

The Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries



A Jewish Yemenite family walking through the desert to a reception camp set up by the American Joint Distribution Committee near Aden

From Israeli National Photo Archive



A Cuneiform tablet dating from the Babylonian Exile period attesting to the antiquity of the Jewish community in Iraq. The tablet contains numerous Jewish names, and records a heifer lease agreement between Haggai son of Ahiqam and Yahu-azar, two brothers from the Jewish settlement of Al-Yahudu, southern Iraq, 507 BCE

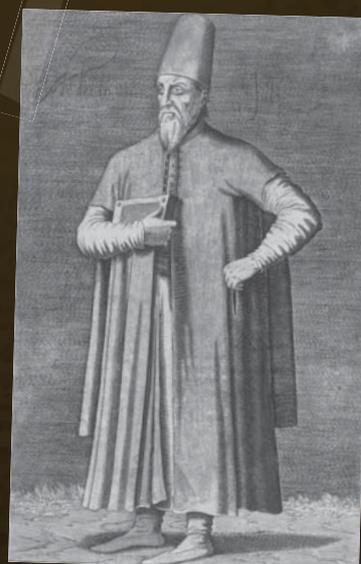
Courtesy of the Cindy and David Sofer Collection. Photographer: Ardon Bar-Hama. On display in the exhibition *By the Rivers of Babylon* at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 2015-2016

History & Background



Jewish woman in Islamic lands

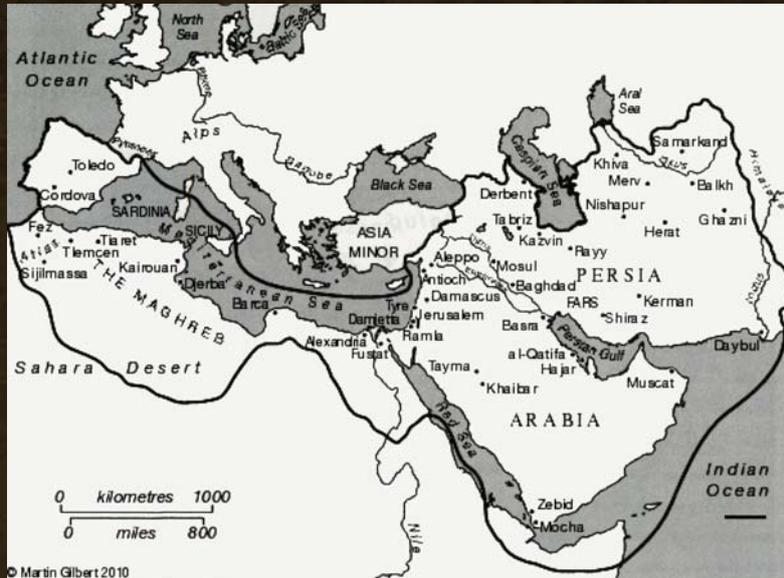
17th century print. From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Jewish doctor in Islamic lands

17th century print. From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish People more than three thousand years ago. Since ancient times, centers of Jewish civilization were established in many parts of the adjacent regions. Significant Jewish communities existed throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Babylon, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen and the Gulf region for more than 2000 years, centuries before the advent of Islam and the Arab conquest.



Extent of the Islamic Conquest by 750 CE. Large Jewish communities existed in each of the designated cities. Courtesy of Sir Martin Gilbert

Islamic Conquest

Under Islamic rule, Jews were considered dhimmi, second-class citizens, forced to pay special taxes, wear distinctive signs and articles of clothing and suffered other discriminatory decrees and legislation. Where Sharia law was strictly implemented, Jewish orphans were at times forcibly taken from the community and converted under coercion.



