

JEWISH REFUGEES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

AN UNRESOLVED INJUSTICE



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StandWithUs

Jewish Refugees of the Middle East

Who Is a Refugee? “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.” —*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Definition*

The story of Jews forced out of Arab countries after 1948 is not well known. Approximately 850,000 Jews became refugees. Sometimes referred to as “the forgotten refugees,” they never received recognition or help from the international community or compensation for their great losses.

“When the last Jew dies, the temples and religious artifacts and books that were the property of what was once probably the wealthiest Jewish community of the Mediterranean will go to the Egyptian government—not to me, or my children, or to any of the numberless descendants of Egyptian Jews.”

—*Andre Aciman, Jewish refugee from Egypt*

Jewish Population in Middle Eastern and North African Countries

	1948	2011
Algeria	140,000	1,500
Egypt	75,000	100
Iran	100,000	10,400
Iraq	150,000	7
Lebanon	20,000	0
Libya	38,000	0
Morocco	265,000	2,700
Syria	30,000	100
Tunisia	105,000	1,000
Yemen	55,000	250

Jews: Indigenous to the Middle East

Over 4,000 years ago, Jews began developing their unique civilization in the land of Israel. They flourished for 1,300 years until the Romans conquered them in the first and second centuries and renamed their land “Palestine.” From biblical times until the expulsions of the mid-20th century, Jews continued to live as an oppressed minority both in their ancestral homeland and across the Middle East and North Africa.



Artifact showing ancient version of language spoken in Israel today—Hebrew.



The Arch of Titus, Rome.



Detail from the Arch of Titus.

Colonization

In the seventh century CE, Arab armies swept out of Arabia under the banner of the new religion, Islam, and conquered vast regions of the Middle East and North Africa. They came to rule over the Berbers, Jews, Kurds, and other indigenous peoples. Over the centuries, through a process of colonization, these regions became known as the “Arab world,” and the original non-Arab peoples became minorities in their own lands.

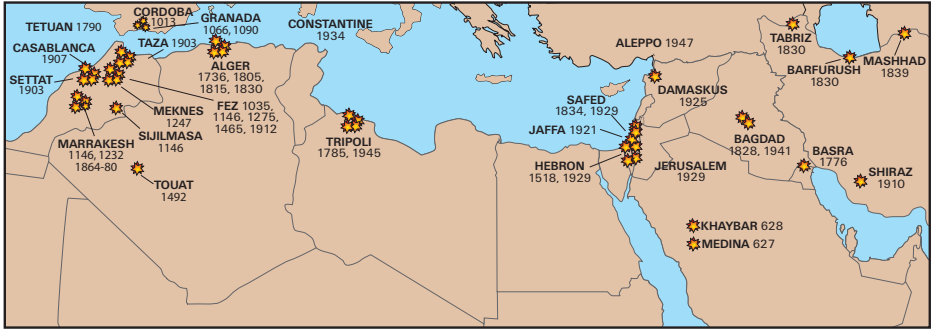
Medina, Islam’s second-holiest city, was originally named Yathrib. It was largely populated by Jewish tribes that had fled Judea after the Roman conquest and had developed prosperous communities. In the mid-seventh century, Mohammed and his followers enslaved and murdered the Jews, seized their property, and renamed the city Medina.



Detail from 19th-century miniature by Muhammed Rafi Bazil, courtesy Andrew Bostom.

[S]ome you slew and others you took captive. He [Allah] made you Masters of their [the Jews'] land, their houses, and their goods, and of yet another land [Khaibar] on which you had never set foot before. Truly, Allah has power over all things.—Sura 33: *The Koran*

Roots of Persecution and Expulsion of Jews from the Arab World



Pre-1948 massacres in the Arab world (T. Karfunkel).

The expulsion of Jews from Arab lands was not just a backlash against the reestablishment of Israel in 1948. Contrary to prevailing myths, Jews and Arabs did not live in harmony for centuries. There were thriving Jewish communities in some times and places, but Jews were always second-class citizens at best and brutally oppressed at worst. Their expulsion in the 20th century was rooted in this oppression.

