



RAIMUND FASTENBAUER

# Forgotten tragedy: The Jewish “Nakba”

THE EXPULSION OF THE JEWS  
FROM THE ARAB COUNTRIES AND IRAN

**mena-watch**  
Der unabhängige Nahost-Thinktank

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Title image: "Prayer" Memorial in Ramat Gan in memory of the Jews murdered in Iraq during the Farhud pogrom (1941) and in the 1960s.  
Source: Avishai Teicher, PikiWiki – Israel free image collection project

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## “NAKBA”: EVER-PRESENT AND IGNORED CATASTROPHES

Many studies and analyses of the attack on the State of Israel, which was founded in 1948, suffer from an imbalance: For decades, the concept of the Palestinian “Nakba” (Arabic for “catastrophe”) has been the center of focus in the public world. In 1948, hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees left the newly founded Israel, partly at the request of their leadership, partly because of Israeli military orders, as was the case in the cities of Lod and Ramla. There is great uncertainty regarding the exact numbers of those who left. Different sources – depending on who expressed their opinion, in what context, what point of view – differ with respect to the estimates made.

On the other hand, the Jewish “Nakba”, the expulsion of Jews from Arab states, is hardly existent in the public mind, although, since 1948, at least as many Jews, and according to current figures<sup>1</sup> even more, namely 966,000, have left the Arab states and Iran. Again, details regarding

those figures differ depending on the source, the definition and the date of data collection.<sup>2</sup>

The most current figures available are the highest, which does not suggest that the situation of Jews in the Arab states and Iran has improved in recent decades. While more than one-fifth of Israel’s population is Arab, there are hardly any Jews left in Arab countries and Iran.

Public perception and reactions of the international community towards Palestinians and Jews diverge as inexplicably as drastically. Not only have nearly one million expelled Jews not triggered any extensive international relief efforts; quite the contrary, a separate UN organization (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA) was founded exclusively for Palestinian refugees, which is not only unique on a historical and global level but is also uniquely liberal in defining who its beneficiaries are, thereby allowing that number to grow several times over since 1948.

<sup>1</sup> Point of No Return, Justice for Jews from Arab countries, 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/mtstxdt>. The figures refer only to the ten countries discussed in detail here.

<sup>2</sup> Julius, Lyn, *Uprooted, How 3000 Years of Jewish Civilisation in the Arab World Vanished Overnight*, London 2018, p. xvi: 850.000; Margalith, Alexandra, *Die “Naqba” der Juden*, Schlaglichter, 2. August 2017: more than one million, <http://tinyurl.com/msurpzj9>; Stearns, Peter, *The Encyclopedia of world history, ancient, medieval, and modern, chronologically arranged*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston 2001, p. 966: 783.000 (without Iran).

## 1. THE PALESTINIAN “NAKBA”

### THOSE WHO FLED: REFUGEE STATUS WITH A CLAIM TO ETERNITY

During the course of the Israeli War of Independence following the Arab rejection of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine from November 1947 and the attack by neighboring states on the newly founded Jewish state in May 1948, some of the Arabs living on the territory at the time left Israel. In 1948, the UN mediator for Palestine estimated that 472,000 Palestinians had fled,<sup>3</sup> historians speak of 600,000 to 700,000,<sup>4</sup> the Arab side rounds those figures up to one million people who either chose to flee or, in some cases, were expelled.

Israel's government wanted to deal with the Palestinian refugee problem head on within the scope of peace negotiations after the war had ended. The defeated Arab states, however, refused to take part in these negotiations, interpreting UN Resolution 194 as a claim under international law to a collective right of return to Israel for all Palestinians who had fled and been expelled as well as their descendants.

### SEPARATE UN ORGANIZATION

The principles of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) are actually intended to secure the right to asylum and to promote the integration of refugees in their respective countries of residence. The success of this principle can be illustrated by an example: Almost at the same time the Israeli War of Independence took place in 1948, there was a population exchange between India and Pakistan, that had begun in 1947. The approximately ten million refugees were integrated into their respective new countries of residence so that, to this day, no deliberately perpetuated refugee problem exists there.

In assisting Arab refugees, the United Nations went way beyond its own rules of the United Nations Refugee Agency, which was founded in 1950, in similar cases:<sup>5</sup> While there is a single UN relief agency for all refugees world-

wide, the UNHCR, UN Resolution 302 dated December 8, 1949, created UNRWA, a separate organization exclusively for Palestinian refugees, which also extends refugee status to future generations.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022, UNHCR cared for 29.4 million refugees worldwide,<sup>7</sup> and UNRWA for 5.9 million Palestinians,<sup>8</sup> most of whom are not refugees but their descendants. If UNRWA were to apply the same criteria for defining refugees as the UNHCR does for all other refugees worldwide, only a few tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees from 1948 would still be alive.

Over the years, UNRWA has extended its social services even further to include all Palestinians in need. This unique method of counting is the reason why the number of Palestinian refugees increasingly continues to grow. Furthermore, the organization's statistics also include Palestinian refugees who have long since ceased to live in refugee camps but have emigrated to Europe for example. Thereby, every child, regardless of the place of birth, is automatically a new refugee.

### INTEGRATION NOT DESIRED

Contrary to the principles of the UNHCR, the UNRWA has always opposed the integration of Arab refugees into their host countries. As the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) noted in retrospect, from the outset, it had been intended to maintain the refugee status of those who had relocated in 1948 to “strengthen Palestinian identity.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, this reverses the right of asylum in the host countries: With the exception of Jordan, the refugees did not have the opportunity to acquire citizenship in any Arab state.

The UNRWA operates fifty-eight refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem, which have long since ceased to be camps in the traditional sense but are small towns consisting of three- to four-story houses. Ninety-five per cent of UNRWA's budget is funded by a total of one-hundred

<sup>3</sup> Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator for Palestine, official reports of the General Assembly: Third meeting, Supplement No. 11 (A/648), Paris, 1948, p. 47 and Supplement No. 11 A (A/698 and A/689/ Add. 1. P. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Cambridge 2004, p. 602–604.

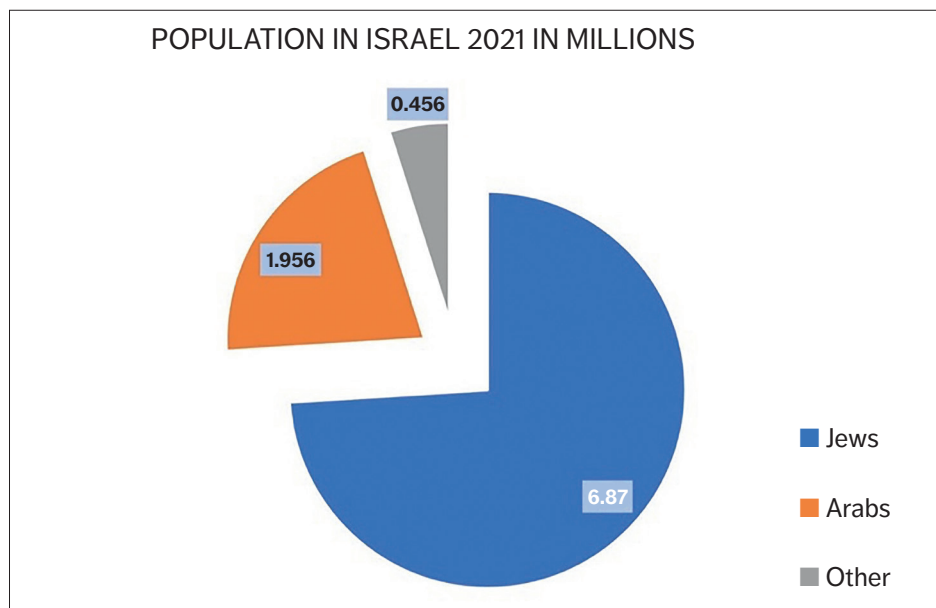
<sup>5</sup> Feuerherd, Alex/Markl, Florian, *Die Vereinten Nationen gegen Israel*, Berlin 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Becker, Avi, *The Forgotten Narrative: Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries*, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17:3-4, 2005, <http://tinyurl.com/yeyvfm98>

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, *The UN Refugee Agency, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*. <http://tinyurl.com/57jbb3pe>

<sup>8</sup> UNRWA, *The United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 2022, UNRWA in Action*, <http://tinyurl.com/bdz5bjwy>

<sup>9</sup> *Palestinian Liberation Organization (Department of Refugee Affairs), The Palestinian Refugees Factfiles, Ramallah 2000*, p. 22.



sixteen donor countries; first and foremost the United States, followed by the European Union, in which Germany takes the lead.<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning, UNRWA has promoted the ideology of the right of return, which, however, is not based on any UN resolutions. Resolution 194 of the UN General Assembly, which was always cited in this context and adopted on December 11, 1948, included the possibility of return only on condition that the returnees would live “in peace” with their neighbors, thereby simultaneously demanding the integration of the Palestinians into the states to which they had fled. In 2022, UNRWA estimated a budget of \$1.6 billion for 5.9 million Palestinians of all generations since 1948.<sup>11</sup> The UNHCR High Commissioner for Refugees, which is responsible for all other almost thirty million refugees worldwide, adopted a budget of just about nine billion dollars.<sup>12</sup>

## THOSE WHO STAYED: RECOGNIZED AND INTEGRATED

Those who stayed after 1948 form the core of Arab Israelis. In 2021, Israel was home to around two million Arabs (more than 21 percent of the population), 6.9 million Jews (about 74 percent) and less than half a million people from other groups (five percent). In September 2023, the non-Jewish, mainly Arab population already numbered 2.6 million.<sup>13, 14</sup> The Arabs are equal citizens, who are represented in the Knesset and who had supported the government coalition from 2021 to 2022 via the Arab Raam party.

In contrast, the revanchist propaganda of the Palestinian organizations and, to a large extent, their local staff have been promoting and fueling the struggle against Israel. Anti-Semitism is taught in Palestinian and other Arab and Islamic schools,<sup>15</sup> is the pillar of those states whose foundations are based on Sharia law, and is enthusiastically practiced and celebrated. Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, is a recent example of this.