Tomb of the prophet Jonah
North Mosul, Iraq, Circa 1930
Vilnai Collection



Tomb of the Prophet Ezekiel, Kifil, Iraq
From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Jewish wedding procession, Debdou, Morocco, Circa 1920
 From Gerard Levi Jewish Postcards Collection

Religion

Many of the seminal texts of Jewish culture - the Talmud, the major codifications of Jewish law and the siddur (prayer book) - were written and compiled by Jewish scholars living in what is today the Middle East. Famous Talmudic academies thrived in the Babylonian cities of Pumbedita and Sura where Saadia Gaon, the father of Judeo-Arabic philosophical and legal literature, served as Exhilararch. In Egypt, Maimonides completed his famous Mishneh Torah and Guide for the Perplexed. Jews were called the 'People of the Book' by their Arab neighbors and their secular scholarship and medical knowledge were highly regarded by many Muslim leaders, despite periodic restrictions on Jewish religious practice.



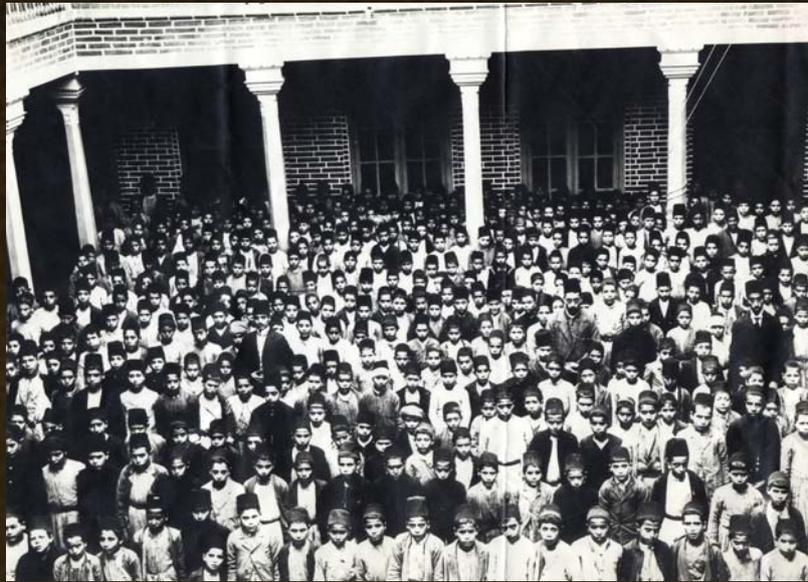
Synagogue in suburb of Algiers, Algeria 1916
 From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Chevra Kadisha burial society, Algeria 1901
 From the collection of JIMENA



Ritual circumcision, Tunis 1909
 From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Talmud Torah students, Baghdad, Iraq, Circa 1930 From Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, Photo Archives

Education

Until the modern era, Jewish - like Arabic - education was primarily based on the study of religious texts. In order to better cope with pogroms and conditions of severe discrimination, the Alliance Israelite Universelle was created in 1860 to equip Jews for modernity and enable them to struggle for equal rights. The Alliance worked to ensure that Jewish children in the Middle East and North Africa received first-class education. Many of its graduates attended universities abroad and achieved scholarly distinction, such as Claude Cohen-Tannoudji and Serge Haroche who won the Nobel Prize in physics. However, with the rise of Arab nationalism in the Twentieth Century, Jews were marginalized and gradually excluded from public life. Quotas on higher education were introduced in the 1930's and 1940's.



