

JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE FACT SHEET

Jews from the Middle East



How did changing powers affect Middle Eastern Jews in the 20th century?

History

Prior to World War I, much of the Middle East was under Ottoman control, and Jews lived as Ottoman subjects with *dhimmi* status (people of the book). Under the Ottoman system, ethnic and religious groups had their own leadership and some autonomy over community affairs; they were protected through *jizya*, a poll tax. Depending on where in the region, violence against Jews was not a usual occurrence.

Middle Eastern Jews were generally indifferent or opposed to secular Zionism coming from Europe (Zvi Ben Dror, *Invisible Exile: Iraqi Jews in Exile*: 149). Some Middle Eastern rabbis thought Zionism would endanger their communities. (Simon in *Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*, 2003:168)

British and French Colonization and Administration

In 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement divided the Middle East under French and British colonial control.

Jews under North African French rule received certain privileges, and sometimes citizenship or access to particular education or employment, as did Jews under British rule.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration voiced British support for a 'Jewish national home in Palestine' advocated primarily by European Jews in the Zionist movement. In 1922, the League of Nations legitimized British control by giving it a Mandate to control Palestine.

The Arab Revolt against the British in Palestine (1936-1939) created tensions throughout the Middle East related to imperial and colonial rule in the region.

The Zionist Movement

The Yishuv (Zionist leadership in Palestine) became the Jewish voice to the British while Sephardic leadership that had functioned in Ottoman times, was disregarded. The Yishuv's relationship with the British colonial power portrayed Zionism as Jewish nationalism but also as an agent of colonialism.

In the 1940's, the Jewish Agency (in Palestine, pre-Israel)

Definitions [of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews]

Edot Hamizrach ("Communities of the East") This was how Jews from the Middle East were categorized ethnically by the European Jewish establishment when they immigrated to Israel after 1948. They were differentiated as being Eastern, from Arab and Muslim countries. Israeli censuses list these populations as being from "Africa and Asia."

Mizrahi ("Eastern" or "Oriental"), Mizrahim ("Eastern Jews"), Mizrahiyut ("Eastern-ness") refer to Jews coming from the Arab and Muslim world, including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Mizrahim have been in the Middle East continuously for over 2500 years, starting with the expulsion of Jews from Israel to Babylon. Mizrahi has been used as a derogatory term to describe non-European Jews, especially those from the Arab world, with overtones of poor education and lack of culture and economic resources. Some call themselves Mizrahim to reclaim their Middle Eastern identities and to resist European Jewish hegemony. The term "Oriental," as Edward Said described in his book *Orientalism*, is connected to the racist categorization used by European colonizers to describe non-Europeans.

Sephardi, Sephardim ("Spanish", "Persons from Spain") Sephardic Jews lived in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal, Sepharad in Hebrew), and during the Spanish Inquisition were forced to leave, convert, or be killed. The majority of Sephardim left for the Ottoman Empire, including Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia, and settled throughout the Middle East while some found shelter in locations such as Amsterdam and other places in Western Europe. Others remained in Iberia or came to the New World as conversos, converts to Catholicism who maintained a secret connection to Judaism. Sephardic also refers to the religious traditions of Jews different than Ashkenazi Jews (of Eastern and Central European origin). Sephardi has been used by Shas, a religious political party that seeks to reclaim traditional Sephardic religious identity. Sephardi is often seen in Israel as less derogatory than Mizrahi.

Arab-Jews describes Jews whose families were for the most part integrated into Arab society, who may be considered Arabs who practiced Judaism. Only in coming to Israel did these Jews have to choose between being Arab or Jewish. Politically, Arab-Jews is used today by scholar-activists such as Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav (Iraq), Smadar Lavie (Yemen), and Sami Shalom Chetrit (Morocco) to reclaim their Arab identities and histories along with their Jewish identities as a form of resistance to anti-Arab sentiment, Arab racism, and Eurocentrism.

Depending on geographic, economic, political, social, and cultural circumstances, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews will identify themselves in different ways. Some may use more specific terms, such as Yemeni-Israeli, Moroccan, or Iraqi. Being from Turkey or Iran, as opposed to the Arab world, may also be significant. Not all Mizrahim are Sephardim and not all Sephardim are Mizrahim, just as not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs.