<sup>10</sup> Bedein, David, Roadblock to Peace, Jerusalem 2014, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> UNRWA, Budget 2022, <http://tinyurl.com/mr38bab9>

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, February 17, 2023, EC/74/SC/CRP.8, Update on budgets and funding (2022 and 2023), <http://tinyurl.com/4duz2bh2>

<sup>13</sup> Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Population of Israel on the Eve of 2021, <http://tinyurl.com/nymy9td7>

<sup>14</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, Jewish & Non-Jewish Population of Israel/Palestine (1517-Present), 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/nn24wn6t>

<sup>15</sup> Markl, Florian, Teaching to Hate: An Analysis of Palestinian Textbooks, Dossier No. 3, Edition Mena-Watch, Vienna 2022 <http://tinyurl.com/mt3mrppe>

## 2. THE JEWISH “NAKBA”: THE FORGOTTEN TRAGEDY OF THE EXPULSION OF THE JEWS IN THE ORIENT

### “WHERE ARE YOUR JEWS?”

On March 21, 2017, Hillel Neuer, Executive Director of the human rights organization UN Watch, brought the Assembly of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to a state of utter silence with just a few simple questions.<sup>16</sup> The representatives of the anti-Israel member states attacked the only democracy in the Middle East with the well-known stereotypes:

“Israel has used the worst kinds of abuse, ethnic cleansing and imposing a regime of apartheid.” (*PLO*)

“Israel continues to exercise apartheid in Palestine, which constitutes a crime against humanity.” (*Qatar*)

“Violence and terrorism are being exercised against the Palestinian people.” (*Sudan*)

“Violations including building of apartheid walls... to legitimize theft of land and to Judaize Jerusalem.” (*Syria*)

“The separation wall is an example of the apartheid policy practiced by Israel.” (*Bahrain*)

“Israel’s practices of discrimination and extremism...” (*Saudi Arabia*)

Neuer’s answer was interrupted by objections from the Palestinians, Egypt and Pakistan. Then he was given the floor again:

“Israel’s 1.5 million Arabs,<sup>17</sup> whatever challenges they face, enjoy full rights to vote and to be elected in the Knesset, they work as doctors and lawyers, they serve on the Supreme Court. Now I’d like to ask the members of that commission, that commissioned that report, the Arab states from which we just heard. Egypt, Iraq, and the others: How many Jews live in your countries? How many Jews live in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco? Once upon a time, the Middle East was full of Jews.



“Prayer” Memorial in Ramat Gan in memory of the Jews murdered in Iraq during the Farhud pogrom (1941) and in the 1960s.  
Source: Avishai Teicher, PikiWiki – Israel free image collection project

<sup>16</sup> Neuer, Hillel, UN Watch, UN Human Rights Council debate on March 21, 2017, Algeria Where Are Your Jews? <http://tinyurl.com/325n772n>

<sup>17</sup> According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021, almost two million Arabs now live in Israel (see above).

Algeria had 140,000 Jews. Algeria, where are your Jews? Egypt used to have 75,000 Jews. Where are your Jews? Syria, you had tens of thousands of Jews. Where are your Jews? Iraq, you had over 135,000 Jews. Where are your Jews?

Mr. President, where is the apartheid? Why is there a UN commission on the Middle East that does not include Israel? From the 1960s and the '70s they refuse to include Israel. Where is the apartheid, Mr. President? Mr. President, why are we meeting today on an agenda item singling out only one state, the Jewish state, for targeting. Where is the apartheid, Mr. President?"

What Hillel Neuer was talking about had hardly been a political issue until now – not even in Israel. The Jews expelled from the Arab countries and Iran were not dealt with by any UN organization, and of the many UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, not a single one dealt with the fate of Jewish refugees that fled from the Arab states and Iran. From 1948 onwards, almost one million Jews fled this region over the years and decades. 650,000 came to Israel, 200,000 moved to European countries, most of them to France, and many emigrated to the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The founding of Israel in 1948 was the occasion, but not the reason, for the flight of the Jews. Their persecution already began with Islam's conquest and colonization of the Middle East, centuries before the establishment of the Jewish state.

Zionism was not the cause of hostility towards Jews, but a reaction to it and an occasion and welcome excuse for the Islamic world to remain silent over centuries of hostility towards Jews. Inversely, however, after the founding of the state, the Jews finally had a country to which they could flee from discrimination and persecution.

## ISLAM AND THE JEWS

In late antiquity, monotheistic ideas influenced by Judaism and Christianity reached the Arabian Peninsula as well as Mecca, the hometown of Muhammad, who later became the prophet of Islam. Originally, the Koranic tradition was strongly influenced by biblical traditions with which Muhammad opposed the prevailing polytheistic understanding of religion in Mecca. After his flight from Mecca to Medina, conflicts increasingly occurred with the Jewish tribes of Medina, which Muhammad eventually conquered. From the period after the conquest of Medina, the Koran, similar to the New Testament, contains anti-Semitic motifs such as treason and conspiracy.

## A LONG TIME AGO

The positive, virtually Zionistic statements about the Jews all date back to earlier times.<sup>19</sup> Here are some examples:

"And when Moses said to his people: 'O my people! Remember Allah's favors upon you when He raised prophets from among you, made you sovereign, and gave you what He had never given anyone in the world. O my people! Enter the Holy Land which Allah has destined for you to enter. And do not turn back or else you will become losers.'" (*Surah 5:20-21*)

"Indeed, the believers, Jews, Sabians and Christians— whoever truly believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, there will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve (after the reckoning on the Last Day)." (*Surah 5/69*)

"Indeed, we settled the Children of Israel in a blessed land, and granted them good, lawful provisions. They did not differ until knowledge came to them. Surely your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Judgment regarding their differences." (*Surah 10/93*)

## CREED OF ANTI-SEMITISM

The Surahs of a later date, on the other hand, contain negative and anti-Semitic statements:

"Jews as those condemned by Allah"  
(*Surah 4:46*),

Jews as "disgraced apes", "reduced to apes and pigs"  
(*Surahs 2/65-66, 5/60-61, 7/166-167*),

"You will surely find the most bitter towards the believers to be the Jews" (*Surah 5/82*),

"The land of the Jews will belong to the Muslims"  
(*Surah 33/26-27*),

"Fight against them until they are humiliated and pay tribute"  
(*Surah 9/29-30*),

"They are the enemy, so beware of them"  
(*Surah 63/6-7*).

In total, there are more than fifty passages in the Koran that portray Jews negatively. This includes not only those passages in which Jews are explicitly mentioned, but also those in which Jews are not named, but which have always been identified with Jews in the traditional interpretation of the Koran and still are.

Radical interpretations of the Koran are facilitated by the common principle of interpretation, which, in the event of

<sup>18</sup> Roumani, Maurice M., *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement*, Brighton/Chicago/Toronto 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Quran.com, 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/yck7fzd5>





According to tradition, Muhammad expelled the Jewish tribe of the Banu Qaynuqa from Medina in 624. Source: Imago Images

contradictions, gives precedence to more recent Koranic Surahs over older ones, the anti-Jewish ones all being more recent.

In addition to the Koran, the Hadith Collections, the collections of accounts from the life of the Prophet, also contain a number of explicitly anti-Semitic passages in which Jews are portrayed as devious, mendacious, deceitful and too lax in punishing sexual offenses. They are also accused of falsifying scriptures and murdering several prophets, including Muhammad.

Thus, the basic scriptures of Islam are full of anti-Jewish invectives. The only accusation that cannot be found is the Christian accusation of murdering God, but only because Islam does not consider Jesus to be the Son of God.

## DHIMMIS: SECOND-CLASS PEOPLE

The situation of the Jews in the Middle Ages was better in the Islamic sphere of rule than in the Christian Europe of the Crusades, the banishments and the Inquisition. However, even though Jews, like Christians, were regarded as “Ahl al-Kitab”, the “People of the Book” and thus superior to pagans, they were seen not as equals but as tolerated *dhimmis*, as second-class citizens who were systematically worse off than Muslims, thereby being subject to a num-

ber of discriminatory regulations and restrictions. Among other things, they had to pay a special tax for their protection.

These discriminatory measures always had a special symbolic component: The payment of the poll tax, for example, was not only about the economic burden that came with it, it was also to be levied in a degrading form in order to stage the fundamental inferiority of the infidels. The historian Bernard Lewis, in his study *The Jews of Islam*,<sup>20</sup> pointed out that the precepts served “to maintain and more especially to symbolize the social inferiority of the *dhimmis*, and the corresponding superiority of the Muslims. The symbols of inferiority were sometimes of greater importance than the reality.”

## OVER A THOUSAND YEARS OF PERSECUTION

But persecution also occurred in the Islamic world, for example, after the conquest of the Arabian Peninsula in early Islam or in Moorish Spain. Examples include Cordoba in 1011<sup>21</sup> and Granada in 1066,<sup>22</sup> the Moroccan Fez in 1465,<sup>23</sup> Yemen in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century increasingly North Africa, the Middle East and Persia. Ultimately, in 1941, as part of the attempt by pro-German

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *The Jews of Islam*. Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Fletcher, Richard, *Moorish Spain*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2006, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Birnbaum, Eli, 2023, [jewishhistory.org.il](http://jewishhistory.org.il), <http://tinyurl.com/3etyy3xn>

<sup>23</sup> Gerber, Jane S., *Jewish Society in Fez 1450–1700*, Studies in Communal and Economic Life, Leiden 1980, p. 24.