Yeshivat Beit David Classroom, Morocco, Circa 1930

From Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, Photo Archives

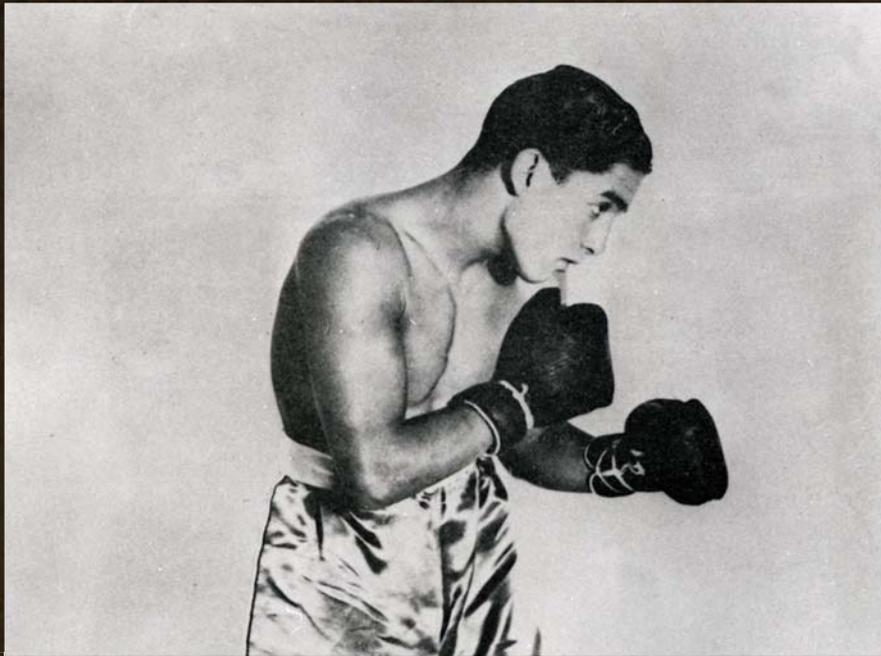


Student assembly at Otzar Torah school, Casablanca, Morocco, Circa 1930

From Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, Photo Archives



Children in Purim costumes at the Jewish Community Center, Algiers, Algeria 1956



Sports



Victor "Young Perez", originally from Tunis, world boxing flyweight champion, 1931
From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

Unable to join local Arab sports associations, Jews organized their own, such as Maccabi. Some Jews excelled in international competition, like Alphonse Halimi, a world bantamweight champion from Algiers, and Zizi Taieb, a swimming and water polo champion in Tunisia. Guido Asher starred on the Egyptian national basketball team, and Tunis born Pierre Darmon was eighth seed in international tennis rank.

Hebrew Sport Day, Damascus, Syria 1936
From Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, Photo Archives



Maccabi female basketball team, Cairo, Egypt 1943
From the Collection of Levana Zamir



While maintaining a separate identity, Jews were noted contributors to Arabic culture in literature, poetry and music. Ya'qub Bilbul, was a pioneer of the Iraqi novel and short story. Togo Mizrahi, was a renowned Egyptian director, actor, producer and screenwriter. Saleh al-Kuwaity is considered by many to be the father of modern Iraqi music and Dawood Hosni wrote the first Arabic operetta.

Cheikh El Afrite Jewish singer, poet, author and composer, Tunis 1884.

From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

Culture



Jewish fiddler, Tunis 1920

From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

Jewish orchestra, Iraq 1933

From the collection of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, Or Yehuda, Israel





When Jews were granted freedoms they prospered, but when these were curtailed, they suffered crushing poverty. Many Jews in Egypt, Iraq and Aden achieved success in business and commerce, and their contributions to the Arab economies were highly disproportionate to their numbers. When they departed, Jewish communities were forced to leave behind, or were expropriated of, assets worth many billions of dollars.

Economic life



Sir Heskell Sassoon, Minister of Finance of the Government of Iraq, 1920-1925

From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Jewish sweets vendor in Syria during First World War

