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Source: *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Fall 2005, Vol. 17, No. 3/4 (Fall 2005), pp. 3-19

Published by: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25834637>

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THE FORGOTTEN NARRATIVE: JEWISH REFUGEES FROM ARAB COUNTRIES

Avi Beker

Historically, there was an exchange of populations in the Middle East and the number of displaced Jews exceeds the number of Palestinian Arab refugees. Most of the Jews were expelled as a result of an open policy of anti-Semitic incitement and even ethnic cleansing. However, unlike the Arab refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case because of a combination of international cynicism and domestic Israeli suppression of the subject. The Palestinians are the only group of refugees out of the more than one hundred million who were displaced after World War II who have a special UN agency that, according to its mandate, cannot but perpetuate their tragedy. An open debate about the exodus of the Jews is critical for countering the Palestinian demand for the “right of return” and will require a more objective scrutiny of the myths about the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Introduction

Why was the story of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries suppressed? How did it become a forgotten exodus?

Jewish Political Studies Review 17:3-4 (Fall 2005)

Semha Alwaya, an attorney from San Francisco and former Jewish refugee from Iraq, wrote in March 2005 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the world is ignoring her story simply because of the “inconvenience for those who seek to blame Israel for all the problems in the Middle East.”¹ As she notes, since 1949 the United Nations has passed more than a hundred resolutions on Palestinian refugees and not a single one on Jewish refugees from Arab countries. The UN makes a clear divide between the “right of return” of millions of refugees even into Israel proper (the pre-1967 borders) and the rights of these Jewish refugees.

Although they exceed the numbers of the Palestinian refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case. Whereas the former are at the very heart of the peace process with a huge UN bureaucratic machinery dedicated to keeping them in the camps, the nine hundred thousand Jews who were forced out of Arab countries have not been refugees for many years. Most of them, about 650,000, went to Israel because it was the only country that would admit them. Most of them resided in tents that after several years were replaced by wooden cabins, and stayed in what were actually refugee camps for up to twelve years. They never received any aid or even attention from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or any other international agency. Although their plight was raised almost every year at the UN by Israeli representatives, there was never any other reference to their case at the world body.²

Only at the end of October 2003 was a bipartisan resolution (H. Con. Res. 311) submitted to the U.S. Congress that recognized the “Dual Middle East Refugee Problem.” It speaks of the forgotten exodus of nine hundred thousand Jews from Arab countries who “were forced to flee and in some cases brutally expelled amid coordinated violence and anti-Semitic incitement that amounted to ethnic cleansing.” Referring to the “population exchange” that took place in the Middle East, the resolution deplores the “cynical perpetuation of the Arab refugee crisis” and criticizes the “immense machinery of UNRWA” that only “increases violence through terror.” The resolution called on UNRWA to set up a program for resettling the Palestinian refugees.³

Typically, the issue of the Jewish refugees was not on the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for a final settlement at Camp David in July 2000. The subject emerged only after the parties failed to reach an agreement on the issue of the Palestinian refugees. Only then did the Israelis raise the question of justice for the Jews from Arab countries.

In addition to the international constraints, there have been domestic political reasons for successive Israeli governments’ suppression

of the subject. Many Israelis regarded the immigration and later integration of the Middle Eastern Jews into Israeli society as an important element in the Zionist ethos of the ingathering of exiles, and there was a reluctance to describe it in terms of a forced expulsion or, at best, an involuntary emigration. The Zionist leadership of the newborn state chose the romanticized code-name Magic Carpet to describe the immigration from Yemen, and the biblical title Operation Ezra and Nehemiah—they were Jewish leaders who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to build the Second Temple—for the exodus of the Iraqi Jews.

Before Camp David in July 2000, the conventional wisdom among both Israelis and international observers was that the issue of the Palestinian refugees should be left to the end of the peace process. It was believed that once the parties reached agreements on recognition, security, borders, water, normalization, and so on, the difficult refugee question would dissipate by itself. Indeed, it was never negotiated seriously since the abortive meetings of the UN Palestine Conciliation Commission in the early 1950s, which discussed a compromise on the refugees' return that the Arabs rejected.

From the very beginning, the Arabs treated the refugee issue as an instrument to achieve, through UN diplomacy, what they had failed to attain in the battles of 1948–1949 and the subsequent armistice agreements. The much-quoted General Assembly Resolution 194, which is adduced as legitimizing the Palestinian “right of return,” was originally rejected by the Arab states and contains nothing that makes this “right” a principle of international law.⁴ The wording of 194 already compromised the basis of negotiation by establishing the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) with the aim of facilitating “indirect contacts between the sides,” so as to overcome the Arab refusal to recognize Israel.

