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# 'Arab Jews' in Mediterranean World: A Critical Note on Multiculturalism in Israel

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## *1. Introduction*

In this essay, I will discuss embryonic symptoms of multiculturalism in Israel in light of a historical map of Jews in the East (Orient), especially on the southern shores of the Mediterranean basin. I focus on ethnic relations in the State of Israel in the context of a new trend of multiculturalism in special reference to terminology designated as the Jews from Arab countries to Israel after World War II. I keep in mind assimilationist, though French-oriented, activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle before World War II, although I don't intend to present a historical study of the Alliance, but show a model of assimilation into an indigenous society.

The motivation of writing this essay is that a new trend of rethinking Arab-Jewish or Palestinian-Israeli relations has emerged among new historians, sociologists or anthropologists of so-called "post-Zionism". [Shafir 1987] [Ram 1995] [Rabinovitz 1997] [Pappé 1999]

Until recently Zionist or Zionist-oriented researchers have almost monopolized the interpretation of the Jewish recent past in Arab countries or the Jewish immigrations to Palestine and Israel in Israeli academic scene. [Cohen 1972 1973] [Laskier 1992 1994]

One of old-styled researchers sometimes projects their negative image about the Jewish past on biased interpretation of Jews in Muslim lands. [Bat Yo'er 1985] Needless to say, Zionist monopoly of the interpretation has gradually been challenged, though not completely overcome, and more sophisticated and well-documented studies have been conducted by Jewish or Israeli scholars themselves, whether they are Zionists or not. [Cohen & Utovitch 1989] [Stillman 1991] [Goldberg 1996] [Courbage et al 1997] Especially the Jews of Egypt have been a keen focal point of interest in the Mediterranean world. [Beinin 1998] [Krämer 1989] [Shamir 1987]

I reviewed this new trend of study against the background of a 'traditional' description of

the Jewish past in Morocco. [Usuki 1995b]

As a student of a political and social history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I have been interested in a new trend of academic debates on how to reconstruct “national history” or how to narrate the past in general. In Israel, “post-Zionist debates” have heated up between older generations or “orthodox” researchers and new generations or so-called “revisionist” researchers on the topic of demythification of the establishment of the State of Israel in terms of “history and memory”. I cannot go into detail concerning these debates, but I could say that my discussion heavily relies upon on-going debates on “postzionism”. [Silberstein 2000]

I hope this essay could contribute to the understanding of a new attempt to interpret a ‘project’ and ‘fact’ of multiculturalism in Israel.

## *2. On the Term ‘Arab Jews’: Rethinking ‘Arabness’ of Jews from the Arab world*

The term ‘Arab Jews’ is usually avoided in Israeli daily usage since their Arabness is contrary to essential ideas of the Jewish state. ‘Arab Jews’ are Jews emigrating from Arab countries whose native language is Arabic. The problem here is that the boundary between Arabs and Jews are essentialized and even politicized in the context of the prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict. But recent trends of study show that Arabs and Jews are not contradicted and often overlapped each other in terms of the formation of nations and nationalisms in the Arab world. At the same time, demythification of Arab nationalism is going on in the backdrop of the collapse of political movements for Arab unity. [Jankowski et al 1997] [Khalidi et al 1991]

Coexistence, even if it is called “symbiosis”, between Muslims and Jews or Christians in pre-modern Arab countries is considered as a symbolic discourse of dominate Muslims’ tolerance toward *Zhimmis* or *Ahl al-Kitāb* (Jews and Christians in Islam). [Abdo & Kasmieh 1972]

The end of long tradition of the coexistence between Muslims and Jews in the Mediterranean world, however, suddenly came after the establishment of Israel in 1948 [Lewis 1984], to which the Palestinians fell victims and were finally expelled from their own country. The State of Israel not only triggered four-time Arab-Israeli wars that followed its emergence, but also waved anti-Jewish feelings and behaviors among Arab people. A Palestinian scholar tried to reinterpret a modern Jewish history in Iraq from a critical point of view, exploring newly opened materials and documents in British archives. In his book, Shiblak claims that the use of the term ‘Arab Jew’ is appropriate, since the indigenous Jewish communities were Arabized in many respects in the Muslim and later Ottoman rules. [Shiblak 1987 p. 11]