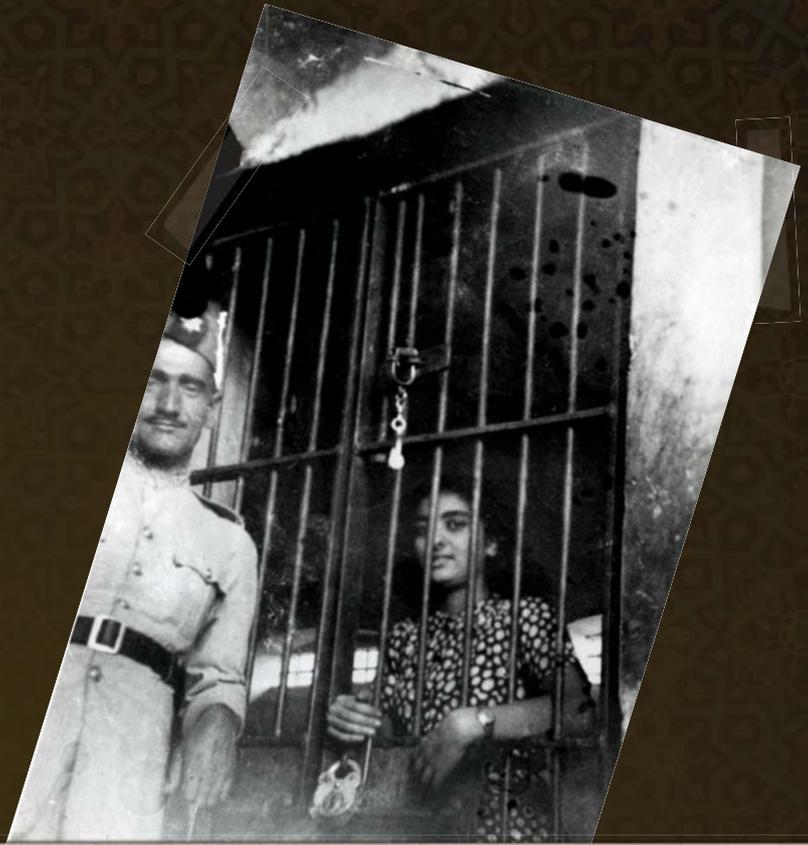
From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot



Shop of Isaac Gabbai in Egypt 1930

From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

Over the centuries, the position of the Jews was frequently precarious. There were numerous incidents of massacres and ethnic cleansing, such as the destruction of the Jewish communities in the Arabian peninsula in the Seventh Century. In Morocco, Libya and Algeria Jews were forced to live in ghettos or mellahs. In Yemen and Iraq, Jews at times were forced to choose between conversion to Islam or death. Blood libels and other false accusations led to massive rioting; and in the 1930's and 1940's, Nazi-inspired massacres took place against Jews in Libya, Egypt and Algeria and most infamously in Baghdad, known as the Farhud.



Herzila Lukal arrested for Zionist activity, Erbil, Iraq, 1948
From the collection of Beit Hafutsot

Discrimination & Pogroms



Burned synagogue, Aden, 1948
From the collection of Yigal Ben Shalom



Funeral of Shmuel Jorni, a teenager killed in Tunis, June 1952
From the collection of Beit Hafutsot



Jewish home looted in pogrom, Zuwiya, Libya 1945
From the collection of Levana Zamir



Drawings of the Abu Qir detention camp, next to Alexandria, where hundreds of Jews were arrested for about 18 months, until expulsion

From the collection of Levana Zamir

Confiscation decree of Hizkiahu Ibrahim Basrawi's assets, by the Egyptian authorities, together with assets of other Jews



Expulsion from the Arab world

Prior to the UN Partition Plan, which called for the creation of a Jewish state alongside an Arab state in Mandatory Palestine, the Political Committee of the Arab League drafted a law governing the legal status of Jewish residents.

It provided that the bank accounts of Jews from Arab League countries were to be frozen and used to finance resistance to 'Zionist ambitions in Palestine'; and Jews believed to be active Zionists would be interned as political prisoners and their assets confiscated. These and other state-sanctioned acts of repression and violence, precipitated a mass departure of the ancient Jewish communities, often in desperate economic circumstances. In total, over 850,000 Jews were forced to leave the Arab countries, in a process of expulsion and exodus which continued through the 1970's.



Operation "Magic Carpet". Jews from Yemen in an airplane on their way to Israel
From the collection of Beit Hatfutsot

On May 14, 1948 the State of Israel was proclaimed. Despite attack from six Arab armies dedicated to its extermination, waves of mass immigration brought hundreds of thousands of Jews to Israel's shores, Holocaust survivors from Europe and nearly the entire Jewish communities of Libya, Yemen and Iraq.