Subsequently, the General Assembly refused for many years to use the word peace in regard to settlements between the parties in the Middle East. This deletion from the UN vocabulary sharply contradicted the UN Charter and was a major failing for an organization that had mediated the armistice agreements after Israel's Independence War, for which its chief negotiator Dr. Ralph Bunche received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The conspiracy to exploit the human tragedy of the refugees against Israel was consolidated when the Arabs refused to accept the concept of resettlement, which appeared in 194 as an alternative solution. This approach was manifested in the establishment of UNWRA in December 1949 as the only agency of its kind to deal with a regional refugee problem.

On 14 December 1950, the UN again reiterated the principles of “repatriation or resettlement and compensation,” and even voiced

a concern that “the repatriation, resettlement, economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation have not been effected.” The Arabs, however, rejected the conciliation efforts of the PCC and succeeded to convince the General Assembly to separate the refugee issue from the other contested matters of the dispute. This marked a turning point in the UN’s attitude toward the refugee question; subsequently it took on a clear political dimension as needing to be solved in the framework of the “right of return” to an entity known as Palestine.⁵

The UN never discussed the plight of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries even though it had all the necessary information on their expulsion and even “ethnic cleansing” resulting in their resettlement mostly in Israel. From that point the refugee issue became an independent question, with no relationship to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole and the hostile acts that had created the problem in the first place. Hence, the Arabs consistently rejected ideas such as the UN Security Council’s 1949 proposals for an economic survey aimed at settling the refugees in different parts of the Middle East. Similarly, in June 1959 the Arabs reacted with fury when UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld presented a multiyear plan for the refugees’ rehabilitation.

The crisis at Camp David in 2000 highlighted the disastrous impact of this approach. It became apparent that the gaps between the parties were unbridgeable. Both the Israelis and the Americans were shocked to discover the Palestinians’ unwillingness to compromise on this matter. Even the pro-Palestinian Left in Israel felt betrayed and expressed the fear that the insistence on full implementation of the right of return is an attempt to destroy the Jewish state. It was only because of this crisis that the Israelis decided to present their own demands for the rights of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries. As a result, President Clinton made a historic statement recognizing these refugees’ entitlement to compensation: “the fund should compensate 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, who lived in predominately Arab countries who came to Israel because they were made refugees in their own land.”⁶

This American commitment was not, however, entirely new. In a press conference held twenty-three years earlier, on 27 October 1977, President Jimmy Carter said in regard to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty: “Palestinians have rights...obviously there are Jewish refugees...they have the same rights as others do.” Although both presidents’ statements are critical for the historical narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict and have serious implications for solving the Palestinian refugee problem, they remained tangential to the peace process. The

matter of the Jewish refugees seems to lurk as a “secret weapon” or fallback position in case the Arab side refuses to compromise on the right of return.

Are Jews Refugees, Too?

On 11 October 2003, the *New York Times* printed a story whose title bore a question mark: “Are Jews Who Fled Arab Lands to Israel Refugees, Too?” In its evenhanded approach and politically correct sensitivity to Arab claims, the *Times* left the issue unresolved because, as the article’s author Samuel G. Freedman asserted, the Middle East is “typified by clashes of narratives, different accounts of flight and dispossession that are used to justify political goals today.”⁷ The *Times*, however, could have cleared up the confusion by consulting its own archives and checking the reports on the nine hundred thousand Jews who fled Arab states amid anti-Semitic riots and threats after Israel’s creation in 1948. In those accounts there was no clash of narratives but only the “news that’s fit to print” about the mortal danger these Jews faced.

On 16 May 1948, the day after Israel declared independence, the *Times* published a front-page story with the headline: “Jews in Grave Danger in All Moslem Lands.”⁸ The paper noted that for nearly four months, “the UN had had before it an appeal for immediate and urgent consideration of the case of the Jewish population in Arab and Moslem countries.” A sub-headline stated that: “Nine Hundred Thousand Jews in Africa and Asia Face Wrath of Their Foes,” and the article cited reports of deteriorating Jewish security including violent incidents. The *Times* points out that according to a law drafted by the Political Committee of the Arab League, all Jewish citizens of these countries would be considered “members of the minority Jewish state of Palestine.” This implies that there was a clear Arab strategy to expel their Jewish citizens while expecting that they would find refuge in Israel.

