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 Israel National Photo Archive
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.
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.
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 Saadiah Gaon, the father of Judeo-Arabic philosophical and legal literature, served as Exhilarch. 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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.

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.
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.
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.
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.”
“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.”