

# A Tragedy Shrouded in Silence: The Destruction of the Arab World's Jewry

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The pages are yellowing, nearly disintegrated. For decades they have lain forgotten, stuffed into crates piled high in the archives of Israel's Ministry of Justice. No one reads them; no one even shows interest. Even now, nearly sixty years after the painful experiences of loss and flight they recount, they still wait for their stories to be told.

In one, a Jewish woman from Alexandria describes her youth in Egypt:

After the [1948] war broke out, my mother was arrested in her ninth month of pregnancy, and they wanted to slaughter her; they threatened her with bayonets and abused her.... One evening a mob came to kill our family with sticks and anything they could lay their hands on, because they heard we were Jews. The gatekeeper swore to them that we were Italian, and so they only cursed us, surrounding my parents, my brothers, and myself, only a small baby. The next day my parents ran away, leaving everything—pension, work, and home—behind.<sup>1</sup>

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On another page, Mordechai Karo, also Egyptian-born, testifies about an explosive device planted in a Jewish neighborhood in Cairo in the summer of 1948: “The tremendous explosion killed and injured scores of Jews in the neighborhood. One of these casualties was my young daughter Aliza.”<sup>2</sup>

Thousands of pages of similar testimony have been collecting dust in various government offices since the 1950s. Under the bureaucratic heading “Registry of the Claims of Jews from Arab Lands,” they tell of lives cut short, of individuals and entire families who found themselves suddenly homeless, persecuted, humiliated. Together they relate a tragic chapter in the history of modern Jewry, a chain of traumatic events that signaled the end of a once-glorious diaspora.

Yet for all its historical import, this chapter has been largely repressed, scarcely leaving a mark on Israel’s collective memory. The media seldom mentioned it then, and rarely do so today.<sup>3</sup> Schools do not devote comprehensive curricula to it, and academia pays it little attention. Indeed, in the past decade only one doctoral dissertation was written on the devastation of Jewish communities in Arab countries.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, of all the parties represented in Israel’s Knesset, not one has included in its platform an explicit demand for the restitution of these Jews’ property, or the recognition of their violated rights.<sup>5</sup>

This dismissive attitude toward one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Jewish people should be cause for astonishment. After all, the heritage of Jews from Muslim lands is enjoying something of a renaissance today, both in academic circles and within the general public. Yet not even the outspoken proponents of this heritage are particularly eager to discuss the historical circumstances under which their deep roots in the Arab world were severed.<sup>6</sup> This prolonged silence becomes even more incomprehensible when we take into account the centrality of the refugee problem to the Arab-Israeli conflict. While Palestinians and their advocates repeatedly emphasize the need to correct the historic injustice done to the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who left or were expelled from their lands and dispossessed of their properties in the 1948 *Nakba* (“catastrophe”),

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Israel's international representatives and spokespeople have refrained from highlighting the plight of the hundreds of thousands of *Jews* who fell victim to systematic persecution and attacks throughout the Middle East and Maghreb at the same time.

How to explain this omission? The answer, as we will see, is neither simple nor easy to digest. It involves a number of motives, some of them pragmatic and some ideological, all of which deserve close scrutiny. Our investigation will raise difficult questions, concerning not only various Israeli governments' policies in both the past and the present, but also the conceptual foundations of the Jewish state itself. And yet, before we can address these sensitive topics, we must recall certain facts that have been buried for too long in dusty ministerial archives.

**O**n the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel, at least 780,000 Jews lived in Arab countries.<sup>7</sup> Today, this ancient diaspora numbers only a few thousand at best. These numbers alone should give us pause: Emigration of more than 99 percent of the population in such a short time is unparalleled in modern Jewish history. Even the Jewish communities of Europe, which experienced the most extreme iteration of antisemitic violence, did not vanish *entirely*, or so abruptly.

The story of the Jews from Arab lands is a saga that extends over hundreds of years and a vast geographic region.<sup>8</sup> An in-depth account of the subject would include an examination of both its high and low points, as well as a detailed analysis of social, political, and economic phenomena—all of which would obviously exceed the limits of the present essay. Moreover, any attempt to compress the varied experiences of Jewish life in an area extending from Iraq in the east to Morocco in the west into a single template is bound to fail. There is, however, one factor that played a crucial role in determining the fate of the Jews in Arab lands in all times and places. This, “the single most important element of unity,” in the words of historian Norman Stillman, was Islam.<sup>9</sup>

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The Muslims' conduct toward the Jews was determined to a great extent by the guiding principles of their faith. Believers were required to humiliate non-Muslims living under their rule, as befits those who reject the divine truth. And yet, until modern times, the Islamic debasement of the Jews was distinct from the virulent hatred that characterized European Judeophobia. Bernard Lewis emphasizes that

in contrast to Christian antisemitism, the Muslim attitude toward non-Muslims is one not of hate or fear or envy but simply of contempt. This is expressed in various ways.... The negative attributes ascribed to the subject religions and their followers are usually expressed in religious and social terms, very rarely in ethnic or racial terms, though this does sometimes occur.... The conventional epithets are apes for Jews and pigs for Christians.<sup>10</sup>

As non-Muslim subjects of the Muslim state, Jews were assigned the inferior status of *dhimmi* ("dependent"). This position ensured the protection of their lives and property, the right to practice their religion, and a degree of internal communal autonomy. In exchange for all these, however, the Jews were required to submit to various forms of legal and social discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

There is no shortage of historical examples of this approach: In the fourteenth century, the Jews of Egypt and Syria were prohibited from living in tall buildings, raising their voices in prayer, burying their dead in graves more impressive than those of their Muslim neighbors, or filling clerical roles. If they wished to enter a public bathhouse, they had to hang a bell or copper coin around their necks.<sup>12</sup> Until 1912, the Jews of Morocco were forced to walk barefoot or wear straw shoes outside the Jewish quarter as a sign of respect for the Arab nation.<sup>13</sup> And the Shi'ite law introduced in Yemen by Zaydi imams determined that a Muslim who murdered a Jew should not be sentenced to death. Jews were obligated, moreover, to wear simple-looking clothes and to refrain from donning a headdress. And if this

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were not enough, many Jewish orphans were abducted by Yemen's authorities and forced to convert.<sup>14</sup>

Jews in non-Arab Muslim lands hardly fared better. The rise of the Shi'ite-Iranian Safavid Empire in the sixteenth century led to a rapid and violent deterioration in the status of Persian Jewry. The Muslim population instigated brutal pogroms, while the authorities, who viewed the Jews as impure, attempted to convert them by force.<sup>15</sup> From the end of the nineteenth century until the 1940s, Jews were forbidden to ride a horse, build a wall around their homes, own a store in the bazaar, or go out in the rain and snow, lest the water mix with their bodily fluids and defile their surroundings.<sup>16</sup> Jews from Iran have told of relatives who were murdered by Muslims simply because they dared to drink from a cup in a public place.<sup>17</sup>

The rise of Arab nationalism, the Balfour Declaration, and the escalation of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine led to a significant deterioration in the conditions of Jews living in Muslim societies. The threat to their safety and welfare reached its peak following the Partition Plan, adopted by the UN on November 29, 1947. In a discussion held by a political committee of the UN General Assembly five days before the resolution was passed, the representative from Egypt, Mohamed Hussein Heykal, explained how the plan would affect the future of Jews in the Arab world:

The United Nations... should not lose sight of the fact that the proposed solution might endanger a million Jews living in Muslim countries. Partition of Palestine might create antisemitism in those countries even more difficult to root out than the antisemitism which the Allies tried to eradicate in Germany.... If the United Nations decides to partition Palestine, it might be responsible for very grave disorders and for the massacre of a large number of Jews.... Riots would break out in Palestine, would spread through all the Arab states and might lead to a war between two races.<sup>18</sup>

