

Resources for Research on Jews of Arab Countries

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Description: We are all well aware of the outcry on behalf of the Arabs that claim to have been driven out of Israel, but little attention has been given to those Jews who were driven out of Arab countries since the formation of the state of Israel. The American Sephardi Federation is presently mounting a campaign to bring attention to these Jews driven from Arab Countries. The ASF library has provided the bulk of the resources involved in this current research. It involves not only a wide array of monographs, but also a number of archival holdings. I will describe some of the research that is currently under way and the goals that are being described in this research.

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In the paper presented by Professor Sarah Carlen, you learned about the history of the Sepharadim over the past two thousand years. I now intend to talk a bit about the difficulties encountered by the Sepharadim living in Arab countries in more recent times. A comprehensive bibliography of the books, articles, and web sites may be seen at the end. Finally, we have an exhibit here and I will try to leave time to visit it at the end. Please do!

We have already seen quite clearly that this was not a phenomenon that derived from the Holocaust or from the creation of the state of Israel. On the contrary, as Professor Maurice Roumani asserts:

Arab oppression of Jews is not, therefore, a post 1948 phenomenon. It is rooted in Islam and has been an inescapable characteristic of the relations between Arabs and Jews since Muhammad's time. 20th century Arab persecution of Jews is only a continuation and intensification of this centuries long tradition, in which the socially and religiously inferior Jew bore the brunt of the Muslim masses' contempt and the Muslim governments' arbitrary policies and financial troubles.¹

In the next few minutes I shall examine the history of the oppression that occurred over the last one hundred years using the Jews of Iraq and Libya as exemplary populations. I shall look at the way that the world has come to acknowledge, if not appreciate the situation that has evolved for the Jews who once lived or are still living in these lands, I will discuss some of the reasons for the development of problems and attitudes among the parties involved, and finally, I will review some of the measures that have been taken in recent times to resolve the existing state of affairs. In the process of discussing these issues, I shall describe a number of the resources that are available for further study.

Let us begin by examining the recent history of the Jews of Arab countries, to get some idea of how we reached the state of affairs that exists today. I shall cite two

¹ Maurice M. Roumani, *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries : A neglected Issue*. Tel Aviv : World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) , 1983. p. 29.

examples -- Iraq and Libya -- that are particularly demonstrative of the extent of the oppression. They are among the most severe cases, and yet they are not unique.

Iraq

Iraq is particularly interesting. The Jews became fully involved in the social life along with their Muslim brethren, while at the same time encountering terrible anti-semitism from the people around them. As Landshut points out in his ground-breaking work:

"An examination of the development of Muslim-Jewish relations in Iraq reveals two noteworthy features, apparently at variance with each other. On the one hand, probably in no other Muslim country has the Jewish minority been so closely associated with the whole fabric of social and political life as in Iraq. On the other hand, in none has anti-Jewish feeling in recent years been so general and nowhere have anti-Jewish measures been applied so systematically."²

As we have seen in the previous lecture, oppression of the Jews in this region is as old as the Bible itself. There are regular stories of Jews being expelled from one area, robbed of all their possessions, and driven elsewhere. Following the Moslem conquest, the situation depended very much on the particular ruler of the time. The more fanatical the ruler, the more oppressive they tended to be.³

With the coming of national independence in 1934, oppression of the Jews began to intensify. Records from the Alliance Israelite Universelle reveal increasing tensions and the initiation of several anti-Jewish measures, as we read:

I am pained to inform you that for the last few months a movement of hostility against the Jews has been taking shape around us and is becoming more accentuated from day to day. It began with the more and more systematic dismissal of Jewish employees from government service in secondary and superior schools, a numerous clausus has been established for Jewish pupils, whose number many not exceed 10 percent of the non-Jewish students, even

² Landshut, S. *Jewish communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East*. London : The Jewish Chronicle Ltd., 1950. p. 42.

³a. It may be assumed that during the reign of the fanatical caliph Omar II ibn 'Abd al 'Aziz (717–720), the Jews of Babylonia, together with all the *dhimmis*, suffered intolerance toward their religion. He forbade the governors to appoint members of other religions as tax collectors and scribes and considered friendship toward Jews or Christians sinful. He also prohibited the *Ahl al-dhimma* ("protected subjects") to dress as Arabs and sought to degrade them socially

b. In spite of all the restrictions, many Jews adapted themselves to the values of Arab culture. They distinguished themselves as physicians and writers, played important roles in the economic life, and held government positions because of the lack of educated officials. The fact that it was necessary from time to time to renew the decrees on clothing proves that they were not generally enforced.... During the reign of the caliph al-Mu'ta'im (892–902) the vizier Ibn Suleiman encouraged the employment of educated Jews and Christians in the royal service because they were more honest than the Muslims. It is said that the caliph ordered the abolition of the poll tax (*jizya*) for the Jews, but Netira, one of the leading and wealthiest Jews of Baghdad, opposed this and said to the caliph: "By the payment of the poll tax the Jew becomes a 'protected subject' [*dhimmi*]; were the tax to be abolished, Jewish blood would be shed freely." According to the story the caliph made Netira responsible for the collection of the tax.

though the Jewish population of Baghdad (80,000) is one fourth of the total population..... J transfers of money have encountered diverse opposition and multiple hindrances.⁴

Iraq favored the Axis powers during WWII, and this produced an increased level of Anti-Semitism. First hand reports of the growing tensions are grim. One family from Baghdad reported, for example:

BAGHDAD, JUNE 1, 1941: A TESTIMONY

"All night long, we heard gunfire and shouting, all night long. It went quiet before dawn. That morning, my father went to the synagogue. He did not pray.