In the same UN General Assembly, death threats were aired against Jews without much ado. The Egyptian delegate, Heykal Pasha, warned already on 24 November 1947 about the consequences of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine: “the United Nations...should not lose sight of the fact that the proposed solution might endanger a million Jews living in Muslim countries...creating anti-Semitism in those countries even more difficult to root out than the anti-Semitism which the Allies tried to eradicate in Germany...making the UN...responsible for very grave disorders and for the massacre of a large number of Jews.”⁹ The Palestinian delegate, Jamal Al-Hussayni, said the Jews’ situation in

the Arab world “will become very precarious. Governments in general have always been unable to prevent mob excitement and violence.”¹⁰ Syrian UN representative Faris Al-Khuri is quoted in the *New York Times* as far back as 19 February 1947 stating that: “Unless the Palestinian problem is settled, we shall have difficulty in protecting the Jews in the Arab world.”¹¹ As reported by a Jewish publication: “With the entire Arabic press fulminating against the perfidy of Zionism, and with Arab politicians rousing their underfed and enervated masses to a dangerous pitch of hysteria, the threats were certainly not empty.”¹²

In Iraq the threats were made publicly, and its Foreign Minister Fadel Jamail offered a similar statement in the UN.¹³ Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Sa’id pursued special efforts to expel his country’s Jews and in different political venues raised the idea of a population exchange. Specifically, according to a diplomatic report he suggested “to force an exchange of population under UN supervision and the transfer of 100,000 Jews beyond Iraq in exchange for the Arab refugees who had already left the territory in Israel’s hands.”¹⁴ The case of the Jews of Iraq is a documented record of legislation and public executions as part an official government policy of ethnic cleansing of the Middle East’s most ancient Jewish community.¹⁵

Expulsion as the Goal

The Arab statements in the UN General Assembly and the *New York Times* reports prove that the intention to expel these Jewish populations preceded the establishment of Israel and the plight of the Palestinian refugees. At the end of the war for Israel’s independence, early in February 1949, Britain’s ambassador to Transjordan Sir Alec Kirkbride was present at an exchange between the abovementioned Iraqi Prime Minister Sa’id and his Jordanian counterpart, Samir El-Rifa’i, regarding the fate of the Iraqi Jews. The former leader was planning mass killings of his Jewish countrymen to induce them to flee via Jordan. According to Kirkbride, Sa’id “came out with the astounding proposition that a convoy of Iraqi Jews should be brought over in army lorries escorted by armored cars, taken to the Jordanian-Israeli frontier and forced to cross the line.” Sa’id spelled out his strategy:

Quite apart from the certainty that the Israelis would not consent to receive the deportations in that manner, the passage of the Jews through Jordan would almost certainly have touched off serious trouble amongst the very disgruntled Arab refugees who were

crowded into the country. Either the Iraqi Jews would have been massacred or their guards would have to shoot other Arabs to protect the lives of their charges.¹⁶

Kirkbride and El-Rafa'i turned down the plan, and Sa'id went back to Iraq to reinforce his anti-Jewish measures internally.

What, then, happened to the nine hundred thousand Jews of the Arab countries?¹⁷

In a few years, Jewish communities that had existed in the Middle East for more than 2,500 years were brutally expelled or had to run for their lives. The statements made in the UN were harbingers of what became a total collapse of these Jews' security. Following the Partition Resolution of November 1947, and in some countries even earlier during World War II, Middle Eastern Jews were the targets of official and popular incitement, state-legislated discrimination, and pogroms—again, all this before the massive flight of the Arabs from Palestine.

In Syria, anti-Semitism grew after the Nazis' rise to power in Germany. By the late 1930s, Syria already served as a headquarters for anti-Semitism and hosted Nazi officers. By 1945 the thirty thousand Syrian Jews already faced restrictions on emigration to Israel and some of their property was burned and looted, including the Great Synagogue in Damascus. In December 1947 there was a major pogrom against the Jews of Aleppo, the largest community with seventeen thousand; many were killed and seven thousand fled. Jewish bank accounts in the city were frozen and private property was confiscated; fifty shops, eighteen synagogues, and five schools were burned. Later, after Israel's founding, more Syrian Jews were killed and banks were instructed to freeze all Jewish accounts.

In Yemen, Jews were always treated as second-class citizens. As far back as the 1880s, 2,500 Jews moved from there to Jerusalem and Jaffa, and as conditions worsened another seventeen thousand left to Aden and Palestine between 1923–1945. Riots and massacres also occurred in Aden, which was in British-controlled Yemen. In three days of disturbances in December 1947, many Jews were killed and the Jewish quarter was burned to the ground, so that the community lost its business and economic base. Altogether in those three days, 82 Jews were killed, 106 shops looted out of 170, 220 houses destroyed, and four synagogues gutted.