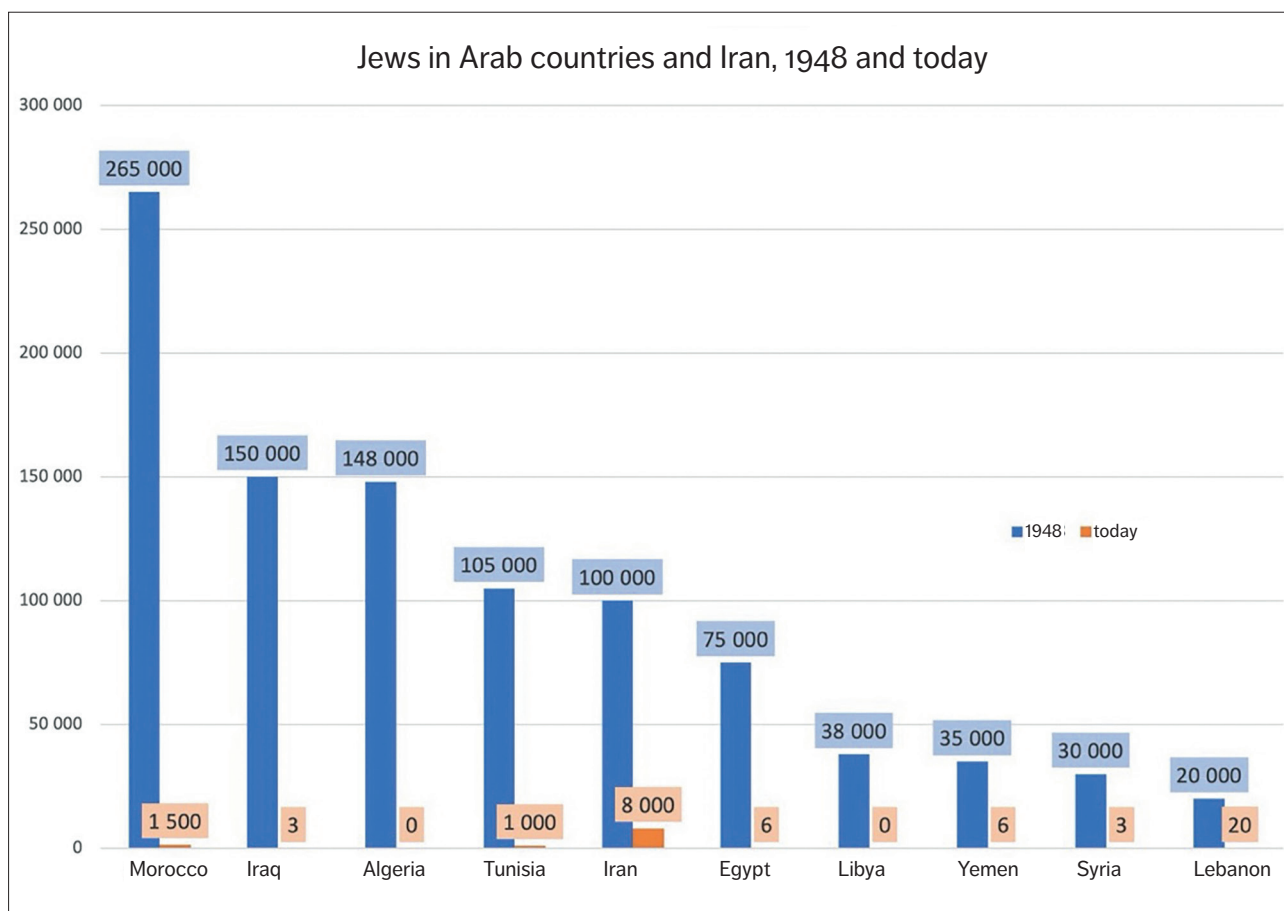
circles to seize power in Iraq, a major pogrom took place in Baghdad, the so-called “Farhud”<sup>24</sup>

In Islamism and political Islam, the relevant Surahs combine with the European anti-Semitism of the Christian clergy in the Orient and later of National Socialism<sup>25</sup> to form an Islamic anti-Semitism.<sup>26</sup> Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, or the Milli Görüs, which emerged in Turkey in the 1970s, transfer relevant Koranic texts and imported anti-Semitism to apply to today’s Jews.

## THE STRATEGY OF THE ARAB LEAGUE

Founded in 1945, the Arab League<sup>27</sup> is an association of twenty-two Arab states and a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation<sup>28</sup> with a total of fifty-six countries that claims to represent Islam.

Lyn Julius, author and co-founder of Harif, an association of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, sums up the organized anti-Semitic communities of the Arab world as follows: “A policy of victimization of their Jewish citizens was common to all Arab member states of the Arab League from 1947 onwards. The AL drafted a series of anti-Jewish laws stripping Jews of their rights, excluding them from public life and dispossessing them of their assets and property. The most egregious measure they took was to criminalize Zionism. This meant that any Jew could be arrested, jailed, and even executed on trumped-up spying charges for Israel.”<sup>29</sup>



Source: Point of No Return, Jewish Refugees from Arab and Muslim Countries

<sup>24</sup> Tsimhoni, Daphne, The Pogrom (Farhud) against the Jews of Baghdad in 1941. In: Roth, J. K., Maxwell, E. Levy, M., Whitworth, W. (Hrsg.), Remembering for the Future, London 2011, pp. 570–588.

See also Matthias Küntzel, 80 Jahre “Farhud”: Das vergessene Massaker an Juden in Bagdad, Mena-Watch, May 31, 2021, <http://tinyurl.com/yckhcwc8>

<sup>25</sup> Küntzel, Matthias, Nazis und der Nahe Osten: Wie der islamische Antisemitismus entstand, Berlin 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Küntzel, Matthias, Islamischer Antisemitismus: Kennzeichen, Entstehung und Folgen, Mena-Watch, June 7, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/26vyc2t7>

<sup>27</sup> Wikipedia, 2023, Arab League, <http://tinyurl.com/yty7de9r>.

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia, 2023, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, <http://tinyurl.com/4h9ee6rc>

<sup>29</sup> Julius, Lyn, unpublished interview with Mena-Watch, 2023.

## ALMOST “FREE OF JEWS”

Whereas in 1948, there were 966,000 Jews living in Iran and in the Arab countries<sup>30</sup> discussed in more detail here, today only 10,538 are left according to the latest available figures. Even though the Arabic term “Nakba” principally signifies the flight of the Palestinians from Israel after 1948, it can be applied analogously to the flight of the Jews from the countries of the Middle East. In total, around one million Jews fled or were expelled during the “Jewish Nakba”.

## JEWS FROM ARAB COUNTRIES AND IRAN TODAY

In contrast to the Arab states’ treatment of the Palestinian refugees, Israel sought to integrate the Jewish refugees without scoring any political points as a result of their fate. In 2014, the Israeli parliament decided to establish an annual day of remembrance (November 30) for the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries.

However, the knowledge of the history and heritage of the MENA Jews [MENA stands for Middle East/North Africa] still leaves much to be desired. This is partly due to the

heterogeneous nature of the perception and self-perception of Jews from Arab countries. As can be read in Tom Segev, for example, the motives for emigration were extremely different.<sup>31</sup> In view of the history of persecution over thousands of years, many Jews, at least since the Shoah, no longer want to see themselves or be seen as victims. Not all of them identify with the label of helpless “displaced persons”, but prefer to identify with Zionism and the state of hope for a free life for Jews.

“I have this to say: I am not a refugee,” Ran Cohen is cited, who was born in Iraq and is a former member of the Knesset.<sup>32</sup> Many Jews had to flee but were welcomed in Israel, Israeli government officials argued against a comparison of the two “Nakbas”.<sup>33</sup> Jews with roots in Arab countries sometimes have a different approach and want their history to be recognized: “what is needed is more grassroots support,” “schools both in Israel and the diaspora to teach the issue” and a “museum in Jerusalem,” for example, are called for.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of different classifications, it remains a fact that public awareness and knowledge of the history of the Jews is just as low as that of the dissemination, social integration and preservation of anti-Semitism as a state policy of some Islamic countries. In any case, it is disproportionate to the attention paid to Palestinian positions.

<sup>30</sup> Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen

<sup>31</sup> Segev, Tom, 1949. *The First Israelis*, New York 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Shenhav, Yehuda, *Hitching a Ride on the Magic Carpet*, Haaretz, August 15, 2003, <http://tinyurl.com/4anebbxf>

<sup>33</sup> Ahren, Raphael, *Changing tack, Foreign Ministry to bring ‘Jewish refugees’ to fore*, *The Times of Israel*, April 2, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/yzjgyud7>

<sup>34</sup> See Julius, Lyn, 2023.

### 3. FACTS AT A GLANCE

## EGYPT

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The Jews in Egypt can look back on a history spanning several thousand years. According to Jewish tradition, even when the Jews left under Moses, a large part of the Israelites remained in Egypt. After the Islamic conquest in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, both the Christianized Egyptian population, the Copts, and the Jews, who were tolerated as *dhimmis*, as wards under Islamic law, became minorities.

### MODERN TIMES

When the Spanish King Ferdinand II enforced the Inquisition in 1478, countless Jews fled the country. Many of them settled in Egypt, which led to a considerable increase in the Jewish community.

In Egypt at that time, a much more tolerant climate towards minorities gave Jews a sense of security. In particular, Ismail Pasha, who as governor and later Khedive (viceroy) wanted to modernize the country from 1863 to 1879, promoted the settlement of Jews by granting them special privileges.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

During the Tanzimat era (“New Order”), a period of far-reaching reforms from 1839 until the adoption of the Ottoman Constitution in 1876, a series of edicts were issued that provided for equality for the Ottoman subjects. Under pressure from European states, whose military assistance the Ottoman Empire sought, the status of *dhimmis* was gradually abolished. But discrimination against Jews essentially remained, which is why wealthy Jews took on foreign citizenships. When Britain took power in 1882, the sultan’s supremacy over the Khedive, the governor of the Ottoman province of Egypt, was not formally challenged.



The interior of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. Source: Imago Images/Design Pics Editorial

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In 1922, Egypt formally became independent, although only five thousand Jews were granted citizenship under the Egyptian citizenship law of 1929. In response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the fall of the caliphate, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, which sought a return to the original Islam and the establishment of an Islamic social order. Seeing Islam threatened, the Brotherhood only wanted to recognize political rulers as legitimate if they ruled in accordance with Sharia law. In addition, al-Banna advocated armed, offensive *jihād* (“holy war”) against non-Muslims and all those whom he saw as their collaborators and helpers. In 1936, Hassan al-Banna addressed this program to the Egyptian king and other Arab heads of state in his tractate *Nahwan-N-Nūr (Toward the Light)*.

In 1938, the Muslim Brotherhood organized violent protests against Jews under the anti-Semitic slogans “Down with the Jews!” and “Jews out of Egypt!” In the same year, members of the Green Shirts<sup>35</sup> – the fascist Young Egypt Party founded in 1933 – met with Adolf Hitler and demanded the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt.