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The threat indeed came to pass: With the encouragement of the authorities, a tidal wave of antisemitism surged through the Arab countries. To be sure, the violence did not come as a complete surprise to the Jews living there: The hostility toward the Jews in Iraq, for example, had already exacted a bloody toll. In 1941, during the holiday of Shavuot, a pogrom known as the “Farhud” took place in Baghdad. During the riots, over 150 Jews, including infants, were brutally murdered, and many hundreds were injured; women were raped, homes were plundered, stores and businesses were looted, and thousands of families were left homeless.<sup>19</sup>

On May 15, 1948, immediately following Israel’s declaration of independence, Iraq went to war against the Jewish state; at home, the military regime began to systematically persecute its Jewish citizens. Hundreds were fired from public service, and draconian restrictions were placed on Jewish merchants, leading to severe deterioration in the economic state of the community. Jews were denied basic health and sanitation services, and required to “donate” money to the military struggle against Israel.<sup>20</sup> Most gravely, over the next two years, hundreds of Jews were arrested on various pretexts and brought before military courts, which sentenced them to incarceration and heavy fines. Prisoners were sent to the Abu Ghraib jail south of Baghdad, where they were subjected to all manner of torture.<sup>21</sup> One of the wealthiest Jews of Iraq, Shafiq Ades—himself hardly a supporter of Zionism—was charged with subversion; after a show trial, and despite international pressure to commute his sentence, Ades was hanged in September 1948 outside his home in the city of Basra. For many Iraqi Jews, the incident was a grim reminder of their situation, and a sign that they should seek a future elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

In March 1950, Iraq allowed Jews to leave the country on condition that they relinquish their citizenship. Those who left were forced to sell their property for a negligible price, since they were forbidden to leave Iraq with more than 50 dinars (equivalent to about \$200 at the time) and a few personal possessions. A year later, the Iraqi government confiscated the assets of tens of thousands of Jews who had applied for emigration to Israel

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but had not yet managed to leave. By the end of that year, approximately 90 percent of the 135,000 Jews living in Iraq had left, leaving behind a wealth of possessions and enormous capital.<sup>23</sup>

During and after the Six Day War, hatred toward the Jews reared its ugly head once more, again with the active encouragement of the Iraqi government. The state press, television, and radio all engaged in vigorous anti-Jewish incitement. Telephone lines in Jewish homes were cut, Jewish-owned businesses were shut down, Jews were fired from their jobs, and dozens more were arrested on charges of collaboration with the Zionist enemy.<sup>24</sup> In 1969, nine Jews were hanged in Baghdad and two more in Basra on charges of spying for Israel.<sup>25</sup> Afterward, the remainder of Iraqi Jewry sought to leave the country in any way possible. In a matter of just a few decades, one of the largest and most prosperous centers of the Jewish diaspora was reduced to nothing.

The Jews of Syria came in for a similar fate. The community's ranks had already been dwindling steadily in the years before the establishment of the Jewish state: Whereas in the 1943 census Syria had close to 30,000 Jews, only five years later the number had shrunk by a third, standing at only 20,000.<sup>26</sup> Then, on December 1, 1947, two days after the UN Assembly's partition resolution, riots broke out in the Jewish neighborhood of Halab (Aleppo). One hundred and fifty homes, fifty stores and offices, five schools, and eighteen synagogues were damaged or destroyed.<sup>27</sup> In August 1948, thirteen Jews, among them eight children, were killed in violent clashes in the Jewish quarter in Damascus.<sup>28</sup> Similar incidents, which occurred throughout the War of Independence, took the lives of dozens more Jews across the country.

In early 1949, the Syrian government ordered all banks to freeze Jews' accounts and provide detailed lists of their assets.<sup>29</sup> Some of these assets, including homes, were expropriated and handed over to Palestinian refugees, who were housed in the Jewish ghetto in Damascus. The Jewish community also lost the Alliance Israélite Universelle school, which was reallocated to serve the needs of the Palestinian refugees' children. A French diplomat who

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protested to the authorities was told that the Syrian Jews must compensate the Arabs who had been expelled by the Zionists in Palestine.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of 1949, approximately two-thirds of Syrian Jews were forced to leave the country due to repeated harassment. From the testimony of those Jews who arrived in Israel in 1953, we know that “the mental anguish [of those who remained] was unbearable. They did not dare to leave their homes after dark, and stone-throwing at synagogues and houses was routine.... No less severe was their treatment by the three branches of the [country’s] internal security service.... Jews were frequently summoned for investigation and often even tortured.”<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-seventies, the Jewish population of Syria had shrunk to roughly 4,000, with the remnants forced to live in ghettos in Damascus, Halab, and the township of Kamishli. The regime imposed numerous restrictions on the community: It was forbidden, for example, for Jews to venture more than three kilometers from their place of residence, to inherit money or property from their relatives, or to serve in public office. The word “Jew” was stamped in red in their passports, and their estates were confiscated. Even school exams were intentionally scheduled on Saturdays.<sup>32</sup> The determined efforts of the Ba’ath government to make the lives of the Jews unbearable bore fruit: According to recent estimations, only one hundred Jews remain in Syria today.

The anti-Jewish wave spilled onto the Arabian Peninsula, as well, where tens of thousands of Jews had lived before the War of Independence. On December 2, 1947, three days after the Partition Plan resolution, the Jewish community in the British colony of Aden (today part of Yemen), consisting of 7,500 people, fell victim to a bloody pogrom that lasted three days: 97 Jews were killed and 120 injured, stores and schools were looted, homes and cars were burned. Bedouin guards, sent by the colonial authorities to protect the Jews, joined the rioters until British soldiers finally intervened and brought an end to the attacks.<sup>33</sup>

The events in Aden hastened the mass evacuation of Yemenite Jews to Israel, which began a year later as part of Operation Magic Carpet. The

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secret emigration of nearly 50,000 Jews from Yemen was further expedited by the drowning of two Muslim girls in a well in the city of Sana'a on December 18, 1948. The blame was placed on the Jews; a large financial penalty was imposed on the community and sixty of its members imprisoned.<sup>34</sup> By December 1949 the evacuation of most of Yemen's Jews was complete.<sup>35</sup> Thousands more escaped the country in the early 1950s and most of those remaining left four decades later, in 1992-1993, as a result of continual oppression and deteriorating living conditions.<sup>36</sup>

Egyptian Jewry, too, paid a high price. On November 2, 1945, the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, protesters in Cairo and Alexandria attacked Jewish-owned businesses and homes. News agencies reported that protests, which had begun in the morning hours, had "become wild riots against the Jews."<sup>37</sup> Repeated attempts by the mob to break into the Jewish quarter in Cairo failed, thanks to the sagacity of local Jewish youth, who had set up barricades and blocked the path of the rioters. But synagogues across the city were looted, and Torah scrolls set ablaze.<sup>38</sup>

With the outbreak of the War of Independence, the Jews of Egypt faced a dire fate. Coinciding with the Egyptian army's invasion of Israeli territory on May 15, 1948, approximately 600 Jews were imprisoned on charges of Zionist or communist activity and held in prison for over a year. Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi an-Nukrashi declared that all Jews were both communists and Zionists,<sup>39</sup> and on May 30 the Egyptian government announced that it would commandeer the assets of any citizen "if his activities endanger the security of the state." Following the pronouncement, extensive Jewish property was confiscated, and approximately seventy Jewish companies and businesses were nationalized.<sup>40</sup>

In the summer of 1948, deadly attacks on Jews in the streets of Egypt's cities intensified.<sup>41</sup> Between the months of May and September, 53 Jews were killed and over 150 wounded in riots and acts of vandalism.<sup>42</sup> The *National-Zeitung* newspaper, published in Basel, reported that Cairo "was entirely given over to the terror of the Arab mob... which roamed about the streets, howling and screaming 'Yahudi, Yahudi' [Jews]. Every

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European-looking person was attacked.... The worst scenes occurred in the Jewish Quarter, where the mob moved from house to house... killing hundreds of Jews.”<sup>43</sup>