The Iraqi Jews' condition deteriorated parallel to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Nazi ideology pervaded Iraqi society including the school curricula, which praised Hitler for his anti-Jewish policy and called the Iraqi Jews a fifth column. Hundreds of Jews were forced out of their civil service jobs in the 1930s, and during the 1936 Arab

Revolt in Palestine, Jews were terrorized and murdered in Baghdad. That year the Chief Rabbi of Iraq, Sassoon Khaddouri, was forced to issue a statement denying any connection between Iraqi Jews and the Zionist movement, and in 1938 thirty-three Jewish leaders cabled to the League of Nations a strong condemnation of Zionism.¹⁸

The worst, however, came in June 1941 with the Farhud, a pro-Nazi uprising against the Jews. Beginning on the Shavuot holiday, in two days incited mobs murdered two hundred Jews, wounded over two thousand, looted more than nine hundred homes, and damaged shops and warehouses.

The Partition Resolution of November 1947 found Iraq's Jews in a state of fear. There had already been riots in the two preceding years, and Jewish children were no longer accepted in government schools. In May and again in December 1947, Jews were accused of poisoning sweets for Arab children and trying to inject cholera germs in drinking water. In 1948, Zionism was declared a crime, 1,500 Jews were dismissed from public service, and Jewish banks lost their authorization.¹⁹ Many Jews were imprisoned and some hanged on the same "charge"; in 1948 the richest Jew in Iraq, Shafiq Adas, received the death penalty for "Zionist and communist crimes." His execution by hanging was a clear message that Jews had no future in the country.²⁰ Again in 1949, numerous Jews were injured in a new wave of riots. Hence, the evacuation of more than one hundred thousand Jews to Israel between 1949–1951 was precipitated by Iraqi anti-Semitism and echoed the calls of Iraqi leaders for expulsion and population exchange.

A similar wave of persecution took place in Egypt and Libya, where in 1945 there were riots and massacres of hundreds of Jews, with destruction of synagogues and other communal buildings. This recurred in 1948 with the arrest of thousands in Egypt, and deadly attacks in both countries along with synagogue burnings and confiscation of both communal and private property.

The North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia also saw periodic waves of anti-Jewish riots including mass killings, but they were less intensive and with fewer casualties because of the better protection offered by the French authorities, who were engaged in their own conflict with the Arabs. However, many testimonies express fears of sudden deterioration that were reinforced by developments in other Arab countries and in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Clash of Narratives or Deliberate Injustice?

The creation of the Jewish refugee problem in the Middle East was strongly intertwined with the establishment of Israel and the Arab

rejection of a Jewish state. When, after successive wars, a peace process slowly emerged, the Palestinians expected that Israel would strongly pursue the issue of the Jewish refugees. In a 1975 article Sabri Jiryis, then director of the Institute of Palestine Studies in Beirut, accused the Arab states of expelling their Jews “in a mostly cruel manner after confiscating their possessions or taking control of them at the lowest price.” Jiryis expected that the Israelis would claim, in future negotiations, that there had been a population exchange in the Middle East. Although Israelis indeed raised the issue in international forums and information material, it did not enter the peace talks as a clear and unequivocal demand. Jiryis, however, envisaged it differently:

There is no need to say that the problem of those Jews and their passage to Israel is not merely theoretical, at least from the viewpoint of the Palestinian problem. Clearly, Israel will raise the question in all serious negotiations that may in time be conducted over the rights of the Palestinians...Israel’s argument will take approximately the following form: It is true that we Israelis brought about the exodus of Arabs from their land in the war of 1948...and that we took control of their property. In return, however, you Arabs caused the expulsion of a like number of Jews from Arab countries since 1948 until today. Most of them went to Israel after you seized control of their property in one way or another. What happened, therefore, is merely a kind of “population and property transfer,” the consequences of which both sides have to bear. Thus, Israel gathers in the Jews from Arab countries and the Arab countries are obliged in turn to settle the Palestinians within their own borders and work towards a solution of the problem. Israel will undoubtedly advance these claims in the first real debate over the Palestinian problem.²¹

Why did this not materialize?

Although the repression of painful memories by the Jewish refugees themselves is understandable, it is harder to grasp the silence of Israel’s government and society on an issue that touches the very heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Drawing an analogy between the stories of the Jewish and Palestinian refugees enables presenting a moral argument against the Palestinian demand for a right of return. For different reasons, however, both the Israeli Left and Right have been reluctant to make that analogy.

