

The forgotten story

The Nazi-Muslim Persecutions and the Forced Exodus of Jews from Islamic Countries

by Shelomo Alfassa

When the issue of 'refugees' is raised within the context of the Middle East, people invariably refer to Palestinian refugees, virtually never to Jews displaced from Arab countries. In reality, two major population movements occurred as a result of over a half century of turmoil in the Middle East. Securing rights for these former Jewish refugees has never been adequately addressed by the international community. For any peace process to be credible and enduring, it must address the rights of all Middle East refugees, including Jewish and other minority populations that were displaced from Arab countries.

Jewish refugees
arriving in Israel
from Iraq





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Jewish refugee with his bag from Iraq

Historically, Jews and Jewish communities have existed in the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region for more than 2,500 years. Jews in substantial numbers resided in what are today Arab countries over 1,000 years before the advent of Islam.¹ Following the Muslim conquest of the region, for centuries, while relegated to second-class status, Jews were nonetheless permitted limited religious, educational, professional, and business opportunities.²

It is important to note that the treatment of Jews by Arab leaders and Islamic populations varied greatly from country to country. By way of example, in some countries, Jews were forbid-

den to leave (e.g. Syria); in others, many Jews were expelled (e.g. Egypt) or displaced en masse (e.g. Iraq); while other Jewish communities lived in relative peace under the protection of Muslim rulers (e.g. Tunisia, Morocco).

When Arab countries gained independence, followed by the rise in Arab nationalism, state sanctioned measures, coupled often with violence and repression, made remaining in the land of their birth an untenable option for Jews.

In 1948, the status of Jews in Arab countries worsened dramatically as many Arab countries declared war, or backed the war against the newly founded State of Israel. Jews were either uprooted from their countries of longtime residence or became subjugated, political hostages of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many governments

began to enact officially legislated discriminatory laws against Jews, denying them most basic human and civil rights, including: expropriating their property; removing them from civil service and other forms of employment; subjecting them to countless arrests, physical attacks, torture, and even public executions. In virtually all cases, as Jews left the country, individual and communal properties were confiscated without compensation. Since 1948, over 850,000 Jews have left their birthplaces and their homes in some 10 Arab countries. Today, fewer than 7,000 Jews remain in these same countries. The fact that Jews displaced from Arab countries were indeed bone fide refugees, under international law, is beyond question.

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WHERE DOES ARAB HATRED COME FROM?

The virulent hatred that resonates today throughout the modern world—that ever agonizing disgust of the Jewish people—is not an old time Arab feeling toward the Jews. This hatred is a result of the living Nazi influence that never died. Although the Allies killed Nazi troops, destroyed their buildings, burned Nazi books, and even the fact that the German Fuehrer killed himself, the Nazi spirit lived on long after WWII.

This spirit of the age-old anti-Jewish hatred which was found in the Qu’ran, (but often dormant), was exacerbated in the Arab world by Amin Al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who was the de facto leader of all Arabs during the war years. The relationship between Amin Al-Husseini and the Third Reich was strengthened when the Mufti visited the German Consul General at Jerusalem in 1937. After that, he met with Eichmann when the Nazi leader visited Palestine, investigating the possibility of deporting German Jews to Palestine. It has been reported, based on war-crimes testimony and the Eichmann trial transcripts, that Eichmann and the Mufti enjoyed a close relationship. The Mufti would soon become the spiritual leader of the Islamic legions that were trained by and for the Nazis.

The rise of Hitler to power in 1933 marked a turning point in the new mufti’s activities. He sent a cable of congratulations to the Nazi leader and expressed support for the Jewish boycott in Germany. Soon after, Hitler’s Mein Kampf was translated into four different Arabic versions and circulated between 1933-1939 in Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo and Berlin. In the first few months of WWII, shops in the towns of Syria would frequently show posters with Arabic sayings: “In heaven G-d is your ruler, on earth Hitler.” In the streets of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus a popular verse in a local dialect said: “No more ‘Monsieur,’ no more ‘Mister’- G-d in



The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem with Hitler

heaven, on earth Hitler!”

