkish immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio during the same period. According to New York City Almanac of 1938 there were about 30.000 Turks in New York by 1930.

Most of the early Turkish immigrants, both Muslims and non Muslims, were males who did not intend to settle in the US, but wanted to save money that would enable them to buy lands and houses after returning back to their native homelands. Frank Ahmed (1986, xiii) claimed that the early Turkish immigrants' "strong cultural viewpoint was to immigrate, get settled, and then bring their wives and families [afterwards]". "They looked upon America" as Karpas (2004, 618) pointed out "as a culturally alien land where they had been driven by sheer necessity and where they wanted to stay as little time as possible".

Being unskilled, those Turkish workers were mostly employed in hard jobs such as iron and soap factories, leather industry, and auto plants. Due to their cultural, religious, and linguistic difference, they were cut off from the rest of society. A sense of solidarity, hence, rose among the early Turkish communities which tried as much as possible to maintain their traditional lifestyle. They were living in the same districts, shared their food together, went to work in groups, and enjoyed their time together meeting in Turkish coffeehouses. Furthermore, they continued to cook Turkish food and listened to Turkish music.

Being exposed to what they referred to as a hostile world and working under harsh working conditions some Turks yearned for their native homelands particularly after the establishment of the New Turkish Republic in 1923. According to Karpas (1995), about one third of the Christians and more than half of Muslim early Immigrants from Ottoman territories returned to their homelands. Some statistics show that the rate of Turkish returnees who returned to Turkey was about 86 percent during the years before and after the Great Depression (1929).

According to Ahmed (1986) about 25,000 Turks went back to Turkey after World War I. The reasons behind immigrants' return were their intentions of temporary stay which discouraged them to build long standing institutions that would consolidate their ethnic community in the United States, and their inability to marry American women being against their traditional and religious beliefs further disheartened them to stay there. As the newly established Turkish republic welcomed foreign Turks living abroad and urged them to return to Turkey, many Turks went back home as they failed to adjust to the norms and values of the receiving country. Those who stayed, however, married Irish, Italian, or French Canadian women. They were more interested in the preservation of their cultural traditions than taking part in the American life. They established some organizations for the promotion of the Turkish community interests and welfare, the most important of which were Turkish Aid Society (*Türk Teavün Cemiyeti*) in New York with branches in Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland; the Red Crescent (*Hilal-i Ahmer*) in Detroit (1922), and the Turkish Cultural Alliance in New York (1933). These aid societies were mainly concerned with raising funds and the organization of cultural and social activities.

### **The Second Immigration wave (1950-70)**

After World War I, the Turkish immigration particularly from Turkey decreased drastically and this goes back to a variety of reasons the most important of which was the strict US immigration regulations imposed under the Johnson Reed Quota Act in 1924 which limited immigration from Turkey to 100 per year (Altschiller, 1995). Also during the same period and with the establishment of the new state, Turkish people living abroad were encouraged to come back to Turkey and participate in its reconstruction. When the Turkish immigrants in the United States were offered a free passage back to Turkey, many did not hesitate to come back to their native homelands. According to Halman (1980) of a total number of Turks who immigrated to the United States in the period 1899-1924 about 86 percent returned back to Turkey.

It was not until the end of World War II (1939-1945) that the United States witnessed the emergence of a new wave of Turkish immigrants. In contrast with the previous immigrants, post World War II generation was more educated, usually professionals and included men, women, and children. Statistics given by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service indicate that the number of Turkish immigrants was 798 in the period from 1941 to 1950, and their number in 1951-60 was 30519. According to Karpat (1995), the number of those professionals extended from 10 to 50 thousands from 1948 to 1980.

While some of those professionals migrated to Europe because of proximity and cheaper travel expenses, others preferred to go to the United States as the latter offered better professional and university trainings and better job opportunities. Some of them went back after the end of their trainings whereas the majority remained. In fact, "the political rapprochement between Turkey and the United States that started with the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and the country's inclusion in N.A.T.O. in 1952 gave a new momentum to the Turks to search for professional specialization in the United States" (Karpat, 1995, 238). The number of Turkish professionals tended to increase particularly after the enactment of the 1965 Act which declared the National Origins Quota of 1924 as discriminatory and took apart quota based on national origin, race, and religion. The number of Turkish immigrants hence, increased from 100 per year from 1924-65 to over 1.000 per year following the 1965 Act (Karpat, 1995).

Most of the Turks who came to the United States in post World War II were professionals including many engineers, doctors, scientists and other professionals too (Evinch, 2009). Among them, however, were also semi skilled workers and highly skilled tailors and artisans (Halman, 1980) who unlike the previous Turkish immigration wave came with their families and were more conservative than the other professionals who came during the same era. Most of both groups, the professionals and the skilled workers, came from Turkey. Some of them, however, were also from former Soviet Union Republic who came to the US as refugees via Turkey. While some of them identified themselves as Turks, others claimed to have linguistic and cultural traits that differentiated them from the Turks of Turkey. Nevertheless, despite their differences and unlike the earlier wave of immigrants who did not have a strong national identity as they only identified themselves in terms of “Ottomanness” and “Muslimness”, the more recent immigrants identified themselves as Turks being the centre of their identities and hence worked for the promotion of their Turkish culture and interests in the United States. To this end, they organized meetings and participated in community affairs. They further created associations with the aim of keeping contact with their countrymen of the different American cities, and helped organize cultural and social activities. Among the leading associations there were the Turkish American Society founded 1949 and the Turkish Women’s League of America established in 1958. Other associations of Turkish peoples were also part of the national, regional, and local Turkish American associations, these included people from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Cyprus (Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kazaks, Kirgiz, Crimean, and Tatar). Other umbrella associations were also founded. These included the Federation of Turkish American Associations and the Assembly of Turkish American Associations founded respectively in 1956 and 1979.