The Left, for its part, has trouble with an argument that tends to emphasize the morally superior approach of the Jewish side, which absorbed and rehabilitated its refugees whereas the Arabs worked to perpetuate the Palestinian refugees’ suffering as an anti-Israeli tool. For the Left, the Zionist ethos involves much guilt over Israel’s having allegedly caused the Palestinians to flee. The radical Left has even

made sweeping and false accusations that Israeli forces committed systematic massacres and deportations. According to the New Historians and post-Zionists, the state of Israel was born in sin. These notions have found their way into the public discourse, and have been adopted in academe and among the tone-setters in the Israeli culture and media.

The Israeli Right and Center have inhibitions of a different kind. These circles, which represent the mainstream ideology, believe the term “Jewish refugees” should be avoided so as to diminish the social tensions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In their view, it is better to stress that most of the Jews from Arab states were drawn to Israel by Zionist ideals and did not come as refugees. Indeed, many Israelis from Arab countries prefer that interpretation. The truth, however, is that the vast majority of Israelis, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, came to the Promised Land as persecuted or deported refugees; the voluntary, pioneering leadership was always a small minority.

For ideological reasons, as part of its Zionist mission, the Israeli government did not retain the term refugees for the Jews who came from Arab countries. Because it refers to someone without a home or a shelter, the state of Israel “abolished the term from the Jewish historical lexicon,” aiming to show that its door was open to Jewish immigration according to its Law of Return.²² However, these Zionist principles concealed the fact that almost all the Jews from Arab countries were indeed refugees who had suffered a great deal as individuals and as a community. They had undergone persecution, official and unofficial discrimination, and daily political, social, religious, and economic restrictions. They also were refugees because they arrived penniless after all their property and bank accounts were confiscated or looted.

As for the Zionist motives of these immigrants, they were reflected in their religious life in their Diaspora countries where they had prayed for their homeland in Israel and for the welfare of Jerusalem. But like their brethren in Europe, their strong ties to Zion, which were kept and nourished for two thousand years, were never translated into a voluntary, massive immigration to the Land of Israel. What prompted that were the riots and massacres that had been threatened and incited by the Arab leaders even from the rostrum of the UN.

The Role of the UN and UNRWA

The UN clearly played a central role in constructing the Arab narrative and ignoring and later delegitimizing the Jewish-Israeli one. The world body gave the Jews only a short grace period after the Holocaust and

up to the establishment of their state. When the UN voted to partition Mandatory Palestine into two states on 29 November 1947, most Jews around the world were ecstatic. Yet even this historic decision was achieved only because of a sudden shift by the Soviet Union and its satellites motivated by political expediency. The Soviets, already engaged in the Cold War, wanted first and foremost to speed Britain's departure from the Middle East.²³ They later reaffirmed Israel's establishment in the Security Council resolutions of 15 July 1948, which blamed the Arab League for rejecting calls for a ceasefire, and in Israel's admittance to the UN in May 1949.

The approval of Israel's UN membership has both political and legal significance, beyond the recognition itself. The passing of the resolution by the General Assembly, against the Arab will, can be considered an *ex post facto* acknowledgment of the armistice agreements, and a confirmation of the realities created by the Arab rejection of partition: the territorial changes and the need to resettle the Arab refugees in their new areas of residence. Such resettlement of refugees was the regular practice in numerous cases after World War II, and was referred to regarding the Arab refugees in two other General Assembly resolutions: 194 of December 1948, and 394 of December 1950.

The strategy of delegitimizing Israel was based from the beginning on the tragedy of the Palestinians. The Arabs exploited their distress in seeking to make Israel a pariah state. UNRWA was established as the only UN agency devoted to a specific group of refugees. Unlike the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, an agency that deals with all other refugees throughout the world, the Arabs opposed rehabilitation plans for the displaced Palestinians. UNRWA's political objective was clear: to create a permanent reminder of alleged Israeli misdeeds so as to keep the Palestinian issue alive. In August 1958, the former director of UNRWA in Jordan said: "The Arab States do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don't give a damn whether the refugees live or die."²⁴

In 2000, more than fifty years after UNRWA's establishment, an official PLO document reaffirmed the Arab strategy to perpetuate the refugees' distress by keeping them in the camps: "In order to keep the refugee issue alive and prevent Israel from evading responsibility for their plight, Arab countries—with the notable exception of Jordan—have usually sought to preserve a Palestinian identity by maintaining the Palestinians' status as refugees."²⁵

The UNRWA system has largely enabled the corruption of the Palestinian Arab leadership, who have never displayed a real concern for the refugees but only exploited them for political-financial interests. Although UNRWA has carried out laudable humanitarian work, this

cannot atone for its generally destructive role. The way in which UNRWA's mandate is defined plays into the hands of militant groups, including those in the camps. The literature on humanitarian aid refers to the camps as a "refugee-warrior" community, meaning they serve as military staging grounds.

