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THE OTHER REFUGEES: JEWS OF THE ARAB WORLD

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One Million Jews in the Muslim World / The Political Climate Changes / Anti-Jewish Pogroms in the 1940s / Mass Escape to Israel / Hardship for Those Who Remained / The Situation Today / The Jewish Claim for Restitution

[Editor's Note: After nearly three decades during which "Middle East refugees" seemed to be synonymous with "Palestinian refugees," Jews from Arab countries living in both Israel and the diaspora formed the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) in 1975 to make certain that any "just settlement of the refugee problem" recognizes those Jews who were forced to flee from lands where they had lived for centuries. This Jerusalem Letter is based on a presentation prepared for the Third International Conference of the World Organization of Jews from Arab Lands held in Washington, D.C., October 26-28, 1987.]

One Million Jews in the Muslim World

Jews have lived in the Arab-speaking countries of western Asia and North Africa for millennia. Indeed, in certain

countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Morocco, Jewish communities can be traced back to the period of the first exile, following the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. If one includes the Muslim but non-Arab countries of Iran and Turkey, more than one million Jews lived in this region before the establishment of Israel in 1948. Today only 75,000 remain in Muslim countries.

If we exclude Turkey and Iran and concentrate on the Arab countries, the contrast appears even sharper. As against some 880,000 Jews living in Arab countries on the eve of the creation of the State of Israel, today fewer than 25,000 remain, more than half in Morocco. Although they are protected by the king and officially enjoy full rights, their numbers continued to dwindle through gradual

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emigration. The second largest community, of 4,000 to 5,000 is in Syria. There the number remains relatively constant only because the Syrian authorities forbid all Jewish emigration. Even to visit relatives abroad, Syrian Jews must leave a large financial deposit and close family members behind as hostages for their return. Jews caught trying to flee the country are subject to brutal interrogation and imprisonment for six months or longer.

The Political Climate Changes

Why did the overwhelming majority of the Jews in the Arab world "vote with their feet" and leave their homes during the past 40 years? For some there was the positive attraction of political Zionism: the rebuilding of an independent Jewish state in the land of Israel. For others, such as the Yemeni Jews who were flown to Israel in "Operation Magic Carpet," the return to Zion on "the wings of eagles" appeared as the marvelous fulfillment of biblical prophecy and an age-old Jewish longing.

But in the great majority of cases it was a combination of negative forces in their countries of residence -- push factors -- that impelled them to leave their homes, sometimes at great personal peril. These historical forces were:

1. The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and traditional Islamic society.

In the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire -- a "world state" of 400 years duration -- Jews had enjoyed a large measure of autonomy in their communal and religious life. Sovereignty, however, and participation in the ruling elite, were traditionally reserved to Muslims. Although Jews and Christians had a second class and inferior position in the Islamic order, they had a clearly defined status. Under benevolent rulers, Jews and other minorities enjoyed affluence and even achieved positions of prominence. Under fanatical or arbitrary rulers they were

severely restricted and discriminated against, and at times of political instability suffered murder and pillaging at the hands of Muslim mobs.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ottomans tried to reform their empire. Two attempts at constitutionalism, with Western encouragement, tried to broaden citizenship to include the minorities on an equal footing. But these attempts were resisted by traditional Islamic elements. They succeeded only in undermining the old Islamic basis of political stability and coexistence.

2. The domination of the Middle East by Western colonial powers and the rise of Arab nationalism.

With the decay of Ottoman power in the 19th century, Britain, France, and Italy seized large areas of the Arab world, a task they completed at the end of World War I. From this time onward, Jews, as well as some of the Christian minorities, played a disproportionately large role in the commercial, professional, and administrative life of these countries. Their knowledge of Western languages, inculcated by the educational efforts of their Occidental co-religionists, and their commercial contacts abroad, facilitated ties between local Jews and the colonial powers.

Local Arab nationalism developed in part as a reaction to foreign rule. Since Jews were visibly associated in trading and administrative relationships with the hated foreign rulers, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, it was simple for Arab nationalists to scapegoat Jews as tools of the imperialists. As proponents of a new educated, urban class, Arab nationalists were at times jealous of the wealth and position attained by some Jews in administrative and economic life. As they sought wealth and position for themselves through government channels, their policy of "Arabization" became a convenient justification for limiting and ultimately supplanting Jews in these places.