Young girl carrying brother through the mud of Beit Lid Camp, Winter 1950

From Israel National Photo Archive

The fledgling state, following a protracted war of independence, was in hard economic straits, and struggled to provide housing and jobs for the new immigrants. Ma'abarot camps of tin shacks and tents gave temporary shelter; employment was created and the Hebrew language taught; the educational system was expanded to meet the needs of tens of thousands of children from varied backgrounds. Additional mass immigration took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, from the newly independent countries of North Africa, Morocco and Tunisia.

The human capital - the expertise, talent and fortitude - of the Jews from Arab lands, has contributed immeasurably to Israel's success, despite decades of conflict in a violent region.

Yemenite Jews awaiting airlift to Israel, Aden, 1949

From Israel National Photo Archive



Moroccan immigrant with her children in refugee tent camp, Israel, 1949

From Israel National Photo Archive

Integration into Israel

International Status

The definition of a refugee in international law applies clearly to the Jews from Arab lands who had "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race or religion", and the UN High Commissioners for Refugees have confirmed on several occasions that the UN considered Jews fleeing persecution in Arab countries as refugees who fall under the UNHCR mandate.

In all the relevant international multilateral and bilateral agreements, (UN Resolution 242, Madrid Conference, Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, Road Map for Peace), 'refugees' are referred to generically, and include the recognition of all Middle East refugees - Jews and Arabs alike.

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JEWS IN GRAVE DANGER IN ALL MOSLEM LANDS

By MALLORY BROWNE
Special to The New York Times

LAKE SUCCESS, N. Y., May 15—For nearly four months, the United Nations has had before it an appeal for "immediate and urgent" consideration of the case of the Jewish populations in Arab and Moslem countries stretching from Morocco to India.

Even four months ago, it was the Zionist view that Jews residing in the Near and Middle East were in "extreme and imminent danger." Now that the end of the mandate has precipitated civil war or even worse developments in Palestine, it is feared that the repercussions of this in Moslem countries will put the Jewish populations in many of these states in mortal peril.

Reports from the Middle East make it clear that there is serious tension in all Arab countries. The Jewish populations there are gravely worried at the prospect that an Arab-Jewish war may

Nine Hundred Thousand in Africa and Asia Face Wrath of Their Foes

EGYPT	45,000
IRAQ	30,000
TRANS-JORDAN	12,000
SAUDI ARABIA	7,000
SYRIA	6,000
YEMEN	4,000
LEBANON	2,000

OF these only Trans-Jordan's Arab Legion is considered a regular army.

servants in the employ of the Syrian Government have been discharged. Freedom of movement has been "practically abolished." Special frontier posts have been established to control movements of Jews.

In Iraq no Jew is permitted to leave the country unless he deposits \$5,000 (\$20,000) with the Government to guarantee his return. No foreign Jew is allowed to enter Iraq even in transit.

In Lebanon Jews have been forced to contribute financially to the fight against the United Nations partition resolution on Palestine. Acts of violence against Jews are openly admitted by the press, which accuses Jews of "poisoning wells," etc.

Danger Emphasized

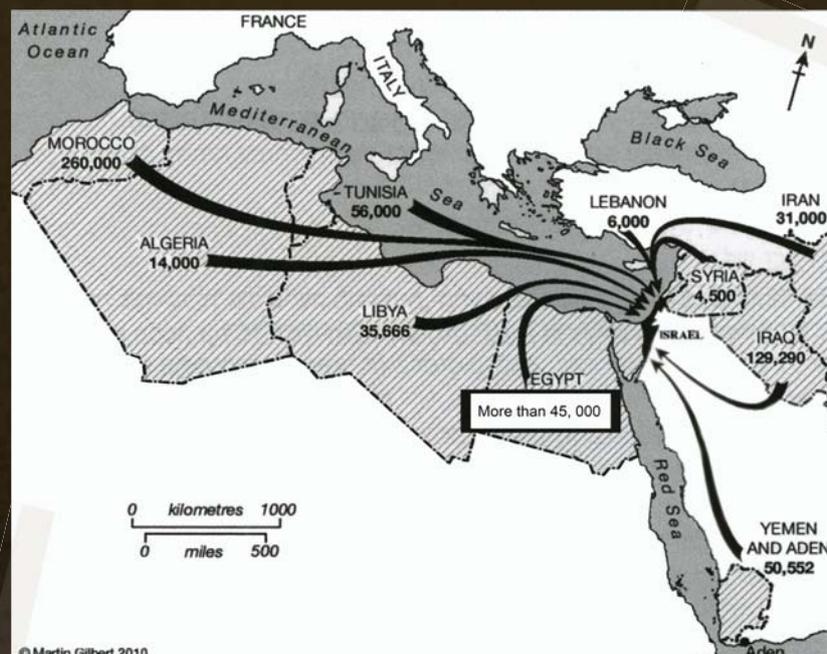
Giving many other details of persecution, this report declares that "the very survival of the Jewish communities in certain Arab and