*When he got back, he told Mother what happened; Jewish homes were burned, daughters raped, homes looted. One synagogue was burned down. As Father was talking, they burst into our house, broke down two doors, entered shouting, waving sticks; Father took us to the stairway leading to the roof. We started to climb, one after another, my mother after us, my father bringing up the rear. Suddenly, my mother heard a shot. She turned, and saw my father, dead. A policeman came. Mother started to cry, telling him, 'They killed my husband.' He said: 'How do you want to die?' and bashed her head in with his gun."*⁵

Even before the United Nations voted in favor of the establishment of a Jewish State, Jews in Iraq were being accused of the most fantastic crimes and subjected to many restrictions. In May, 1947, for instance, an Arab newspaper alleged, in spite of an official police denial, that a Jew had given poisoned sweets to an Arab child. In December of the same year another Jew was arrested on suspicion of having placed a tube containing Cholera germs in a stream (*Daily Telegraph*, December 29, 1947)⁶

With the outbreak of the war against Israel, a state of emergency was declared, which the Iraqi government used as their reason for enforcing a number of anti-Jewish rules and regulations. Jews were prohibited from leaving the country, and at the same time treated terribly while they remained. The sum of L 2,000 deposit, guaranteeing the return of Jews wishing to go abroad, was increased to L 3,000 on May 15, 1948; and even then an exit permit, granted only in exceptional cases, was necessary. ⁷ In a series of show trials, Jews were accused and convicted of a whole series of crimes. In many cases, the Iraqi press reached the point where they did not even feel the need to report the crime, just the sentence. In these two examples, for instance, one reads:

Hezekiel Zaki has been condemned to two years' imprisonment and fined 500 dinars. (*Al-Shaab*, February 7, 1949.)

⁴AIU Archives (Paris) "The Iraqi Government initiates several anti-Jewish measures." In Norman A. Stillman (ed.). *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*. Philadelphia : The Jewish Publication Society, 1991.

⁵ Nezima Mu'alleem-Cohen, recorded in Yigal Lucin, *The Pillar of Fire* (in Hebrew), 1982. From Rachel Neiman's English translation of Itamar Levin, *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries*, 2001.

⁶Landshut, S. *Jewish communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East*. London : The Jewish Chronicle Ltd., 1950. p. 47

⁷Loc.cit.

Sadik Nahum has been found a danger to the security of the state and fined 3,000 dinars as a guarantee of good conduct (*Liwa al-Istiqlal*, March 14, 1949).⁸

In particular, Jews were regularly accused of involvement in "Zionist" activities. These activities could be as harmless as being accused of disturbing the peace, to receiving a letter from a relative living in Israel:

The court martial rules that Shaul Yahya must deposit a guarantee of 200 dinars as it is alleged that he has committed acts which have disturbed public order (Saut al-Ahrar, December 19, 1948)

R. Sassoon Ghazale and Nissim Rahim must pay 500 dinars guarantee for their good conduct and the maintenance of order, as it is alleged that Nissim Rahim has received a letter from his aunt, Therese Rahim, who is now in Palestine.⁹

Landshut concludes that the fact that fines were always attached to these sentences means that "...there can be no doubt that the main duty of the courts martial was to obtain funds for the empty treasury."¹⁰ Moreover, he asserts that "There is little doubt that the majority of contributions towards the fund raised for the prosecution of the Palestine campaign and later, for the assistance of Arab refugees, came from Jews. .¹¹ Cohen reiterates that: "The aim of the authorities was to fill the government treasury with the money of the Jews and break up the Jewish underground movement." ¹² We can see for example, that the income from the Jews was quite significant:

Y.S. immigrated to Israel in 1951 and filled out a claim form in December, 1954. Y.S. claimed he was owed 263,900 dinar, the premium paid annually to the German insurance company Allianz via the Ottoman Bank branch in Baghdad; the insurance policy had been confiscated by the Iraqi regime. He also claimed 75 dinar on a retirement fund after having been employed for 13 years by the Iraqi railway. He sought compensation for the confiscation of merchandise from a shop owned by him and his partner Ibrahim Mu'llem in Baghdad's Suq al-deri open market, valued at 2,838,900 dinar. The total value was \$76,000.¹³

Finally, on March 10, 1951, the Iraq government passed a Law for the Control and Management of the Assets of Denaturalized Iraqi Jews, which froze the assets of Jews who had renounced their nationality. In addition, another order was issued which froze the assets of Jews who had fled Iraq after the beginning of 1948 and had not returned by May, 1951.

Law of Freezing The Assets of Jews Residing at Present

Article 2A: The assets of Jews who have lost their nationality shall be frozen and shall not be disposed of in any way after this law is promulgated, and they shall

⁸Loc.cit.

⁹Loc.cit.

¹⁰Loc.cit.

¹¹Loc.cit.

¹²Cohen, Hayyim J. "Iraq." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol.8, Jerusalem : Keter Books, 1973. pp. 1453.

¹³Levin, Itmar. *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries*. Praeger: Westport, Connecticut, 2001.

be disposed of in accordance with it and the order which will be issued as a consequence of it.

Article 2B: An office will be established with the title of Amana Ama (General Secretariat) for the supervision and management of the assets of Jews who have lost their nationality under the direction of the General Secretary, as shall be decided by the Council of Ministers. The fares and salaries of the employees of the office and all the expenses of the office will be taken from the assets which will be put under the control of the General Secretary.

Article 4: All the transactions and engagements of the General Secretary and the decisions taken by him in accordance with this law and the orders issued in pursuance thereof shall be legally binding.¹⁴

As a result of this action, the government managed to seize assets valued at some \$200,000,000.