Dhimmi Status of Non-Muslim Minorities: Jews and Christians who lived under Muslim rulers were given “dhimmi” status. This meant they had to accept institutionalized discrimination, injustices, higher taxes, various forms of humiliation, and even violence. In return they were not forced to convert, received “protection,” and were allowed to practice their religion.

“The condition of the Jews is another form of slavery.”—Rev. Lancelot Addison, British Chaplain in Tangier, Morocco, 1662-1669

19th-20th Centuries: End of Dhimmi Rules: During European colonial rule, dhimmi rules were more fully abolished. Though anti-Jewish prejudice remained, Jews began to participate fully in economic, political, and cultural life. They became lawyers, bankers, and civil servants and, in some cases, rose to high government office.

20th-Century Intolerance and Marginalization of Non-Arabs: Newly independent Arab states marginalized and suppressed the culture of non-Arab and/or non-Muslim peoples like Copts, Assyrians, Kurds, Amazighs, and Baha'is.



The Sultan of Morocco opened one of his palaces for Jews fleeing from violent riots against them in Fez in 1912.

The Influence of Nazism

Nazi Germany gained significant influence in the Middle East in the 1930s. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 and subsidized by German funds, made anti-Jewish racism central to its ideology.

Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini collaborated with Adolf Hitler during World War II and broadcast Nazi propaganda throughout the Arab world from a Berlin radio station. He hoped to bring the “Final Solution” to the Middle East, and his racist propaganda fueled more anti-Semitism in the Arab world.

This racism against Jews remains a significant influence today in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood is a powerful organization throughout the region. Hamas, which rules Gaza, is the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas Charter, Article 2). Hamas is designated a terrorist organization by the EU, the U.S., Canada, Japan, and Jordan.



Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini and Adolf Hitler meet in 1941.

“[Jews] were regarded as people who could usually be tolerated if they accepted the dominance of Muslims, but who lacked honor and could not fight. This is important if one is to understand the sense of humiliation in the Islamic world at being defeated militarily by Israel.... It is, as we used to say in the schoolyard, like being beaten by a girl.”

—Tunisian-Jewish writer Albert Memmi

Attempts to Suppress the Liberation of the Jewish People • 1947-1972

“The lives of a million Jews in Moslem countries will be jeopardized by the establishment of the Jewish state.” —*Heykal Pasha, UN Egyptian Delegation, 1948*

After 1,900 years of dispossession and oppression across Europe and the Middle East, the Jewish people started a liberation movement, went back home to Israel, and worked to reestablish a Jewish state there. Unfortunately, Arab leaders refused to accept the rights of the Jewish people to self-determination in the Jewish homeland. The Arab League (founded in 1945) not only launched a war to destroy Israel in 1948 but also enacted discriminatory laws against Jews living in Arab countries.

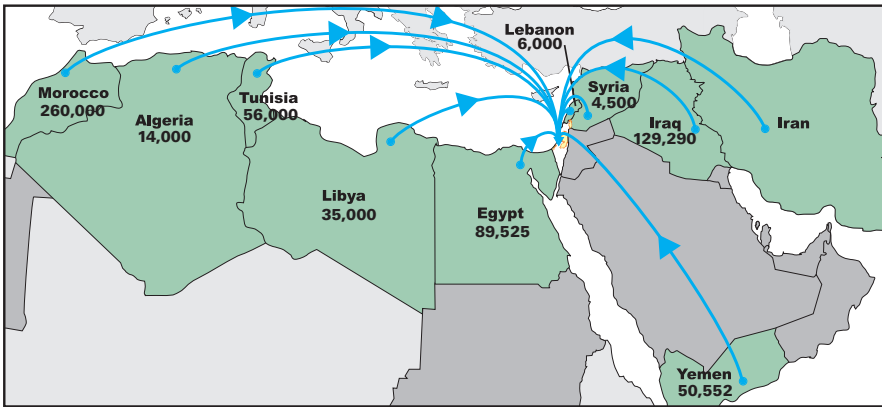


“New York Times,” May 16, 1948.