In light of this hostile atmosphere, it is not surprising that by 1950, some 20,000 Jews had left Egypt.<sup>44</sup> The Arab-Israeli wars hardly made things easier for those who chose to stay behind: In November 1956, after the Suez crisis, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser signed a series of orders enabling authorities to expropriate Jewish property and revoke the citizenship of anyone suspected of Zionism. Many Jewish citizens, primarily the distinguished and the wealthy among them, were arrested and deported. Over a thousand Jewish-owned factories and places of business were nationalized. In the ensuing months, nearly 35,000 Jews were expelled from Egypt, largely on ships bound for Europe.<sup>45</sup> During the Six Day War and its aftermath, the depleted remainder of the community was forced to weather yet further persecutions. According to reports that reached Israel at the time, almost all Jewish men, except for the elderly and infirm, were placed under arrest, tortured, and humiliated, while their families hovered on the brink of starvation. By 1970, Egypt was nearly empty of Jews.<sup>46</sup>

The Jews' departure from Libya, then under British rule, began as early as 1945, following a bloody attack on the Jewish community of Tripoli. Rumors of the Jewish massacre of Arabs and the destruction of mosques in Palestine spurred tens of thousands of Libyan Muslims to riot in Jewish neighborhoods for four days straight. Synagogues were desecrated, stores torched, houses broken into and ransacked. One hundred and thirty-three Jews were murdered and hundreds more injured. On June 12, 1948, a Muslim mob once again assaulted the Jews of Tripoli, killing fourteen.<sup>47</sup> The growing fear and severe financial distress left their mark: Libya was quickly emptied of its Jewish population. By the end of 1952, only 4,000 Jews remained of the 35,000 who had lived there just four years before.<sup>48</sup> Their state only worsened after Libya joined the Arab League. In the 1950s, Libyan authorities imposed a series of restrictions on the Jewish minority, confiscated its property, denied it employment, and constrained it at every

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turn. The final nail in the coffin of Libyan Jewry was the antisemitic carnage that took place once more in both Tripoli and Benghazi during the Six Day War. The attacks drove the last of Libya's Jews to flee for their lives to Italy or Israel, leaving behind property and capital that amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars.<sup>49</sup>

In June 1948, Moroccan Jewry experienced one of the most traumatic events in its history. In a pogrom instigated by the residents of the cities of Oujda and Jerada, forty-two members of the Jewish community were killed.<sup>50</sup> The antisemitic outbursts did not abate in the following years: In August 1954, Muslims in the city of Petitjean (today known as Sidi Kacem) murdered six Jews and publicly burned their bodies<sup>51</sup>; further riots occurred in the summer of 1955 in Casablanca, Mazagan, and Safi.<sup>52</sup> The Jewish population, which numbered close to a quarter of a million in 1947, consistently shrank through mass emigration over the course of the next two decades. Today only a few thousand Jews live in Morocco, the last remnants of the greatest of the North African Jewish communities.<sup>53</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of Jews who were forced to leave their countries of origin and abandon their homes, their property, and at times even their family and friends sustained a severe trauma, from which many struggled to recover. For the Arab world, by contrast, the elimination of the centuries-old Jewish communities that had flourished in its midst was quite an accomplishment. "The Arab governments and societies were generally glad to be rid of their Jewish communities," writes historian Benny Morris:

At base, there was the traditional religious alienation, unease, and animosity. And against the backdrop of the Palestine war, there was vengefulness and genuine fear of the Jews' potential subversiveness; the Jews were identified with Zionism and Israel. As well, Arab states derived massive economic benefit from the confiscations of property that accompanied the exodus, though the wealthier émigrés, from Baghdad and Egypt, managed to take out some of their assets. But the vast majority... lost everything or almost everything. They arrived in Israel penniless or almost penniless.<sup>54</sup>

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The catastrophic fate that befell the Jewish communities in Arab lands not only wrought havoc on countless individuals and families. It also magnified the tragic aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Over the years, various elements in the international community have raised the idea of reparations for Jewish refugees from Arab countries within the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement. And yet it was Israel, where most of the exiled and dispossessed Jews found their home, which consistently shied away from any active role in promoting such an arrangement.

Already at an early stage, the plight of the Jews in Arab lands was tied to the fate of the Palestinian refugees. In July 1949, for instance, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said suggested a “voluntary exchange” between the two populations.<sup>55</sup> Two years later, in 1951, Israel requested that the U.S. government exert its influence to prevent the appropriation of Jewish property in Iraq. In response, American ambassador Monnett Bain Davis drew a parallel between that property and the assets left behind by the Palestinians who fled Israel in 1948, emphasizing that “an effective act by the Israeli government... to hasten the transfer of frozen assets of Arab residents... will make it possible to consider appealing to the Iraqi government in the matter of a parallel settlement for the assets of Jews there.”<sup>56</sup>

The American ambassador’s proposal did not fall on deaf ears. The idea of settling both the Palestinian refugees’ predicament and the problem of the Jewish refugees from Arab lands through an exchange of population, assets, and land was discussed in Israel a number of times and in various governmental fora, but never came to anything.<sup>57</sup> In the end, after the attempts to salvage the property of the Jewish community in Iraq failed, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett announced in the Knesset on March 19, 1951:

By freezing the property of tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants to Israel... the government of Iraq invited a reckoning between itself and the State of Israel. An account already existed between us and the Arabs regarding compensation due to Arabs who left the territory of Israel....

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The act now perpetuated by Iraq with regard to the property of Jews... compelled us to link the two accounts. The Israeli government therefore has decided to inform the appropriate United Nations institutions—and I hereby make this public—that the value of Jewish property frozen in Iraq will be taken into account with regard to the compensation we may have undertaken to pay Arabs who abandoned property in Israel.<sup>58</sup>

At that time, Israel began registering Jewish property left behind in Arab lands, particularly in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>59</sup> Yet this painstaking archival work never evolved into an overt political or legal initiative.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Israeli representatives even stressed, on numerous occasions, that there was no basis for comparison between the Jews of Arab lands, especially those from Iraq, and the Palestinian refugees. In a letter sent to the UN's Reconciliation Commission in 1951, Foreign Ministry Director General Walter Eytan stated that “the Palestinian Arabs who left the country and abandoned their property in 1948 joined hands with the neighboring Arab countries in attacking the Jewish state, with the declared objective of destroying the Jewish community and preventing the establishment of the state. The case of Iraqi Jews is entirely different: They were not involved in any act of aggression against the government or the Iraqi people.”<sup>61</sup>

The international community, for its part, repeatedly expressed its willingness to grant the Jews expelled from Arab lands official refugee status and treat them accordingly.<sup>62</sup> In 1957, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, August Lindt, declared that the Jews of Egypt who are “unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of the government of their nationality” fall, in his opinion, under the mandate of his office.<sup>63</sup> A decade later, the commission's senior legal counsel wrote to the Joint Distribution Committee that the Jews who had fled Arab countries due to persecution engendered by the Six Day War were considered, ostensibly, refugees.<sup>64</sup> Resolution 242, adopted by the UN Security Council in November 1967, stated that a comprehensive agreement would be necessary for “achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.”<sup>65</sup> Arthur Goldberg, the U.S.

