

**Thumbnail Image:**



Jun 28, 2023 by Sarah Schornstein

## Can A Fallen Empire Be Reborn? <sup>[1]</sup>

*Note from the CPD Blog Manager: An earlier version of this piece was published on Independent Women's Forum [here](#).*

A month ago, I took a trip to the country of Turkey to analyze the public diplomacy efforts and landscape of the Turkish government, to see what is successful and what needs to be improved upon. What I found when I got there was very different and much more nuanced than anything I imagined. Though it is a Muslim-majority country today, and it was the home of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is a country that is at the crossroads of religious civilizations. It was home to some of the major moments in human religious history. Not only is it the final location of Noah's ark, the biblical story of God's flood restarting the earth with Noah and his family as the first humans but it is also the home of the first Christian monasteries and the

Ottoman Empire, the home of the Islamic caliphate for over 500 years. This historical religious significance is very different from the relatively liberal Muslim-majority country that Turkey is today. This creates an interesting debate for the Turkish government to address: how do we address the history of multiple religions today when our Muslim population is 99% of the overall Turkish population?

What I was astounded to find was that Turkey has actually been taking significant steps in trying to preserve these historical sites from all of the Abrahamic faiths in order to forge a more cohesive Turkish identity and to engage with the Turkish people domestically and in the diaspora. What can we, in the United States, learn from this priority especially when the movement to take down historical monuments in the U.S. becomes greater by the day?

First, in relation to the Jewish community in Turkey, the Turkish Jewish community mostly arrived as a result of the Ottoman Empire allowing Jewish people to come in following the Inquisition. Therefore there was an incredibly vibrant Sephardic Jewish community for hundreds of years in Turkey. But over the years, due to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, natural disasters, the end of World War II and the increased terrorist attacks due to the perception of the state of Israel among the populace, the Turkish Jewish community dramatically decreased and now 16,500 Jews remain. This led many synagogues around the country to close and either become something different or become museums about the Jewish community. Because they are so small, the Chief Rabbinate's office has become the overarching organization running the engagement, welfare needs and synagogue preservation of the Jewish community. They run the Jewish schools of Turkey, and they even publish a newspaper once a week that has a whole page in Ladino, the ancient language mix of Spanish and Hebrew in order to preserve the language of Ladino.

Second, the Christian communities that lived in Turkey also have a complex history. Following the Greco-Turkish war in the 1920s, the Treaty of Lausanne that ended the war mandated that the Turks took in all of the Greek Muslims and the Greeks took in all of the Christians, therefore there are no Turkish Christians left to use the ancient monasteries and churches throughout the country. The monasteries in the Cappadocia region of the country are some of the first monasteries in the world where thousands of Christians would live. So much so that during a time of persecution, they built an underground city to protect themselves for up to 20 days that is also being preserved as a tourist attraction to educate people about their long interfaith history.

In 2011, as a result of the desire to join the EU, the Turkish government put out legislation that gave back property the government took over in 1936 to Jews and Christians of Turkey. This allowed the Jewish and Christian communities of Turkey to apply to reclaim the territories and therefore determine what to do with the property. Because some of the property was destroyed or turned into something else, the Jewish and Christian communities received reparations for that property but some of the places of worship were still intact.

The Chief Rabbinate's office along with other Jewish NGOs then worked together to reinstate those synagogues back to their original state and some are used for services today. But, for properties that could not be retrieved, the Jewish community has been leading the effort to try and ensure the property is used for "appropriate means." This means that they do not want former Jewish schools to be turned into tattoo shops, they want them to be turned into libraries, museums or schools. That way, they know that the space is used for decent purposes. As a result of the same law, the Turkish government has been putting police

officers into ancient churches, opening them up as museums and partnering with European universities to preserve these churches to prevent vandals from scratching out the faces of Jesus in the churches but also to welcome Christian visitors to Turkey.

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When looking at Ottoman Muslim historical sites, another picture comes to the surface as well. When we went to a place known as Tika, or the Turkish version of USAID, we sat listening to the representatives tell us all about the work they were doing building up schools and libraries for countries around northern Africa and the Middle East. But then, we went downstairs to their showroom of the projects that they worked on and I noticed that almost all of the buildings they showcased were Mosques they built. I thought to myself, why would an organization that is supposed to focus on development aid be showcasing Mosques as their most beautiful works? Then it hit me, my interpretation of this image is that they are looking to export the image of Turkey around the world.

They want to present themselves as the image of religious history, diversity, and importance. That is why they are working to preserve their religious sites; they are trying to create a unified identity that is clear to the rest of the world where Jewish Turks in America can resonate with Christian Turks in Greece and Muslim Turks in Turkey. By preserving their historical religious significance, they remind their people that they are part of a robust history that still continues to this day, 100 years after modern-day Turkey was established to bring them closer to being proud of their Turkish identity no matter if they are in Turkey or around the world.

What can the U.S. learn from this work? Like Turkey, the United States has one of the most robust and complex histories in the world of diversity, one of freedom, mistakes, innovation and more. But one of the major problems today in the U.S. is that some refuse to accept the common American identity and history that we all share. When we have no history, we have no identity and that is when we fall apart. That is why people are looking to take down American statues and historical sites. In order to bring back that common ideal, we must remember our history and learn from our mistakes to not repeat them.

We cannot take down our statues, not even the controversial ones, because then we are bound to forget the mistakes we make and could make them again. We must add to them, put statues of Martin Luther King Jr. in the same town as Robert E. Lee to showcase the progress we have made as a country and to recognize that though we are not perfect, we will always work to achieve progress as one common people and identity.

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