Anti-Jewish feeling continued to mount in the Middle East during the 1930s, as the Fascist and Nazi regimes and doctrines increasingly appealed to many Arab nationalists. King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia sought German arms and contacts and was favorably received. Various delegations of Syrians and Iraqis attended the Nürnberg party congresses, and the Arabic translations of Mein Kampf were widely disseminated. Both the German and Italian regimes were active in promulgating propaganda throughout the Arab world, and there was much pro-German sentiment in Egypt.

Anti-Semitic elements seized upon the Palestine problem and Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 to portray international Jewry, including the Jews of the

Maghrib [the area of North Africa, comprising Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya], in a negative way to the Muslims, many of whom expressed solidarity with the Palestinian Arabs against Zionism and the British Authorities in the Mandate. Nazi propaganda broadcasts from Berlin and Stuttgart, as well as broadcasts from fascist Italy, added fuel to the ongoing anti-Jewish campaigns.

As part of the new, tough policy against Arab violence, the British dismissed Al-Husseini from his post as head of the Supreme Moslem Council. Fearing arrest, on October 12, 1937, the Grand Mufti donned a disguise and fled to Lebanon, where the French gave him asylum. During 1937, Damascus was a center of anti-Jewish activities. During this same year, a Nazi delegation went to Syria where a symbiosis was developed that would lead to intensified anti-Jewish sentiment, especially among both German and Arab youth.

Nazi Germany started transmitting in Arabic for the first time in April 1938. Germany thus became an Italian radio surrogate, providing a new programming dimension by the addition of anti-Jewish and anti-British themes broadcast by several prominent Arab exiles, including Rashid Ali El-Ghailani, an ex-prime minister of Iraq, and the Mufti, Al-Husseini.

The Mufti developed a world headquarters in Germany. In an office in Berlin, his activities included: radio propaganda; espionage and fifth column activities in the Middle East; organizing Muslims into military units in Axis-occupied countries and in North Africa and Russia; and establishment of the Arab Legions and the Arab Brigade. These groups were trained by the Nazis and used by them. The Mufti’s anti-Jewish radio broadcasts were some of the most violent pro-Axis broadcasts ever produced. He had at least six stations in Berlin, Zeissen, Bari, Rome, Tokyo and Athens, which he used to en-

courage Muslims across the world to commit acts of sabotage and kill Jews.

Hitler had made it clear that the project of killing Jews was by no means confined to Europe. As he explained to the Mufti, "his hopes of military victory in Africa and the Middle East would bring about the destruction of Jews in the Arab World." In November of 1941 Hitler informed the Mufti at a meeting in Berlin that he intended to kill every Jew living in the Arab world, including those in Palestine as well as "Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, and French Northwest Africa." Hitler asserted that, in the event of a German advance into the Middle East, the German objective would be the "destruction" of "Judaism" in Palestine.

During 1941, in Mosul, Iraq, pro-Nazi Arab activists continued to propagandize against Jews. In Baghdad, when the war film "For Freedom" showed in cinemas, audiences cheered Hitler and booed Churchill. Leaflets circulated: "Rashid Ali, the Leader of all the Arabs, is returning with ropes and gallows to hang a number of criminal Jews, Christian traitors and other enemies of Islam." October 5, 1943, the Mufti arrived in Frankfurt, Germany visiting the Research Institute on the Jewish Problem where he declared that Arabs and Germans were, "Partners and allies in the battle against world Jewry." The Mufti beamed radio sermons to the Balkans, the countries of North Africa, and the Muslims in India. Arabs in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt were called upon for Jihad against the British, with statements including the suggestion that Muslims could, "Save their souls by massacring the Jewish infidels" they came across.