Indeed, the link between refugee camps and terror in general was recognized by the UN Security Council in 1998 when, in discussing refugees in Africa, it declared the "unacceptability of using refugee camps...to achieve military purposes." Later that year Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in his report to the Security Council, demanded that "refugee camps...be kept free of any military presence or equipment." But such strictures were never applied to the UNRWA camps, where suicide-bomb belts are prepared, car bombs are constructed, and terrorists are trained.

The Myth of Arab Tolerance

Both Jewish and Arab writers, in different times and for different reasons, have contributed to the myth about the interfaith utopia between Jews and Arabs under Islam. In the nineteenth century, among Jewish authors, this reflected frustration over the failures of European emancipation, and in the twentieth century it figured in Arab accusations that Zionism and Israel had spoiled hundreds of years of pleasant coexistence. Specifically, the myth of Arab tolerance is used to deny the allegations that Jews were expelled from Arab states or faced threats and persecution there. Arab and Palestinian leaders have claimed that the Jews who left those countries can return and resume their peaceful lives.

The historical record of Jewish life under Arab rule, however, is mixed and much less encouraging. Maimonides, the greatest Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages, was close to power in Islamic society and conversant in the Arab language and culture. In his classic "Epistle to the Jews of Yemen" (1172), which he wrote to bolster the Yemenite Jews in the face of oppression and attempts at forced conversion, he wrote:

You know, my brethren, that on account of our sins God has cast us into the midst of this people, the nation of Ishmael, who persecute us severely, and who devise ways to harm us and to debase us. This is as the Exalted had warned us: "Even our enemies themselves being judges" (Deut. 32:31). No nation has ever done more harm to Israel. None has matched it in debasing and humiliating us. None has been able to reduce us as they have.²⁶

For Maimonides, who knew about the Crusaders' depredations against the Jews of Europe, this was an emphatic historical judgment. It may reflect his own family's experience of fleeing Spain after the deterioration in the Jews' conditions there and the death threats they faced from Muslim extremists, or it could be a great thinker's religiocultural assessment and anticipation of the future Muslim-Jewish confrontation.

The particular myth about the Golden Age and interfaith utopia in Spain was popular in Jewish historiography in the nineteenth century. The Jews' traumatic expulsion from Catholic Spain in 1492 and the fact that they found refuge in Muslim Turkey reinforced the longing for the better periods when Jews were somewhat economically and culturally integrated in Muslim Spain. Moreover, nineteenth-century Jewish historians were frustrated by their people's tortuously slow acceptance by European society in what was supposed to be a liberal age. As the greatest of these scholars, Heinrich Graetz, put it in his *History of the Jews*:

Wearied with contemplating the miserable plight of the Jews in their ancient home and in the countries of Europe, and fatigued by the constant sight of fanatical oppression in Christendom, the eyes of the observer rest with gladness upon their situation in the Arabian Peninsula. Here the sons of Judah were free to raise their heads, and did not need to look around them with fear and humiliation....Here they...were allowed to develop their powers in the midst of a free, simple and talented people, to show their manly courage, to compete for the gifts of fame, and with practiced hand to measure swords with their antagonists....

*The height of culture...was reached by the Jews of Spain in their most flourishing period.*²⁷ (emphasis added)

Bernard Lewis, however, offers a more balanced assessment of the fourteen centuries of Jewish life under Islamic rule:

The Jews were never free from discrimination, but only rarely subject to persecution;...their situation was never as bad as in Christendom at its worst, nor ever as good as in Christendom at its best. There is nothing in Islamic history to parallel the Spanish expulsion and Inquisition, the Russian pogroms, or the Nazi Holocaust; there is also nothing to compare with the progressive emancipation and acceptance accorded to Jews in the democratic West during the last three centuries.²⁸

Unlike Christianity, Islam had no tradition of deicide and Muslims did not blame Jews for the demise of their prophet Mohammed, who died a natural death. However, Muslims' attitudes

toward contemporary Jews were influenced by biographical accounts of Mohammed and by *hadith* concerning Jewish attempts on the Prophet's life, and when the Islamic world was threatened from within or without, its leaders became harsher toward the other religions leading to discrimination and violent persecution.²⁹