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ambassador to the UN at the time and one of the drafters of the resolution, later wrote that “this language presumably refers both to Arab and Jewish refugees, for about an equal number of each abandoned their homes as a result of the several wars.”<sup>66</sup> Shortly before Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s historic visit to Jerusalem, American president Jimmy Carter also expressed his position on the subject for the first time: On October 27, 1977, Carter stated that the Jewish refugees “have the same rights as others do.”<sup>67</sup> And on June 3, 2005, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin declared that “a refugee is a refugee and that the situation of Jewish refugees from Arab lands must be recognized.”<sup>68</sup>

Some of the voices that called for recognition of the injustice came from within the Arab world itself. In an article published in the *An-Nahar* newspaper in May 1975, leading PLO official Sabri Jiryis pointedly criticized the Arab states for expelling the Jews “in a most ugly fashion, and after confiscating their possessions or taking control thereof at the lowest price.” He added that “clearly, Israel will raise the question in all serious negotiations that may in time be conducted over the rights of the Palestinians.”<sup>69</sup> In a similar tone, Egyptian journalist Nabil Sharaf Eldin wrote in a column published in 2008 in the *Al-Masry Al-Youm* newspaper that “we owe our Egyptian Jewish brothers a historic apology for the injustice we caused them, for causing a community, whose roots in the land of Egypt go back to the prophet Musa (Moses)... to disappear.”<sup>70</sup>

The question of the status of Jewish refugees from Arab lands arose once again in the summer of 2000, during the Camp David summit attended by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. The summit’s host, U.S. President Bill Clinton, was asked by an Israeli interviewer about the matter of Jewish refugees. “If there is an agreement... there will have to be some sort of international fund set up for the refugees,” he told the interviewers, and added, “There is, I think, some interest, interestingly enough, on both sides, in also having a fund which compensates the Israelis who were made refugees by the war, which occurred after the birth of the State of Israel. Israel is full of people, Jewish people,

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who lived in predominantly Arab countries who came to Israel because they were made refugees in their own land.”<sup>71</sup>

Clinton’s was a show of goodwill; it was the Israeli diplomats who, paradoxically, were more reserved. Their draft for the permanent settlement declared that “The Parties agree that a just settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict should settle the claims by Jewish individuals and committees that left Arab countries or parts of Mandatory Palestine due to the 1948 War and its aftermath.”<sup>72</sup> The cautious formulation effectively unhinged the issue of the Jews from Arab lands from the refugee problem, linking it instead to the future resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But this position, too, was quickly abandoned by the Jewish state with the renewal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians at the Taba summit in January 2001. In response to a Palestinian document on the question of the refugees, Israel announced that “Although the issue of compensation to former Jewish refugees from Arab countries is not part of the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian agreement, in recognition of their suffering and losses, the Parties pledge to cooperate in pursuing an equitable and just resolution to the issue.”<sup>73</sup> In direct contrast to this statement, however, Israel went on to agree that the Arab countries ought to be compensated for the many years in which they had “hosted” the Palestinian refugees. Thus, in an astonishing ploy of self-defeat, Israel severed the claims of Jews from Arab lands from any future settlement with the Palestinians—but allowed the interests of the Arab side to stand.

As has happened more than once, the American House of Representatives assumed a more hawkish position on this topic than did Israel itself. Resolution 185, which it adopted on April 1, 2008, noted that “the Palestinian refugee issue has received considerable attention from countries of the world, while the issue of Jewish refugees from the Arab and Muslim worlds has received very little attention.” The House urged the U.S. president to instruct American officials to use their power and influence to ensure that any decision about the future of the Palestinian refugees “include a similarly explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish refugees.”<sup>74</sup>

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Two years later, Israel's Knesset followed suit. On February 22, 2010, it passed a law to safeguard "the rights to compensation of Jewish refugees from Arab countries and Iran." The law determined that "as part of the negotiations to achieve peace in the Middle East, the government shall raise the issue of compensation to Jewish refugees from Arab countries and Iran for the loss of property, specifically the assets owned by the Jewish community in these countries."<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, something *has* changed in Israel's attitude. Previously, its policy had been based on the assumption that, within a comprehensive peace agreement to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, both sides would present their financial claims regarding property loss, such that each would offset the other.<sup>76</sup> From interviews with public figures and senior officials, however, it would seem that this approach has lately been abandoned in favor of a demand for *actual* compensation: "Our position at present is that the Jews from Arab lands must receive money at the end of the process," says Aharon Mor, senior director for restitution of rights and Jewish property in the Ministry for Senior Citizens. And according to former MK Rafi Eitan, who chairs the National Council for Jewish Restitution, "If tomorrow morning it would be announced that X billions are handed over to the Palestinian refugees, the same amount must also be given to the Jewish refugees. The solution is to establish one joint fund, and each side will distribute the money."<sup>77</sup>

Time will tell whether this new approach will have an actual effect on official policy. One thing is certain, however: The problem will not simply go away. Sooner or later, the government of Israel will need to decide how to handle the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab lands (and their descendants). And yet, a change of policy, essential as it may be, won't answer one niggling question: Why did it take so long?

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There is no one explanation as to why the state authorities in particular and the Israeli public in general have been inclined to turn a blind eye to one of the most painful chapters in modern Jewish history. Indeed, from interviews with key officials in both past and present Israeli governments, as well as a review of numerous primary and secondary sources, it becomes clear that there are in fact a number of reasons for this infuriating indifference. Some are understandable, while others are far more difficult to swallow.

The first and perhaps most exculpatory point to be made concerns the technical problem of obtaining the relevant information. Many countries, including Israel, grant researchers access to archives and records, even if they were formerly classified. Not so the Arab world: Important documents and primary sources concerning decisions of the Arab League and the activities of Arab states in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the precise registration of personal and communal property, are extremely difficult to come by—if not completely inaccessible.

But there were also other, more principled motives for Israel's policy on the subject. First, in contrast to the situation that still prevails on the Palestinian side, there is currently no "problem" of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Although these Jews were initially considered refugees in the wake of their hasty departure from their countries of origin, the State of Israel made every effort to ease their burden, from the granting of immediate citizenship upon arrival to wide-ranging support services, such as assistance in housing and employment. True, this aid did not always bear the desired fruit; frequently clumsy and at times humiliating, the state's efforts were met with accusations of discrimination that are still heard today from both the immigrants and their children. Yet unlike the Arab regimes and the Palestinian national movement, the Jewish state had no interest in perpetuating the refugee situation.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, while in the early 1950s Israel established transit camps to house new

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immigrants temporarily, there is today no Jewish parallel to the Palestinian refugee camps.

Second, the Jewish immigrants themselves did their utmost to rebuild their lives in their new country, even though many arrived in Israel in a state of economic and emotional devastation.<sup>79</sup> They had no reason to believe they would receive any kind of compensation<sup>80</sup>: As Israel lacked diplomatic relations with the countries from which these Jews had fled, there was no addressee for their claims. (Even Egypt, in this case, was no exception. Though the Israel-Egypt peace agreement stated that a “claims commission for the mutual settlement of all financial claims” would be established, no such body was ever created.<sup>81</sup>)

Yet another motive for keeping quiet on the subject was the legitimate concern for the well-being of those Jews who remained in Arab countries. True, the plight of these Jews was raised from time to time as a humanitarian issue, primarily as a result of the virulent antisemitism that spread throughout the Arab world in the wake of the Six Day War. Even then, however, Israeli officials were worried that discussing the problem in public would merely exacerbate it.<sup>82</sup>

The precautionary stance taken by the Ministry of Finance only complicated matters. For years officials charged with addressing the problem assumed it would eventually be resolved by a future settlement that would “balance out” the financial claims of both Jewish and Palestinian refugees. At the same time, Finance Ministry executives feared that the Palestinian property in question would turn out to be of greater value than Jewish assets; no less worrisome was the possibility that the refusal of the Arab governments to recognize their former citizens’ claims would prompt the Jewish refugees to turn to the *Israeli* government for compensation.<sup>83</sup>

The Foreign Ministry had reservations of its own. The common perception in diplomatic corridors was that, in any dialogue with an Arab counterpart, Israel must focus first and foremost on the question of security; everything else was secondary. Moreover, official Israeli representatives preferred not to raise the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab lands for fear this

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might trigger a discussion of the “right of return.” Let sleeping dogs lie, they seemed to think, hoping that if Israel refrained from mentioning refugees, the Palestinians would do the same.<sup>84</sup> And indeed, with the signing of the Oslo accords, Israeli negotiators labored under the impression that the Palestinians’ central demand was the establishment of a sovereign state within the 1967 borders, and that the return of refugees to their pre-1948 estates was less critical. It is hardly surprising, then, that Minister of Justice Yossi Beilin decided, in the year 2000, to fire Ya’akov Meron, who since 1969 had headed the department tasked with registering these Jews’ claims.<sup>85</sup>

Israeli expectations, however, proved unfounded. The Palestinians brought up the refugee question repeatedly, in each round of negotiations. The issue was also mentioned in the 2002 Saudi initiative, which is considered at present to be the official Arab position.<sup>86</sup> And just last year, dispelling any hope some Israelis may still harbor, Saeb Erekat, one of the senior Palestinian negotiators, clarified that “no leader will agree to surrender the right of return and obliterate the Palestinian narrative.”<sup>87</sup>

These facts notwithstanding, there is perhaps a deeper—and far more troubling—reason that Israeli discourse has marginalized one of the worst tragedies in Jewish history. This reason is inextricably bound up with the internal contradictions that have characterized Zionism since its very inception. The Zionist movement, as is well known, sought to resolve the “Jewish problem” once and for all through the establishment of a safe haven for the persecuted Jews. Zionism’s founding fathers understood that the systematic oppression of the Jews throughout history was the result of their having been a weak minority in their places of residence. To put an end to this state of affairs, Zionism aimed to create a sovereign political entity in which Jews could determine their own fate, without being dependent on the goodwill of other nations.