In July 1968, the Ba'ath party came to power--the initial military coup was led by General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakkar, but the true leader who eventually asserted power was Saddam Hussein (who officially took over control of the government in 1970). In January, 1969 nine Jews were condemned as spies by an Iraqi court and were hanged in Baghdad's main public square. Itamar Levin points out that: "...As execution by law also meant confiscation of property, it may be no coincidence that these false accusations were levied, for the most part, against wealthy Jews. An Iraqi paper, which published a chillingly disparaging account mocking the Jewish victims' final moments, termed them "subhuman" -- the same term ("untermensch") used by the Nazis against the Jews."¹⁵

A short reprieve announced on Baghdad radio on May 1, 1969 was extremely misleading, but very telling. It stated:

"The Iraqi government finds that Jewish community members were persecuted and unjustly treated by the former hated regime. So it has decided to take the following measures in order to make amends for all the damages caused and wrongs done: (1) restriction to freeze shares and bonds pertaining to Jews will be lifted off as from the coming Saturday, and the Jew can sell, buy and dispose of his shares and bonds, as every Iraqi can; (2) Restrictions to freeze Jews' money in the banks will be lifted off as from the coming Saturday, and the Jew can withdraw or deposit money as much as he wishes, as every Iraqi can; and (3) Jews can sell their immovable property as from the coming Saturday, as every Iraqi can. Later the speaker also announced that "Jews wishing to leave the country must register within the next few days in a special department assigned for this purpose in the Passport and Identity Card official Bureau."¹⁶

This announcement however, is very telling-- It is, to begin with, an admission to the fact that the Jews had for many years been mistreated by the government in Iraq. It also seems to have been a ploy on the part of the new Iraqi government to set the Jews off balance, and to get them to give up their last assets, before then eliminating the last of the Jews altogether.

¹⁴ Anglo-Jewish Association: Foreign Affairs Committee, May 4, 1951.

¹⁵ Levin, Itmar. *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries*. Praeger: Westport, Connecticut, 2001. p 76

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79

They must have expected, as one Jewish inhabitant asserted that: --"Now that there's hope for an exit out of the country for his family and himself, the Jew does not care much about his money, his share, his bonds, his property. He'll be happy to quit, leaving everything behind."¹⁷

Finally in 1970, the government ordered the remaining Jews to leave. Today, there are an estimated 30-40 Jews remaining--Those who remain have mixed feelings about the Saddam Hussein government. Some note that Saddam Hussein installed Khairallah Talfah, the uncle who had raised him, as mayor of Baghdad and in 1991 allowed him to publish his philosophy, which asserted that there were "three whom God should not have created: Persians, Jews, and flies."¹⁸ Others were much more complacent:

They told me that during the first year or so after the Ba'ath coup, life had been hell. There were hangings and disappearances, .. The situation improved when Saddam Hussein attained greater power, and today the attitude toward Jews was the same as toward other Iraqis. Their old businesses were given back to them, first of all import-export businesses. They hold important positions as teachers and public officials, and there is even a Jewish pharmacist who works in Basra, and who the men told me with pride had been sent by the government to represent it in a delegation to China.....¹⁹

Sheffy Gabbai notes moreover, that:

The Jewish community in Iraq consists at present of 250 people, mostly adults and elderly – a “nature preserve” that enjoys the protection of the regime of Saddam Hussein ...”After he took power, Saddam ordered that ten closed synagogues be returned to the community,” the heads of the community in Baghdad told journalist.... “Since we do not need them, we rented them out to Muslims. We also rented out the two Jewish hospitals that were returned to us. We use the proceeds to aid the elderly in the community who have no source of income, and we will soon make use of them to install air conditioners in the Meir Tawig synagogue.”²⁰

The truth seems to be that the Jewish population, though held in contempt, is no longer significant to the leaders of Iraq -- The people there are old, and few possess property worthy of the government taking. Since the last Gulf war, the few remaining Jews reportedly are concerned about a surge in fundamentalist Shiite power.²¹

¹⁷Sawdayee, Max. *All waiting to be Hanged*. Tel Aviv : n.l., 1974. pp.119-131. Cited in Levin, Itmar. *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries*. Praeger: Westport, Connecticut, 2001. p. 79.

¹⁸Kazzaz, David. *Mother of the Pound : Memoirs on the life and history of the Iraqi Jews*. Brooklyn, NY : Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1999. p. 406.

¹⁹Viurst, Milton "The Last Jews in Baghdad (1987) In Melamed, Ora (ed.) and Levin, Edward (Trans.) *Annals of Iraqi Jewry: A collection of Articles and reviews* .Jerusalem : The Department for Torah Education (The Department of Sephardi Communities of the World Zionist Organization), 1995. p. 425-6.

²⁰ Gabbai, Sheffy. “Iraqi Jewry: Isolated and Tense.” In Melamed, Ora (ed.) and Levin, Edward (Trans.) *Annals of Iraqi Jewry: A collection of Articles and reviews* .Jerusalem : The Department for Torah Education (The Department of Sephardi Communities of the World Zionist Organization), 1995. p.427-9.

²¹Matthew McAllester. “New fear for Iraq Jews,” *Newsday*, May 9, 2003.

The Jews of Libya

The Jews of Libya are another example of acculturation and yet persecution. In a recent article produced by the librarian, David Littman, the author cites a whole litany of incidents described in the archives of the Alliance Israelite Universelle detailing Muslim attacks on Jews living in Libya at end of the nineteenth century.²² In one 1879 letter from the AIU, the administrators reported that because they had received no punishment for their acts the Muslims felt emboldened and continued to harass their Jewish neighbors. Receiving little relief from the Arab leadership in Libya, the Jewish community began to turn for assistance to the nations of Europe and the US.²³ In another letter from 1897, it is reported that the Jews were excluded from a number of the rights that the Sul-ton had granted to all subjects regardless of race, as it states:

The situation of the Jews in all parts of Tripolitania is very dangerous. From all the rights which, from his known goodness and generosity. His Imperial Majesty the Sultan has granted to all his subjects without distinction of race, we are unfortunately excluded by reason of extreme ill-treatment and persecution at the hands of the Muslims in our country, under the government of our present *Vali* (Governor) Hamik Bey, who does not wish to aid us, nor protect us against the cruel and inhumane Muslim population.²⁴

