

Jewish Identities in the Arab Middle East: The Case of Egypt in Retrospect

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Much work has been done in recent decades on the histories of the Jews of Arab lands across a variety of time periods, reflecting an increasing interest in the historical past of the Jews of the “Orient.” While diverse, this literature may be divided into several general groups. The first comprises studies written by Western and Israeli scholars and encompasses a broad spectrum of Arabic-speaking countries.¹ This literature has explored, among other things, issues relating to the way of life and administration of ethnically and culturally diverse Jewish communities, their approaches to Zionism and the question of their national identities, their positions regarding the Zionist–Israeli–Arab conflict in its various phases, and the phenomena of anti-Semitism, particularly in light of the increasing escalation of the conflict. It includes works by Israeli intellectuals of Mizrahi heritage, some of whom came together in the late 1990s in a sociopolitical dissident movement known as the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition. The target audience of this movement was Mizrahi Jews: refugees and emigrants from Arab countries as well as their second- and third-generation offspring. The movement, which was not ideologically homogeneous (particularly regarding approaches to the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict), took a postcolonialist approach to the Zionist narrative and enterprise, and was critical of the entrenchment of the Ashkenazi (European-extraction) Jews among the elites of the emerging Israeli society. The movement had scant success in reaching its target population: the majority of Mizrahi/Sephardi Jews living in Israel. Nevertheless, it brought to the fore the historical socioeconomic injustices that many Jews from Arab countries had experienced since arriving in Israel, whether reluctantly or acquiescently.

A pioneering work in this direction was Ella Shohat’s “Sephardim in Israel,” published in 1988. Shohat asserts that “Oriental Jews had to be taught to see the Arabs, and themselves, as Other.”² The term “Arab Jew” has several connotations, as she suggested a decade later: “it celebrates the Jewish past in the Eastern world; it affirms the pan-Oriental communities developed in Israel itself; and it invokes a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab Muslim East.”³ Yehouda Shenhav, a sociologist and founding member of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition, discussed the role of religion in the incorporation of “the Arab Jews into the Zionist project” and in shaping the “Mizrahi identity” of these Jews.⁴

The question of whether Arab Jews were truly Arabs is largely a matter of semantics, as Lital Levy put it.⁵ The phenomenon of Arab Jews is unfortunately historical rather than contemporary. Jews originating in Arab countries may define and identify themselves as “Arab Jews,” yet none of them live or have been welcomed to live in their parents’ country of origin. Born in Israel to Libyan Jewish parents,⁶ I was brought up in a multicultural milieu where colloquial Arabic was heard and spoken, and Arabic music,

films, and food were an integral part of my boyhood. Nevertheless, with all my affinity to Arab culture, I still cannot define or identify myself as an “Arab Jew.”

A second strand of literature is written by Arab scholars and intellectuals on the subject of Arab Jews, their legacies, their heritage, and their contributions to the respective Arab societies where they resided. The question of how Jews have been perceived in this scholarship is profound and varied and cannot be fully addressed in this essay. But two contradictory viewpoints can be discerned. Some, like Muhammad Abu al-Ghar, have written favorably of Jews’ loyalty to and identification with their respective countries, drawing a distinction in the pre-Israel phase between the Zionist minority and the non-Zionist loyal Jewish citizens. Abu al-Ghar condemns the anti-Semitism that flourished in Europe and admonishes Europeans not to lecture Semites on this matter, as the latter’s parents and grandparents welcomed the Jews who fled from European anti-Semitism. Jews, he recalls, lived and worked in Egypt in complete freedom and were an important part of Egyptian society.⁷ Others, like Sa’ida Muhammad Husni, play down the contribution of the Jews of Egypt to the society in which they lived, arguing that, in contrast to the multifaceted roles of Jews in other places, the role in Egypt of Jews of foreign extraction was “minimal,” limited to union activity or the propagation of revolutionary ideas.⁸ At the same time, she takes pains to note that there were also anti-Zionist voices; one of the most outstanding was “the Jewish anti-Zionist League,” established in the mid-1940s. This organization struggled against Zionist propaganda, which it saw as conflicting with the interests of both Jews and Arabs. It advocated a close connection between the Jews of Egypt and the rest of the Egyptian people in the struggle for independence and democracy, and stressed the need to take action to resolve the plight of uprooted Jews in the world through means other than settling them in Palestine. Nevertheless, Husni criticizes the Union for limiting its membership to Jews despite its calls for closer ties between Arabs and Jews in Egypt. Resistance to Zionism, she concludes, characterized an insignificant minority of Jews, while Zionism was supported by influential and wealthy Jews in the country.

Broadly speaking, some of the arguments presented in the second category of literature do not completely correspond to past historical reality. For many, the long years of the Arab–Israeli conflict have blurred the distinction between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews, leading them to present adverse, ultracritical, and unbalanced accounts that seem to have little basis in historical reality.