3. Resentment over the development of Jewish nationalism and its political manifestation in the Zionist movement.

With the issuance of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, the awarding of the Mandate over Palestine to Britain after World War I, and the subsequent increase in Jewish immigration to Palestine, Arabs within the Mandate and in the surrounding countries felt politically threatened. Zionist efforts increasingly clashed with Palestinian and pan-Arab nationalism. There was rioting in Palestine in 1921, 1929, and throughout the period of 1936-39. Pro-Palestinian sympathy in Arab countries led to demonstrations which sometimes spilled over into attacks on local Jews, as in Syria in 1936.

It must be noted that although a limited amount of Zionist activity -- usually clandestine -- took place among Middle Eastern Jewries in those years, it was neither widespread nor prevalent enough to warrant being called "Jewish provocation."

4. The readiness of political movements and unpopular regimes to scapegoat the local Jews for political purposes.

The new Arab states, politically weak autocracies emerging from imperialist domination, would at times persecute their Jews, or allow others to do so, to divert public attention from their own failings in the political, military and economic spheres. This trend reached a fever pitch directly after the unexpected defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine, during the first Arab-Israeli war, but in some instances it began well before 1948. The chosen governmental methods of persecution were unjust arrests, imprisonment and torture, discriminatory legislation, confiscation of property, and agitation in the press and radio. Members of the Jewish communities were scapegoated as being Communist or Zionist (sometimes both), and imprisoned and despoiled of their property for belonging to these movements that were anathema to Arab regimes. Notorious

examples of these practices occurred in Iraq during the 1940s, Egypt during the Nasser era, and Syria since its independence after World War II.

Anti-Jewish Pogroms in the 1940s

Moreover, pan-Arab and pan-Islamic parties and movements in almost every Arab state have fomented mob violence against Jews, in part to undercut the authority of these very same regimes, as well as in revenge for Israeli victories in the several Arab-Israeli wars. Indeed one might characterize these assaults as a veritable war against the Middle Eastern Jews. In Aleppo, Syria in 1947, much of the Jewish quarter was set ablaze. In 1948, bombs were found in numerous locations in the Jewish quarter of Damascus; in August 1949, more bombs in the same neighborhood killed and wounded scores. In Cairo in 1945, mobs in the Jewish quarter burned a synagogue, a hospital, and numerous homes and shops; on June 20, 1949, bombs in the Jewish quarter killed 34 and wounded 80. Eighty-two died in a riot in Aden in 1947. These are just a few of the examples that can be cited from this notorious and bloody catalogue.

As one European observer of these disturbances, Victoria d'Asprea, put it rather bluntly, "of all the non-Moslems, the Jews are the safest targets. They are considered to be Europeans and as such any 'barefoot' Mohammedan is glad to shoot at them. They are not supported by a powerful empire and attacks on them do not create diplomatic incidents. Moreover, they are 'infidels,' which make them particularly attractive victims of the more fanatical Mohammedans. They are Jews, which satisfies those who are more specifically anti-Semitic."

All these factors combined over the past century to weaken the traditional position of the Jewish communities in Arab lands. But it was the last set of factors, the state-sponsored discrimination and pogrom-like mob violence, that precipitated the rapid dissolution of these ancient

Jewish communities. As a result of these events, the Jews of Arab countries in effect became political refugees, that is, persons who had a well-founded fear of persecution and consequently fled untenable, often life-threatening, political situations in their countries of origin. Within a four-year period, from 1948 to 1952, 127,000 Jews escaped from Iraq, almost 50,000 from Yemen and Aden, 36,000 from Libya, and perhaps another 100,000 from French-controlled North Africa. Violence, discrimination, and in some cases expulsion brought about what was euphemistically called "whole community transfer."

In Iraq, for example, a large Jewish community having roots dating back to biblical Babylonia was decimated in less than a year, in a particularly illuminating case study of several of the trends listed above. A weak, unpopular monarchy installed by the British Mandatory power in the 1930s faced subversion by radical pan-Arabist forces, violence and discrimination against Jews were rife from an early period, well before the establishment of the State of Israel.

