

THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF ZIONISM IN LIBYA

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The development of the Zionist movement in Libya was an evolutionary process which brought changes in ways of thinking and behavior without detaching completely from tradition. New social and economic elements entered public life (lower middle class and women) and changes took place in education (modern Hebrew language and literature and modern Jewish history). This is not to say, however, that those social elements did not have any part in public life beforehand, but now their involvement became a mainstream one. Similarly, traditional education did not cease, and the old political guard continued to exist: the official communal leadership was manned by it, and Zionist leaders were observant Jews who were backed by many rabbis. Despite the growing involvement of women, they hardly reached leadership positions.

The impact of the Zionist movement in Libya was not only political but also social, cultural and economic. This resulted from the entry of people from new socioeconomic classes into political life, and the advocacy of new socioeconomic and cul-

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tural ideas by the Zionists, which they tried to implement in Libya in preparation for life in Israel. These processes were opposed by many of the members of the traditional leadership and consequently their development had to overcome several hurdles. Moreover, since these internal conflicts among the Jews, especially in Tripoli, prevented smooth administration of the community, the Italian authorities felt it necessary to intervene and stop some of the political activities and thus direct the local groups into cultural and social activities.

Major Phases of Zionist Activity in Libya

The first testimonies of Zionist activity in Libya are from 1900, when a small number of individuals in Tripoli and Benghazi contacted the Central Zionist Organization and wanted to spread Zionism in Libya. Due to the lukewarm and slow reply and also to difficulties in political activity in Libya during the late Hamidian period and under the Young Turks, this correspondence ceased in 1904.¹ Zionist activity was renewed under Italian rule (1911–1942/43), especially after World War I. Zionist clubs were established in Tripoli and Benghazi, often in connection with the Italian Zionist Federation to which they belonged. This activity strengthened during the 1920s–1930s, though its foci altered from political to cultural-social, as will be discussed later. Contacts with Zionists abroad, and especially in Palestine, increased, mainly following World War II, when Jewish Palestinian soldiers and emissaries were in Libya. These connections had a strong impact on social and cultural as well as economic and political tendencies among Libyan Jews.

Characteristics of Political Activists in Libya Prior to Zionism

Traditionally, the Jewish leadership was composed of spiritual and temporal leaders. The former were rabbis who belonged to a limited number of families, several of which stemmed from abroad (mainly from Palestine, Italy and Turkey). The temporal leadership was in the hands of the heads of rich

mercantile families, many of whom had strong economic, social, and cultural ties with Italy. Thus, the leaders came from a small number of families, who were renowned for their scholarship or for their wealth. Women had no part in the leadership, although they participated in various communal activities, mainly those connected with welfare.

Characteristics of the Early Zionist Activists in Libya

There are only a few documents relating to early Zionist activities in Libya. It seems that only a few men were involved in these activities during 1900-1904, the period covered by this correspondence. From their correspondence with the Central Zionist Organization one might conclude that those on the Libyan side were mostly Jews with foreign (i.e., non-Ottoman) citizenship, who were among the wealthy merchants and professionals.² Although part of the correspondence was in Hebrew, it seems that these people were more fluent in European languages.³ As a result of the limited response to requests from Libya, the difficulty of leading non-Ottoman and non-Turkish national activities in Libya in the late Ottoman period, and perhaps the limited interest among the Westernized Jews to whom the activists at the time belonged, the Zionist activity ceased around 1904 (or at least no documentation of it remained), and did not spread to other classes of Libyan Jews.

Zionist Activists in the Mid-1910s–1920s

With the renewal of Zionist activity in Libya under Italian rule, the change in the socioeconomic background of most Zionist activists is striking. Most of them were young professionals of the lower middle class, who wanted to enter communal politics in order to change the socioeconomic, cultural, and political structure of the community.⁴ This was most apparent in Tripoli. To this end they established societies and clubs, and tried to operate in two directions: educational and political. The political competition, however, often hindered their educational efforts. When it became known who stood behind the

Hebrew courses, which were the focus of Zionist educational activity, political rivals took pains to convince students not to attend, and many courses had to shut down.⁵

In order to achieve socioeconomic and political changes in the community, the Zionists entered the political arena and confronted the old guard, which was based on a different socioeconomic background and held other political views. Whereas in the past the political struggle in the community was mainly between individuals of a similar socioeconomic background, as well as between the mercantile Westernized class and the religious leadership, in the 1920s the struggle was between opposing Westernized and modern groups, one belonging to the rich, mostly Italianized, group, and the other based on lower middle class Jews who also had modern education, taking Zionism as their ideological orientation. In contrast to the past, the latter had clear short and long term political goals regarding their life in Libya and Palestine, whereas the former leadership was mainly concerned with ad hoc issues and did not have a clear-cut political program.

The conflicts between these groups eventually paralyzed the operation of the communal leadership of Tripoli and the Italian authorities decided in 1929 to intervene. They appointed an Italian (Christian) civil servant to administer the community, and no further elections were held during the Italian period. This move forced the Zionists to focus on cultural and social activities, and consequently the 1930s are characterized by an enhanced Hebrew revival.

The spiritual communal leadership did not allow changes in its traditional educational system of Talmud Torah institutions in Tripoli (in most other places, except for Benghazi and Khoms, the movement for educational change was not yet strong). It did not prevent, however, the establishment of independent afternoon Hebrew courses by self-taught Zionists, who formed the Ben Yehuda society and established the HaTikvah evening school in the early 1930s. This institution paved the way for educational changes in the 1940s, and brought hundreds of young people, mostly female, into close contact with Zionist ideas — political as well as social. The predominance of females resulted from the fact that Hebrew education was almost non-existent in the educational systems that Jewish girls frequented (this part of the

AIU system was of a low level). This period witnessed the move from Judeo-Arabic to Hebrew among Libyan Jews who regarded themselves as Zionists, while simultaneously Italian was acquired by all Jews educated in modern institutions and those who needed the language for their economic activity.