The Jews of Idder complain that the guards protecting them had been removed and as a result, their synagogue was attacked and ransacked. The records show, moreover, that although the culprits were initially captured and imprisoned, no changes were brought against them and they were released shortly thereafter. The records conclude that in the eyes of the Muslims, the Jews were of no significance, as is explained: "It is quite understandable that, to the Muslims, Jews are of no account, and our personal safety in jeopardy and our belongings are not our own."²⁵ In yet another letter from 1897, the Tripolitanian Community of Idder-Misurata complain that the governor is not only failing to come to their aid, but he is also misrepresenting the situation, as is stated:

We are in receipt of your letter in which you inform us that, having spoken on our behalf to the Governor, his reply to you was that we have only 30 houses in our quarter, and that we live in perfect harmony with the Muslims, who according to him protect us from malefactors. Our reply to this is that in the past we had more than 60 houses, but after several Israelites had been killed and their houses robbed, most of the other Israelites abandoned their houses and fled. those who were poor joined up with us, so that every house contained and still contains four or five families, such was their fear of being killed by the Arabs..²⁶

²²Littman, David "Jews under Muslim Rule in the late Nineteenth Century." *The Wiener Library Bulletin*, vol. xxviii, new Series nos. 35/36. 1975. p. 69.

²³Loc.cit.

²⁴Ibid., p.69-70.

²⁵Ibid., p. 70.

²⁶Ibid., p. 70.

During World War II, a number of new restrictions and laws were imposed on the Jews. One such law was Governors decree no. 105 of May 30, which became effective on June 2, 1942. Of this decree it was said that :

It forbade Jews to sell, purchase, or lease property of farms to or from Aryan Italians or Muslims.... Authorization was also necessary for transferring commercial and manufacturing concerns for any purpose, for setting up companies and for practicing the professions of broker, commercial traveler, commission agent, and franchise holder.²⁷

Following the end of World War II, official restrictions came to be replaced by mob violence.²⁸ The communal records also provide a long list of material damages sustained in these riots.

The damage caused in the riots was various: plunder, rapes, fire, etc. .. The most affected areas in Tripoli were Suk el Turk (variety shops, modes, mercery shops,, ironmongeries, tailor-shops, shoe shops, goldsmith shops, household articles shops, household articles, etc.),... Besides shops, many homes, stores, and factories were plundered or damaged. Most of the houses were wholly emptied, and therefore the families who occupied them now find themselves without even personal effects.....The Jewish community, as a body, also suffered a conspicuous part of the damage. In the nine synagogues attacked in Tripoli and in the other minor communities the furnishings, household goods and furniture were destroyed by fire or damaged: 35 Scrolls of the Law, 2,084 sacred books, and 89,086 kg. of silver (sacred ornaments) were plundered.²⁹

Immediately after the creation of the State of Israel, mobs began attacking the Jewish community throughout Libya. Norman A. Stillman writes in the *Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* that on June 12, 1948 (the day after the first truce was declared between Israel and the Arab States) mobs attacked the Jewish quarter in Tripoli.³⁰ Stillman points out that there was some serious discrepancy between the figures derived by the British and by other sources: According to the British sources for example, 13 Jews and 3 Arabs were killed; According to the Jewish Sources 14 Jews and 30 Arabs were killed.³¹

²⁷Felice, Renzo de. *Jews in an Arab Land : Libya, 1835-1970*. Trnaslated by Judith Roumani. Austin : University of Texas Press, 1985. pp.180-181.

²⁸The Jewish Community in Tripolitania reported, in fact, that:

From the 4th to the 7th of November, 1945, mobs of Arabs, old and young, made a vicious and sudden attack on the Jews in different parts of Tripolitania. Never in the history of Tripolitanian Jewry, not even in the darkest periods of their existence, has such a pogrom been launched against them.....In Tripoli and the smaller provincial centers of Suk el Jouma, Tagiura, Kussabat, Zanzur, and Zavia, more than 100 Jews, law-abiding and unarmed (including a large percentage of women, old people, and children), were savagely massacred, some after cruel torture, others by being burned alive. A great number of houses, shops, and stores were plundered and set alight, five synagogues in Tripoli, two in Amrus (Suk el Jouma) one in Tagiura, one in Zanzur were profaned, plundered, and fired, together with the Scrolls of the Law, all equipment and the Sacred books. Well-to-do families were reduced to abject poverty overnight. Scores of widows, orphans, and others who lost relatives who had supported them now swelled the ranks of the already numerous poor Jews CZA (Jerusalem) S 25/5219 "Anti Jewish Riots in Tripolitania," pp.1-6).In Norman A. Stillman (ed.). *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*. Philadelphia : The Jewish Publication Society, 1991.pp. 461-5.

²⁹Loc.cit.

³⁰Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times.*, p. 152.

³¹Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, pp. 224-5.

The rioters then turned upon undefended neighborhoods outside the Hara. Only 13 or 14 Jews were killed and 22 seriously injured, but property damage was very high. Approximately 300 families were left destitute....³²

Libyan Jewry was thoroughly demoralized by the pogroms and saw no hope for the future in the country.

Some members of the community, in an impassioned letter to the United Nations Security Council, described their collective plight as "unbearable materially, economically, as well as morally: and asked to be "free of this hell." According to the same letter, 60% of the community was living on welfare provided by Jewish philanthropy from abroad."³³ Between April 1949 and December 1951, over 31,000 of a total 35,000 to 36,000 Jews left the country on Israeli ships, the last two of which sailed out of Tripoli harbor shortly after Libya gained its independence at the end of 1951.³⁴

Following the 6 day war in 1967, mobs of Arabs were again aroused to inflict violence upon the Jews. With the increased hostilities resulting from the War, Jews were forced to flee, leaving behind all their possessions.³⁵ According to the (Libyan) government in 1970, Colonel Muamar Qaddafi's revolutionary regime nationalized the property of the Jews who had left Libya, but he promised indemnification in 15 years. His government made the following statements:

THE COMMAND OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL HAS PROMULGATED THE LAW CONCERNING THE RESTITUTION OF CERTAIN ASSETS TO THE STATE AS FOLLOWS:

In the name of the People

The Command of the Revolutionary Council:

Having regard to the constitutional notice dated Shawwal 1389 corresponding to the 11 December 1969 and Law No. 6 of 1961 concerning the liability of certain Israeli assets to custodianship;

³²Stillman, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

³³Ibid, p. 155.