Yet despite this unconcealed motive, Zionism preferred to couch its vision in terms of “redemption,” a “return to the land,” or the “renewing of past glory.”<sup>88</sup> The desire to grant the Zionist project a strong and proud venter inevitably led to the obfuscation of the most obvious historical

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justification for the establishment of the State of Israel—the suffering endured by the Jewish people throughout the generations. To admit to such a motive was seen as a sign of weakness, of wretchedness; it is thus only alluded to in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, and even then only in reference to the Holocaust.<sup>89</sup>

Occasional public debates concerning the Jews of Arab lands echo this internal contradiction. While some of these Jews and their descendants have insisted on their rights, even defining themselves as former refugees,<sup>90</sup> others were vehemently opposed to such a stance. When in 1975 Mordechai Ben-Porat, an Iraqi-born member of Knesset, insisted on discussing the matter of “the legitimate rights of Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries,” his speech was interrupted by fellow party-member and Iraqi native Haviv Shimoni, who claimed that “the Jews are not refugees. They came of their own free will.”<sup>91</sup>

In another discussion that took place in the Knesset in 1987, a similar argument revolved around the definition of a “refugee.” This time, it began with an implied accusation that Ashkenazi Jews apply the derogatory title only to Sephardim, defining themselves instead as “Zionist pioneers.” In the heated discussion that ensued, Iraqi-born MK Ran Cohen wondered:

Are we refugees? I do not feel like a refugee.... Can anyone say that we, Jews from Arab lands, came here only as a result of negative factors, and the power of Zionism, the gravitational pull of this land, and the idea of redemption played no role for us?...

**MK David Magen:** In terms of international law, the Jews who escaped from Arab lands destitute and penniless are refugees.

**Cohen:** Is that true also of the immigration from Poland?

...

**MK Eliahu Ben Elissar:** A person who comes as a pioneer is not a refugee.... The status of refugee has a definition—a refugee is someone who was expelled following malicious proceedings and persecution... it is in no way a disgrace. There are Jewish refugees from Poland and there are Jewish

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refugees from Morocco.... Under no circumstances should we relate to refugee status as something that is embarrassing, shameful.<sup>92</sup>

Cohen's remarks are a striking instance of the "sovereignty" narrative, which finds it difficult to regard the suffering and loss that spurred so many Jews to leave the diaspora as a fitting "Zionist" motive. And indeed, the advantages of this narrative are obvious: An ideology of refugeeism tends to engender frustration and bitterness among those who cling to it; moreover, it is often self-perpetuating. One need only observe the victim mentality in which Palestinian society still wallows to realize the harm it can cause.

At the same time, however, the insistence on ignoring the fear and desperation that drove so many Jews to leave their homes behind and relocate to entirely foreign surroundings not only obscures one of the driving forces behind the Zionist revolution. It also rewrites history. True, some Jews from Arab countries immigrated to Israel even before the situation at home deteriorated so dramatically, just as some Jews would undoubtedly have come even if life in their countries of origin had *not* become unbearable. Yet there is no denying that the vast majority of Jews who chose to flee the diaspora, whether from Arab countries or elsewhere, did so because they suffered severe persecution and discrimination there. Ultimately, with the exception of Jews from Western democracies such as the U.S., Canada, or Britain (and to a decreasing degree today, France), the lion's share of both Sephardi *and* Ashkenazi Jews in Israel are either refugees or their descendants. And this definition holds true whether they immigrated to Israel following a pogrom in Kishinev or in Baghdad.

**F**ortunately, there have been signs of change of late in Israel's approach to the calamity that befell the Jews of the Arab world. Perhaps the most visible shift is the state's new position vis-à-vis the compensation to which these Jews are entitled for the substantial property they left behind.

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The loss of property, however, devastating though it was, is only a small part of a much larger story: that of a centuries-old diaspora, which was utterly destroyed by the determined and violent Arab opposition to Zionism. Yes, the Jews, persecuted and humiliated by the Arab authorities and their Muslim neighbors alike, found a new home in Israel. But a shattered life can often be difficult to piece back together. The fact that their voice has not been heard and their stories not told certainly has not helped relieve their pain.

Arab states, which bear the responsibility both for destroying the Jewish communities in their lands and for creating the Palestinian refugee problem—which came about as a direct result of their rejection of the 1947 Partition Plan—not only refuse to recognize the role they played in these tragedies, but also continue to cultivate a fictitious depiction of Israel as a colonial project, essentially foreign to the region in which it is located. In so doing, the Arab world adds insult to injury: After casting out the Jews, who had lived for many hundreds of years in its midst, it now denounces them as invaders. It is probably no coincidence that the American journalist (of Lebanese origin) Helen Thomas recently called for the Jews to “get the hell out of Palestine” and go back to “Poland, Germany, and America”<sup>93</sup>—and not, pointedly, to Iraq or Egypt. Thomas is apparently unaware that millions of Israelis descended from Jews who were born and raised in the Middle East and Maghreb. To where, precisely, should *these* Jews return?

Possibly the most powerful response to these distortions was formulated by the Tunisian-born Jewish writer and thinker Albert Memmi during a symposium in France on November 24, 1973. In the discussion, which involved prominent intellectuals and journalists as well as the ruler of Libya, Muammar Qaddafi, the latter proposed that the Jews return to his country. Memmi challenged him with a string of questions, all of which serve to refute the common misconception—still prevalent today—regarding the neighborly relations that allegedly existed between Jews and Muslims before the intervention of Zionism. “Is it true that you have said that the Jews have always lived at peace in the Arab countries? And that you have nothing against Jews, only the Zionists?” he wondered, and added:

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Can it be that you seriously believe in the myth, deliberately invented for the sake of reassuring Westerners, that the Jews led idyllic lives in the Arab countries?... The truth is that we lived lives of fear and degradation in Arab countries. I will not take the time here to recite another litany, that of the massacres that preceded Zionism, but I can make it available to you whenever you wish. The truth is that these young Jews from the Arab countries were Zionists before Auschwitz. The State of Israel is not a result of Auschwitz, but of the Jewish predicament at large, including its predicament in Arab countries.<sup>94</sup>

As Memmi points out, the tragedy of the Jews from Arab countries is an inseparable part of the Zionist story, and the suffering that was their lot for many hundreds of years—and even more so during the past seven decades—grants undeniable moral validity to the existence of the Jewish state. The time has long since come for that Jewish state to proclaim as much to the world.

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*Adi Schwartz is an independent journalist and researcher.*

## **Notes**

1. This testimony, cited anonymously in order to maintain privacy, is kept today in the Ministry for Senior Citizens. My thanks to Aharon Mor, senior director of the Department for the Restitution of Rights and Jewish Property in the ministry, and to Orly Rahimiyan, the department's adviser on research and documentation of the rights of Jews from Arab countries and Iran, for the opportunity to study these documents.

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2. The testimony appears in Ya'akov Meron, "The Explosion in the Karaitic Jewish Quarter in Cairo on June 19, 1948," *Pe'amim* 70 (Winter 1997), p. 154 [Hebrew].