Jews Indigenous to the Middle East By defining Mizrahim as "indigenous" some political groups attempt to turn Mizrahim into a political tool to counter Palestinian claims to rights and redress from Israel. While there were Sephardi Jews living in Palestine for generations prior to modern Zionism, their relationships to the land, to their Arab and Ottoman neighbors, and to the surrounding cultures were entirely different than those of the European Zionists. The advent of Zionism rendered these longstanding relationships largely irrelevant, as power passed from the hands of European colonizers to those of European Jewish Zionists.

trained and sent about 150 Jews in Palestine, and directed by *Mossad le-Aliya Bet* (Organization for Illegal Immigration), to be emissaries all over the Middle East (172).

Though there were some Middle Eastern Jews that participated in the Zionist movement, generally there was indifference or opposition to Zionism (Zvi Ben Dror, *Invisible Exile: Iraqi Jews in Exile*: 149); Zionism mostly circulated in the Middle East by European Jews that were in the region (Simon, 2003:168).

During WWII

The Nazi-collaborating Vichy French rule in North Africa enacted anti-Jewish legislation and policies, bringing Nazi-style racial propaganda to North Africa and the Levant. Algerian Jews were stripped of their French citizenship while Libyan and Tunisian Jews were sent to labor camps. Restrictions on Jewish employment and education, and Jewish arrests and detentions for different political and social participation impacted Middle Eastern Jewish experiences in their countries of origin.

Some Arab nationalist movements-- in alliance with Germany against imperial rule, the British and French presence in the Middle East-- contributed to anti-Jewish policies

In Iraq, 179 Jews were killed in the 1941 *Farhud*, anti-Jewish riots; Iraqi Jews were seen as British allies. Libyan Jews were also scapegoated in 1943 during anti-Jewish riots. The British administration and military each time could have but did not intervene, which was a colonial strategy.

Other anti-Jewish riots took place throughout the region as a result of tensions with Europe and the circulation of anti-Jewish literature.

Middle Eastern Jews resisted these anti-Jewish policies through boycotts of German goods, protests, and the formation of educational societies.

There were also acts of solidarity: King Muhammad V of Morocco declared Jewish subjects to be equal citizens, and Tunisian Muslims hid their Jewish neighbors to prevent deportations to labor and concentration camps under the Nazi occupation of Tunisia.

Arab nationalism and Independence

The UN Partition Plan of 1947 split Palestine into a Jewish and Arab state; Israeli independence was a

marker of colonial impacts and practices in the region.

The *Egyptian company law of 1947* restricted all non-Egyptian nationals from work and investment in Egypt; many Egyptian Jews had foreign passports or were stateless, causing severe job loss.

Crack-downs in Arab states on government opposition movements, i.e. the Communist movement and moves toward independence, also impacted Jewish members and citizens.

Arab nationalist desires were growing and Middle Eastern Jews were involved in anti-colonial and Arab nationalist movements toward independence.

The Iraqi *Denaturalization Law* was enacted in March of 1950 when Iraqi Jews were allowed to immigrate legally to Israel if they gave up their Iraqi citizenship. In 1951, when the government realized that Iraqi Jewish registration increased after violent incidents, the government also froze Jewish assets, keeping Jewish resources in Iraq.

Why did Middle Eastern Jews immigrate to Israel, Europe and the Americas?

Middle Eastern Jews immigrated to Israel for a variety of reasons related to each particular country's economic, political, religious and national policies, messianic hopes and Israeli policies. Where one immigrated depended on socio-economic status and religiosity.

For example, many Yemeni Jews and some North African Jews decided to immigrate to Israel for messianic reasons. Most Algerian Jews moved to France as French citizens. Wealthier Iraqi, Egyptian and other Jews moved to Europe and the Americas rather than Israel.

After WWII governance experiences, over 31,000 Libyan Jews, almost half the population, left on Israeli ships once the British eased restrictions, (Stillman 1991 (2003):155-156)

Once North African states became independent from France in the 1960's, many North African Jews left for Israel and France leaving behind tense dynamics from the stratification set up by French rule between Jews and other Arabs.

Some Egyptian Jews left after the *Egyptian Company Law of 1947* was enacted. The 1956 Suez Crisis/War saw another

Of 7 million Israelis, 35-40% are Mizrahim, 15% are Russian immigrants, 20% are Palestinian Israelis, 2.2% are Ethiopian, and 25-30% are Ashkenazi Jews and others. This means 55-60% of the Israeli population is 'non-white'; together, Mizrahim and Palestinian Israelis form a majority.



Sha'ar Hashamayim Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt

Are Middle Eastern Jews Refugees?

According to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is "a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country." By this definition, some Middle Eastern Jews are considered refugees, although few use this language to describe themselves.