In a letter to Himmler, dated September 28, 1944, General Berger of the Waffen S.S. reported: "Today the Mufti came to see me for a long talk. He talked about his work and noted happily that the day is nearing [when] he will head an army to conquer Palestine." It was during this same year that the Mufti developed an Arab Brigade that included Arabs trained in Holland by the Germans.



Jewish Quarter residents evacuating the Old City through the Zion Gate during May 1948

It was said the Mufti even visited Auschwitz and Maidanek. In both of these death camps, he paid close attention to the efficiency of the crematoria, spoke to the leading personnel and was generous in his praise for those

who were reported to be particularly conscientious in their work. He was on friendly terms with such notorious practitioners of the "final solution" as Rudolf Hess, the overlord of Auschwitz; Franz Zeireis of Mauthausen; Dr. Seidl of Theresienstadt; and Yosef Kramer, the "Butcher of Belzen".



Yemenite Jews on the way to Israel

After VE Day, May 8, 1945, Nazi officials were prepared to allow Jews to be diverted from concentration camps and even to let children go to Palestine via "illegal" ships — all in exchange for cash. Yet, Al-Husseini in-

sisted they be dispatched to concentration camps. That same year, liberated Yugoslavia sought to indict the Mufti as a war criminal for his activities in Bosnia, but with help from the Nazi SS, the Mufti had already escaped Germany with other members of his clan.

The teaching of the Holocaust is absolutely incomplete, if it is taught as an event which only affected European Jewry. Hitler's dark hand reached across from Europe, stretched into North Africa, and, as you now know, reached as far as the Middle East. During this period, the fierce anti-Jewish hatred that was exacerbated by the Mufti in the Islamic world and fueled by the German war machine, led to the death of Jews across North Africa. Moroccan Jews were murdered with poison gas, and Jews in Tunisia, Algeria and Libya were tortured, forced into labor camps and used as slaves to build the Trans-Sahara Railroad. Although North African Jews were not systematically interred, they were among the Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz and other European concentration camps.

At the end of WWII, the Nazis were destroyed and the Holocaust ended, however, the intense hostility instituted during that era lived on and remained a root cause of modern anti-Semitism. This also has been the reason for hostility toward the State of Israel. Islamic holy books, which Muslims study from childhood, are filled with hatred and revulsion for the Jews, often in very direct language such as, "Humiliation and wretchedness were stamped on the Jews and they were visited with Allah's wrath" (Qu'ran 2:61); and, "Sufficient for the Jew is the Flaming Fire!" (Qu'ran 4:55) The anti-Jewish hatred Muslims were indoctrinated with, combined with Hitleresque verbal fire and brimstone, resulted in violence against



Woman with daughter in Israeli transit camp

Jews. This is one of the foremost reasons why hundreds of thousands of Jewish people, born in Arab countries, were made refugees after 1948. Even today, the paradigm of hatred continues to live on in the Islamic world and is spreading throughout the West due to the adroit use of propaganda, revisionist history and disinformation.

The Personal Face of the Tragedy

At the end of WWII, there were close to one million Jews living in the Middle East and North Africa. They were loyal citizens that contributed to every facet of society. These people watched as their entire civilization, everything they knew, was destroyed through the forces of discrimination, harassment,

violence and worse. Personal stories of Jewish refugees from Arab countries are almost unknown to the world, including the following tragic accounts which have come from actual victims of Arab persecution:

Rachel, from Iraq, recounts: "My husband was arrested three times and was tortured in prison. He was almost killed the last time while I was pregnant. We had to escape from Iraq on foot and had to leave all our property and belongings."

Victoria, from Tunisia, recounted: "On several occasions my father was taken away in the middle of the night by the police without charges. My brother and I were harassed in school and discriminated because we were Jews. I was often humiliated in front of my classmates. We lived in constant fear."

