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SERIES

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST

JEWISH REFUGEES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

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Jewish Refugees from the Middle East

“The cruel displacement of 850,000 Jews who were born and grew up in their ancient communities in Arab lands... should be thoroughly researched by serious academics.... To be able to reach a peaceful solution, the forced migration of Jews from Arab countries must be acknowledged as one of the tragedies of this long and painful conflict.”

—*Professor Ada Aharoni*

Who is a refugee? “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.”

—*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Definition*

The story of Jews forced out of Arab states and Iran before and after 1948 is not well known. Around 850,000 Jews became refugees. Sometimes referred to as “the forgotten refugees,” they never received recognition or help from the international community or compensation for their great losses.

“When the last Jew dies, the temples and religious artifacts and books that were the property of what was once probably the wealthiest Jewish community of the Mediterranean will go to the Egyptian government—not to me, or my children, or to any of the numberless descendants of Egyptian Jews.”

—*Andre Aciman, Jewish refugee from Egypt*

Jewish Roots in the Middle East

Jews are a diverse ethnic and religious group with indigenous roots in the land of Israel. Jews have lived in their ancestral homeland and other parts of the Middle East for over 3,000 years.

While the center of ancient Jewish life was in Israel, there was also a Diaspora, meaning Jews living outside of their homeland. Mizrahi (meaning “eastern”) communities date back to the 6th century BCE, when many Jews were exiled from Israel to Babylon. Jewish communities also formed in ancient Syria, Libya, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and parts of the Roman Empire.

After Rome crushed Jewish revolts in 70 and 135 C.E. and destroyed Jerusalem, some Jews continued to live in their homeland as an oppressed minority. However, most gradually scattered across Europe and the Middle East.

This led to the creation of Sephardic Jewish communities in Spain and Portugal. During the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century, Sephardic Jews faced horrific oppression and many fled to the Middle East.

Though Jews everywhere have Middle Eastern roots, Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish communities have the longest history in the region.



Artifact showing ancient version of language spoken in Israel today—Hebrew.



The Arch of Titus, Rome.



Detail from the Arch of Titus (built in 81 C.E.), depicting Roman soldiers looting Jewish artifacts from Jerusalem.

Colonization

In the seventh century C.E., Arab armies swept out of Arabia under the banner of a new religion, Islam, and conquered vast regions of the Middle East and North Africa. They came to rule over the Kurds, Jews, Amazigh, and other indigenous peoples. Over the centuries, through a process of colonization, these regions became known as the “Arab world.”

After this colonization, Jews and Christians in the region were legally classified as *dhimmis*, an Arabic word meaning “protected person.” In return for this “protection,” Jews and Christians were expected to pay a special tax and act as an inferior, subject population.