There are several organizations who define Middle Eastern Jews as refugees and seek redress for their lost property after 1948. Recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution (H.Res.185) stating "for any comprehensive Middle East peace agreement to be credible and enduring, the agreement must address and resolve all outstanding issues relating to the legitimate rights of all refugees, including Jews, Christians, and other populations, displaced from countries in the Middle East..

Did a population exchange occur between Middle Eastern Jews and Palestinians?

It is tempting to assert that an equal population exchange occurred in the Middle East in which Palestinians fled or were expelled from what is now Israel and Middle Eastern Jews left their countries of origin to settle in Israel. Accordingly the claims of one group should cancel out the claim of the other. The Israeli government has stated "Since 1948, an exchange of population has, in effect, taken place. Israel has accepted within its borders, and absorbed within its economy and society, Jewish refugees from Arab countries in a number equal or even exceeding the number of Arab refugees from Palestine."

This view, however, is problematic for several reasons. First, it collapses the different stories of emigration and loss experienced by Middle Eastern Jews into one story, which is assumed to end happily with their absorption into Israeli society. Second, it ignores the facts that not all Middle Eastern Jews came from hostile countries, migrated to Israel, migrated at one time, or migrated as a result of fear, force, or violence. Third, it frees the state of Israel and the Arab states from any responsibility to provide redress to individual Middle Eastern Jews and Palestinians who actually suffered losses. It simplifies those most impacted as 'Jews' and 'Arabs' without distinguishing who committed injustices (i.e., governments) or who was harmed by them (i.e., individuals, communities). It ignores the fact that the European Zionist movement made choices about how to deal with European colonial powers, the Arab states, and the Palestinians that helped lead to events that often made it challenging for Middle Eastern Jews to continue living in their native countries as they had done for thousands of years.

It seems that the tactic of defining Middle Eastern Jews as refugees is intended more to stall negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians than to provide real justice for refugees, whether Jewish or Palestinian. It is interesting to ask, given that some Arab countries have invited Jews to return and regain citizenship, would Israel make the same offer to Palestinians?

Middle Eastern Jews are entitled to represent themselves in their concerns for rights and redress, rather than having the state of Israel or the U.S. Congress speak for them. While monetary compensation is important, it is equally important that we allow Middle Eastern Jews to share their memories of their countries of origin, their stories of loss and resiliency and of their lives in the present, and to define their own relationships with their countries of origin.

lost their jobs and their property and assets were frozen (Stillman 1991 (2003):168-169).

When Imam Ahmad of Yemen eased immigration, over 430 flights brought about 44,000 Yemeni and additional Adeni Jews to Israel on *Operation On Wings of Eagles* (Stillman 1991 (2003):156-157).

As incidents of violence increased in Iraq between 1950-51 during the *Denaturalization Law*, Jewish registration for immigration to Israel increased. Some Iraqi Jewish intellectuals say Zionist emissaries executed these incidents. Regardless, it circulates as an historical moment that caused most Iraqi Jews to leave their home (Shiblak 1986 (2005): 151-165, Stillman 1991 (2003), *Forget Baghdad*).

The Israeli *selection* process limited the immediate immigration of mostly North African Jews. The Jewish Agency accepted only Jews who could pay their way, who were healthy and who had a breadwinner among them. When selection was later eased, many Jews were able to immigrate. Some Maghrebi Jews after immigrating to Israel, returned to their homes in North Africa (Stillman 1991 (2003):164-168, 175).

In short, a complicated web of major historical moments changed the dynamics between Jews and other Arabs in their countries of origin. Middle Eastern Jews were deeply affected by and bore the consequences of the British promise for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the international acceptance of the UN partition and Israeli independence, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the making of over 700,000 Palestinians refugees, and Arab nationalism and independence movements to end forms of European colonization.

What was the population of Middle Eastern Jews before 1948, and in Israel today?

Jews have lived in the Middle East for 2,500 years, and in Tunisia and Morocco since before the destruction of the temple.

Until 1948, 6-8% of the Jewish population lived in the Middle East [2003:174]. Between 758,000-880,000 lived in the Arab countries and at least 157,000 in Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The Israeli Census bureau reported that 330,986 Jews immigrated from "Africa and Asia" between 1948 and 1951. Mizrahim were the majority of immigrants from 1948-1953. [2003:178]. Today, Middle Eastern Jews are the majority of Israel's Jewish population.