On the night of November 2–3, 1945, violent riots broke out on the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, in which Britain promised the Zionists the establishment of a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine. Five Jews were killed, the main synagogue in Cairo and other Jewish institutions were set on fire. Prime Minister Mahmoud an-Nukrashi then accused the “Zionists” of provoking such a reaction.

In 1947, the Egyptian delegate to the United Nations, Heykal Pasha, warned that if the United Nations’ partition plan adopted on November 29<sup>36</sup> was put into practice, one million Jews in the Arab countries would be endangered.<sup>37</sup>

## SINCE 1948

Immediately after the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948<sup>38</sup> one thousand Jews were arrested and martial law was declared in June. Jews were regarded as a “fifth column,” excluded from university studies, private property as well as the property of Jewish institutions was confiscated and the few Jews with an Egyptian citizenship

were deprived of it. As a result, 20,000 Jews fled Egypt, but the assaults did not end there: On June 20, twenty-two Jews were killed in a terror attack, in July five hundred Jewish shops went up in flames, and in September another nineteen Jews were killed.

In 1951, Egyptian journalist Muhammad Halifa at-Tunisi produced the first complete Arabic translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>39</sup> (The original Russian edition was first published in 1903. Although researchers for a long time considered the Russian secret service to be the author of the pamphlet, the actual authorship is still unclear today.) Excerpts from it had already been translated by Arab Christians in the 1920s. Commenting on his translation, at-Tunisi emphasized that his work was intended to warn against the Jews not only because of the conflict with Israel: Even if they were expelled from our countries and lived in any part of the world, he said, they would cause mischief, because wherever they were, they would be enemies of humanity.

In the course of the following years, there were repeated persecutions and riots, such as on January 26, 1952, when shops owned by Jews and other minorities were attacked. During the Suez Crisis in 1956, 25,000 Jews had to leave the country.

Even though the Egyptian Ministry of National Guidance, which issued the translation of the *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1956, doubted – rightly – in their introduction that the tract had been written at the Basel Zionist Congress in 1897, they still voiced their conviction that the text’s correspondence with various Jewish documents such as the Talmud and the policies of Israel proved its fundamental authenticity. For this assertion, the ministry relied on a commentary by the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg.

In 1961, all Jewish shops and businesses were nationalized. During the Six-Day War in 1967, all remaining male Jews in Egypt were interned, and in 1972, the last rabbi, Chain Moussa Douek, left the country.

Thereby, the millennia-old Jewish community of Egypt was expelled within a few years and decimated to the point of almost complete extinction. While in 1918 there were at least 80,000 Jews living in Egypt,<sup>40</sup> in 2016 there were only thirteen (eight in Cairo, five in Alexandria), today there are six.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Armed Conflict Events Data (ACED), 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/bdefvajb>

<sup>36</sup> UN General Assembly: Resolution 181 (II), November 29, 1947, <http://tinyurl.com/28dzu5st>, pp. 1–3.

<sup>37</sup> UN General Assembly, Second Session, Official Records, Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, Summary Records of Meetings, Lake Success, N. Y., 25 Sept.–15 Nov. 1947, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> Küntzel, Matthias, Warum wurde 1948 kein arabischer Staat Palästina gegründet? Mena-Watch, May 8, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/3wuyx2cj>

<sup>39</sup> Hagemeister, Michael, Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion: Der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung, Magazin Wien Museum, February 23, 2021, <http://tinyurl.com/yyykkte6>

<sup>40</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 271.

<sup>41</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

## ALGERIA

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The history of the Jews in Algeria goes back almost two thousand years. Some theories date their presence to pre-Roman times, but there is no evidence for this. Significant archaeological finds date back to the first century, when many Jews settled in North Africa as a result of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Algeria's Jewish communities were augmented by Jews who had fled Europe to escape several waves of persecution, including many from present-day Spain, where the Christian reconquest of the country from Muslim rule was accompanied by the expulsion of the Jews. Larger Jewish communities existed in the coastal cities of Algiers, Oran and Bejaia, but also in some inland towns.

### MODERN TIMES

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, many Spanish Jews emigrated to nearby North Africa. The waves of refugees abruptly enlarged the Jewish communities in the Maghreb, as was the case in Algeria.

Although the newcomers successfully integrated into Algerian society in a short time, they were repeatedly

attacked and persecuted on a massive scale over the next few centuries.

The Jews who had fled Spain quickly learned the language of the Berbers, who had their home mainly in the eastern part of Algeria; in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Arabic, Spanish, Ladino, Italian and Hebrew were added as languages of the Jews living in Algeria.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Like the Jewish communities in the rest of the Islamic Empire, the Jews in later Algeria had the status of *dhimmi*, meaning they were systematically worse off than Muslims. They experienced a profound change in their legal status with the French invasion in 1830 and the associated conquest and annexation of Algeria. Many Jews welcomed the colonization of the country, and the communities quickly adopted the French language and culture.

In the first reforms, the *dhimmi* status was abolished and Jews were put on an equal footing with Muslim Algerians. From 1865 onwards, Jews and Muslims were able to apply for French citizenship, and with the Crémieux Decree, the Jews, but not the Muslims, finally received French citizenship. This step was not without controversy. Among the French living in Algeria, strong anti-Semitism prevailed, which led, for example, to calls for the revocation of the Crémieux Decree in 1890.



Pogrom in Constantine, 1934. Source: Imago/Gemini Collection

The growing anti-Semitism in metropolitan France also spilled over into North Africa: When, in the wake of the Dreyfus affair in 1898, Émile Zola had to justify his actions before a Paris court for his famous article *J'accuse ...!*, anti-Semites in Algiers looted Jewish shops, set fire to one hundred and fifty-eight buildings, and killed two Jews. The year before, there had already been looting in the Jewish quarters of Mozaganem and Oran.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The anti-Semitic propaganda of French right-wing extremists fell on fertile ground with some Muslims. One of the consequences was the pogrom in Constantine in 1934, in which twenty-five Jews were killed without the authorities intervening. In addition, a large number of Jewish institutions were destroyed.

With the Second World War and the invasion of France by Nazi Germany, Algeria came under the control of the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazis.<sup>42</sup> In 1940, it introduced new Jewish laws and repealed the Crémieux Decree. In one fell swoop, around 110,000 Jews lost their French citizenship – a step that was enthusiastically applauded by many Muslims. Jews had to wear the yellow star, and in 1942 the General Union of French Israelites (Union générale des Israélites de France, UGIF) was created as a kind of *Judenrat*.

Anti-Semitic laws were implemented more strictly and harshly in Algeria than in France itself. In addition to a separate administrative department “for the control of the Jewish problem,” an office for the arisation of the economy was established, whereby Jews were excluded from many sectors of the economy, Jewish businesses were confiscated and handed over to non-Jewish trustees. Around two thousand Jews were sent to labor and concentration camps, many of whom died of disease or starvation as a result of the brutal treatment of the guards.

The end of this horror came for the Jews of Algeria with the liberation of the country by the Allies in November 1942, although it took until the summer of 1943 to abolish all anti-Jewish laws and regulations and to restore French citizenship to the Jews.

## SINCE 1948

Algeria’s post-war history differs markedly from other Muslim states, as the country remained under French con-

trol. In 1948, for example, in the context of the founding of the state of Israel, no Jews had to flee, and no forced expulsion occurred.

The war between the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN) and France, the latter of which many Algerian Jews supported, was accompanied by anti-Semitic attacks, including attacks on Jewish institutions in November 1956, an attack on the main synagogue in Algiers in 1960, and the desecration of the Oran cemetery in 1961. Also in 1961, the well-known Jewish singer Sheikh Raymond Leyris was assassinated.<sup>43</sup>

With Algeria’s independence in 1962, around 130,000 Jews left the country. Most of them moved to France, and around 25,000 went to Israel. Independent Algeria revoked the citizenship of all non-Muslims with the Citizenship Act of 1936. By 1969, about a thousand of the approximately 148,000 Jews living in Algeria after the Second World War remained; in 2007, there were fewer than twenty.<sup>44</sup> Today, not a single Jewish community exists in Algeria anymore.<sup>45</sup>

## IRAQ

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The Jewish community in Iraq,<sup>46</sup> formerly Babylonia, has a history of more than two and a half thousand years since the destruction of the first Jewish Temple and the subsequent Babylonian exile, from which only a portion of the refugees returned under Ezra and Nehemiah. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the importance of Babylonian Jewry increased, while that of Judaism in the Land of Israel declined under Christian rule.

After the Muslim conquest of Babylon around 640, non-Muslim subjects became *dhimmis*. Under the governor Umar II, the situation of the Jews deteriorated between 717 and 720, while it temporarily improved after the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. After the death of the Great Khan, however, it became threatening again.

### MODERN TIMES

In 1534, under Sultan Suleiman I, the rule of the Turkish Ottomans over Iraq began; after a short reconquest by the Persians in 1623, whose aegis did not last long, the Turks

<sup>42</sup> The Jews of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/959bzckw>

<sup>43</sup> Berges, Magali, Portrait Cheikh Raymond, Mondomix 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/4y62vxr5>

<sup>44</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 279.

<sup>45</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Mendes, Philip, The Forgotten Refugees: The Causes of the Post-1948 Jewish Exodus from Arab Countries, Melbourne 2002.

took power again in 1638. This led to a significant improvement in the living conditions of Iraqi Jews, many of whom also served in the Turkish army. The joy of the re-conquest, i.e. the expulsion of the Persians, was so great that the Iraqi Jews established a new holiday of their own, Yom Nes (Day of the Miracle).

When the plague broke out in Baghdad in 1743, the Jews were not spared. Since all the rabbis were among the dead, Sadka Bekhor Hussein was appointed as the new rabbi of Baghdad.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Under the rule of the Ottoman governor Dawud Pasha from 1816 to 1831, many Jews were forced to leave the country. Wealthy community members such as the Sassoons, Ezras, Eliases, Gubbays, and Judahs fled to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, from where they provided financial support to the Jews who remained in the country.