3. One notable exception is journalist Ben-Dror Yemini, who dedicated a long polemical essay to the subject. See Ben-Dror Yemini, "The Jewish Nakba: Expulsions, Massacres, and Forced Conversions," *Maariv*, May 16, 2009 [Hebrew]. An English version of the essay may be found at [www.mideasttruth.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=9119&sid=fc2791d75ddf7614a2a6bce95dca1343](http://www.mideasttruth.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=9119&sid=fc2791d75ddf7614a2a6bce95dca1343).

4. This finding is based on an examination of the search engines of all six Israeli universities' libraries. For the doctoral dissertation, see Arye Cohen, "Jews of Syria and Lebanon: Their State and the Struggle to Save Them, 1930-2000" (Ph.D. diss., University of Haifa, 2003) [Hebrew].

5. The platforms of four parties address the "Palestinian refugee problem." Two others, those of Meretz and Balad, address the "refugee problem." See the website of the Israel Democracy Institute, [www.idi.org.il/elections\\_and\\_parties/Pages/elections2009.aspx](http://www.idi.org.il/elections_and_parties/Pages/elections2009.aspx) [Hebrew].

6. In this context, it is nevertheless worth noting two organizations that are engaged in vigorous public activity on the subject: Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), founded in 2002, and the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), established in 1975 with the goal of "bringing to the world's consciousness the stories of approximately one million Jews from Arab countries and the Muslim states, who were forced to flee as a result of a policy of persecution, incarceration, and pogroms both due to their being Jewish and due to the establishment of the State of Israel." WOJAC, which seeks to claim the rights of these Jews, has initiated a number of international congresses on the subject. See the detailed and valuable information on the organization's website, [www.forgotten-million.co.il/wojac.html](http://www.forgotten-million.co.il/wojac.html) [Hebrew].

7. Various estimates as to the precise numbers exist. In a session devoted to the Jews of Arab lands in the Herzliya Conference in February 2009, the director of Yad Ben-Zvi, Zvi Zameret, estimated that before the establishment of the State of Israel there were 135,000 Jews in Iraq, 65,000 in Egypt, 30,000 in Syria, 7,000 in Lebanon, 7,500 in Aden, 35,000 in Libya, 50,000 in Tunisia, and 250,000 in Morocco. See Zvi Zameret, "Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries and Other Muslim Lands," lecture at Herzliya Conference, February 3, 2009, [www.justiceforjews.com/paper2.pdf](http://www.justiceforjews.com/paper2.pdf) [Hebrew]. To these numbers, one can add 50,000 Jews living in Yemen and 150,000 in Algeria, according to the assessment of Ya'akov Meron, adviser on the Law of Arab Countries at the Ministry of Justice, in a letter sent to the deputy minister of justice on August 1, 1974. See "Registry of Jewish Property in Arab Lands," statistical appendix, Israel State Archives 43/6693/8-1.

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The JJAC organization estimates that the number of Jews living in Arab countries in 1948 was 856,000. See “The Displacement of Jews from Arab Countries: 1948-2005,” [www.justiceforjews.com/pop\\_chart.pdf](http://www.justiceforjews.com/pop_chart.pdf).

8. An important work on the subject was recently published by the British historian Martin Gilbert. See Martin Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House: A History of Jews in Muslim Lands* (New Haven: Yale, 2010).

9. Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 108.

10. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton, 1987), p. 33.

11. On the dhimmi status, see Philippe Fargues, “Demographic Islamization: Non-Muslim Minorities in Muslim Countries,” *SAIS Review* 21:2 (Summer-Fall 2001), pp. 103-116; P.R. Kumaraswamy, “Islam and Minorities: Need for a Liberal Framework,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 18:3 (Summer 2007), pp. 94-109; Maurice M. Roumani, “The Silent Refugees: Jews from Arab Countries,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 14:3 (Summer 2003), pp. 41-77; Daniel J. Schroeter and Joseph Chetrit, “Emancipation and Its Discontents: Jews at the Formative Period of Colonial Rule in Morocco,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13:1 (Fall 2006), pp. 170-206.

12. Reuven Kashani, “Jews of Arab Lands: Truth and Legend,” *Kivunim* 5 (Fall 1979), pp. 139-140 [Hebrew].

13. Kashani, “Jews of Arab Lands,” p. 144.

14. David Sitton, *Spanish and Eastern Jewish Communities of the World in Our Time* (Jerusalem: Council of the Sephardi Community, 1974), p. 12 [Hebrew].

15. See Walter Joseph Fischel, “The Jews in Medieval Iran (Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries): Political, Economic, and Communal Aspects,” *Pe'amim* 6 (1980), pp. 5-31 [Hebrew].

16. David Menashri, “The Jews of Iran: Between the Pahlavi Monarchy and the Islamic Republic,” in Haim Saadon, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Iran* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2006), pp. 56-57 [Hebrew].

17. Zameret, “Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries,” p. 1.

18. United Nations, *Official Records of the Second Session of the General Assembly*, Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, summary records of meeting, 25 September - 25 November 1947, Lake Success, N.Y., p. 185. Quoted in Ya'akov Meron, “The Expulsion of the Jews from the Arab Countries: The Palestinians' Attitude Towards It and Their Claims,” in Malka Hillel Shulewitz, ed., *The Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 84.

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19. On the Farhud, see Esther Meir-Glitzstein, "The Baghdad Pogrom: June 1-2, 1941," *Pe'amim* 8 (1981), pp. 21-37 [Hebrew]; Nissim Kazzaz, "Report of the Governmental Commission of Inquiry on the Events of June 1-2, 1941," *Pe'amim* 8 (1981), pp. 46-59 [Hebrew]; "Documents on the Baghdad Pogrom and the Response of the Yishuv in Palestine," *Pe'amim* 8 (1981), pp. 60-91 [Hebrew].

20. In this context, see Itamar Levin, *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2001), pp. 49-62 [Hebrew]; Dafna Zimhoni, "The Government of Iraq and the Mass Aliya of Jews to Israel," *Pe'amim* 39 (1989), pp. 66-68 [Hebrew].

21. Government of Israel Intelligence Services, Government Press Office report, October 23, 1949, Israel State Archives 130/2451/11-צח [Hebrew].

22. On the Shafiq Ades affair, see, among others, Nissim Kazzaz, "The Jews in Their Surroundings," in Haim Saadon, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Iraq* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2002), p. 26 [Hebrew]; Yossi Alfi, "Making a Joke of History," *Ynet*, May 21, 2008, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3545179,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3545179,00.html) [Hebrew]. On the intervention of the U.S. State Department in the affair, see the letter written by Eliyahu Eilat (Epstein) to Moshe Shertok (Sharett) on September 25, 1948, Israel State Archives 130/2451/11-צח [Hebrew].

23. On the period between March 1950 and March 1951, during which almost all of the Jews left Iraq, see Esther Meir-Glitzstein, "The Riddle of the Mass Emigration from Iraq: Causes, Circumstances, and Consequences," *Pe'amim* 71 (Spring 1997), pp. 25-54 [Hebrew].

24. Foreign Ministry to representatives of Israel around the world, "The State of the Jews in Arab Countries," September 14, 1967, Israel State Archives 93/-צח 1396/20 [Hebrew].

25. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 295-296. See also the WOJAC website, [www.forgotten-million.co.il/iraq1-.html](http://www.forgotten-million.co.il/iraq1-.html) [Hebrew]. The website also presents the detailed testimony of Salima Gabai, wife of Fouad Gabai, one of the Jews falsely charged and hanged. See [www.forgotten-million.co.il/eduyot/iraq/gabay\\_salima.html](http://www.forgotten-million.co.il/eduyot/iraq/gabay_salima.html) [Hebrew].

26. Yaron Harel, "Demography," in Yaron Hared, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Syria* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2009), p. 30 [Hebrew].

27. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 211-212.

28. Michael M. Laskier, "In the Shadow of the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Arab Nationalism: Muslim-Jewish Relations in Syria, 1948-1970," *Pe'amim* 66 (Winter 1996), p. 77 [Hebrew].