The most notorious example of this violence was the Farhud (breakdown of law and order), a two-day pogrom in Baghdad in June 1941. In a spasm of uncontrolled violence, between 170 and 180 Jews were killed, more than 900 others were wounded, and 14,500 Jews sustained material losses through the looting or destruction of their stores and homes.

Although the government eventually restored order, the general position of the Jewish community continued to deteriorate as anti-foreign sentiment mounted and Iraq and the states bordering Palestine -- Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon -- became increasingly involved in the Arab-Jewish struggle. Jews were squeezed out of government employment, limited in schools, and subjected to imprisonment, heavy fines, or sequestration of their property on the flimsiest charges of being connected to either or both of the two

banned movements. Indeed, Communism and Zionism were frequently equated in the statutes. In Iraq the mere receipt of a letter from a Jew in Palestine was sufficient to bring about arrest and loss of property.

On November 2, 1945, the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration became the occasion for widespread rioting, murder, and destruction of synagogues and Jewish property in Aleppo, Syria; Cairo, Egypt; and Tripoli, Libya. The Libyan Jewish community was particularly hard-hit, losing 130 people in the Tripoli area in three days of wanton violence. As in the earlier Farhud, the pogrom had been fomented by extreme nationalist elements who were intent on undercutting the British occupation of the country. The British troops in control of Tripoli waited days before restoring order, with an unconcern reminiscent of their conduct in the Iraqi massacre. As in the Iraqi case, the Tripoli massacre inaugurated a train of events that would demoralize and in a relatively short time dissolve the Libyan Jewish community.

After the first Arab-Israeli war broke out, the belligerent Arab governments lost all incentive to continue what little protection they had afforded their Jewish communities. Egypt, Syria, and Iraq took active measures against Jews under the guise of emergency regulations. Arrests, torture, and sometimes hangings of Jews, severe restrictions on travel, and sequestration or confiscation of Jewish property were imposed when these countries sent armies to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state on May 15, 1948. A climate of fear prevailed in these communities as sporadic attacks against Jews mounted.

Mass Escape to Israel

After the defeat of the Arab armies, immigration of Jews from these countries increased until it became a flood. In the first years of Israel's existence, its government arranged a variety of rescue operations from these countries either

extra-legally or with the Arab governments' tacit agreement. Operations "Ezra and Nehemiah" in Iraq and "Magic Carpet" in Yemen airlifted many tens of thousands of Jews to their new homes. Jews from other countries fled through ports along the Mediterranean. Whatever their method of escape, Middle Eastern Jews were required to leave behind Jewish communal holdings, and their real property and immovable goods, which were taken over by their home governments. In the case of Iraq, where many Jews had been involved in banking and finance, liquid assets were also frozen. The effect of these measures was that large numbers of Jewish refugees from Arab countries arrived in Israel penniless.

It must be noted that certain Arab states or governments refrained from the discriminatory behavior manifested by their more belligerent counterparts and enacted measures to protect their Jewish communities. In these states, notably Morocco, but to a large extent also in Tunisia, the exodus was more gradual. The continued existence of the small but vital Moroccan Jewish community attests to the modus vivendi achieved by this state and its Jews wherein Arab-Israel problems are held separate from the relations of the state with its indigenous Jews.

Hardship for Those Who Remained

The Jews that remained within the confines of other Arab states after the mass exoduses of the late 1940s and early 1950s experienced periods of marked hardship, violence and discrimination interspersed with periods of relative quiet, mirroring the ebb and flow of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the domestic political and economic situations. Iraq and Syria both saw frequent coups d'etat in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, which fostered insecurity. Each new dictator, for better or for worse, could not be counted upon to continue the policy towards the local Jews of his predecessor.

Egypt, under the stable dictatorship of the pan-Arabist and Arab socialist Gamal Abdul Nasser, set about expropriating and nationalizing Jewish property along with that of other Egyptian minorities. In truth little difference can be discerned between the treatment of the Jews in the so-called socialist states of the period and that of the right-wing dictatorships. In Libya, where Jews had extracted guarantees of protection at the advent of independence under King Idris in 1952, restrictions on Jewish commerce, licenses, and holding of property were gradually imposed under nationalist pressure.

