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ROUNDTABLE

Jewish Identities in the Middle East, 1876–1956

The Middle Eastern Shift and Provincializing Zionism

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Scholars working on Jewish communities in the Middle East are in the midst of an important historiographical moment, in which the major categories, historical narratives, and key assumptions within the field are undergoing radical changes. A cluster of books and articles written by scholars trained in history, anthropology, and area studies departments, and published in Middle East studies rather than Jewish studies book series and journals, suggests that the study of Middle Eastern Jewish communities in the American academy is undergoing a change which might be termed "the Middle Eastern turn." For such scholars, the history of Jews in Muslim lands, as modern subjects and citizens, is typified by a multiplicity of categories related to their identities—Ottoman, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Arab-Jewish, and local-patriotic—which they explore by looking at the political organizations and social and cultural institutions that enabled the integration of modern Jews into new imperial and national frameworks. This new scholarly wave is transnational, as it illustrates the importance of Jewish networks and Jewish languages in the Middle East, and likewise seeks to draw comparisons between Jews and other transregional and religious minorities, such as Armenians and Greek Orthodox Christians. It is interdisciplinary, as it attempts to incorporate the insights of sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars. Finally, it is postcolonial, in its critiques of national elites, national narratives, and nationalist histories. These new accounts uncover how processes which affected the entire Middle East, like Ottoman and Egyptian reform politics and the rise of nation-states, shaped modern Jewish lives.

This new historiography has adopted an innovative approach to the modern period. Both conservative Zionist historiography and postmodern critiques of this historiography have had very negative things to say about the modern period. Just as conservative Zionist historians identified modernity with the rise of anti-Semitism in the Muslim world,[1] for some postcolonial critics, modernity was deeply bound up with negative phenomena that led to the destruction of Middle Eastern Jewish communities, as well as the Nakba of the Palestinian people, such as colonialism, antireligiosity, sectarianism, racism, and ethnic cleansing. For many postcolonial critics, the key moment in the meeting between European Jews and Middle Eastern Jews was when the latter encountered European

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Zionists, first as emissaries and workers in the Middle East and subsequently as the hegemonic Ashkenazi majority in Israel.[2] The new scholarship has challenged some of these assumptions through its emphasis on the *potentialities* of modernity. It has rejected the idea that the identities of Middle Eastern Jews should be exclusively juxtaposed with a Zionist identity. The key works are concerned more with how the modern age, and especially the reforms of Ottoman imperial and civic identities and the rise of nation-states, affected, and ultimately dissolved, previous Islamic categories pertaining to religious minorities, such as *ahl al-dhimma* and *ahl al-kitāb*.[3] Studies of cosmopolitan Mediterranean cities have shown that local Jews had many opportunities to interact with European Jews, who were not always Zionist: they read the European Hebrew press, they traded with European Jewish merchants, and they met Ashkenazi Jews who migrated to the region. Jews experienced Western colonialism not only through the appropriation of their identities by Zionism. They also lived under French colonialism in most of North Africa, British colonialism in Egypt from 1882, and French and British Mandate rule in the Mashriq during the interwar period, and they migrated to colonized spaces such as India, to important centers of global trade and commerce like Shanghai, to South, Central, and North America, and to Europe, where they met all sorts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. To understand them, their self-images, and their historical narratives is to provincialize Zionism.[4]

These insights also changed our perception of the "Arab Jew." During the 1990s, the use of this term to refer to Jews in the Middle East before 1948, by Israeli Mizrahi activists who evoked the term to challenge Zionism, seemed highly exciting to many scholars.[5] Today, social scientists recognize that the term was used in the Middle East, yet they also look at the many kinds of Arab Jews in the region—Egyptian, Iraqi, and Palestinian; communist and liberal; royalist and revolutionary—and see the term itself as a product of Arab nationalism. As Lior Sternfeld and Jonathan Gribetz point out in this roundtable, the category also excludes Jews who defined themselves in other ways, such as Jews who saw themselves as local patriots (Moroccan, Egyptian, and so on) but not necessarily as Arab. Middle Eastern Jewish communities also included Jews who did not speak Arabic, or spoke Arabic in addition to other Middle Eastern languages, including Jews who lived in the region of historical Kurdistan and spoke a local dialect of Aramaic as well as Ladino-speaking, Turkish-speaking, and Persian-speaking Jews, communities who later were classified as Mizrahim in Israel. The rise of nationalism, especially in its interwar forms, meant that they too had to face challenges relating to their identities and languages (the abandonment of Ladino under Kemalist pressures, or the decline of Judeo-Persian in modern Iran and Afghanistan, for example).

The need to think about the status of Arab Jews, as well as other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, within, and without, the realities of the Arab–Israeli conflict, led to new archival politics. It is well known that most Israeli scholars cannot conduct research in most Arab states, and most Arab historians cannot conduct research in Israel. These archival politics deepened the gap between scholars interested in the same communities, and consequently directed scholarly attention toward the British and French colonial archives, which were accessible to all. They also put American and European passport holders in a privileged position in relation to Middle Eastern scholars, as Western scholars could sometimes visit both Israeli and Middle Eastern archives. Nonetheless, the new scholarship, as Aomar Boum thoughtfully suggests in his roundtable essay,

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has sought different archives, and different modes of historical recording, to reflect on Jewish histories.

