

# Millet System

by Efrat Aviv

*Efrat Aviv is a lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, and a Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. In this reading she discusses the millet and dhimmitude systems, whereby individuals—often Christians and Jews—living under Ottoman could be granted special status and safety in Islamic law in return for paying the capital tax.*

## Secondary Source:

The term millet in the Ottoman Empire referred to a non-Muslim religious community. The Turkish term millet (from Ar. milla; Ott. Tur. pl. milel; mod. Tur. pl. milletler) originally meant both a religion and a religious community. In the Qur'an, millet frequently refers to the "millat Ibrahim," or religion of Abraham, and rarely as milla, for only Judaism or Christianity. There are also references to millet as "religion, confession, or rite" from 1158 to 1833 in various internal and international communications, mainly between the Ottoman Empire and non-Muslim empires. Occasionally, millet was translated in the West as "sovereign nations," especially in terms of rebellion. Commonly, millet was defined as a "religious community." Millet has its roots in early Islam, and the Ottomans used it to give minority religious communities within their Empire limited power to regulate their own affairs, under the overall supremacy of the Ottoman administration. According to the Qur'an, Christians and Jews were people of the Bible, known as dhimmi, who were not forced to convert to Islam but allowed to live under the Muslim arrangement with certain prohibitions while practicing their religion and paying the cizye and military exemption tax.

The Ottomans allowed the "religions of the book" to be organized in millets: the Orthodox Christians or Rums, the Armenians, and the Jews. Non-Muslims had to be part of a millet to be considered citizens of the empire. In the 19th century, millet additionally came to denote such modern concepts as nation and nationality. Nineteenth-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire changed the structure of the millet organization. The regulations of the Greek community (millet-I Rum) were drafted

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and approved in 1862, and for the Armenian community (millet-I Ermeniya) in 1863. Submission of proposals for the reorganization of the Jewish community (millet-I Yahudiyan), as required by the Khaṭṭi humayun (imperial decree) of 1856, was delayed due to internal dissension. The “Organizational Regulations of the Rabbinate” (ḥakham Khane niaẓmnamesi) was approved in 1865 (Haham Başı). The regulations reveal a desire to limit the powers of the ḥakham bashi. They remained in force as long as the Ottoman Empire existed; only under the republic did they lapse de facto without being officially replaced. In recent years, there has been an academic discussion regarding the general attitude toward non-Muslims in the empire, and the millet in particular, either as an example of tolerance or oppression, using the Ottoman millet system theory as a model of interpretation. It should be noted that in the late decades of the Ottoman Empire, the term millet was used for the Muslim community as well, not just for the non-Muslim communities. In addition, the communities did not see themselves as such, and neither did the Ottomans. They were religious communities. There was no word for “minority” in Ottoman Turkish. The term was introduced with the treaty of Lausanne along with the modern Turkish azınlık. Thus is it considered as an anachronism if used before 1923.

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