Meanwhile, the propaganda arms of the confrontation states, (Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq), but particularly Nasser's influential Sawt al-Arab min al-Kahira (The Voice of the Arabs from Cairo) beamed anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish propaganda on the airwaves all across the Middle East. This inflammatory campaign reached unprecedented proportions in the weeks preceding the June 1967 war. When in this poisoned atmosphere news came of the unexpected and swift Arab defeat by Israeli forces in the Six-Day War, mob violence broke out: riots against Jews in Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In Morocco and Tunisia the governments struggled to protect the Jews, but in Egypt and Syria the governments themselves unleashed fresh anti-Jewish measures. Cairo arrested some 500 Jewish men and held them for months in terrible conditions. They were told that they would be released only if they forfeited their citizenship and property and agreed to be expelled from Egypt. Riots in Libya were so severe that virtually all of the remaining Jews in the country -- slightly more than 4,000 -- were evacuated to Italy with the help of concerned Italian and American diplomats.

The Situation Today

In the period since the 1967 war up to the present day, there has been a

continuing decline in the number of Jews in the Arab world. Draconian government restrictions, sporadic popular assaults, and murderous, often unexplained and unprosecuted individual attacks have contributed to a sense of insecurity in the countries ruled by military dictators. It is thought that today between 200 and 300 Jews live in Iraq, mostly elderly. Few are permitted to travel. Some 250 Jews live in Egypt, also mostly elderly. But in contrast to Iraq and Syria, their situation has brightened. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 has enabled them to resume open contact with their relatives in Israel.

The 5,000 Jews of Syria are a cause of continuing concern for Jews everywhere. Now that the U.S. Ambassador has returned to Damascus, efforts to gain permission for them to emigrate should be high on the agenda of American-Syrian relations. The estimated 1,200 to 2,000 Jews scattered in villages in Northern Yemen are virtually cut off from the outside world. They may not travel or even maintain normal postal ties with relatives abroad. The only periodic contact with the community is maintained by two anti-Zionist rabbis from Brooklyn. Efforts by Yemeni Jews in the United States to organize a visit to their co-religionists in Yemen have been systematically rebuffed by the authorities.

The remaining Jews of Lebanon, who had been protected by successive Christian-dominated governments there, began to emigrate after the 1967 war, with this trend accelerating after the current civil war broke out in 1975. Today fewer than 100 remain, mostly in Christian-held East Beirut.

The kidnapping of four Lebanese Jews at the end of March 1985, provides tragic evidence of the extent to which even Lebanon, which had long been the most tolerant country in the Arab world, has been engulfed by fanaticism and wanton violence. Christian and Muslim officials, including Nabih Berri, the leader of the

Amal, the mainstream Shi'ite militia in Lebanon, condemned the kidnapping of the Jewish leaders in Beirut. In February 1986, a new radical Shi'ite group, the "Organization of the Oppressed in the World," claimed responsibility for the kidnappings and threatened to abduct and kill other Lebanese Jews unless Israel withdrew from "all of the occupied territories" and freed all Lebanese and Palestinian detainees. Eight Lebanese Jews have thus far been murdered by this terrorist group, which is ideologically linked to the pro-Iranian Hezbollah (the Party of God).

As of October 1987, nothing was known of the fate of Isaac Sasson, president of the Lebanese community, kidnapped in March 1985, and Salim Jammous, secretary-general of the community, who had been abducted in August 1984. The bodies of only three of the victims have been recovered and given a Jewish burial. The kidnappers refuse to release the others until their demands against Israel are met.

In North Africa the situation is somewhat different. The roughly 10,000 remaining Moroccan Jews, as mentioned earlier, are fairly secure under the benevolent rule of King Hassan. The 2,800 Jews of Tunisia face uncertain times owing to the presence there since 1982 of the PLO headquarters, as well as the death of Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba, their traditional protector. A trend toward instability and rising Islamic fundamentalism has left its mark on the community. In 1983, a suspicious fire that completely destroyed the synagogue in the town of Zarzis was viewed by local Jews as the work of Palestinian extremists.