³⁴Ibid., pp.155-6.

³⁵Roumani, *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries*, p. 6.

HAS PROMULGATED THE FOLLOWING LAW:

Art.1.

There have been restituted to the State the assets and property of persons liable to the custodianship in force

Art.2.

An indemnity shall be due to the persons indicated in the preceding Article for assets and property transferred to the State, which shall be fixed by one or more commissions constituted by decree of the council of ministers

..Art.3.

The indemnity paid in conformity with the preceding article shall be made in the form of the issuance of registered bonds redeemable in 15 years.

David Harris notes that: Qaddhafi excused the defaulting on the bonds saying, “the alignment of the Jews with Israel, the Arab nations’ enemy, has forfeited their right to compensation.”³⁶ Yet, despite the abuse, many Libyan Jews clung to the soil, long after they had worn out their welcome, as one individual testifies:

“It is quite natural to wonder why we remained in a country increasingly inhospitable to Jews and implacably opposed to Israel and Zionism. How could we live tranquilly when we constantly feared the uncovering of our contact with relatives who had left for Israel in 1948 and 1949? I guess the answer is rather simple: Our roots in Libya were deep, our attachment to the country strong, our daily lives as Jews, believe it or not, unhindered. We came to resign ourselves, almost to take for granted, our political powerlessness and physical vulnerability. Without specific provocation, it would have been difficult to get up and leave for uncertain future”.³⁷

Finally, faced with a complete breakdown of law and order, the Libyan government urged the Jew to leave the country temporarily. Whereas, in the past, Jews had considerable difficulty obtaining travel documents, Libyan officials were now visiting Jewish homes and issuing documents on the spot. Escorts were provided to the airports. But departing Jews were permitted only one suitcase and the equivalent of \$50”³⁸.

³⁶ Harris, David A. *In the trenches : Selected speeches and writings of an American Jewish Activist, 1979-1999*. Hoboken, NJ : KTAV Publishing, 2000. p. 157..

³⁷ Quote told to Harris in 1984 about why Jews stayed in Libya through 50’s and 60’s. Harris, David A. *In the trenches : Selected speeches and writings of an American Jewish Activist, 1979-1999*. Hoboken, NJ : KTAV Publishing, 2000. p. 153.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 156.

Results and Reactions

As a result of the expulsion of the Jews from Arab lands there was a tremendous decrease in the Jewish populations in the various countries. For example :

Jewish Populations in Arab Countries

Country	1948	1958	1968	1976	2001
Aden	8,000	800	0	0	0
Algeria	140,000	130,000	1,500	1,000	0
Egypt	75,000	40,000	1,000	400	100
Iraq	135,000	6,000	2,500	350	100
Lebanon	5,000	6,000	3,000	400	100
Libya	38,000	3,750	100	40	0
Morocco	265,000	200,000	50,000	18,000	5,700
Syria	30,000	5,000	4,000	4,500	100
Tunisia	105,000	80,000	10,000	7,000	1,500
Yemen	55,000	3,500	500	500	200
Total	856,000	475,050	72,600	32,190	7,800
	(Roumani 83	(AJY 58)	(AJY 69; Yemen:AJY 70	(AJY 78)	(AJY 01; Lebanon: AJY 88)

By 1958, 97% of all Jews in Arab countries had emigrated due to hostile political, social and economic climates. In 1948, there were more than 870,000 Jews living in the Middle East and North Africa. Some 400,000 immigrated to Israel as refugees between 1948 and 1951. Over the next twenty years, an additional 186,268 arrived in Israel, mostly from North Africa. Several hundred thousand Jewish refugees from Arab countries also settled in France, the United States, Canada, Mexico and South American countries. The ugly situation is acknowledged by various organizations, including: the Israeli Knesset, the U.S. Congress, and the United Nations. We shall look at each in turn, and analyze their reaction to the expulsion of Jews from the various Arab Countries.

The Knesset

In the Knesset, we find that On October 26, 1987, a Resolution was passed in the Knesset by parties representing 100 out of the 120 Knesset members that affirmed that:

.... even today, when the integration of the Jews from Arab countries is an accomplished fact, the emigres from Arab countries have the right to receive compensation from the governments of Arab countries for property which was expropriated, nationalized, or forcefully taken away, and for persecution perpetuated against them. The Arab countries are obligated to return to them the religious and cultural treasures and works of art taken from them.³⁹

Expressions were voiced both on the right from Benjamin Netanyahu who stated:

“...The Jewish communities which came to us from Arab countries flourished in the Middle East before the advent of Islam, before Arabs set foot in those countries, before any Jews lived in Europe. Jewish communities which existed for millennia were forced out of their ancestral homes virtually overnight. Jews from Arab lands left behind homes, lands, fortunes, businesses, possessions. Almost 800,000 of them came to Israel – considerably more than the Arabs who left, mostly voluntarily, in 1948. And the property they left behind was valued at nearly five times the property left by the Arabs.”⁴⁰

As well as on the left from Benjamin Ben Eliezer (Ma’arach) who stated:

“The world remembers and reminds us exclusively of the problem of the Palestinian Arab refugees whenever the matter of a political settlement is raised. The problem of Jews from Arab Lands should not be forgotten, nor should their rights be prejudiced, just because hundreds of thousands of them have been fully absorbed into the State of Israel, whilst the Palestinian Arab refugees have not been absorbed by the Arab States and have been turned into political pawns and hostages, particularly by the P.L.O.”⁴¹

In 1976, Minister of Justice Haim Zadok of the Labor Party:

“...Most of the Jews were forced to flee destitute, their property having been looted, confiscated, impounded, or nationalized. The majority of these Jews came to Israel and what has taken place here is in fact an exchange of population”

The Israeli Knesset thus expressed a great deal of interest and concern over the unhappy situation confronting the Jews driven from Arab Countries.