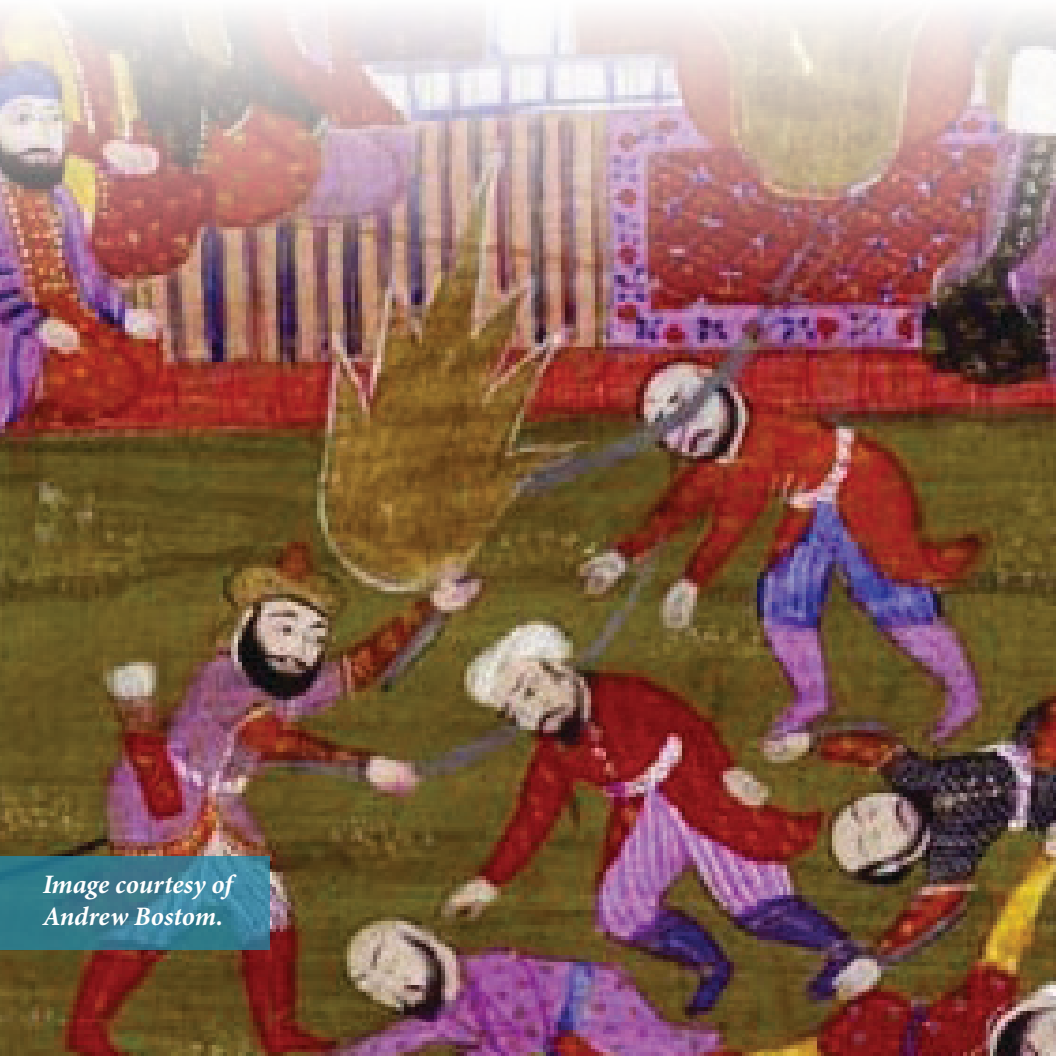
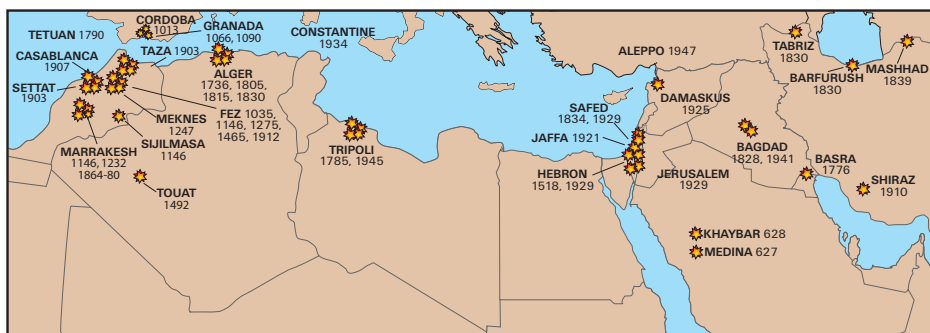


Image courtesy of
Andrew Bostom.

Roots of Persecution and Expulsion of Jews from the Middle East



Pre-1948 massacres in the Arab world (T. Karfunkel).

The expulsion of Jews from Arab states was not only an unjust and racist backlash against the reestablishment of Israel in 1948. Contrary to common myths, Jews and Arabs did not always live in harmony for centuries. Jewish communities thrived during some times and in some places and produced some of Judaism's most influential rabbis, scholars, and leaders. During other periods they suffered severe marginalization, discrimination, and even massacres, though not as often as Jews in Europe. Through it all, Jews were always second-class citizens at best and brutally oppressed at worst. Their expulsion by Arab governments in the 20th century was rooted in this historic oppression.

“The condition of the Jews is another form of slavery.”—Rev. Lancelot Addison, British Chaplain in Tangier, Morocco, 1662–1669

19th–20th Centuries: End of Dhimmi Rules: During European colonial rule in the Middle East, dhimmi rules were mostly abolished. Jews began to participate fully in economic, political, and cultural life. They became lawyers, bankers, and civil servants and, in some cases, rose to high government office. However, this improved status also fueled resentment and hostility against Jews in some cases.