Although *dhimma* was formally abolished in the Ottoman Empire with the Tanzimat edicts, especially by the reform decree Hatt-ı Hümâyûn of 1856, discrimination and persecution did not change much for the Jews. On September 15, 1889, a pogrom in Baghdad left several dead.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century

When, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Mandate of Iraq was formed, the Jews applied to the British in 1918, 1919 and 1920 for British citizenship, but were denied. Nevertheless, a brief flowering of Iraqi Jewry followed, in which educated Jews played an important role: For example, Sir Sassoon Eskell was the first Chancellor of the Exchequer (1921 to 1927) of Jewish origin.<sup>47</sup>

But as early as 1929, the Zionist movement was banned from operating in Iraq. From 1932, the year of independence, the German ambassador Fritz Grobba published translations of excerpts from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Iraqi newspapers, while from 1933 the German Radio



In June 1941, one of the largest pogroms in history took place in Baghdad, the Farhud.  
Source: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International

<sup>47</sup> Lieber, Dov, Dismay, poetry as home of Jew who helped found modern Iraq is destroyed, Times of Israel, August 12, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ye27e4hw>



Zeesen broadcast anti-Semitic diatribes in Arabic.<sup>48</sup> As a result, the teaching of biblical studies, Jewish history, and Hebrew was banned, and between 1934 and 1936 all Jews were dismissed from the civil service. In 1934, an exit tax was imposed on Jews, and in 1936, Jewish companies were forced to take on a Muslim partner. On Yom Kippur of the same year, there were several attacks in which three Jews were murdered in Baghdad and one in Basra.

On April 1, 1941, the pro-Nazi politician Rashid al-Kilani seized power in a coup d'état, whereupon military clashes with British troops began on May 2. After the victory of the British, one of the largest anti-Jewish pogroms in history, the Farhud, took place from 1 to 2 June.<sup>49</sup>

The riots in Baghdad took place against the backdrop of a power vacuum following the collapse of the pro-Nazi government and the emergence of rumors that the Jews had supported the British army. Within forty-eight hours, at least one hundred and eighty Jews were murdered, a thousand wounded, and nine hundred houses destroyed. After the massacre, an underground Zionist movement was formed, as most Jews no longer saw a future for themselves in Iraq.

On November 28, 1947, Iraqi Foreign Minister Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali echoed the warnings of his Egyptian counterpart: A UN partition resolution for Palestine, which would recommend the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state on the territory of the British Mandate, would have very negative consequences for Jews throughout the Arab world.<sup>50</sup>

## SINCE 1948

In the course of the founding of the State of Israel, Iraq declared a state of emergency in 1948. Three hundred and ten Jews were tried by military courts, Jewish officials were dismissed from the civil service, and Zionist activities were prosecuted and punished with at least seven years in prison. In 1949, another hundred Jews were tried for alleged Zionist activities.

In September 1948, Shafiq Ades, the country's richest Jew and opponent of the Zionist movement, was hanged in front of his villa in Basra. Jewish companies lost their licenses and Iraqi Jews were obliged to pay a tax for the fight against Israel.

In March 1950, the parliament allowed Jews to leave the country for one year subject to the renunciation of their property. One of the motives of the authorities was the high proportion of Jews among the members and functionaries of the Communist Party, whom they wanted to get rid of in this way, but also the hope of overtaxing the Israeli economy and causing it to collapse by forcing the admission of completely destitute Jews.

From 1951 to 1952, after bombings of synagogues, 120,000 Iraqi Jews were brought to Israel via Iran and Cyprus, and Israel had to pay a bounty for each evacuee.<sup>51</sup> The operation was named after Ezra and Nehemiah, who, according to biblical tradition, led Jews back to Judea from the Babylonian exile in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.

After the Baath Party came to power in 1963, the Jews who stayed behind were given yellow identity cards. As part of a new wave of persecution in 1968, nine Jews were sentenced to death; one year later they were publicly hanged together with other convicts. Between 1970 and 1972, another eighteen executions took place.

In 1970, nine hundred Jews fled Iraq via the Kurdish region. In 2005, there were only seventy-six Jews still living in the country. In 2016, only five were left,<sup>52</sup> compared to 140,000 in the 1930s, and currently this number has decreased down to three.<sup>53</sup>

## IRAN

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The history of the Jews in Iran began about two thousand six hundred years ago, when King Cyrus II, after his conquest of Babylon, gave the Jews permission to return from their Babylonian exile to Jerusalem and rebuild the Holy Temple. However, only some of the Jews took advantage of this opportunity. Under the subsequent rule of the religiously tolerant Parthians, the Jews who remained in the country supported the rulers in their fight against the Romans.

In 226, the Parthians were ousted by the Sassanids, whose Zoroastrianism left less room for other religions. As a

<sup>48</sup> Rosbach, Jens, Nazi-Propaganda auf Arabisch, Deutschlandfunk, October 8, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/3mfvtne>

<sup>49</sup> Tsimhoni, Daphne, Farhud. In: Dan Diner (ed.): Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur (EJGK). Band 2: Co-Ha, Stuttgart/Weimar 2012, pp. 324–327; Julius, Lyn, Warum wir (uns) an den irakischen Farhud erinnern müssen, Mena-Watch, June 7, 2022, <http://tinyurl.com/yc45jp83>; as well as Wahba, Rachel,

Farhud Days: Remembering the Screams, Times of Israel, June 7, 2022, <http://tinyurl.com/2zuv65f9>

<sup>50</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, 126<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session on November 18, 1947, Continuation of the discussion on the Palestinian question, <http://tinyurl.com/3sdhy3wh>

<sup>51</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. xxi.

<sup>52</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 277.

<sup>53</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

result, Christians and Jews were persecuted at times, which is why the Islamic conquerors of Persia, who were advancing from the year 634 onwards, were initially welcomed as liberators. Nevertheless, the Jews had to be content with *dhimmi* status in exchange for the payment of a special tax (*jizya*) for tolerated persons or wards.

## MODERN TIMES

During the period of Mongol rule and that of the Safavids, who made the Shia branch of Islam the state religion, their status deteriorated further. In 1656, for example, the Jews were expelled from Isfahan and forced to convert to Islam. Since this led to a financial loss – after all, the authorities missed out on their habitual *jizya* in this fashion –, the Jews were again allowed to return to their faith in 1661, but they had to wear a special mark on their clothing, as they were considered unclean. For religious Muslims, this resulted in the need to ritually purify themselves after any physical contact with Jews.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In 1830 there was a massacre in Tabriz and a forced conversion of the survivors to Islam. In Mashhad, in 1839, a pogrom of Muslims against the Jewish community called “Allahdad” (God’s Justice) took place. Survivors were again forced to convert to Islam. A large number of Jews then outwardly practiced Islam but continued to adhere to their faith in secret as so-called crypto-Jews.

In 1867 there was a massacre in Barfurush; in 1892, twenty Jews were murdered in Shiraz and three synagogues were burned down.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In 1910, there was another pogrom in Shiraz, which had been triggered by slanderous accusations of ritual murder against the originally Jewish Qavam family, who had converted to Islam, according to which Jews had killed a Muslim girl. Twelve members of the Jewish community were murdered, fifty wounded, and the six thousand Jewish inhabitants of Shiraz robbed of their property. Pogroms and the forced acceptance of Islam also occurred in Zarqon, Lar, Jahrom, Darab, Nobendigan, Sarvestan and Kazerun.

The Pahlavi dynasty, which came to power in 1925, initially improved the situation of the Jews, forced conversions

were prohibited and the status of impurity of Jews was abolished. Nevertheless, in 1931 the critical Jewish journalist and member of parliament Shmuel Hayyim was arrested on false charges.

It was at this time that Reza Shah began to sympathize with the National Socialists, who in turn saw the Iranians as Aryans who were not affected by the Nuremberg Laws. On the occasion of Purim in 1941, which celebrates the death of ancient Persian enemies of the Jews who wanted to stage a pogrom and exterminate the Jews, the Persian-language Nazi radio encouraged Iranians to return the favor to the Jews.

On September 16, 1941, Britain forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

### SINCE 1948

Especially during the last years of his reign before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Shah repeatedly made anti-Semitic statements about alleged Jewish conspiracies, probably also as a result of the strong representation of Jews in the communist Tudeh Party. Nevertheless, there was close cooperation with the State of Israel on economic and security issues.

In the first months after the Islamic Revolution, left-wing Jewish intellectuals united in the Association of Jewish Iranian Intellectuals (AJII), together with Chief Rabbis Yedidia Shofet and Uriel Davidi, tried to find a modus vivendi with the emerging Islamic regime. Eventually, however, most of them left the country – often for California, presumably in order not to endanger family members left behind in Iran by emigrating to Israel.

On March 16, 1979, the honorary president of the Jewish community, Habib Elghanian, who had already been abroad, was arrested during a visit to his homeland and sentenced to death as an alleged spy.<sup>54</sup> In the first year of the revolution, a total of seventeen Jews were executed as alleged spies.

Although the Iranian regime ostensibly claims to distinguish between “Jews” and “Zionists,” the two terms are interchangeable in Iranian propaganda. The regime does not shy away from cooperation with the leading figures of the Holocaust denier scene. For example, on February 6, 2006, the International Holocaust Caricature Contest was announced, to which over a thousand cartoons were submitted.<sup>55</sup>

This was followed in December 2006 by a conference attended by internationally well-known right-wing extrem-

<sup>54</sup> Encyclopaedia Iranica, Elqanian Habib, 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/hcbfe695>

<sup>55</sup> Revisionists, The Holocaust Historiography Project, Iranian Holocaust cartoon contest, 2023, <http://tinyurl.com/zdfdcy6z>



Antique carpet with Jewish motifs from Iran. Source: Imago Images/NurPhoto

ists such as the French Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, German NPD functionaries and the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke.<sup>56</sup> In 2012, on Israel's Shoah Remembrance Day, TV films were broadcast in which the Holocaust was denied. In 2014, a second *New Horizon* conference of “independent thinkers” was held, and in 2016, a second Holocaust caricature competition took place.

Threats of annihilation are regularly issued against the State of Israel. The military, especially units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, support the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and smuggle weapons via Syria to the terrorist Hezbollah in Lebanon.

When former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani called for the nuclear annihilation of Israel in a sermon

delivered on December 14, 2001 in the mosque of the University of Tehran,<sup>57</sup> he said, among other things: “The use of even one atomic bomb in Israel will destroy everything. In contrast, it will only do damage to the Islamic world. It is not irrational to consider such an eventuality.”