Nevertheless, it appears that the Israelis made less than a concerted effort to ask for reparations in the first twenty years after the creation of Israel and this appears to have

³⁹ World Zionist Organization. *Resolutions of the 31st Zionist Congress pertaining to Jews from Arab Countries, 6-10 December 1987.*

⁴⁰ Netanyahu, Benjamin. "Speech delivered by Ambassador Benjamin Netanyahu at the Third International Conference of WOJAC," Washington D.C., October 27, 1987.

⁴¹ *Knesset Record : The legitimate rights and claims of Jews from Arab Countries.* Sessions No. 349 and No. 356 of the 11th Knesset. October, 1987. p.18.

been because the refugees were focused on their Aliyah to Israel and had given up hope of saving the remains of their previous lives. As Ya'akov Meron points out:

....the romantic "magic carpet" image for the migration from Yemen and the "Ezra and Nehemiah Operation" name attached to the Iraqi migration stress the positive, glossing over the unhappy circumstances of the Arab expulsions...."Israel only very rarely emphasizes the fact that a part of its population left property and space it legitimately owned in the Arab countries of its origin."⁴²

Indeed, we find that Shimon Peres, while serving as Israeli Foreign Minister in 1987, asserted that many of the Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries came to Israel "...out of genuine Messianic yearning."⁴³ It was only at a later date that Israelis began acknowledging their losses and began expressing their grievances.

The U.S. Congress

The U.S. Congress has also expressed concern over the expulsions from Arab Countries as well as concern for the conditions of the Jews living in those countries. For example, we read in **H.R.3100--100th Congress 1st Session--Congressional Record--Proceedings and Debates of the 100th Congress., Washington, 1987-1988:**

(a) FINDINGS-- The Congress finds that--

- (1) many Jews presently living in Israel and the Diaspora are originally from Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa representing the proud heritage of oriental Jewry
- (2) the number of Jews who are still citizens of these countries has dropped drastically, as can be seen when comparing 1948 to 1984: Syria, 45,000 versus 4,500; Morocco, 40,000 versus 17,000; Iraq, 125,000 versus fewer than 300; and Libya, 40,000 versus none;--⁴⁴

More recently, furthermore, U.S Rep. Frank Pollone, Jr. (D-NJ) gave the following statement on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday, May 7, 2003:

Many people do not realize that during the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, more Jews than Arabs became refugees. It is estimated that over 900,000 Jews were stripped of their property and expelled from Arab nations.⁴⁵

Thus, there has been some awareness in the U.S. Congress of the situation confronting Jewish refugees who have been driven from Arab countries. It is questionable, however,

⁴² Cited in Ya'akov Meron, "Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries." *Middle East Quarterly*, September, 1995. p.54.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ H.R.3100--100th Congress 1st Session--Congressional Record--Proceedings and Debates of the 100th Congress., Washington, 1987-1988:

⁴⁵ Ben Eliezer, Shmuel. "Jews from Arab lands to get money? The Week in Review. *The Jewish Press Magazine*. May 16, 2003.

whether as much consideration is given to the Jewish Refugees as is given to the Moslems who have departed from Israel over the past 50 years.

The United Nations

Even participants in the United Nations have expressed concern regarding the Jewish refugees who were driven from Arab countries. Most notably, one reads of this concern in Resolution 242, adopted by the United Nations in 1967. The resolution speaks of “*a just settlement of the refugee problem.*” It makes no distinction between Palestinian Arab refugees and Jewish refugees from Arab countries. U Thant, the U. N. Secretary general at the time, emphasized that all refugees, Arabs and Jews, were entitled to a just settlement of their respective claims. Furthermore, one is confronted with the statement by Ambassador Shaul Ramati in the Special Political Committee of the United Nations on October 31, 1978, in exercise of his right of reply:

....having contributed so much more than their share to Iraq's national wealth, the Iraqi Jews are entitled to a part thereof, at the very least to a part proportional to their numbers. As citizens with equal rights and duties in every respect, as the Iraqi delegate has pointed out, a claim might even be justified for some territorial compensation to which they might have a claim, equal to an are of Iraq which could be in proportion to the ratio of the Jewish community to the general population of Iraq at the time of its expulsion. ⁴⁶

Furthermore, on October 27, 1987, a UN tribunal headed by Justice Arthur J. Goldberg, issued a series of findings relating to the Claims of Jews from Arab Lands. They found that:

Jews in substantial numbers and communities have resided in Arab countries over 1,000 years before the advent of Islam.... The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNWRA), from its inception through 1986, has expended \$2,939,774,915.10 to support Arab refugees. Of this sum, approximately \$1,276, 353,989 has been contributed by the United States. In contrast, the cost of the absorption of Jews from Arab countries was borne by Israel, which has expended approximately 12 billion dollars for this purpose, without assistance from UNWRA. The Commission concludes, from evidence presented to it and from the historical record, that Jews from Arab lands are refugees, in the common meaning of the term. In their exodus, they were, as stated, deprived of their properties, which were confiscated by Arab states without compensation, contrary to the norms of international law. And the indisputable fact is that Jews from virtually all Arab lands were denied elementary human rights -- a prime cause of this exodus. Recommendations:

1. The just claims of Jewish refugees from Arab lands for violation of their personal and property rights should be acknowledged by the Arab states responsible and just compensation rendered.
2. The international community, which has granted substantial monetary compensation to Palestinian Arab refugees, should join in providing redress to

⁴⁶ Working Paper *From the rostrum of the United Nations: Who is a refugee in the Middle East.* World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC)

Jewish refugees from Arab lands, and to assist in rectifying this manifest injustice by diplomatic and other peaceful means.⁴⁷

There thus appears to be a growing awareness of the plight of Jewish refugees that has reached into many political circles throughout the world. The question arises however as to how this situation first developed.