20th-Century Intolerance and

Marginalization of Non-Arabs: Newly independent Arab states marginalized and suppressed the cultures of non-Arab and/or non-Muslim peoples like Copts, Assyrians, Kurds, and Amazighs.



The Sultan of Morocco opened one of his palaces for Jews fleeing from violent riots against them in Fez in 1912.

The Influence of Nazism

Nazi Germany gained significant influence in the Middle East in the 1930s. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 and later subsidized by German funds, made anti-Jewish racism central to its ideology.

Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini collaborated with Adolf Hitler during World War II and broadcast Nazi propaganda throughout the Arab world from a Berlin radio station. He hoped to bring the “Final Solution” to the Middle East, and his racist propaganda fueled more antisemitism in the Arab world.

This racism against Jews remains a significant influence in the Middle East today. The Muslim Brotherhood is a powerful organization throughout the region. Hamas, which rules Gaza, is the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas Charter, Article 2). Hamas is designated a terrorist organization by the EU, the U.S., Canada, Japan, and Jordan.



Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini and Adolf Hitler meet in 1941.

“[Jews] were regarded as people who could usually be tolerated if they accepted the dominance of Muslims, but who lacked honor and could not fight. This is important if one is to understand the sense of humiliation in the Islamic world at being defeated militarily by Israel.... It is, as we used to say in the schoolyard, like being beaten by a girl.”

—*Tunisian-Jewish writer Albert Memmi*

The Destruction of Middle Eastern Jewry

In the mid-20th century, the twin forces of pan-Arab nationalism and Islamist extremism brought about the demise of Mizrahi Jewish communities. Today, fully 99 percent of these communities no longer exist.

Before and after Israel declared independence in 1948, hostility toward Jews rose dramatically across the Middle East. Arab regimes, coordinated by the Arab League, enacted legislation denying human and civil rights to Jews. As a result of discrimination, violence, expulsion, and fear, 850,000 Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews became refugees, forced to leave everything behind.

Jewish Population in Middle Eastern and North African Countries

	1948	2016	Percentage Left
Algeria	140,000	50	0.1%
Egypt	75,000	100	0.2%
Iran	100,000	9,000	9%
Iraq	150,000	0	0%
Lebanon	20,000	200	1%
Libya	38,000	0	0%
Morocco	265,000	2,300	0.9%
Syria	30,000	2,300	0.4%
Tunisia	105,000	1,100	1.1%
Yemen	55,000	50	0.1%

Attempts to Stop the Liberation of the Jewish People • 1947–1972

“The lives of a million Jews in Muslim countries will be jeopardized by the establishment of the Jewish state.” —*Heykal Pasha, UN Egyptian Delegation, 1948*

After 1,900 years of oppression across Europe and the Middle East, the Jewish people started a liberation movement and worked to reestablish a Jewish state in their ancestral home. Unfortunately, Arab leaders refused to accept Jewish rights to self-determination. The Arab League (founded in 1945) not only launched a war to destroy Israel in 1948 but also enacted discriminatory laws against Jews living in Arab countries.



New York Times, May 16, 1948.

Arab States' Policies against Jews: 1948–1972

Stripping of Citizenship: All Arab countries except Lebanon and Tunisia.

Arrests and Detentions: All Arab countries except Lebanon and Tunisia.

Riots/Pogroms: All Arab countries. No exceptions.

Religious Restrictions: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Criminalization of Zionism: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Syria.

Restricting Freedom of Movement: Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen.

Employment Discrimination and Job Termination: Jews were fired and/or banned from certain careers in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen.

Freezing of Assets: All Arab countries except Morocco.

Property Confiscation: All Arab countries except Morocco.

Examples of Communities Destroyed

Iraqi (Babylonian) Jews

The Iraqi Jewish community was one of the world's oldest. In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. Most Jews were exiled to Babylon (Iraq).

About 50 years later, Babylon was conquered by the Persians, whose ruler, Cyrus the Great, decided to free all exiled peoples. Many Jews returned to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem and reestablish Jewish sovereignty, but some remained.

After Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E., Jewish life shifted to the Galilee and to Babylon. Babylonian Jews produced many great scholars whose influence on Judaism endures to this day. By the 20th century, about 150,000 Jews lived in Iraq and played a vital role in shaping the country following its independence in 1932.