David, an Egyptian Jew recounts: "The police came into my jewelry store, then took me to a police station where we were handcuffed and beaten. They put us on a truck and took us to a prison camp where they hit us with belts and sticks. We were terrorized by the officers all night. I lost everything. A year later I was transferred to another prison, and three years later I was deported."

Stella, from Syria remembers: "As all the young people were escaping from Syria, the government was putting their families in jail. They locked up several fathers and mothers. The next day the community decided to stay in the synagogue where a black flag was flown outside the building. After crying and praying all day, we gathered at the government building, like a rally, and demanded they better kill us, and we screamed for our freedom. It was like a civil war. My father had been captured, but eventually came home as a broken man; the following day he suffered a heart attack and died."

An Iraqi Jewish woman named Fortune recounted: "My father was arrested



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at our home and tortured almost half to death. We saw him again after eight months. He was able to obtain a passport and fled to Lebanon where he then managed to flee to Switzerland and eventually Israel. My mother supported us alone, as one by one my family fled the country. One relative fled to Turkey then to Israel after learning her entire family was murdered while she was at school. My brother and I fled to Northern Iraq where Kurds were paid to bring us to Tehran and then we went to Israel."

Steven, from Egypt, recalls: "My mother went to the bank to withdraw the money she had saved, which was in the tens of thousands. The bank teller said, 'We don't give money to Jews.' She went to gain access to her safe deposit box to get her jewelry, diamonds and gold, and was denied. My father died penniless in Israel, he had left everything in Cairo."

On the Political Front

Since the early 1960s, various Jewish leaders who came from Arab countries have attempted to bring the issue of rights and redress up in Israel and to the attention of the world. While they made some progress, the greatest push for such rights has been made in the last several years. Of the various victories, the most notable has been

the overwhelming adoption on April 1, 2008, of a resolution by the U.S. Congress, which grants first-time-ever recognition to Jewish refugees from Arab and Muslim countries.

The adoption of House Resolution 185, affirmed that all victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict must be treated with equality, and this may be the catalyst for a dramatic shift in United States policy. Why? Because prior to the Resolution's adoption, all U.S. resolutions on Middle East refugees referred only to Palestinian Arabs. The new resolution underscores the fact that Jews living in Arab and Muslim countries also suffered human rights violations, were uprooted from their homes, and were made refugees.

Underscoring the importance of this resolution, Congressman Joseph Crowley (D-NY), one of the bi-partisan co-sponsors, said, "The world needs to understand that it is not just the Arabs and it is not just the Palestinians in the Middle East, but also Jewish people who themselves were dispossessed of their possessions and their homes and were victims of terrorist acts. These are people who lived in Middle Eastern communities, not for decades, but for thousands of years." Rep. Crowley added that the Resolution will, "bring light upon an issue that has been swept under the carpet."

The resolution was supported and backed by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), the organization which has been the tip of the spear for the International Rights and Redress

Campaign, a global movement endorsed by a coalition of over 77 Jewish organizations. JJAC seeks legal rights and redress for the over 850,000 Jews who lost everything - from their dignity and property, to their loved ones - many of whom were beaten, tortured and murdered prior to or during their flight from Arab countries.

What Does the Future Hold?

Subsequent to the U.S. resolution, other advances have been made across the world, which have the potential to aid Jewish refugees from Arab countries in their seeking of legal rights and eventual redress. In June 2008, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries organized a hearing in the British Parliament. In an appearance before a overflow gathering at the House of Lords, Canadian MP Prof. Irwin Cotler declared:

The pain and plight of 850,000 Jews uprooted and displaced from Arab countries - the forgotten exodus - has been both expunged and eclipsed from both the Middle East peace and justice narratives these past sixty years. The United Nations also bears express and continuing responsibility for this distorted Middle East and peace narrative. Since 1948, there have been more than 130 UN resolutions that have specifically dealt with the Palestinian refugee plight. Yet, not one of these U.N. Resolutions makes any reference to, nor is there any expression of concern for, the plight of the 850,000 Jews displaced from Arab countries. It must be appreciated that while justice has

long been delayed, it must no longer be denied. The time has come to rectify this historical injustice, and to restore the plight and truth of the 'forgotten exodus' of Jews from Arab countries to the Middle East narrative from which they have been erased these 60 years.