Of a total Israeli population of 7 million, over 2.5 million (35-40%) are Mizrahim, about 1 million (15%) are Russian immigrants who came in the last 20 years, about 1.4 million (20%) are Palestinian Israelis, 154,000 (2.2%) are Ethiopian, and about 2 million (25-30%) are Ashkenazi Jews and others. This means 55-60% of the Israeli population is 'non-white'; together, Mizrahim and Palestinian Israelis form a majority. Knowledge of these demographics has the

potential to change the perception and treatment of these marginalized communities.

Despite being the majority Jewish population in Israel, *Mizrahim* are represented in small numbers in the Israeli Parliament and in elite positions such as professorships. Many still live in poor ‘development towns,’ agricultural *Moshavim*, or urban peripheries such as South Tel Aviv that receive fewer municipal funds than more central and majority-Ashkenazi Jewish cities, towns, and Kibbutzim.

How have Middle Eastern Jews fared in their immigration to and acculturation in Israel?

Mizrahim were discriminated against in a variety of ways including in education, housing, and access to positions of power from the earliest days of the state.

On arrival, some underwent humiliating experiences such as being sprayed with DDT. *The Ringworm Children* documentary highlights the tens of thousands of mostly North African children received high doses of radiation for ringworm, resulting in deaths and long-term effects

including seizures, infertility, and cancers. While the government eventually acknowledged its effects, compensation has been minor. The kidnapping of Yemeni children to be adopted into Ashkenazi families in Europe, the U.S., and Israel is barely acknowledged. Yemeni parents were told their children died but never received proof, leading to decades of suspicion and protest. While some children have been reunited with their birth parents, thousands of cases remain unresolved.

Mizrahim were often placed into *Ma’abarot* (transit camps) for months or years, then settled in peripheral ‘development towns’ and city peripheries on former Arab villages, and they were allowed to start agricultural *Moshavim*, many of which occupied strategic locations as well.

Mizrahim reclaim power through protest movements and organizations such as the Wadi Salib riots, Israeli Black Panthers, Tent Movement, the SHAS party, Achoti, HILA, and Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrahit (landmark housing rights); and in struggles in Sderot,

Kiryat Shemona, and Kfar Shalem.

Wadi Salib Riots: *Mizrahim* were placed in the former Arab neighborhood of *Wadi Salib* in Haifa in the 1950’s. In 1959, following the shooting of a community member by police, they protested discrimination and mistreatment, poor living conditions, Ashkenazi elites, and the *Histradrut* labor union and expressed their desire for ‘bread and work.’ They were evacuated in 1961.

The Israeli Black Panthers, HaPanterim HaShkhorim were a group of young, low income Sephardi/*Mizrahi* Israelis that formed in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Musrara in 1971, along the East and West borders of Jerusalem, protesting discriminatory practices and racism toward Sephardim and *Mizrahim* in Israel. *Mizrahim* were settled there to secure the border with Jordan (East Jerusalem). The Black Panthers’ forced the Israeli government to shift their budget priorities around housing and education, though this later was abandoned at the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. Charlie Biton of the Black Panthers met with members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization to unify the voices of those being mistreated by Israeli policies.

The Tent Movement began in 1976. Yamin Swisa led *Mizrahim* to protest housing conditions and shortages in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem by squatting in vacant apartments built for new Russian immigrants. By 1981, they organized a large tent camp raising awareness about housing, education, wages, and culture, and the contradictions of the Israeli government building new settlements under Occupation while providing nothing for poor *Mizrahi* communities.

Sderot is a southern immigrant development town of mostly Moroccan immigrants. Since 2000, it has been the recipient of continuous Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza while the Israeli military bombards Gaza with strikes killing Palestinian militants and civilians. *Sderot* residents live in traumatic conditions and lack the resources to go anywhere else; many residents actively seek a diplomatic resolution that would allow their border lives some level of peace and security.

Kfar Shalem is a working-class Yemeni neighborhood in South Tel Aviv, where in December 2007 about 35 Yemeni Jewish families were evicted from their homes. Although they paid taxes and rent to the state housing company for 60 years, the court found that a private individual owned the land, who was then given permission to evict them and demolish their homes. The court also did not enforce compensation negotiations or alternative housing.

Jews in the Middle East

Jews have lived in the Middle East for 2,500 years, and in Tunisia and Morocco since before the destruction of the temple.

Until 1948, 6-8% of the Jewish population lived in the Middle East [2003:174]. Between 758,000-880,000 lived in the Arab countries and at least 157,000 in Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The Israeli Census bureau reported that 330,986 Jews immigrated from “Africa and Asia” between 1948 and 1951. *Mizrahim* were the majority of immigrants from 1948-1953. [2003:178]. Today, Middle Eastern Jews are the majority of Israel’s Jewish population.