In 1933 the Nazis took power in Germany. Key Iraqi Arab nationalists, seeking an anti-British ally, contacted German intelligence. Nazi propaganda soon appeared in Baghdad, influencing Iraqi government policies. In 1934 scores of Jews were fired from positions in Iraq's government, and anti-Jewish quotas were introduced in universities and the civil service.

In 1941, pro-Nazi Iraqi officers, known as the "Golden Square," overthrew Iraq's government with significant popular support. From June 1 to June 2, 1941, inspired by anti-Jewish broadcasts, thousands of Iraqis armed themselves and attacked Jews in Baghdad and Basra, killing hundreds and wounding 2,000. A mass grave for 600 Jewish bodies was dug.

In 1948, the Iraqi government passed a series of racist laws depriving Jews of their livelihoods. Many Jews began to flee, and in 1951 Israel launched Operations Ezra and Nehemiah to help them escape. About 120,000 to 130,000 Iraqi Jews were airlifted to the Jewish state. As they left, Iraq stripped them of their citizenship and confiscated their property.

Today, no Jews remain in Iraq.
Their ethnic cleansing is complete.



Egyptian Jews

Paraphrased from “Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: The Case for Rights and Redress” by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries:

In 1937 there were 63,500 Jews in Egypt—a place where Jewish communities existed since Biblical times. In the 1940s, the rise of Egyptian nationalism fueled an increase in antisemitism. In 1945, riots erupted—ten Jews were killed; 350 injured, and numerous Jewish institutions were torched.

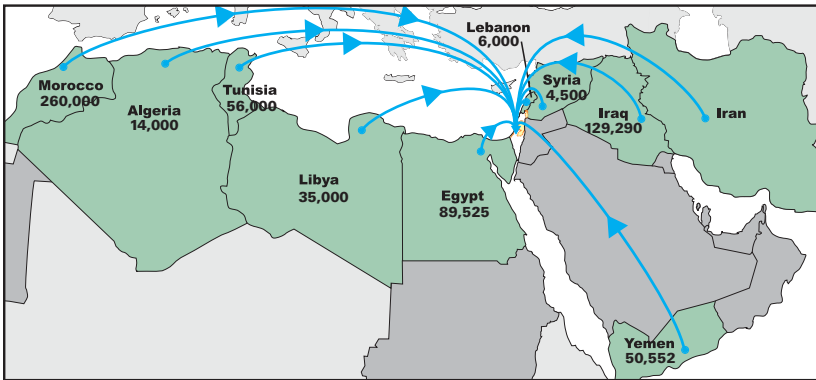
Between June and November 1948, the government engaged in violence and repressive measures. A series of bombings killed more than 70 Jews and wounded nearly 200. Rioting over the next few months resulted in many more Jewish deaths. Two thousand Jews were arrested, and many had their property confiscated.

In 1956 the Egyptian government sent 1,000 Jews to prisons and detention camps and expelled 25,000. They were allowed to take only one suitcase, a small sum of cash, and were forced to sign declarations “donating” their property to the Egyptian government.

By 1957, the Jewish population of Egypt was only 15,000. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Egypt renewed its oppression, and the community dropped to 2,500. By the 1970s, after the remaining Jews were given permission to leave the country, the community dwindled to only a few families.



Jewish Refugees from Arab and Muslim Countries • 1948–1978



Map showing numbers of Jews who fled Middle Eastern countries and went home to Israel.

Pre-1948: In 1948 almost 1 million Jews lived in Arab-Muslim lands. Baghdad was 40 percent Jewish in the early 20th century.

Post-1948: These Jewish communities were destroyed. Jews were stripped of citizenship and, in most cases, their property as well. Around 650,000 Jewish refugees went back to their homeland in Israel, where they and their families became the majority of Israel's population. Another 200,000 fled to the West.

Connection to the 1948 War and Palestinian refugee crisis: In 1947, the land of Israel was under the authority of the British Mandate for Palestine. Due to escalating conflict between Arabs and Jews in the region, the UN proposed a peace plan that would have created a Jewish state and an Arab state living side by side. Jewish leaders said yes, but Arab leaders said no and launched the 1948 War to destroy the Jewish state. This decision led to deep traumas that continue to this day. About 165,000 Palestinian Arabs stayed in Israel, became equal citizens, and now make up approximately 20 percent of the population. However, up to 750,000 Palestinian Arabs became refugees. Most fled to escape the fighting. A minority left after Arab leaders told them to do so or were expelled by Israeli troops, mostly from towns where Arab forces were located.