It is not least such statements that make the apparent development of such weapons by the Islamic Republic<sup>58</sup> so dangerous and completely unacceptable to Israel, as the German political scientist Stephan Grigat notes in his book entitled *Die Einsamkeit Israels*:

“The open threats of annihilation against Israel by Iran and its allies such as Hezbollah are so threatening because this anti-Semitism is combined with both conventional rearmament and a nuclear weapons program.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Küntzel, Matthias, *Unholy Hatreds: Holocaust Denial and Antisemitism in Iran*, Jerusalem 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yu5k6ufk>

<sup>57</sup> GlobalSecurity.Org, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Qods Day Speech (Jerusalem Day), December 14, 2001, <http://tinyurl.com/ms2n7fkt>

<sup>58</sup> Markl, Florian/Albright, David/Burkhard, Sarah/Berman, Ilan, ... haben die Fähigkeit, die Bombe zu bauen ... Das iranische Atomwaffenprogramm im Lichte des geheimen Atomarchivs, Dossier Nr. 5, Edition Mena-Watch, Wien 2022, <http://tinyurl.com/p4awyhg9>

<sup>59</sup> Grigat, Stephan, *Die Einsamkeit Israels. Zionismus, die israelische Linke und die iranische Bedrohung*, Hamburg 2014; Grigat, Stephan, *Antisemitic Anti-Zionism: Muslim Brotherhood, Iran and Hezbollah*. In: Lange, Armin/Mayerhofer, Kerstin (eds.): *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Worlds. An End to Antisemitism. Vol. 5*, Berlin/Boston 2021.

In the period between 1948 and 1966, almost 45,000 Jews immigrated from Iran to Israel. After a period of stabilization, the number of Jews in Iran has declined since the Islamic Revolution, from about 100,000 to 150,000 immediately before the revolution to 9,200 in 2021. Currently, about eight thousand Jews are still living in Iran.<sup>60</sup> In the face of this exodus, the claim made by apologists for the Tehran regime that the Jews were doing well in Iran as the second largest community in the Middle East existed there, is proving to be misleading. “One might as well say that Finland is the second most popular destination for beach vacationers and windsurfers, if Jamaica is the only alternative,” said Michael Rubin, an American expert on the Middle East, characterizing this protective claim.<sup>61</sup>

## YEMEN

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Yemen’s relationship with the Land of Israel dates back to the time of the biblical King Solomon.<sup>62</sup> The presence of Jews in the south of the Arabian Peninsula has various origins: Some may have been natives, others came as immigrants from northern Africa, Babylon, the Levant and present-day Israel. The Jewish community in Yemen was considered one of the oldest outside of Israel. Although geographically isolated, it maintained close contacts with other communities in Babylonia and Egypt.

From the first to the sixth century, meaning before the spread of Islam, Yemen was home to the kingdom of Himyar<sup>63</sup>, whose ruling class in the fourth century adopted a monotheistic faith that is now generally attributed to Judaism.



*Jews in a Yemeni mountain village, 1902. Source: Imago Images/UIG*

<sup>60</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Ist der Iran ein sicherer Ort für Juden? Mena-Watch, March 16, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/mr4582tk>

<sup>62</sup> Goitein, Shelomo Dov, Von den Juden Jemens, Berlin 1937.

<sup>63</sup> Gajda, Iwona, Le Royaume de Himyar à l’époque monothéiste. L’histoire de l’Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de l’ère chrétienne jusqu’à l’avènement de l’islam. Paris 2009.

Over time, Ethiopian Christians seized power before the former Jewish kingdom became a province of the Persian Sassanid Empire and then the expanding Islamic Empire.

During the Islamic period, the importance of Judaism in Yemen declined; the Jews, as everywhere else in the Islamic Empire, were regarded as *dhimmis*. Nevertheless, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries they took an active part in intellectual and economic life, especially in periods when the other *dhimmi* rules were observed less strictly in return for payment of higher taxes.

## MODERN TIMES

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the situation deteriorated dramatically. Yemen became one of the few regions in the Arab world where forced conversions to Islam occurred. Particularly detrimental were the developments surrounding the pseudo-messiah Shabbtai Zvi, who was able to gather a large following before he finally surprisingly converted to Islam. In 1679, the Jews were expelled from Yemen, but this had such negative consequences for the country that they were soon allowed to return.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Spurred not least by a new wave of forced conversions to Sunni Islam, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of the emigration or flight of many Jews to the territory of present-day Israel. Others moved to the north of the country, where a far more tolerable branch of Shiite Islam prevailed.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In 1911, under the reign of Imam Yahya in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the strictest *dhimmi* rules were reintroduced, such as those prohibiting Jews from any physical contact with Muslims or the obligation to clean latrines. After Jewish orphans were automatically declared Muslims,<sup>64</sup> their parents often married them off at the age of seven or eight in order to protect them from forced incorporation into Islam in the event of their own death. In view of the large number of Jewish emigrants, Imam Yahya finally forbade emigration.

As a result of the UN Partition Plan, which provided for the creation of a Jewish and an Arab state in the Mandate of Palestine, a pogrom took place in Yemen in 1947, in which eighty-two Jews were murdered in Aden with the

participation of the police, dozens more were injured, and synagogues, shops and hundreds of homes were destroyed.

## SINCE 1948

By the time Israel was founded in May 1948, about a hundred thousand Jews – and thus a considerable part of the community – had already left Yemen for Israel. Between 1949 and 1950, the approximately fifty thousand who remained in the country were ransomed by Israel and brought to Israel via an airlift from Aden.

Thus, the two-thousand-year-old presence of the Jews in Yemen had shrunk to a few hundred people. The civil war that has been going on since 2004,<sup>65</sup> in which the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthis have been and continue to be conspicuous by their vehement anti-Semitism,<sup>66</sup> drove out most of the Jews still living in Yemen. Following reports in 2021 that the Houthi militias were chasing the last Jewish families out of the country, one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world became extinct. Today, only six Jews are said to be living in Yemen.<sup>67</sup>

## LEBANON

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In Lebanon, as in Syria, there was a two-thousand-year-old Jewish community, especially around Beirut, in Sidon and Baalbek, of which almost nothing remains today. The first Jews settled after the defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt by the Romans in 136.

## MODERN TIMES

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

After the territory of present-day Lebanon had been part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, the country once again attracted the attention of leading European states at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1861, the so-called Mount Lebanon was proclaimed as an autonomous province, populated predominantly by Christians, who exerted a strong influence in Lebanon. Nevertheless, a joint council was established in which all the country's religions were to be equally represented.

<sup>64</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 272.

<sup>65</sup> Yemen: Huthi-Milizen vertreiben die letzten Juden, Mena-Watch, July 16, 2020, <http://tinyurl.com/3zt4na33>

<sup>66</sup> Huthi-TV: Juden kontrollieren die Welt, Mena-Watch, March 17, 2022, <http://tinyurl.com/496vmm24>

<sup>67</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, Syria and Lebanon came under French mandate administration. The Lebanese Constitution of 1926 guaranteed Jews freedom of religion and self-government. However, the Jewish community had always been much smaller in number than that in neighboring Syria. In 1948, up to twenty thousand Jews lived in Lebanon.<sup>68</sup>

### SINCE 1948

In November 1948, several Jews were killed during violent riots. In the 1960s, refugee movements from other Arab countries temporarily led to an increase in the Jewish population. In 1971, the Jewish community president, Albert Elkia, was kidnapped and murdered. With the beginning of the civil war in the mid-1970s, almost all Jews emigrated; thirty of those who remained were murdered during the war. Today, only fifteen to twenty Jews<sup>69, 70</sup> still live in Lebanon.

## LIBYA

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The history of the Jews in present-day Libya began about two thousand five hundred years ago with the settlement of Jews from Alexandria in the Greek colony of Cyrenai-ca. Josephus Flavius also mentioned that under Ptolemy I, Jews from Alexandria settled in this area, also in the ancient province of Tripolitania. After the suppression of the Jewish revolt in Palestine, in the year 115, there was uprising in the Jewish settlement area that was bloodily suppressed by the Romans.

The rule over the country changed over the centuries from the Romans to various Berber tribes (some of whom embraced the Jewish faith before the Islamic conquest) and Vandals to the Arabs, who conquered Libya around 645. Initially welcomed by the local Jews after years of oppression by the Eastern Roman Empire, the Arabs imposed *dhimmi* status on the Jewish population, whose situation deteriorated considerably under the Moroccan Berber dynasty of the Almohads.



*The Magen Avraham Synagogue in Beirut. Source: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license*

<sup>68</sup> Schulze, Kirsten, *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict*, Brighton/Portland 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 274.

<sup>70</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.



Former Serousi Synagogue in Tripoli. Source: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license

## MODERN TIMES

With the *reconquista*, the Christian reconquest of Spain, Tripolitania became an important refuge for Jews who had fled from or were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. In 1551, the Ottomans conquered Tripoli.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

After changing local dynasties, the Sublime Porte in Constantinople took power in Libya in 1835 before the colonization of the country by Italy began in 1911.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The situation of the Jews deteriorated after an initially quite good period with the rise of fascism in Italy under Benito Mussolini. The adoption of anti-Semitic laws in Italy under pressure from Germany in 1938 also had an impact on Libya; however, the situation of the Jews only became dramatic with the direct German involvement in North Africa.

While the German *Wehrmacht* was waging war against the Allies, the Germans deported about two thousand Jews from the Jewish quarter of Benghazi to the desert, where six hundred of the deportees died in labor camps. The Italians set up the Giado concentration camp south of Tripoli, where the Jews of Cyrenaica were held under cruel conditions. By the time the camp was liberated by the Allies in early 1943, hundreds had died, mainly from diseases caused by the catastrophic hygienic conditions.

However, the liberation of Libya by the Allies did not end the suffering of the Jews. For example, a pogrom initiated by Arab nationalists on the occasion of the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration in British-administered Tripolitania at the beginning of November 1945 led to one of the worst anti-Semitic outbreaks of violence in all of North Africa. In Tripoli and other cities, one hundred and forty Jews were killed, a large number were injured and several synagogues were destroyed. After this event, three years before the founding of Israel, the exodus of Jews from Libya began.