A third group of literature dealing with Arabic Jewry is written by Jewish intellectuals of an international leftist orientation who have taken a hostile position toward Zionism and the State of Israel. Egyptian Jews of a Marxist orientation have viewed their Arab/Egyptian past in different ways. In this context it is worth noting that while the emergence of supraterritorial Arab nationalist trends in Egypt began in the second half of the 1930s and the 1940s, many Egyptian Jews continued to identify with the particularistic Egyptian nationalist trends that held sway in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of these were European immigrants who arrived in Egypt during the British occupation and did not see themselves as Egyptian, and others were natives who were deeply rooted in the local society and culture, particularly the Karaites. The difference between these groups was particularly noticeable in their approaches to national identity. The *mutamaşşirün* (foreign nationals who were permanent residents) tended to stress their Egyptian identity, while “indigenous” Egyptian Jews stressed the Egyptian/Arab blend

in their identities. Among the latter group were figures such as the advocate Yusuf Darwish (Karaite), Ahmad Sa'd Sadiq, and Raymond Duwayk, founders and leaders of the Marxist periodical *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, who stressed moderate Pan-Arab nationalist tendencies in their ideological writings and in their political and social activism.⁹

Marcel Israel, a former communist leader, was a prototype of a *mutamaşşir*. According to his book, published in 2002, he was deported from Egypt to Italy in the early 1950s and immediately reverted to his original family name (Shirizi) to avoid any association with the State of Israel, because, in his words, he had fought, and would continue to fight, against its aggressive policy toward the Arab states.¹⁰ Israel notes that the fact of his being Jewish did not attenuate his Egyptian identity. He did not feel himself foreign, was proud to be Egyptian, and fought with the Egyptian nationalist movement against imperialism. He did not feel his Jewishness because of the atmosphere of religious tolerance in Egypt and because of his sense that he was “a human being before he was a Jew.” He was fully connected to Egypt and its people.¹¹ In this context, Avraham Farhi noted that in the early 1940s many young Jews were going through a crisis of identity. “Who are we?” and “What could be done to reinvent our identity?” were common questions among young Jews. Farhi arrived at the conclusion that Judaism had nothing new to offer; for him, it was *passé*. He wanted to feel Egyptian and convinced himself that his future was tied to Egypt.¹²

Marcel Israel claims that the State of Israel did not resolve the Jewish problem; rather, it played an important role in destroying Jewish consciousness and diminishing the cultural, conceptual, religious, and ethical level of world Jewry.¹³ A similarly hostile view toward Israel and Zionism was expressed in a book by the Jewish-Egyptian advocate Shahata Harun. Unlike Marcel Israel, Harun insisted until his dying day on living in his native Egypt. He claimed that the behavior of the Arab regimes toward the Jews following 1948 strengthened Israel by providing it with 60 to 65 percent of its citizens. He identified as Jewish and leftist, stressing that he had no loyalty other than to Egypt.¹⁴

To conclude, the abundance of recent literature on and by Jews of the Arab Middle East points to new directions in the study of the modern Middle East in general and of the complex histories of Arab Jews in particular. Jews living in Arab countries were divided into two orientations: nationalist and internationalist. In Egypt, a large number of Jews were cosmopolitan and geographically mobile. To study their histories is to rely methodologically on research trends in transnational history, as I did in my recent study on the history of Egyptian communism (with special reference to the role of Egyptian Jews).¹⁵ My purpose was to avoid the essentializing views of a history written from a national(ist) perspective. To study communist Egyptian Jews means to rely on a variety of sources in Arabic, English, French, Hebrew, Russian, and even Yiddish. It is essential to remind contemporary Arabs and Israelis that the reading of these histories instructs us that Jewish-Arab peaceful coexistence is not only desirable but, moreover, attainable.

NOTES

¹See, among many others, Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2004); Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2007); Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948–1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); M. M. Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920–1970* (New York: New York University Press, 1992);

Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Cultural, Politics and the Formation of the Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); J. M. Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Shimon Shamir, ed., *The Jews of Egypt: A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987); Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt: 1914–1952* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989); Maurice M. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008); Rachel Simon, *Change within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1992); Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985); and Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

²Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, nos. 19/20 (1988): 25. On the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition, see Tilde Rosmer, "Israel's Middle Eastern Jewish Intellectuals: Identity and Discourse," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 9 (2014): 62–78.

³Stephanie Schwartz, "Double-Diaspora in the Literature and Film of Arab Jews" (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2012), 14.

⁴Yehouda Shenhav, "How did the Mizrahim 'Become' Religious Zionists? Zionism, Colonialism and the Religionization of the Arab-Jew," *News From Within* 20 (2006): 73. See also idem, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006). For ruminations on the complexities of using the term "Arab Jews," see Lisa Lital Levy, "Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863–1914" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), 10–17. See also Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday*.

⁵Lital Levy, "Jewish Writers," 13.

⁶My father was a descendant of the eminent Jewish philologist Jonah Ibn Janah (990–1050), who lived in Muslim Spain and wrote his pioneering works in Arabic; my maternal grandmother was Egyptian from Alexandria.

⁷Muhammad Abu Al-Ghar, *Yahud Misr min al-Izdihar ila al-Shatat* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2004).

⁸Sa'ida Muhammad Husni, *al-Yahud fi Misr min 1882–1947* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, 1993).

⁹Rami Ginat and Meir Noema, "Al-Fajr al-Jadid: A Breeding Ground for the Emergence of Revolutionary Ideas in the Immediate Post-Second World War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44 (2008): 886–87.

¹⁰Marsil Shirizi (Israel), *Awraq Munadil Itali fi Misr* (Cairo: Dar al-'Alam al-Thalith, 2002), 12.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45–47.

¹²Quoted in Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 248.

¹³Shirizi, *Awraq*, 47–50.

¹⁴Shahata Harun, *Yahudi fi al-Qahira* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 1987), 9–14.

¹⁵Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*.