Despite their involvement in Zionist circles, for most Libyan Jews, Zionism was more theoretical than practical or self-fulfilling (i.e., leading to *aliyah* — immigration to the Land of Israel). They approved of the Zionist ideas in principle, learned Hebrew and became acquainted with developments among the “New Yishuv” in Palestine, but only a few prepared themselves for *aliyah* and even less actually immigrated to Palestine. Some new manifestations were already apparent in this period:

1. The desire to create a “New Jew” — culturally, socially, economically and politically.
2. The inclusion of girls, first as students and soon after also as teachers, in the emerging Hebrew educational system.
3. Modern education drawing heavily from the Hebrew educational system in Palestine.
4. Leadership by teachers who were not from the traditional rabbinic class, and had modern, mainly Italian, education complemented by basic traditional Jewish education and independent modern Hebrew studies, who continued to be religiously observant.
5. Emphasis on Zionist issues in education, including attempts to change the socioeconomic structure of the community and improve the lot of its members.

The Impact of Zionism During the Postwar Period

Jewish political activity ceased during World War II. Jews could attend only traditional communal schools, and suffered under the anti-Jewish racial legislation, while the German presence in Libya grew.⁶ The events of the war broke the trust the Jews of Libya had in improving their condition through European Westernization, and the pogroms of November 1945 showed them the dangers they might encounter under an independent Arab rule (which was one of the options discussed for the future of Libya).⁷ In addition to these two developments, the Jews of

Libya came into an immediate contact with numerous Jewish Palestinian soldiers who served in the British army in Libya, and later met several special Jewish emissaries who were sent to Libya from Palestine. Both groups were strong believers in Zionism and wanted to help the Libyan Jews following their suffering during the war. As a result, the Palestinian Jews were deeply involved in recreating an educational system, as teachers, directors, and advisors, through the establishment of a Hebrew school system, mainly in Benghazi and Tripoli. They not only prepared curricula but also strengthened the contacts between the Hebrew educational system in Palestine and the one emerging in Libya. Knowing that due to military requirements they might leave Libya soon, the soldiers — some of whom were educators in their civilian life — made special efforts to train modern Hebrew teachers. This was not only a change in educational orientation but also a social change, because a large number of the new teachers were women, and previously women had had no part in the communal educational system, either as students or as teachers. Although traditional Talmud Torah schools continued to exist, the leadership of the educational system passed to the modern Hebrew teachers. The status of the latter had increased not only in their field but also in the community in general, and they started to hold leadership positions, though not always in a formal way.⁸

The postwar period had also witnessed the foundation of the pioneering movement (HeHalutz) in Libya, as a direct consequence of Zionist ideas of creating a "New Jew" and changing the social and economic structure of Jewish life. While it is true that not many young Jews joined the movement, and fewer participated in its training farm (with women entering apparently only in the very last stages of the later 1940s), this experiment was highly regarded in Libya at the theoretical level. Not many were ready to actually participate in it, and families were reluctant that their children, and especially their daughters, live in what they regarded an "immoral" lifestyle and waste their time in despicable professions.

Viewing Zionism as the only solution, the growing connections with the institutions of the Yishuv in Palestine, the creation of HeHalutz in Libya, and the difficulties in immigration to Palestine during 1945-1949 increased the efforts at illegal immigration, in which the new leadership and Zionist youth were

dominant.⁹ The experience they got during this period was in high demand during the mass legal emigration of 1949–1951, when Israeli emissaries were legally operating in Libya, and Israeli ships took Jews directly from Libya to Israel. Apart from the Israeli administrators, most of the operation was in the hands of the new emerging leadership, which included numerous members of the middle and lower classes, including a growing number of women. This operation included the concentration of the Jews of the hinterland in Tripoli, the preparation of the community for emigration, and at the same time continuing to provide it — including the numerous Jews from the hinterland — with the necessary services (mainly health, education and housing). While it is true that the official leadership continued to include mainly members of the old mercantile class (the Chief Rabbi was from Israel), the daily operation of the community was in the hands of the emerging Zionist leadership.

Notes

1. For details, see "The Relations of the Jewish Community of Libya with Europe in the Late Ottoman Period," in J.P. Miege, *Les relations intercommunautaires juives en Méditerranée occidentale XIIIe—XXe siècles* (Paris: CNRS, 1984), pp. 75-76.
2. The correspondents were merchants and a lawyer.
3. Some letters are in French, and the long one in Hebrew was written by a scribe and signed in Italian.
4. For an examination of Zionist activity in Libya in this period, see Maurice Roumani, "Zionism and Social Change in Libya at the Turn of the Century," *Studies in Zionism*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1987):1-24.
5. For details on the revival of the Hebrew language in Libya, and its status in this period, see "Hatenuah HaIvrit BeLuv," *Shorashim BaMizrah*, vol. 2 (1989):173-209.
6. For details on the condition of the Libyan Jews during World War II, see "Yehudei Luv al Saf Shoah," *Peamim*, no. 28 (1987):44-77.
7. For details, see Frigia Zuretz [et al.], *Yahadut Luv* (Tel Aviv, 1982), pp. 207-227.
8. Rachel Simon, *Change Within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya* (Seattle, 1992).
9. For details, see "MeHug Tsiyon LeTsiyonut Magshimah: Aliyat Yehudei Luv," *Shorashim BaMizrah*, vol. 3 (1991):295-351.