## SINCE 1948

Around the founding of Israel, there were renewed attacks on Jews, in which twelve people were murdered and two hundred and eighty houses were destroyed. It was only thanks to the determined self-protection measures taken by the Jewish communities that more deaths were not to be mourned.

By the time they were banned from emigrating in 1952, about thirty thousand of Libya's thirty-eight thousand Jews had already left the country, most of them for Israel, while the remaining were subjected to further discriminatory measures and acts of violence. In the course of the Six-Day War, the community of Tripoli was once again the target of a pogrom in which ten Jews were murdered. King Idris I then temporarily allowed Jews to leave the country; more than four thousand were evacuated to Italy by the Italian Navy.

When Muammar al-Gaddafi came to power in 1969, there were only about a hundred Jews left in the country. Gaddafi pursued a strict anti-Semitic policy, confiscating Jewish property and turning synagogues into mosques. Although emigration was again forbidden, the majority of the remaining Jews managed to leave the country. Five years after Gaddafi's seizure of power, there were reportedly only about twenty Jews left in Libya.

With the death of Esmeralda Meghnagi and the departure of the then eighty-year-old Rina Debach in 2002, Jewish life in Libya came to an end.<sup>71, 72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 276.

<sup>72</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

## MOROCCO

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The Jews of Morocco had a centuries-long tradition of co-existence with the Amazigh, the indigenous population of North Africa, who has long been known by the term “Berbers”, which was known to be degrading. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, two Jewish Amazigh tribes, the Jarawa and the Nefuka, led the resistance against the Islamic conquerors under Queen Kahina,<sup>73</sup> together with Christian Amazigh tribes.

After the Islamization of the country, the status of the Jews deteriorated. In the course of conflicts between the tribes of the Banu Ifran and the Maghrawa, both of whom belonged to the Amazigh tribal group of the Zenata, a pogrom took place in Fez in 1033, in which six thousand male Jews were murdered and all the women were abducted.

Particularly under the dynasty of the Almohads between 1147 and 1269, the Jews were sometimes persecuted on a massive scale. In contrast to other Islamic countries, where they were only one of several religious minorities, in Morocco they were the only religious minority, making them the sole target of religious intolerance and religious hatred. Their position was comparably bad only in Persia – not coincidentally the other periphery of the Ottoman Empire – under whose influence Morocco fell in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even though it was the only Arab state to successfully assert itself against the Ottomans.

Morocco was the only country in the Arab world where Jews had to live in their own neighborhoods, the *mellahs*, which were similar to the ghettos in Europe. The discriminatory provisions of the *dhimma* were applied far more strictly here than elsewhere. Accordingly, as historian Bernard Lewis emphasized in his study *The Jews of Islam*, the Moroccan Jews’ position was in this respect „similar to that of the Jews of medieval Christendom, and different from that of Jewish communities in eastern Islamic lands.”<sup>74</sup>

### MODERN TIMES

In 1465, the local Islamic-Arab dynasty of the Idrisids rose up in Fez against the Sultan of Morocco, Abd al-Haqq ibn Uthman Abu Muhammad, and his Jewish vizier (government commissioner) Harun ibn Batash. The uprising ended the rule of the Merinids, but it did not bring the Idrisids to power. Instead, the Amazigh dynasty of the Wattasids under Muhammad ash-Sheikh al-Mahdi was able to pre-

vail in the ensuing battles. Simultaneously, one of the largest pogroms in Moroccan history took place in Fez, in which the Jewish community was almost exterminated. It was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that it was able to recover from this, when a large number of Spanish Jews who had fled the Inquisition settled there.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Even in the later centuries more and more persecutions and pogroms followed. The first war between France and Morocco in 1844 greatly worsened the living conditions of Moroccan Jews, which was particularly noticeable in Mogador, today’s Essaouira. When the Spanish-Moroccan War began in 1859, the Jewish population was once again under severe pressure. Among others, the *mellah* of Tetuan was devastated and plundered. In 1864 five hundred Jews were killed in Fez and Marrakesh, and in 1875 twenty in Demnat.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In the 1930s, the anti-Semitism of the French right in Morocco was combined with that of the Moroccan Islamic nationalists. In Fez, during the struggle against French colonial rule in 1912, more than fifty Jews were killed by Moroccan soldiers and hundreds of houses and shops were destroyed or damaged.<sup>75</sup> The establishment of the French protectorate in the same year ended the *dhimmi* status of 230,000 Jews, who were however denied French citizenship.

In 1934, the vizier asked the French authorities to ban Jews from parts of Casablanca. In 1937, forty shops were destroyed as the result of a pogrom in Meknes.

On October 3, 1940, a law of the French Vichy government prohibited the employment of Jews in the public sector and in the media. On October 31, 1940, further anti-Jewish laws followed. Affluent Jews had to move to the *mellahs*. The Grand Vizier Muhammad el Mokri repeatedly attracted attention with anti-Semitic statements. Until 1941, other anti-Jewish laws were enacted according to the French model.

### SINCE 1948

In 1948, pogroms took place in the towns of Oujda and Jerada in northeastern Morocco, during which forty-four Jews were killed by Muslims and an estimated one hundred

<sup>73</sup> Hoffer, Gerda, Dahiya Cahena. In: Zeit der Heldinnen. Lebensbilder außergewöhnlicher jüdischer Frauen, München 1999.

<sup>74</sup> Lewis, Bernard, Jews of Islam, p. 148.

<sup>75</sup> Hubert, Jacques, Les journées sanglantes de Fez, 17–18–19 avril 1912: les massacres ; récits militaires ; responsabilités, Paris 1913; and Edmund Burke III, The Fez Mutiny and the Revolt of El Hiba, Prelude to Protectorate in Morocco: Pre-Colonial Protest and Resistance, 1860–1912, Chicago 2009..





*Old synagogue in the mellah, the former Jewish quarter in the old town of Fez. Source: Imago Images/Robert Fishman*

and fifty were injured. As a result, between 1949 and 1957, around one hundred thousand Jews left the country.

Four Jews were murdered in Oujda in 1953 and seven in Sidi Qasam in 1954. A year later, a pogrom broke out in El Jadida, with one thousand seven hundred people fleeing to the European part of the city. In 1955, seven Jews were murdered in Wadi Zem.

In 1956, Morocco, which had gained its independence, imposed a ban on emigration to Israel. Between November of 1961 and the spring of 1964, this led to a secret operation (Operation Jachin) by the Israeli secret service, Mossad, in which some eighty thousand Jews were taken out of the country with a bounty of two hundred and fifty dollars per evacuee.<sup>76</sup> In addition to Israel, Canada also took in large numbers of these refugees. A total of more than 260,000

Jews left Morocco after 1948, leaving only a few thousand behind.

The 2011 constitution officially recognized the contribution of Jews to the cultural development of the country for the first time. In the wake of the Abraham Accords, with which several Islamic states have already normalized their relations with Israel, a further rapprochement took place from December 2020,<sup>77</sup> which led to the inclusion of Jewish history in the school curriculum and the restoration of hundreds of Jewish places of worship and cemeteries. In November 2021, Morocco established direct flights to Israel and shortly thereafter signed a comprehensive defense agreement with the Jewish state<sup>78</sup> – a cooperation that has since been further intensified. There are currently about one thousand five hundred Jews living in the country.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. xxi.

<sup>77</sup> Carlin, Maya, How Israel and Marocca Have Embraced the Abraham Accords, Center for Security Policy, September 16, 2021 <http://tinyurl.com/3vpethz4>

<sup>78</sup> Israel und Marokko unterzeichnen umfassendes Verteidigungsabkommen, Mena-Watch, November 25, 2021, <http://tinyurl.com/mrbck3su>

<sup>79</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

## SYRIA

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In Syria, as in Lebanon, there is nothing left of the two-thousand-year-old Jewish community, which dates back to at least Roman times and most likely even goes back to the time before that. Larger communities existed mainly in Aleppo and Damascus.

### MODERN TIMES

From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Jews from Italy and France settled as traders in Damascus and Aleppo, but for the most part retained their citizenship so as not to be subject to Islamic law as *dhimmis*.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In 1840, several dignitaries of the Jewish community were arrested in Damascus after they were accused of killing a Christian monk and his Muslim servant in order to use their blood to bake *matzot*, the unleavened flatbread eaten at Passover, as the ritual murder legend claims.

The accusations on the part of the Christians were supported by the French consul in Damascus, Ulysse de Ratti-Menton, who was a known anti-Semite. He ordered an investigation in the Jewish quarter of the city, where the two men had allegedly been last seen, and encouraged the Egyptian governor of Damascus to arrest the accused and to extract confessions through torture. Two Jews died under the ordeal, while another converted to Islam to save his life.

Christian and Muslim attacks were the consequence of the affair, which attracted international attention, especially in Jewish circles. After an intervention by the British entrepreneur Sir Moses Montefiore, who is considered a pioneer of Zionism, and the lawyer and politician Adolphe Crémieux, who was a representative of the Consistoire Central Israélite, the prisoners were released from custody without formal acquittal.

The so-called Damascus affair is considered the beginning of the era of modern anti-Semitism in the Arab and Islamic world. The fact that the Ottoman sultan explicitly stated in an edict that the accusations against the Damascus Jews had been unfounded could not change the spread of blood libel.

Although there was no counterpart in the Islamic tradition for the accusation of ritual murder originating from the Christian world, the accusation greatly flourished and,



Mural painting of the ancient synagogue of Dura Europos in eastern Syria. Source: Imago Images/UIG

within a very short time, was on the agenda in almost all provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Bernard Lewis, in his book, *The Jews of Islam*, listed some examples:

“For the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the blood libel becomes almost commonplace in the Ottoman lands, for example in Aleppo (1810, 1850, 1875), Antioch (1826), Damascus (1840, 1848, 1890), Tripoli (1834), Beirut (1862, 1874), Dayr al-Qamar (1847), Jerusalem (1847), Cairo (1844, 1890, 1901-1902), Mansura (1877), Alexandria (1870, 1882, 1901-1902), Port Said (1903, 1908), Damanhur (1871, 1873, 1877, 1892), Istanbul (1870, 1874), Büyükdere (1864), Kuzguncuk (1866), Eyub (1868), Edirne (1875), Izmir (1872, 1874), and more frequently in the Greek and Balkan provinces.”<sup>80</sup>

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Both the blood libel and the later conspiracy theory of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are still widely circulated in the Arab world today.<sup>81</sup> The publishing house of former Syrian Defense Minister, Mustafa Tlas, for example, published a new edition of the *Protocols* more than a century after they were written. As late as 1983, Tlas published an anti-Semitic book entitled *The Matzah of Zion*,<sup>82</sup> which contains an affirmative description of the Damascus affair of 1840 and once again spreads the medieval blood libel, according to which Jews used the blood of Christian children to bake the *matzot*.