By the end of the 1970’s Turkish American Immigrants in the United States of America could successfully integrate themselves in the American society through the establishment of a strong Turkish community whose ultimate aim was the promotion of Turkish interests and identity in the US. Such assimilation was the result of the established contacts with their country of origin made possible thanks to the availability of modern communication and transportation. Indeed, second generation Turkish immigrants in the United States wished to maintain ties with their countries of origin to allow themselves and more particularly their children born in America to keep in touch with their heritage and culture. Most of them had a dual citizenship (American and Turkish). For them to give up their Turkish citizenship would mean to deny their origins and heritage and they could hardly accept it.

The establishment of local and regional associations further stimulated interaction among the Turkish Americans in the different parts of the United States and helped the organization of cultural and social activities. It was this interaction which paved the way for the establishment of informal schools which provided instruction about Turkish language and culture, particularly to children born in the United States. Instruction was usually provided by Turkish university students, parents, and in some cases by professional trained teachers from Turkey. The Ataturk School founded by the Association of Turkish-American Women in 1971, and the Mustapha Kamal Ataturk School founded by the Turkish American Community Centre in 1995 are among the best known informal schools which provided instruction about Turkish linguistic, historical, artistic, and cultural heritage to the Turkish-American children.

### **The third wave of Turkish immigration (the 1970's up to the present)**

The most recent wave of Turkish immigration to the United States started in the late 1970's and accelerated in the 1990's. With the process of globalisation, along with Turkish interest in the outside world particularly under Ozal's liberalisation policies which aimed to integrate Turkey to the globalised world could but stimulate Turkish peoples' openness to the world outside Turkey and generated their desire to pursue new opportunities outside their homelands. With the introduction of the diversity immigration visas program (the lottery system), the number of Turkish immigrants in the US steadily increased. Turkish immigrants from all walks of life and of diverse social classes and educational levels began arriving to the United States by the 1980's. They were professionals, businessmen, graduate students, as well as unskilled or semi-skilled Turkish labourers.

According to Altschiller (1995), the number of the Turkish Americans who have been living the US since the 1990's was about 100.000 to 400.000. The Immigration and Naturalization Service indicates that from 1820 to 2000 about 450.593 people from Turkey came to the US. Furthermore, in the fiscal year of 1997, 64.000 Turkish people visited the United States with four types of visas. The number of Turkish immigrants was only 16.000 in 1985. It shifted to about 34.000 in 1990, 46.000 in 1995, and 54.000 in 1996. However, despite these numbers it is difficult to give accurate statistical data because not all immigrants visited the US illegally while others visited it with tourist and student exchange visas and then became illegal immigrants after the expiration of their visas.

Many unskilled and semi-skilled labourers were usually working in cargo ships and when the ships were on the American harbours they escaped from their ships to never come back. Statistics provided by the 1997 Immigration and Naturalization Service indicate that the number of illegal immigrants working in America was over 5 million, most of them were Mexicans but there were also some Turks. It is worth noting that the most recent wave of Turkish immigrants who came to the US were mostly college graduates who came for educational, specialization, or financial purposes. The number of the Turkish students enrolled in US educational institutions was over 15.000 with Turkey holding the ninth position with regard to the number of international students' enrolment in American educational institutions (A. A, 2003).

As the costs of education were much higher than in Turkey, those students, particularly those who did not benefit from research assistantship, or any form of financial support, were compelled to find jobs to finance their education. While some of those Turkish graduate students went back home after the end of their trainings, most of them remained in America. They played a pivotal role in promoting the Turkish culture and nationality in their school campuses through the organization of students' associations at various American universities. In 2003 only these Turkish American associations used to be the voice and advocate for the Turkish American students in particular and the Turkish American population as a whole. They helped Turkish new comers to adjust to their new life in the US. They further created Turkish dance troops, and helped for the instruction of the Turkish language to Turkish children on Sunday classes.

### **CONCLUSION**

Very little is known about the historical immigration patterns and cultural backgrounds of Turkish immigrants in the United States of America as the latter have not been documented

thoroughly. Nevertheless, it is agreed that there have been three documented waves of Turkish immigration to the United States roughly defined as the first wave from 1820 to 1921, then the second wave from 1950 to 70, and the third wave from the 1970's to the present. The early wave of Turkish immigrants to the US were overwhelmingly rural and illiterate villagers and farmers who came to the United States mainly for economic reasons and also to escape the restrictive rule of Ottoman Turks. The majority of those early immigrants were male who did not plan to stay in America. They lived in isolation within ethnic communities with little intent to assimilate. Indeed, the process of integration was difficult as these "guest workers" as they were referred to in history, did not intend to remain in America. Their primary goal behind their immigration was rather to collect money that would enable them to invest in their homelands.

Unlike the earlier wave of Turkish immigrants, the post World War II Turkish immigrants were highly educated and included men, women, and families. They were professionals and college graduates who came to the US for professional, educational and training considerations. Among the immigrants there were also skilled and semi skilled workers. They could easily assimilate to the American cultural context. They were active participants in the society of the host country while maintaining close ties with their native countries. In order to ensure active participation in the American society they established Turkish-American associations and networks which sought to bring Turkish-American communities together for the promotion of the Turkish identity and culture in the US.

Finally, the last wave of Turkish immigration to the United States goes back to the 1970's and speeded up in the 1990's. Compared to the preceding immigration waves, this group was characterized by a great professional diversity. They were professionals, businessmen, unskilled and semi-skilled workers and students. They played

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