Justice and the Search for Peace

Recognizing the rights of the Jews displaced from Arab countries is a call for truth and reconciliation. For any peace process to be credible and enduring, it must ensure that all bona fide refugees receive equal rights and treatment under international law.

And yet, the mass violation of the human rights of the Jews from Arab lands, the destruction of their ancient and thriving communities, the expropriation of their assets and properties, and their displacement and expulsions from their lands of residence over the millennia have never been adequately addressed by the UN and the international community.

Recognizing the rights of the Jews from Arab countries is a call for justice, fairness and the acknowledgement of historical truth in the search for Middle East peace.



Jewish populations leaving Arab countries following establishment of Israel Courtesy of Sir Martin Gilbert

Personal Stories: Maurice Shohet (Iraq)



"We had an opportunity to throw a last glance back at the country where we had grown up and lived. Thoughts welled up in my mind about the country we were about to leave behind. We had loved Iraq more than many Iraqis do. I recalled the memories of the land of the Tigris and the Euphrates. As in a movie, I saw pictures passing through my mind, of the school where I had grown, of the synagogues where I prayed, and of the tombs of the prophets where I visited.

I thought about the descendants of the ancient Iraqi Jewish Community that dated back to the time of the Babylonian Empire, and the end that had befallen the Jewish community in this Arab country after the State of Israel was established. I thought of the miserable Jews on whom Iraq had vented its wrath after being shamed, when its army shared defeat together with other Arab armies during the Six Day War."



Personal Stories:

Regina Bublil Waldman (Libya, 1967)



Gina Bublil Waldman, 1960, in Purim costume



"When the Six Day War broke out between Israel and its Arab neighbors, I was 19 year old. My mother called me at work to tell me that thousands of people had taken to the streets rioting and burning Jewish properties. She begged me to find a hiding place, because it was too dangerous for me to return home.

One of the British engineers in the company agreed to hide me in his home. Incidentally, he was Christian. From my hiding place, I watched the fires consume my father's warehouse. Killing people, rampaging and burning Jewish properties went on for days.

I lived in hiding for a month before returning home. All Jews were expelled and their property, including their bank accounts, were expropriated by the government. We were only allowed to take a few suitcases and very little money.

The day we left, armed soldiers put us on a truck to escort us "safely" to the airport. Instead, they dumped us on the side of the road. We boarded an airport bus, which then stopped in the middle of the desert. The driver said that there was engine trouble and the conductor allegedly went to get help and left us alone, once again. I looked to my father for support, but he was frozen in horror. I darted off the bus and ran to find help. As I ran my whole body shook with fear, but anger drove me forward.

When I reached the gas station, the conductor was holding the phone. After struggling with him, I snatched the phone out of his hand and called the British engineer who had hidden me. I turned to leave but now, the door was blocked by three men, including the conductor. I was petrified. My throat tightened. My heart was pounding. I forced my way through the door and ran back to the bus.

Gasoline was everywhere, the driver held a box of matches in his hand. The plan was to burn the bus with my family in it. Just then, the British engineer drove up. My family jumped into his car and we sped off to the airport. Upon arrival, the porters refused to load our luggage and spit on us. Our flight took us to Rome, Italy, where my family still lives."