Since the late nineteenth century both theological and racist European anti-Semitism, including the innovations of the Nazis, have been internalized in the Muslim world. This includes themes centering on Jewish "chosenness," with wide dissemination of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Lewis observes that hatred of Israel is the only grievance that can be freely and safely expressed in the Arab totalitarian societies; Israel serves to deflect anger about economic conditions and lack of political freedom.³⁰

Yehuda Bauer notes that the study of Islam is important for Holocaust scholars because the same patterns and threats have arisen and a second Holocaust is perfectly possible: "In radical Islam there are forces which are mentally prepared—given the power—to carry out genocide against others." Whereas in the past traditional Islamic sects like the Saudi Wahabists did not focus on Jews, they now speak explicitly of eradicating them: "Their language is a mixture of that of the Nazis and the Qur'an."³¹

Denial of History and Justice

The denial of history has become an important tool in the Arab-Palestinian narrative. The obfuscation of the Jewish exodus from Arab countries is part of a larger revisionist endeavor. For instance, the official Palestinian Authority newspaper *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* quotes Muslim writer Safi naz Kallan's statement that: "there is no people or land named Israel, only Zionist thieves unfit to establish a nation or have their own language and religion." These Jews are "Shylocks of the land, busy emptying Palestinian pockets."³² At the Camp David talks in July 2000, Yasser Arafat denied any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount, thereby contradicting the Koran, the *hadith*, and other Islamic sources. His representative Saeb Erekat said the very idea of the Temple is a Jewish invention with no historical basis. President Clinton replied: "it is not just all the Jews around the world who believe that the Temple was there but the majority of Christians as well."³³

The Arabs' claim of a right of return for the Palestinian refugees relies on false premises: that there is such a right under international law, that it was granted to the Palestinians in UN resolutions, and that Israel is responsible for creating the refugee problem.³⁴ The case of the Jewish refugees highlights the Arabs' unwillingness to recognize

the Jewish right to a homeland and calculated policy of exploiting the conflict to pursue their goal of an “ethnic cleansing” of Israel. This policy has long and consistently been practiced by the Arabs. Today almost no Jews live in the Arab world, and Christian communities have dwindled sharply there.

In launching their war against the Jewish state in 1948, Arab countries were basically responsible for both the Jewish and Arab refugee problems. During this eighteen-month confrontation, in which Arab armies invaded Israel and battles raged in almost every city and settlement, there were instances in which Israeli troops forced the local Arab population to leave their homes. These were acts of self-defense in a war that killed six thousand of the six hundred thousand Jews then in the country, and it is clear that Israel did not, as alleged, mastermind a large-scale expulsion of Palestinians. According to their own testimonies, most of the Palestinians left because of the threats and fear-mongering of Arab leaders.

In his memoirs the former prime minister of Syria, Khalid Al-Azm, placed the entire blame for the refugee problem on the Arabs:

Since 1948 it is we who demanded the return of the refugees...while it is we who made them leave....We brought disaster upon...Arab refugees, by inviting them and bringing pressure to bear upon them to leave....We have rendered them dispossessed....Then we exploited them in executing crimes of murder, arson, and throwing bombs upon...men, women and children—all this in the service of political purposes.³⁵

In March 1976, in the official PLO journal in Beirut, *Falastin Al-Thawra*, current Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas wrote:

The Arab armies entered Palestine to protect the Palestinians from Zionist tyranny, but instead they abandoned them, forced them to emigrate and to leave their homeland, imposed upon them a political and ideological blockade and threw them into prisons similar to the ghettos in which the Jews used to live in Eastern Europe....³⁶

The Arab demand for a right of return is a formula for destroying Israel as a Jewish state and reflects the unwillingness to seek a realistic settlement. Open discussion of the Jews’ flight from Arab countries will encourage a more objective scrutiny of the myths about the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab and Palestinian responsibility for the population exchange that occurred weakens their argument for a “return” and highlights the double standard the UN has consistently applied to the conflict.

The case of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries and their harsh expulsion is a critical element in transforming the refugee question from a political-military tool to a humanitarian issue and helping to set the Middle East narrative straight.