Reasons for existing state of affairs

Some assert that conflict over the refugee problem arose as a result of the creation of Israel and Zionism. Some Arab leaders even acknowledge that Arab antagonism resulted as a reaction in response to the creation of the state of Israel. Heykal Pasha, an Egyptian delegate to the UN General Assembly asserted:

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...A million Jews live in peace in Egypt [and other Muslim countries] and enjoy all rights of citizenship. They have no desire to emigrate to Palestine. However, if a Jewish State were established, nobody could prevent disorders. Riots would break out in Palestine, would spread through all the Arab states and might lead to a war between two races.⁴⁸

Alternatively, some authorities claim that struggle resulted from the rise of Arab sense of Power and entitlement. George Gruen stated for example, that there were several factors contributing to the struggle, including:

1. Rise of Arab Nationalism
2. Breakdown of Ottoman Empire and Traditional Islamic Society
3. Willingness of Political movements to scapegoat local Jews⁴⁹

Gruen thus argues that the animosity towards Jews arose as a product of Arab nationalism and the breakdown of traditional society.

Still another factor which led to the Jewish expulsion from Arab countries was the domination of the Middle East by the western colonial powers, and their practice of divide and conquer. The western powers (i.e., England, France, and Italy) found that by encouraging the Moslems and the Jews to fight among themselves, they offered less resistance to colonial subjugation. David Harris notes that the parties were not always altogether unaware of such manipulation, as he explains:

Many Libyan Jews are persuaded that the British were, in fact, at least partially responsible for the pogrom, citing the otherwise inexplicable British delay in

⁴⁷ Goldberg, Arthur J. "Findings of the Tribunal relating to the claims of Jews from Arab lands." World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), October, 27, 1987.

⁴⁸ U.N. General Assembly, Second Session, Official Records, Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question. Cited in Ya'akov Meron, "Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries." *Middle East Quarterly*, September, 1995. p.47.

⁴⁹ Gruen, George E. "The dwindling Jewish Communities in the Muslim countries of the Middle East: Their Current status and reasons for mass emigration." In Daniel J. Elazar and Morton Weinfeld (eds.) *Still Moving: recent Jewish migration in comparative perspective*. New Brunswick (NJ) : Transaction, 2000. pp.382-384..

responding to the violence. According to this view, the British were disturbed by Jewish calls for an independent Jewish state in Palestine. Also, they were reportedly anxious to hold on to their colonies and manipulate Arab Jewish relations in Libya to prove that the country was not ready for independence⁵⁰.

In one Libyan testimony gathered by Vivienne Roumani-Denn a woman named Lydia asserted that: "...the English -- they are the ones who gave them, they gave them four hours in which to kill the Jews. Four hours they gave them to kill -- the Arabs, they came to tell us...." The powers in the region who were striving to build empires appear to have taken advantage of the breakdown in traditional authority, the rise in Arab nationalism, and the animosity between peoples to weaken and subjugate the nations of the Middle East and to bend them to their will. Unfortunately, the action resulted in a situation in which everyone was unhappy and intensified hostilities among peoples.

How do we resolve this situation?

The question persists as to how this situation may be resolved. Some argue that the problem has already been resolved in the exchange of people from Arab Lands and Israel. One can see on the chart below that a similar number of Jews and Arabs have been displaced in the Middle East over the past 50 years since the creation of the state of Israel:

Jews		Arabs	
Immigrated to Israel	586,268	Emigrated from Israel in 1948	539,000
Immigrated to other Countries	200,000	Emigrated from Israel in 1967	250,000
Total	786,268	Total	789,000
Net Displacement (in Israel Alone)	1,136,436	Net Displacement	1,310,000 ⁵¹

"...the net number of Jews who were displaced from their homes in Arab lands is also comparable to the net number of displaced Arabs. (It should be noted here that the 1,136,436 displaced Jews do not include those who fled to countries other than Israel. If these refugees and their offspring were to be added, the total number of Jewish refugees would undoubtedly be much greater than the number of Arab refugees)....It is important to note, however, that of the total Palestinian population before 1967 (a group which included both refugees and non-refugees) nearly half -- or 1,050,000 -- now reside in Israel or in Israeli-administered areas, where they have been aided by the Israeli government to establish normal and prosperous life."⁵²

⁵⁰ David Harris, "Once upon a Time in Lybia" *In the Trenches, selected speeches and writings of an American Jewish activist*. Hoboken, NJ : KTAV Pub. House, 2000. p. 149-150

⁵¹ Roumani, Maurice M. *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries: A Neglected Issue*. Tel Aviv : WOJAC, 1983. p.42.

⁵² Loc. cit.

Yet, despite the comparable numbers of Jews and Arabs displaced, a few writers have pointed out that the numbers are clearly disproportionate when compared with the number of people living in those countries. For example, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer (Ma'arach) stated in the Knesset:

More than 1.5 million of the 3.5 million Jews in Israel, or, if you prefer, 43% of the Israel's Jewish population, stem from Arab lands. In comparison, the Arabs who left Israel constitute less than 2% of the total Arab population of the region.⁵³

It is evident then that proportionately speaking, only a very small number of Arabs had their lives disrupted with the formation of the state of Israel, as compared to nearly half of Israel's population being driven from their homes and being forced to find refuge in Israel.

Moreover, there are still a number of Jews who remain in the Arab countries who continue to be persecuted, and yet, are unable to escape. There have been several responses to this situation. Among these is the "Council for the rescue of Syrian Jews" who wrote in a series of memoranda dispatched to members:

1. In June, 1993, the Council asserted that the Syrian government was preventing Syrian Jews from traveling and leaving the country--The Syrian government denied the charge, but the Council continued to challenge their actions.
2. Then, in July, 1993, the U.S. Senate submitted a letter signed by 75 of the 100 members expressing the Senate's concern over the stoppage of permissions for travel for Syrian Jews.