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29. Laskier, "In the Shadow," pp. 77-78.
30. Meron, "Expulsion of the Jews," pp. 34-35.
31. Laskier, "In the Shadow," p. 83.
32. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 303-304; Meron, "Expulsion of the Jews," p. 50.
33. See, on this subject, Reuven Aharoni, *The Jews of Aden: The Community That Was* (Tel Aviv: Afikim, 1991), pp. 333-342 [Hebrew]; Haim Saadon, "'The Palestinian Element' in Violent Eruptions Between Jews and Muslims in Muslim Countries," *Pe'amim* 63 (Spring 1995), pp. 94-95 [Hebrew]. On the Jewish community in Yemen, see also WOJAC's website, [www.forgotten-million.co.il/teman-.html](http://www.forgotten-million.co.il/teman-.html) [Hebrew].
34. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, p. 232; Haim Saadon, "Longing for Zion and Immigration," in Haim Saadon, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Yemen* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2002), p. 122 [Hebrew].
35. In this context, see Dov Levitan, "'On Wings of Eagles': The Immigration from Yemen and from Aden," in Haim Saadon, ed., *Open and Secret: The Great Waves of Immigration from Muslim Countries (1948-1967)* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2000), pp. 31-42 [Hebrew].
36. More information on the plight of the last of Yemen's Jews is available in the fascinating article by journalist Boaz Bismuth, who visited the country in March 2010. See Boaz Bismuth, "Get Us Out of Here," *Israel Hayom*, March 29, 2010 [Hebrew].
37. "Three Days of Pogroms for Egyptian Jewry," *Davar*, November 4, 1945 [Hebrew].
38. Kashani, "Jews of Arab Lands," p. 144.
39. Haggai Erlich, "Egypt and Its Jews," in Nahem Ilan, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Egypt* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2008), p. 22 [Hebrew].
40. Zameret, "Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries," p. 3.
41. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 226-227.
42. Saadon, "Palestinian Element," p. 92.
43. Quoted in Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), p. 413.
44. For more on the twilight period of the Jewish community in Egypt, see Gurdun Käamer, "Zionism in Egypt, 1917-1948," *Pe'amim* 16 (1983), pp. 107-127
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[Hebrew]; Robert L. Tignor, "The Egyptian Jewish Community and Zionism," *Pe'amim* 16 (1983), pp. 29-106 [Hebrew]; Adi Schwartz, "This Was Their Home," *Haaretz*, December 28, 2007 [Hebrew].

45. Meron, "Expulsion of the Jews," p. 36; for the chronicles of the Jews of Egypt between 1951 and 1969, see Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 251-264.

46. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 288-292.

47. See Yaacov Hagag-Liluf, "The Pogroms in Libya (1945, 1948, 1967): Background, Process, Results, and Reactions," World Organization of Libyan Jews, [www.livluf.org.il/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/226Riots1945.pdf](http://www.livluf.org.il/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/226Riots1945.pdf) [Hebrew].

48. See Yaacov Hagag-Liluf, "Immigration and Demography of Libyan Jews," World Organization of Libyan Jews, [www.livluf.org.il/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/224DemographyOfLibyanJews.pdf](http://www.livluf.org.il/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/224DemographyOfLibyanJews.pdf) [Hebrew].

49. See Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 272-274, 283-286; Yaacov Hagag-Liluf, "The Jews in the Era of Independent Libya," World Organization of Libyan Jews, [www.livluf.org.il/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/225JewsInIndependentLibia.pdf](http://www.livluf.org.il/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/225JewsInIndependentLibia.pdf) [Hebrew].

50. Saadon, "Palestinian Element," pp. 105-115.

51. Yaron Tsur, "Jews in the Colonial Era," in Haim Saadon, ed., *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Morocco* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2003), p. 75 [Hebrew].

52. Haim Saadon, "The Immigration of the Jews of Morocco: Stages and Characteristics," in *Jewish Communities: Morocco*, p. 119 [Hebrew].

53. On the Jews of Morocco see, among others, Agnes Bensimon, *Hassan II and the Jews: The Story of the Clandestine Immigration from Morocco* (Paris: Seuil, 1991) [French]; Uziel Hazan, *In a Nutshell: A Play in Three Acts* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1998) [Hebrew]; Shmuel Segev, *Operation Yechin: The Clandestine Immigration of Moroccan Jewry to Israel* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1984) [Hebrew].

54. Morris, *1948*, pp. 414-415.

55. Zimhoni, "Government of Iraq," p. 68. It is interesting to note that even earlier, on January 21, 1949, former President Herbert Hoover advised in a letter sent to President Harry Truman that tens of millions of dollars be invested in the rehabilitation of 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq (a proposal that had nothing to do with the Jews then living there). Four days later, Truman responded that he was "working on just such a plan." See the Truman Library, [www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/internaltemplate.php?tldate=1949-01-21&groupid=5195&collectionid=hoover](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/internaltemplate.php?tldate=1949-01-21&groupid=5195&collectionid=hoover), as well as [www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/internaltemplate.php?tldate=1949-01-25&groupid=5249&collectionid=hoover](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hoover/internaltemplate.php?tldate=1949-01-25&groupid=5249&collectionid=hoover).

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56. U.S. Government response to the letter from the Israeli Government on the matter of freezing the assets of Jews in Iraq, May 1, 1951, Israel State Archives 130/2451/11-צח.

57. In response to the proposal to exchange lands outside the borders of the state with the local estates of absentee Palestinians, the Guardian of Absentee Assets wrote to the minister of finance, "It is legally impossible to arrange an exchange of absentees' land under our jurisdiction for Jewish land which is not within the borders of the State of Israel," February 24, 1950, Israel State Archives 130/2402/16-צח [Hebrew]. In 1952, the Foreign Ministry examined the possibility of exchanging the property of Arabs who wished to emigrate from Israel for the property of Jews in Libya. See "An Integrated Proposal for Settling Arab Refugees in Libya, Recovering Jewish Property, and Emigration of Arabs from Israel to Libya," March 31, 1952, Israel State Archives 130/2402/6-צח [Hebrew].

58. Quoted in Levin, *Locked Doors*, p. 302.

59. The registry was composed by the Finance Ministry foreign claims registrar (during 1951-1956), the Public Committee for Egyptian Immigrants' Claims Registration (1957-1959), and the Public Committee for Iraqi Immigrants' Claims Registration (1956-1958). In September 1969, the Justice Ministry set up a department to record the claims of Jews from Arab lands (see Government Decision 34, September 28, 1969). Until August 1974, all the governmental bodies had collected 3,210 claims against Egypt, 4,852 against Iraq, 150 against Syria, 43 against Yemen, 18 against Saudi Arabia, 82 against Lebanon, and 48 against Jordan. See "Registry of Jewish Property in Arab Lands," Israel State Archives 43/6693/8-ג. Today, all such claims are handled by the Ministry for Senior Citizens.

60. Thus, for example, in August 1957, in preparation for the UN General Assembly's discussion later that year, Avraham Herman, later Israel's ambassador to the U.S., said, "Lately we have made almost no public declarations regarding our claims for compensation, i.e., the claims of the refugees we have absorbed. It is a fact that in the past year the country has absorbed at least 12,000 refugees from Egypt, whose claims for compensation are many and great." See the protocol of consultation in the Foreign Ministry ahead of the UN Assembly, August 25, 1957, Israel State Archives 130/4315/8-צח. Five years later, Finance Minister Levi Eshkol instructed his staff "to prepare material" on the abandoned property of Jews from Arab countries. See the minutes of the consultation in the Finance Minister's Office on the question of compensation for refugees and counterclaims, August 27, 1962, Israel State Archives 130/4315/10-צח.

61. Foreign Ministry Director General Walter Eytan to the UN Reconciliation Commission, March 29, 1951, Israel State Archives 130/2451/11-צח.

62. The circumstances in which those Jews were forced to leave their places of residence were consistent with the definition of "refugee" according to the 1951 UN

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Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention defines a “refugee” as a person who is found outside his country of nationality “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion... and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” See [www.unhcr.org/protect/protection/3b66c2aa10.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/protect/protection/3b66c2aa10.pdf).