Arab States’ Policies against Jews: 1948-1972

- Stripping of Citizenship:** All Arab countries except Lebanon and Tunisia.
- Arrests and Detentions:** All Arab countries except Lebanon and Tunisia.
- Riots/Pogroms:** All Arab countries. No exceptions.
- Religious Restrictions:** Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen.
- Criminalization of Zionism:** Laws criminalizing Zionism in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Syria.
- Restricting Freedom of Movement:** Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Yemen.
- Employment Discrimination and Job Termination:** Jews were fired and/or banned from certain careers in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen.
- Freezing of Assets:** All Arab countries except Morocco.
- Property Confiscation:** All Arab countries except Morocco.

Jewish Refugees from Arab and Muslim Countries • 1948-1978



Map showing numbers of Jews who fled Middle Eastern countries and went home to Israel.

Pre-1948: In 1948 almost 1 million Jews lived in Arab-Muslim lands. Indigenous to the region, Jews had lived in Israel and in every city of the Middle East and North Africa since ancient times. Baghdad was 40 percent Jewish in the early 20th century.

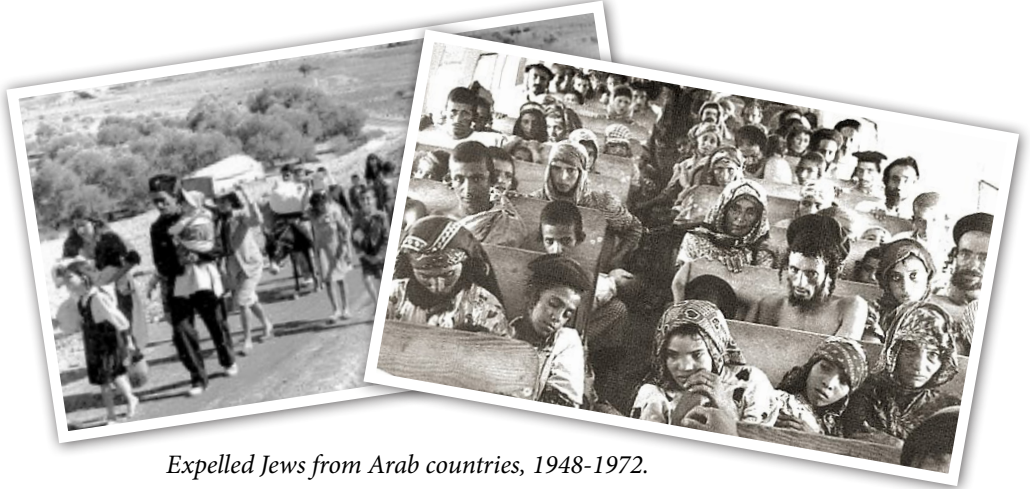
Post-1948: The Jewish communities, many of which predated Islam, were destroyed. Jews were stripped of citizenship and, in most cases, dispossessed of their property. Today, 99 percent of Jews have been ethnically cleansed from Arab-Muslim countries.

Approximately 650,000 Jewish refugees went back to their homeland in Israel, where they and their descendants became the majority of Israel's population and an integral part of Israeli society. Another 200,000 fled to the West.

Palestinian and Jewish Refugees Compared: In 1948 between 472,000 and 750,000 Palestinian Arabs became refugees from Israel, a number roughly equivalent to the number of Jewish refugees. While a small minority of Palestinian Arab refugees were driven out by Israeli forces, the vast majority fled on their own, to escape the war zone created by Arab states. 165,000 of them stayed, became equal citizens in Israel, and now make up approximately 20 percent of the population. If Arab leaders had chosen compromise over war, there would have been no Palestinian refugees.

On the other hand, Jewish refugees from Arab countries fled primarily because of the active oppression they were subjected to by Arab governments. The other key differences between these refugee crises is that the UN set up a special agency—UNRWA—to assist the Palestinians and has passed over 100 resolutions about their plight. UNRWA still operates today. In stark contrast, Jewish refugees have received little recognition and no help from the UN.

Exile and Resettlement



Expelled Jews from Arab countries, 1948-1972.