---President Bill Clinton replied to the letter in support of the Syrian Jews.

3. Finally, in a press conference held on August 3, 1993, the Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara explained that the Syrian government had no intention of restricting the Jews, and it was just bureaucratic mix-ups that had constrained them.
4. As a follow up, the Council encouraged members of the American Sephardi Federation to join in the struggle by writing letters to the President and Secretary of State Warren S. Christopher to fight these restrictions.⁵⁴

Thus we see that strenuous efforts have been made to liberate the Jews remaining in Arab countries. Indeed, in 2001 only 100 Jews remained in Syria.

Those Jews who had been driven from Arab countries have become increasingly outspoken in their calls for reparations. Their cries for help have met with a variety of responses. The middle of the 1970's saw the formation of WOJAC. First headed by Mordechai Ben-Porat--a former Israeli Cabinet Minister and Knesset member who was also a refugee from Iraq, the organization's purposes were

- a. To relieve the distress of Jews remaining in Arab Countries who suffered from Persecution (i.e., the Syrian Jews)
- b. To respond to the persistent issue of Palestinian refugees
- c. To raise the issue of Jews forced to leave Arab countries and to abandon all communal and private property⁵⁵

⁵³ *Knesset Record : The Legitimate rights and claims of Jews from Arab Countries* : Sessions no. 349 and no. 356 of the 11th Knesset. 1987.

⁵⁴ American Sephardi Federation Archives. Subseries 2: General Agenda, n.d., 1973-2000, Box 9, Administration: Folder: Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews.

The WOJAC organization sought to refute the Arab claim for "right of return" and instead voice some of the concerns of Jews driven from Arab countries. In particular, they demanded that the rights and claims of Jews from Arab countries be raised and resolved in context of Middle East negotiations.⁵⁶

In 1987 another voice was heard when a group of Jewish exiles from Libya held their First international convention of Jews from Libya. It was organized by Rafaello Fellah of Rome and its objectives were to focus attention on the history and culture of Libyan Jews and to remind the world that there is another "Forgotten Refugee Problem," consisting of the nearly 1 million Jewish refugees driven from Arab lands (including the nearly 40, 000 Libyan Jews).⁵⁷

More recently, a number of steps have been taken by ASF and the Israeli Government to recover property lost when Jews were driven from Arab countries. In March, 2002, Israeli Justice Minister Meir Sheetrit announced the government's support for the ASF to serve as the primary source for the distribution and collection of testimonial claims to document the losses and chronicle the history of Jews from Arab countries. In April, 2002, he wrote a letter to the director of ASF, stating:

“As you know, the Ministry of Justice of the State of Israel has recently renewed the work of the office responsible for registering claims made by Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries. We have in our possession more than 15,000 documents describing the personal losses of these Jews... Given the interest in this topic, on the part of the American Sephardi Federation, we thought to interest you in joining us in this venture and help carry it out expeditiously.”⁵⁸

The American Sephardi Federation thus proceeded to collect, register, and archive the claims of Jews who had been expelled from Arab countries. To further this cause, an additional organization: the Justice for Jews from Arab Countries was launched on September 30, 2002. This latter, was launched as a coordinated, international campaign operating under the auspices of the American Sephardi Federation, the World Jewish Congress, and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.⁵⁹ Its objectives, according to the American Sephardi Federation *Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries Project Program Report* of March 2003 were the following:

- a. Chronicle the experience and document the legitimate claims of Jews displaced from Arab Countries
- b. Educate public opinion on the causes, and plight of Jews who were displaced from Arab countries, and

⁵⁵ "The Plight of Jews from Arab Lands: About WOJAC." World Jewish Congress. <http://www.wjc.org.il/wojac/wojac.html>.

⁵⁶ Ibid., *The forgotten million: Arab Jewry: Heritage and aspiration*. Photo exhibition on the occasion of the Third International Convention of W.O.J.A.C., Washington D.C., October 26-28, 1987.

⁵⁷ *1st International Convention of Jews from Libya, New York, June 6-7, 1987. Program Book*.

⁵⁸ Personal Correspondence from Meir Sheetrit, Minister of Justice of the State of Israel to Mrs. Vivienne Roumani-Denn, National Executive Director of the American Sephardi Federation, New York, NY, April 21, 2002.

⁵⁹ Personal communication with Mr. Stanley Urman, Director of the Justice for Jews from Arab Countries organization, June 9, 2003.

- c. Secure rights and redress for Jews from Arab Countries who suffered losses as a result of the Arab Israeli conflict.⁶⁰

The "Justice for Jews of Arab Countries Committee", then, was established as a legal agency to advance the claims of Jews driven from their homes in Arab countries. The Committee worked together with several other organizations to assist the Jewish refugees. The Various agencies each took on a different objective:

- a. American Sephardi Federation was to collect Testimonial claims, as well as facilitate education and outreach.
- b. World Jewish Congress was to hold National Conventions and promote press coverage of the work
- c. The Justice for Jews from Arab Countries committee was established as a legal committee for promoting International relations
- d. And the Ministry of Justice in Israel was to provide storage and preservation of claims in a central database.⁶¹

The general objectives of these organizations are:

- a. Bringing a class action law suit for the retrieval of property or reimbursement for losses for those Jews that were driven from Arab Lands
- b. Bringing property claims to be included in the negotiations in any Middle East Peace agreement that is created.⁶²

Confronted with a terrible situation the American Sephardi Federation is leading the struggle in striving to document, to publicize, and to gain reparations for Jews driven from Arab countries.

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⁶⁰ *Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries Project Program Report*, American Sephardi Federation, March, 2003.

⁶¹ Personal Communication with Ms. Vivienne Roumani-Denn, National Executive Director, American Sephardi Federation, June 10, 2003.

⁶² *Loc. Cit.*