63. Michael M. Laskier, “Egyptian Jewry Under the Nasser Regime, 1956-1970,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 31:3 (July 1995), pp. 573-619.

64. Dr. E. Jahn, Office of the UN High Commissioner, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, document no. 7/2/3/Libya, July 6, 1967.

65. For the full text of the resolution, see the UN website, <http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/240/94/IMG/NR024094.pdf?OpenElement>.

66. Arthur J. Goldberg, “Resolution 242 After Twenty Years,” in National Committee on American Foreign Policy Report, *U.N. Resolution 242: Origin, Meaning, and Significance*, April 2002, [www.mefacts.com/cached.asp?x\\_id=10159](http://www.mefacts.com/cached.asp?x_id=10159).

67. Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, p. 327.

68. Carter's statements at a press conference on October 27, 1977, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6849#axzz1PnrIrr8y](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6849#axzz1PnrIrr8y). Quoted in Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House*, pp. 329-330.

69. Quoted in Meron, “Expulsion of the Jews,” p. 38.

70. Nabil Sharaf Eldin, “Jews of Our Country,” trans. Bruriah Horowitz, *Ruah Mizrahit* 8 (December 2008), p. 30 [Hebrew].

71. For the interview transcript, see [www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/000727\\_clinton\\_tv.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/000727_clinton_tv.html).

72. “Israeli Draft of the Framework Agreement on Permanent Status (appendix 1),” in Rex Brynen, *The Past as Prelude? Negotiating the Palestinian Refugee Issue*, briefing paper for Chatham House, p. 13, [www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/11721\\_0608palrefugees\\_brynen.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/11721_0608palrefugees_brynen.pdf).

73. “Israel's Private Response to Palestinian Refugee Paper of 22 January, Taba, 23 January 2001 (Draft 2),” in Brynen, *Past as Prelude?* appendix 5, p. 17.

74. See H.R. Res.185, 110th Cong., 1st sess., [www.opencongress.org/bill/110-hr185/text](http://www.opencongress.org/bill/110-hr185/text).

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75. Published in *Records: Book of Laws* 2232, March 3, 2010, pp. 406-407, [www.knesset.gov.il/Laws/Data/law/2232/2232.pdf](http://www.knesset.gov.il/Laws/Data/law/2232/2232.pdf) [Hebrew]. MK Nissim Zeev's bill and an explanation appear in *Records: Bills of the Knesset* 302, January 25, 2010, p. 92, [www.knesset.gov.il/Laws/Data/BillKnesset/302/302.pdf](http://www.knesset.gov.il/Laws/Data/BillKnesset/302/302.pdf) [Hebrew].

76. This policy serves as a basis for sociologist Yehouda Shenhav's conspiracy theory, according to which the State of Israel exploited Iraq's confiscation of Jewish property in order to avoid paying compensation to the Palestinian refugees. Yet it is unclear, according to Shenhav, what Israel should have done: Compensate the Iraqi Jews out of Israeli taxpayers' money? Compensate the Palestinians absent a comprehensive peace agreement? Shenhav often invokes the popular anti-Zionist claim that "when seeking the roots of the antagonism between Jews from Muslim lands and the Arabs," one should examine "the manner in which the Zionist movement and the State of Israel served as an alienating agent." For some reason, he does not even mention the violence perpetrated against the Jews of Iraq. See Yehouda Shenhav, "The Theft of Baghdad," *Haaretz*, April 10, 1998 [Hebrew]; see also the response of Shlomo Hillel, "The Perfect Distortion," *Haaretz*, April 29, 1998 [Hebrew].

77. Interview with Aharon Mor, formerly an official in the Ministry of Finance on matters of the property of Jews from Arab lands, August 2010; interview with Rafi Eitan, chairman of the National Council for Jewish Restitution, July 2010.

78. On the decision not to rehabilitate the Palestinian refugees and the problematic function of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), see, for example, Adi Schwartz, "We Are to Blame," *Israel Hayom*, November 5, 2010 [Hebrew].

79. The story of the Yedid (today Aharoni) family of Cairo is one of many examples. The family was forced to leave Egypt in 1949; its business was expropriated and transferred into Muslim hands, and its bank accounts seized; the father of the family suffered cardiac arrest, and his brother died of heart failure; one of the women of the family, who was elderly, refused to leave Egypt, and when she understood that she could not remain, she threw herself down the stairs and died instantly. See Schwartz, "This Was Their Home."

80. The Ministry for Senior Citizens has at present 12,000 claims; interview with Aharon Mor.

81. "Peace Treaty Between Israel and Egypt," art. 8, Foreign Ministry website, [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Israel-Egypt%20Peace%20Treaty](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Israel-Egypt%20Peace%20Treaty).

82. In August 1974 the legal adviser on Arab countries, Ya'akov Meron, wrote to the deputy minister of justice that those who left Syria and Yemen seldom filed property claims, and "from our end, we did not push the registration of matters

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relating to Syria, out of consideration for the survivors there.” See “Registry of Jewish Property in Arab Lands,” Israel State Archives 43/6693/8-1 [Hebrew]. Two years earlier, Shmuel Divon of the Foreign Ministry wrote in a letter to Foreign Minister Abba Eban that “The authorities in Iraq prevent the release [of the Jews]... and it is also in our interest to continue the line we adopted until now of avoiding publicizing the departure as well as criticizing Iraq in the Jewish context.” See “Jews of Iraq and Syria,” February 7, 1972, Israel State Archives 43/6693/8-1 [Hebrew].

83. Interview with Aharon Mor. Evidence of this was provided in a government meeting as early as March 1951, in which MK Bechor-Shalom Sheerit presented the claims of Iraqi Jews to the property that the Palestinian refugees had left behind in Israel. “There is no doubt that their demand regarding the Arab property in Israel has a basis,” Sheerit said. “Their situation is a result of the creation of the State of Israel, and we must think of a way to compensate... otherwise they can justly claim: Were it not for the State of Israel, we would have lived there for hundreds of years as free men, working in trade and crafts, amassing riches and property.” Minister of Finance Eliezer Kaplan answered him: “[We should] avoid saying: ‘In fact, the Jews could have sat in peace in Iraq, but the State of Israel forced them to leave their land,’ as if they are only victims of the State of Israel.... Indeed, it is possible to go further and say that the State of Israel owes compensation to each and every person who comes to Israel.” Records of the Second Cabinet Meeting 5711, meeting 35, 311, March 15, 1951 [Hebrew].

84. Interview with Aharon Mor; interview with Zvi Gabay, former ambassador and deputy director general of the Foreign Ministry, August 2010; interview with a source who wishes to remain anonymous, August 2010.

85. Interview with Jean-Claude Nidam, adviser on Arab law in the Ministry of Justice, October 2010.

86. “Arab Peace Initiative, Beirut, 28 March 2002,” in Brynen, *Past as Prelude?*, appendix 7, p. 20.

87. Saeb Erekat, “It’s Time You Chose: Occupation or Settlement,” Ynet, November 3, 2010, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3979142,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3979142,00.html) [Hebrew].

88. In the preface to one of the seminal texts of the Zionist movement, *The Jewish State*, Theodor Herzl writes that “the idea which I develop in this pamphlet is an age-old one: the establishment of a Jewish State.” When explaining why he saw fit to revive this idea, however, he writes, “What matters is the driving force. What is that force? The distress of the Jews.” Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Herzl, 1970), pp. 27-28.

89. See the Knesset website, “The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel,” [www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat\\_eng.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm).

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90. See, for example, the article by Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, "I Am a Refugee," *Jerusalem Post*, September 1, 2010.

91. Agenda proposal 901, meeting 128 of the eighth Knesset, January 1, 1975 [Hebrew].

92. Agenda proposal "The Claims of Jews from Arab Countries and Their Legitimate Rights," meeting 356 of the eleventh Knesset, November 26, 1987.

93. Jeremy W. Peters, "Reporter Retires After Words About Israel," *New York Times*, June 7, 2010.

94. Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago: J. Phillip O'Hara, 1976), pp. 31-34.