“We were stripped of our Egyptian nationality, which we had through five generations. Our personal assets—bank accounts, homes, etc.—were also confiscated, and we were told never to return.”—*Henry Mourad, Jewish refugee from Egypt, 1956*

“My mother could not stop weeping at the sight of her innocent Jewish neighbors’ lives in a state of destruction.”—*Abdel, Libyan Muslim from Benghazi, 1948*



As hundreds of thousands of refugees from Arab countries thronged to the new Jewish state, the government had no choice but to erect tent encampments where immigrants lived, some for several years. This photo is from 1950.

Going Home to Israel

In Israel the Jewish refugees found safety, freedom, justice, and a place to build a better future for their children. The majority of Israeli Jews are those who came home from Arab countries or their descendants. They came as refugees and then rose to become an integral part of Israeli society, politics, and culture.



*Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik (Iraq)
(2006-2009)*



Yemenite-Israeli hip-hop trio A-Wa



Footballer Yossi Benayoun (Morocco)



*Drone inventor Dr. David Harari
(Egypt)*



Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer (Iraq)



*IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi
(Syria) (2007-2011)*

“I liked the feeling in Israel that I would walk in the street and nobody would look at me with hostility.” —Isabelle Fhima, Moroccan Jew now living in Israel

Jewish Refugees: An Unresolved Injustice

The history and rights of Jewish refugees must be recognized. Although they were ultimately absorbed in Israel and Western nations, the injustice they suffered must be addressed. They were displaced; their vibrant, rich cultures destroyed.

Israel designated November 30 as the memorial day for Jewish refugees from Arab Countries and has begun raising awareness through events at the UN.

Why is the Jewish refugee issue so critical?

Too many people view the Middle East conflict through a distorted lens. They ignore the suffering of Jews forced from their centuries-old communities in the Middle East and North Africa. Today, there is growing recognition that there is a moral and legal imperative for the rights of Jewish refugees to be placed on the international agenda.

- In 2008 the U.S. Congress passed a resolution requiring that Jewish refugees be mentioned in all official documents that refer to Palestinian refugees.
- In 2010 the Israeli Knesset enacted a law that no peace agreement can be signed unless compensation for Jewish refugees from Arab countries is addressed.

“We were uprooted and expelled. We have been denied compensation. We watch helplessly as our culture, language, and legacy disappear and our part in history is systematically erased. In short, we have been truly ethnically cleansed.”—*Raphael Luzon, Libyan Jew whose uncle and eight cousins were murdered in Libya in 1967*



Jews of Fez, Morocco, c. 1900.



Jewish wedding, Aleppo, Syria, 1914.

Why are Jewish refugees a key to peace and reconciliation?

At least half the Jewish population of Israel is composed of Jewish refugees from Arab countries and their descendants. They do not want to return to the lands where they suffered intolerable persecution and violence. What they do want is for the international community to recognize their plight and integrate full compensation for lost property in any final Middle East peace agreement. The assets lost by Jewish refugees are estimated to be 50 percent more than the assets that Palestinians lost.



Great Synagogue of Oran, Algeria, confiscated and turned into a mosque in 1975 after the departure of Jews.

“Only the acknowledgement of the inconvenient truth will lead to reconciliation, because without the truth, there can be no reconciliation.” —Gina Bubil Waldman, Jewish refugee from Libya

Resources on Jews from Arab Countries

StandWithUs at www.standwithus.com

Point of No Return at www.jewishrefugees.blogspot.com

Justice for Jews from Arab Countries at www.justiceforjews.com

JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) at www.jimena.org

Resources on Sephardic Communities at www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuvlj/sephardic.html

Robert Ivker, “The Forgotten Jewish Refugees From Arab States,” *In Focus*, Spring 2008, at www.jewishpolicycenter.org/article/112

Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton University Press, 1984

Sidney Zabludoff, “The Palestinian Refugee Issue: Rhetoric vs. Reality,” *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Spring 2008, at www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&TMID=111&LNGID=1&FID=388&PID=0&IID=2196

Jewish Refugees of the Middle East: An Unresolved Injustice



Destitute Jews were transferred to Israel in some of the largest airlifts of all time. On arrival they were housed in tent camps or wooden huts ("ma'abarot"). Some of these camps existed for 13 years.

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