After the 1948 War, the UN set up a special agency—UNRWA—which continues to assist Palestinian refugees to this day. Meanwhile, Jewish refugees, many of whom fled the same oppressive Arab regimes that launched the 1948 War, have received little recognition and no help from the UN. Whether the international community sees it or not, the trauma of Jewish refugees continues to have a major impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Exile and Resettlement



Expelled Jews from Arab countries, 1948–1972.

“We were stripped of our Egyptian nationality, which we had through five generations. Our personal assets—bank accounts, homes, etc.—were also confiscated, and we were told never to return.”—*Henry Mourad, Jewish refugee from Egypt, 1956*

“My mother could not stop weeping at the sight of her innocent Jewish neighbors’ lives in a state of destruction.”—*Abdel, Libyan Muslim from Benghazi, 1948*



As hundreds of thousands of refugees from Arab countries thronged to the new Jewish state, the government had no choice but to erect tent encampments where immigrants lived, some for several years. This photo is from 1950.

Coming Home to Israel

In Israel the Jewish refugees found safety, freedom, justice, and a place to build a better future for their children. At the same time, life there wasn't always easy. Many Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews lived in refugee camps for years and had to overcome discriminatory attitudes, poverty, and a lack of representation in government. Despite these challenges, these Jewish refugees and their descendants have become an integral part of Israeli society, politics, and culture.



*Israeli Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik (Iraq)
(2006–2009)*



Yemenite-Israeli hip-hop trio A-Wa



*Israeli Footballer Yossi Benayoun
(Morocco)*



*Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon
(Morocco)*



*Israeli Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer
(Iraq)*



*IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi
(Syria) (2007–2011)*

“I liked the feeling in Israel that I would walk in the street and nobody would look at me with hostility.” —Isabelle Fhima, Moroccan Jew now living in Israel

Jewish Refugees: An Unresolved Injustice

The history and rights of Jewish refugees must be recognized. While they were ultimately absorbed in Israel and Western nations, the injustice they suffered must be addressed. They were displaced, and their vibrant, rich cultures were destroyed.

Israel designated November 30 as the memorial day for Jewish refugees from Arab states and Iran and has begun raising awareness through events at the UN.

Why is the Jewish refugee issue so critical?

Too many people view the Middle East conflict through a distorted lens. They are unaware of the suffering of Jews forced from their centuries-old communities in the Middle East and North Africa. However, there is growing recognition that there is a moral and legal imperative for the rights of Jewish refugees to be placed on the international agenda.

- In 2008 the U.S. Congress passed a resolution requiring that Jewish refugees be mentioned in all official documents that refer to Palestinian refugees.
- In 2010 the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) enacted a law that no peace agreement can be signed unless compensation for Jewish refugees from Arab countries is addressed.

“We were uprooted and expelled. We have been denied compensation. We watch helplessly as our culture, language, and legacy disappear and our part in history is systematically erased. In short, we have been truly ethnically cleansed.”—*Raphael Luzon, Libyan Jew whose uncle and eight cousins were murdered in Libya in 1967*



Jews of Fez, Morocco, c. 1900.



Jewish wedding, Aleppo, Syria, 1914.

Why are Jewish refugees a key to peace and reconciliation?

At least half the Jewish population of Israel are Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews whose families came as refugees. The vast majority do not want to return to the lands where they suffered intolerable oppression and violence. What they do want is for the international community to recognize their plight and include full compensation for lost property in any final Middle East peace agreement. The assets lost by Jewish refugees are estimated to be 50 percent more than the assets lost by Palestinians.



“Only the acknowledgement of the inconvenient truth will lead to reconciliation, because without the truth, there can be no reconciliation.” —*Gina Bublil Waldman, Jewish refugee from Libya*

Great Synagogue of Oran, Algeria, confiscated and turned into a mosque in 1975 after the departure of Jews.

Resources on Jews from Arab Countries

Web Resources

Point of No Return at www.jewishrefugees.blogspot.com

Justice for Jews from Arab Countries at www.justiceforjews.com

JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) at www.jimena.org

Resources on Sephardic Communities at www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuvlj/sephardic.html

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