As part of their exploration of Middle Eastern modernities, historians in particular have paid attention to the rise of new political frameworks within the Ottoman Empire, especially the Tanzimat and the 1908 revolution, and the sense of Jewish Ottomanism they cultivated. Ottomanism—that is, the identification of an Ottoman exclusive realm as a shared imagined community—opened up new possibilities for thinking about citizenship, equality, and justice within a larger imperial setting, as illustrated beautifully in the works of Michelle Campos and Abigail Jacobson.[6] After World War I, Jews were drawn to the national cultures of Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nation-states. Joel Beinin's seminal work on the Jews of Egypt represents an important model for the new scholarship on Jews in Middle Eastern nation-states. Beinin undertook the study of the Egyptian-Jewish middle classes, such as the Sephardi businessmen who collaborated with European and Muslim partners during the interwar period and helped build the state's capitalist networks. He shows that the slogan "Religion is for God and the homeland is for all" invited Jews to claim their place as citizens of the Egyptian nation. Indeed, this slogan was appealing to Jews in other Middle Eastern nation-states. The book, however, also depicts how the turning of the Zionist–Palestinian conflict into an Arab–Israeli conflict led to the demise of the community. Importantly, Beinin considers the lives of Egyptian Jews after their forced emigration, examining Egyptian Jewish diasporic communities in places such as San Francisco and Israel. In this revisionist reading, Israel was a diaspora, and Egypt, a homeland.[7]

Scholars also highlight the importance of the Jewish left, from the Iranian Tudeh to the Moroccan Communist Party, as a challenge to various forms of Middle Eastern nationalism(s), on the one hand, and Zionism, on the other hand. While previous scholarship on communist Jews tried obsessively to figure out whether the participation of Jews in Arab communist parties led to the parties' support for the partition of Palestine (1947), recent work has placed more emphasis on how communism produced new Arab-Jewish and patriotic visions. Rami Ginat's exciting new book thus demonstrates how Jewish Egyptian communism was a sociocultural Egyptian phenomenon. At the same time, he illustrates most lucidly that just as the Egyptian communist movement was not monolithic, Egyptian-Jewish communists acted in very different ways: some converted to Islam, some chose exile, and others migrated to Israel. Thus, Jews assumed various roles in communists groups and defined, and debated, their position as Egyptian, radical, and Jewish activists.[8]

While the new scholarship has highlighted the Jewish opposition to Zionism, noting that many Jews living outside mandatory Palestine saw Zionism as a grave threat to their integration in their home countries, it also recognizes the existence of Zionist movements in the Middle East. Rather than positing a strict binary between Zionists and Arab Jews, scholars have tried to understand what caused Jews to support the Zionist movement, knowing full well that Palestine was not "a land without a people" and that settlement might lead to bloodshed between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and endanger Jewish existence in other countries. These Zionist activities are seen as a response to the Holocaust, the support *some* Middle Eastern elites professed for Nazi Germany during World War II and the Farhud in Iraq; to riots in Jewish quarters following the 1948 war in Palestine; and to the repressive actions taken by Arab governments against Jews during

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and after the 1948 war, in theory to uproot Zionist undergrounds but in practice to use Jews as comfortable scapegoats so as to deflect honest discussions regarding what led to the failure of states like Iraq, Egypt, and Syria in the Palestinian campaign.[9] Scholars also note that Zionist Sephardi Jews, especially in Palestine, believed that Jewish migration to Ottoman and mandatory Palestine could help develop the country and likewise felt that Jews who were persecuted in Europe had the right to settle in Palestine, yet such Sephardi Jews critiqued European Zionists for mistreating and misunderstanding the Arabs. While this position was very typical of Palestinian Sephardi Jews, this binational vision of Palestine was also articulated elsewhere in the Middle East.[10]

Rami Ginat's essay in this roundtable includes a few personal lines on how he, as a son of Libyan parents in Israel who grew up with Arab culture (listening to Arabic music, watching Arab films, etc.), could not identify himself as an Arab Jew. In a way, the new scholarship is interested not only in the Israeli politics which destroyed the concept of Arab-Jewish-ness, but also in the stage which is "before Israel," namely in the options, categories, and definitions of modernity conceptualized by Middle Eastern Jews before the great trauma of 1948 brutally shattered these visions.

NOTES

[1]The most famous example of this narrative is Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[2]See for example, Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[3]For a thoughtful study of Ottoman Jewry, see Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4]See, for example, Emily R. Gottreich and Daniel Schroeter, eds., *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 2011); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); and idem, "Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Creation of the Jewish Colonial," *American Historical Review* (2011): 80–108.

[5]On how to think creatively on Arab Jews within their historical contexts, see Lital Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008): 452–69.

[6]Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

[7]Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998).

[8]Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2011); see also the pioneering work by Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996).

[9]See, for example, Esther Me'ir-Glitsenshtain, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[10]For Sephardi critiques of Ashkenazi Zionism, see Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire*; Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*; and Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, eds., *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893–1958* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2013).

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