In October 1985, on the holiday of Simhat Torah, a crazed guard assigned to protect the Jewish community killed three and wounded eight others in the historic La Ghariba synagogue on the island of Djerba. According to Tunisian government sources, the Libyans also indoctrinated

Tunisian workers in Libya with anti-Semitic sentiments. Some 30,000 were expelled back to Tunisia only weeks before the synagogue attack. The Tunisian government had early expressed its outrage to the Libyan government when it was discovered that a pirate radio station based in Libya, "Radio of Vengeance and Sacred Hate," was broadcasting calls to overthrow the pro-Western regimes and to massacre North African Jews.

Barely half a dozen Jews remain in Libya. In a 1970 law nationalizing the assets of some 600 Libyan Jews, the Libyan government explicitly committed itself to issue fifteen-year bonds to pay full and fair compensation. Nevertheless, the July 21, 1985 deadline passed without any action by Colonel Muammar Qadhafi to fulfill this pledge.

In the section on Libya in the U.S. State Department's report on human rights practices during 1985, the contradictions in the Libyan policy are pointed out: "Qadhafi has stated that he is opposed to Zionism, not Judaism, and that Arab nations should welcome Arab Jews who wish to return to their countries of origin. But in a speech in June 1985, he cited the Prophet Muhammed as stating that Judaism and Islam cannot coexist in the land of the Arabs, and in September 1985, virulently anti-Jewish broadcasts on Libyan radio called for anti-Jewish violence in Tunisia within broadcast range."

Only 300 Jews are thought to live in Algeria, most having left earlier because of the hostile popular climate attendant to this state's radical stance on Arab-Israeli matters.

The Jewish Claim for Restitution

The Jews of Arab countries naturally consider themselves victims of the Middle East conflict and seek restitution for their confiscated properties -- both personal and communal -- from the governments involved. In this quest they have significant basis in international law, the UN Charter and conventions dealing with human rights.

Indeed, the arbitrary decrees against the Jews in many cases run counter to the fine principles enunciated in the much abused constitutions of their countries of origin.

Since 1967 they have also received official United Nations recognition of their claims: United Nations Security Council resolutions 237 and 242. Resolution 237, of 14 June 1967, concerns itself with the safety, welfare, and security of the inhabitants of the areas where military operations had taken place in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and also with the protection of minorities in the states involved in the conflict. UN Secretary-General U Thant sent his special representative, Nils-Goran Gussing, on a special mission to the Middle East to implement the resolution. The Secretary-General stated expressly that the provisions of the resolution dealing with minorities "might properly be interpreted as having application to the treatment, at the time of the recent war and as a result of that war, of both Arab and Jewish persons in the States which are directly concerned because of their participation in that war." The Israeli government had expressed its concern about the treatment of Jewish minorities in the Arab states since the outbreak of hostilities.

Gussing met with officials of the Egyptian government and raised the subject of the treatment of the reported 500 Jewish prisoners and the confiscation of the property of Egyptian Jews. He also met with the Syrian authorities to investigate the restrictions placed on the Jews of that country. Moreover, the questions concerning Egyptian Jewry were taken up by the Secretary-General with the United Arab Republic's (Egypt) permanent representative to the UN in New York.

Resolution 242, still considered the primary vehicle for resolving the Arab-Israel conflict, stipulates that a comprehensive peace settlement should necessarily include "a just settlement of the refugee problem." Justice Arthur Goldberg, the American delegate who was instrumental in

drafting the unanimously adopted resolution, has pointed out that the adjective "Palestinian" or "Arab" was deliberately omitted from the resolution to indicate that the claims of the Jewish refugees from Arab lands need also to be addressed.

This diplomatic activity did not produce results at the time, but it established the claims of Jewish refugees from Arab lands and the treatment of the Middle Eastern Jewish minorities as concerns of the international community. Following these developments, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty also provided for a joint commission to handle the claims of the Egyptian Jewish refugees. These precedents are important, as are the International Conferences of the World Organization of Jews from Arab Lands which seek to focus attention on the communal and personal losses suffered by these Jewish communities. A just settlement of the Middle East conflict must entail protection of the rights of Jewish minorities remaining in the Arab world and a fair handling of the claims of the Jewish refugees.

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