In July 2008, a first-ever hearing was held before the European Parliament, the only directly elected parliamentary institution of



Iraqi Jews testifying before the European Parliament: -r: Moise Rahmani (Belgium), Edwin Shuker (UK), and Carole Basri (USA)

the European Union (EU). This hearing was organized by Paulo Casaca, MEP (Member of the European Parliament), the European Friends of Israel and B'nai B'rith in association with Justice for Jews from Arab Countries. Mr. Casaca told the Parliament: "This particular struggle is very dear to me because I think it is perhaps the most forgotten, the most distorted."

Less than a year later, in June 2009, the first-ever hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies addressed the subject of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. This hearing, sponsored by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, followed the much-anticipated foreign policy speech given by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wherein he reminded the world of the "hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees who left their homes and belongings in Arab countries." Testifying was Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress who stated, "The forgotten story of the forced exodus of Jewish refugees from Arab states must be on the agenda during any Middle East peace talks. Many of these refugees built their new homes in European communities. We therefore call upon the European institutions, and upon European governments to raise their voice and demand that historical justice be done."

In February 2009, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries assisted in bringing the topic of Jewish refugees before the Herzliya Conference, which is Israel's center stage for the articulation of national policy by its most prominent leaders, including the Israeli President and the Prime Minister. One year lat-

er, the Knesset, passed an historic bill aimed at securing compensation for Jewish refugees from Arab countries and Iran as part of future peace negotiations in the Middle East. According to the bill, a Jewish refugee is an Israeli citizen who left one of the Arab states, or Iran, following religious persecution. The bill stipulates that the government must include the compensation issue in all future peace negotiations.

The world, including the United Nations, must honestly understand and recognize the suffering and hardship these hundreds of thousands of Jewish victims experienced. These people were not, for the most part, voluntary migrants seeking to leave their home countries for economic reasons or wanting to immigrate to Israel for religious or ethnic reasons. They were mainly refugees forced to flee to save themselves. Before they were displaced, they were threatened, harassed and persecuted. Before they were displaced, as part and parcel of the persecution they suffered, or after, their property was forfeited or confiscated. The Jews who were displaced from Arab countries and Iran are a victim population, people who suffered human rights violations at the hands of the governments and populations in the countries in which they lived. Victimization creates a right to redress, and under international law the rights belong both to the victim and the beneficiaries of the victim. The duty to make redress falls on the state responsible for the human rights violations. Arbitrary deprivation of property is itself a violation of a fundamental human right, forbidden by the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights. Reparations should be adequate, effective and prompt. They should be proportionate to the gravity of the violations and the harm suffered.

Because it would constitute an injustice if the world were to recognize rights for one victim population - Palestinian refugees - without recognizing equal rights for the other victim population - former Jewish refugees from Arab countries, the continual fight for equality and fairness will continue.▲

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1. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, thought of himself not as a founder of a new religion, but as the prophet of an old one—Judaism. It was not until he failed to win the hearts and minds of the Jews that did he formulate the theology of his new religion of Islam which he brought out to the world through the book he wrote, the Koran.

2. The Jews (and Christians) were considered dhimmis, non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state who are granted residence in exchange for paying a (jizra)

tax. These tax-paying second-class citizens had fewer legal and social rights than Muslims. They were not allowed to ride horses, because they would stand taller than a Muslim and could not own weapons. At different times and places dhimmis were forced to dress in a manner that could be distinguished from Muslims and dhimmis had no right to testify in a court of law against a Muslim. The laws of Dhimmitude are part of Koranic law.