In 1918, Syria came under French mandate administration. Nevertheless, anti-Jewish laws were enacted in 1930 under the influence of the propaganda of the pro-Nazi Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin al-Husseini.

While the majority of Jews fled the country between 1945 and 1950, the anti-Semitic Baath Party was founded in Damascus in January 1947. In the same year, a pogrom broke out in the economic metropolis of Aleppo. All synagogues, five schools, one hundred and fifty shops and institutions were destroyed, seventy-six people were killed, hundreds

injured and several hundred arrested. After that, half of the Jewish population left the city.

Thirteen Jews were killed in Damascus itself, and there were also riots in Beirut and Tripoli in November 1948.

## SINCE 1948

On the eve of the founding of Israel, there were about thirty thousand Jews living in the land. In 1949, the bank accounts of Jews in Syria were frozen and their freedom of movement restricted. In the same year, thirteen Jews were killed and thirty-two wounded in a hand grenade attack on the al-Menashe synagogue in Damascus.

In 1950, there were only five thousand seven hundred Jews living in Syria. Their property was confiscated by law and Palestinian refugees moved to the Jewish quarter of Damascus. In Damascus, Aleppo and Qamishli there were several attacks on the Jewish population. Between 1958 and 1962, another two thousand eight hundred Jews left Syria in exchange for bribes, after which Jews were banned from leaving the country before the Baath Party finally came to power in 1963.

Within the scope of Syria’s accession to the US Gulf War alliance in 1992, President Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar, who is now in power, allowed some two thousand eight hundred Jews to leave the country, renouncing their property.

In the fall of 2003, Al-Manar, Hezbollah’s television station, aired the pre-evening series *Ash-Shatat*, which once again presented the anti-Semitic story of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and blood libel for its target audience, children. In one episode, for example, two rabbis take a Christian boy, slit his throat and collect his blood to use to bake *matzot*.

In 2017, fewer than fifteen Jews lived in Syria,<sup>83</sup> today there are only three.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, p. 158.

<sup>81</sup> Arabische Aufwiegler wärmen die Legende vom Ritualmord wieder auf, Audiator, February 23, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/mtj9c992>

<sup>82</sup> The Middle East Research Institute, MEMRI, Syria, Special Dispatch No. 6983, The Damascus Blood Libel (1840) As Told by the Late Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, June 29, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yaz3jj49>

<sup>83</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2018, p. 274.

<sup>84</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.



Die al-Ghriba-Synagoge in Djerba. Quelle: Imago Images/VWPics

## TUNISIA

### ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The Jewish community in Tunisia also had a history of more than two thousand years, which some experts trace back to the time after the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587/586 BCE. What is certain is that it grew strongly after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and later as a result of refugee movements fleeing anti-Jewish persecution in Europe.

Under Muslim rule, Tunisia's Jews were also considered *dhimmi*s, but the rules were initially generally implemented less strictly than in other parts of the Islamic world. This circumstance led to a flourishing of Jewish life, especially between the ninth and eleventh centuries; for a time, the Jewish community of Kairouan was one of the most important in the world.

### MODERN TIMES

However, this period of prosperity was also followed by periods of mass repression, such as in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which the position of the Jews was worse than anywhere else in the Maghreb. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that their living conditions improved, as European states gained more and more influence.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

However, from this time on, there was also an increase in acts of violence against Jews, as in 1869, when several Jews were killed and houses, shops and houses, shops and synagogues were looted on the island of Djerba.

As was the case in Algeria, the period of French colonization brought about an improvement of the situation, but although the Jews lived in a French protectorate from 1881 onwards, they nevertheless remained subjects of Muslim rulers. Radical steps such as the Crémieux Decree therefore failed to materialize.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

It was not until 1910 that individual Jews were able to obtain French citizenship.

For Tunisia’s Jews, too, the conquest of France by Nazi Germany was a drastic experience. Like Algeria, the country belonged to the Vichy collaborationist regime, whose anti-Semitic laws were introduced in 1940 but implemented less consistently.

This, of course, changed in November 1942, when the wearing of the Jewish star became mandatory and Jewish property was confiscated, with the National Socialists extorting enormous amounts of “fines” from the Jews. There were waves of arrests and arbitrary executions. Around five thousand Jews were interned in labor camps, and one hundred and sixty were deported to the extermination camps in Europe. The liberation of Tunisia by the Allies in 1943 prevented even worse.

## SINCE 1948

Due to the return of the French protectorate power, there was initially no mass flight and expulsion of Jews from Tunisia around the founding of the Israeli state, but the

country’s independence was only a matter of time (1956). Anti-Jewish attacks, such as those in 1952, triggered a first wave of refugees.

In independent Tunisia, President Habib Bourguiba pursued a comparatively liberal policy towards Jews, but at the same time there were repeated violent attacks on communities and institutions, attacking synagogues, cemeteries and residential areas. Between 1956 and the Six-Day War in 1967, about forty thousand Jews left the country, mainly for Israel and France.

After the beginning of the Six-Day War and anti-Semitic acts of violence, emigration turned into an exodus. Armed with iron bars and petrol canisters, rioters plundered and pillaged through the Jewish quarter in Tunis. During the storming of the Great Synagogue, forty Torah scrolls were destroyed.

Whereas, in 1946, still more than a hundred thousand Jews were living in Tunisia; in 1968, only seven to eight thousand remained.

Many of them fled after further anti-Semitic violence, such as the deadly attack on the al-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, in which nineteen tourists were killed. Today, the number of Jews living in Tunisia is estimated at one thousand.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Point of No Return, 2023.

## 4. IN BRIEF

“The Jews in Iraq, Libya, Yemen (Aden), Egypt and Syria fled in dramatic circumstances which included violent riots. The Jews of North Africa were subject to a more prolonged and subtle process of exclusion following decolonization. (The Jews of Algeria are a special case; having French citizenship, they were forced out together with the *pieds noirs*, but those who applied for Algerian citizenship were legally barred from getting it.)”

“The fact that Islam is a source of law in all the constitutions of Arab states puts Jews and other minorities at a disadvantage. Because of the historic inferior status of Jews as *dhimmi*s under Islam, many Arabs cannot accept Jews as equal citizens, or indeed that they are a people deserving of a state.”

“The issue of Jews from Arab countries is the main argument to turn current myths on their head: They are the main victims of MENA ethnic cleansing and apartheid.”

“Jews are indigenous not just to Palestine but to the wider region, predating Islam by 1,000 years. This fact challenges the ‘European settler colonial myth.’”

“The campaign for recognition and restitution can help achieve peace between Israel (where most Jews have roots in Arab and Muslim countries) and the Arabs.”<sup>86</sup>

If one looks at the history of the Jews and their living conditions in the individual countries, there are some differences; however, in the end, the similarities experienced by all the Jews of the region over the millennia outweigh them.

### IN THE REGION SINCE BIBLICAL TIMES

Jews have been part of the population in the countries of the region for thousands of years, more than a thousand years before Islam spread there.

### ISLAMISTIC CLAIM TO SUPERIORITY

The fusion of religious commandments and state laws in Islamic states puts non-Muslims at a disadvantage.

After Islamic conquests, the Jews, who had already been resident for thousands of years, were at best tolerated within the framework of the so-called *dhimmi* status.

### TRADITION AND LAW: HATRED, PERSECUTION AND MURDER

Ultimately, Jews were persecuted, murdered or expelled in all these countries. Their homes, shops and synagogues were set on fire and looted. Their property was confiscated, they were ostracized with yellow identity cards and mandatory markings on their clothing, banned from emigrating and working, denied citizenship, sent to labor, internment and concentration camps and ghettos, deported to European extermination camps, or forced to convert to Islam. Acts of violence, waves of arrests, arbitrary executions, repression and pogroms run like a red thread through the Jewish “Nakba” in the Islamic countries of the MENA region.

This was the rule for the few Jews who remained there, as was the state-sponsored hatred of Jews passed on from generation to generation, which is still intensively propagated today. Each apparent up was inevitably followed by a further down to the complete or almost complete annihilation of the Jewish communities in the region.

### EXCEPTIONS ARE SCARCE

Laudable exceptions in dealing with Jews occurred only in phases, over short periods of time, and not in all states of the region. Typically, the equality of Jews has always remained controversial. It was precisely in these historical periods, when the Jewish communities were doing better, that waves of flaming anti-Semitism and violence in all its forms occurred.

Therefore, the founding of Israel in 1948 opened up an alternative, but it was not the reason for the exodus of Jews from these Islamic states.

### ALMOST “FREE OF JEWS”

In the meantime, the number of Jews in the ten countries mentioned has fallen to about ten thousand. Around 1948 there were just under a million, a hundred times as many, not to mention the numbers hundreds and thousands of years ago.

Conversely, more than one-fifth of the population of Israel, the only democracy in the region, are Arabs, all of whom enjoy the same civil rights as the Jewish majority population.

<sup>86</sup> Julius, Lyn, 2023.

## FORGOTTEN AND IGNORED

In stark contrast to the seemingly omnipresent narrative of the Palestinian “Nakba”, the expulsion and annihilation of Jewish communities in Arab countries and Iran, on the other hand, is virtually absent from public discourse. Nor are there any international support efforts for displaced Jews. This is a difference that is as clear as it is logically and ethically inexplicable compared to the publicity and support provided to all generations of Palestinians.

The Jews expelled from Islamic countries were and are a forgotten tragedy.

## WILL IT CONTINUE LIKE THIS?

If one compares proven facts, follows current developments and deals with official writings and documents, both the intended extent and the state policy of Islamic, non-democratic states become obvious: Their first objective entails the annihilation of the Jews, primarily in Israel (“from the river to the sea”) and everywhere else in the world, followed by the rest of the “infidels”.

## DOSSIERS



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