Notes

1. Semha Alwaya, "The Vanishing Jews of the Arab World: Baghdad Native Tells the Story of Being a Middle East Refugee," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 March 2005.
2. For more on the subject, see Avi Beker, "Perpetuating the Tragedy: The United Nations and the Palestinian Refugees," in Malka Hillel Shulewitz, ed., *The Forgotten Million: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Countries* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 142–52; on the absorption in Israel, see Yehuda Dominitz, "Immigration and Absorption of Jews from Arab Countries," in Shulewitz, *ibid.*, pp. 155–84.
3. Itamar Levin, "Move in US Congress on Jews from Arab Countries...Also Calls on UNRWA to Resettle Palestinian Refugees," *Globes*, 30 October 2003 (Hebrew); Melissa Radler, *Jerusalem Post*, 31 October 2003.
4. Ruth Lapidot, "Legal Aspects of the Palestinian Refugee Question," *Jerusalem Letter No. 485*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, September 2002.
5. Avi Beker, *The United Nations and Israel: From Recognition to Reprehension* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), p. 49; Shabtai Rosenne, "Israel and the United Nations: Changed Perspectives, 1945–1976," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1978, pp. 33–34.
6. ABCnews.go.com/transcript: "Israeli TV Interviews Clinton," 27 July 2000.
7. Samuel G. Freedman, "Are Jews Who Fled Arab Lands to Israel Refugees, Too?" *New York Times*, 11 October 2003.
8. Mallory Browne, "Jews in Grave Danger in All Moslem Lands," *New York Times*, 16 May 1948; George Barret, "Protection of UN Sought for Jews," *New York Times*, 17 May 1948.
9. United Nations, *Official Records of the Second Session of the General Assembly*, Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, Summary Records of Meetings, 25 September–25 November 1947, Lake Success, NY, p. 185.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Quoted in S. Landshut, *Jewish Communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East: A Survey*, for the American Jewish Committee and the Anglo-Jewish Association (London: Jewish Chronicle, 1950).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
13. United Nations, *Official Records of the Second Session of the General Assembly*, Verbatim Record of the Plenary Meeting, Vol. 2, 110—28th meeting, 16 November 1947, p. 1391.
14. For the sources, see Ya'akov Meron, "Expulsion of Jews from Arab Countries," in Shulewitz, *Forgotten Million*, pp. 88–89.

15. Carole Basri, "The Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: An Examination of Legal Rights—A Case Study of the Human Rights Violations of Iraqi Jews," *Fordham International Law Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 3, March 2003, pp. 656–720.
16. Alec Kirkbride, *From the Wings: The Amman Memoirs, 1947–1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1976), pp. 115–16.
17. The survey of the Jewish condition in Arab countries is based on Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991); Martin Gilbert, *The Jews of Arab Lands* (London: British Board of Jewish Deputies, 1976); Ya'akov Meron, "Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries," *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1995, pp. 47–54; Raphael Patai, *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).
18. Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, p. 116, n. 32; Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq 1948–1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 7.
19. Levin, "Move in US Congress," p. 13.
20. Gat, *Jewish Exodus*, pp. 38–39.
21. Quoted in Meron, "Expulsion of Jews," p. 96.
22. Dominitz, "Immigration and Absorption."
23. Beker, *United Nations and Israel*, pp. 32–36.
24. See Terrence Prittie, "Middle East Refugees," in Michael Curtis, Joseph Neyer, Chaim I. Waxman, and Allan Pollack, eds., *The Palestinians: People, History, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1975), p. 71.
25. "The Palestinian Refugees," in *Factfiles* (Ramallah: Palestine Liberation Organization, 2000), p. 22.
26. "Maimonides' Epistle to the Jews of Yemen," in Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 241.
27. Quoted in Marc R. Cohen, *Under the Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3–4.
28. Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (London: Phoenix, 1997), pp. 121–22.
29. Cohen, *Under the Crescent*, p. 24; Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 128.
30. Lewis, *ibid.*
31. "From Propagating Myths to Research: Preparing for Holocaust Education—An Interview with Yehuda Bauer," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism*, No. 3, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1 December 2002.
32. *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, 5 November 1997 (Arabic).
33. Shlomo Ben Ami, *A Front without a Rearguard: A Voyage to the Boundaries of the Peace Process* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2004), p. 219 (Hebrew).
34. Ruth Lapidot, "The Right of Return in International Law, with Special Reference to the Palestinian Refugees," *Israel Yearbook on Human Rights*, Vol. 16 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1986).
35. Quoted in Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial* (Chicago: JKAP Publications, 1984), p. 16.
36. "Abu Mazen Charges that the Arab States Are the Cause of the Palestinian Refugee Problem," *Wall Street Journal*, 5 June 2003.