The Jews of Iraq were the most assimilated and Arabized Jewish communities in the Arab World. [Kazzaz 1991] [Usuki 1994a 1994b] Ben-Zvi, the second Israeli president and Orientalist, also categorizes the Jews in Arab world, among whom there had existed Arabized

Jews or *must'aravim*. [Ben Zvi 1957]

According to Hourani, the 'minorities' in the Arab world are categorized into the following three groups: [A] Sunni Moslems(*sic*), but not Arabic speaking, [B] Arabic speaking, but not Sunni Moslems(*sic*), [C] Neither Arabic-speaking nor Sunni Moslems. It is worth while to mention that he categorized Jews as group [B], namely, Arabic-speaking, but not Sunni Moslems(*sic*). It was in the first half of 1945 that Hourani completed his survey on minorities in the Arab world. This fact means that he wrote his book before the UN General Assembly resolution on the partition of Palestine in November 1947 and also before the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. That is why he considered Jews in the Arab world as "Arabic-speaking" according to their language even though he didn't use the term 'Arab Jews'. [Hourani 1947 pp. 1-2]

Now is the time for us to reinterpret a history of Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of the formation of so-called Arabs and Jews in the Mediterranean world in general and the Levant in special. As the conflict in Palestine completely collapsed into a confessional war between essentialized "Jews" and "Arabs", an appalling shade began to block the rays of light once clearly refracted through the Lavantine prism. [Alcalay 1993 p. 201]

In this context, new reality suddenly appeared in 1993. "Oslo Accords" were signed between Israel and PLO, which would have been expected to reach a final solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestine Question. The final status negotiations however reached a deadlock in Camp David in July, 2000 and the outburst of al-Aqsa Intifada in September 28, 2000. One of difficult agendas in the peace negotiations at Camp David was the Question of Jerusalem. More attention is paid in this essay to the right of returning home for the Palestinian refugees. An agenda of the Israeli compensation of Palestinian refugees for their loss in Palestine made a negotiation more complicated and difficult, because the Israeli side demanded that the Arab governments should compensate Jewish "refugees" from Arab countries for their properties in their ancient homelands. Why did the Palestinians and the Jews in the Arab countries leave their homeland? This is still an acute political problem between Israel and Arab countries. [Roumani 1978]

When we carefully look at discussions about Jewish emigrations from the Arab countries, we can easily find that it was not the secret activities of Zionist emissaries in the region that incited mass "exodus" of Jews from Arab countries. [Laskier 1992 1994]

What were the main reasons or causes of the "exodus"? Not only sporadic outbreaks of violence against the Jews but also the consolidation of "nation-state" system in the region after World War II contributed to Jewish willingness to emigrate. Furthermore, the enhancement of the Arab-Israeli conflict encouraged more emigrations to Israel.

Even though the Jews were willing to emigrate from their ancient homes, the Israeli government considered them to be "reluctant immigrants" in the 1950s and 1960s, since they never believed that Zionism was a just cause for them to immigrate to Israel. Therefore, I concentrate my effort of study not upon Jewish immigrations to Israel, but upon Jewish

emigrations from Arab countries. Notwithstanding that I dare to use here the term “exodus” which carries special connotation of religio-ideological justification of the Jewish emigration based upon the Bible’s description of Moses exodus to liberate the people of Israel from Pharaoh’s oppression in Egypt.

I consider the Zionist movement not as a liberation movement of the Jews in Europe, but as a Jewish nationalist-exclusivist movement in the Arab East in particular, in the Mediterranean world in general. In contrast to the Zionist movement, I should pay more attention to an assimilationist-like Jewish movement such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle, even though it was a French-oriented educational institution with a colonialist objective of “mission for civilization (mission civilisatrice)” of “backward Jewish brethren” in the Orient against the background of European hegemony over the Orient. Aron Rodrigue has conducted extensive studies on educational activities of the Alliance. I therefore have nothing new to be added on this topic. [Rodrigue 1993]

I will discuss the historical background of the Jews in the Arab countries, fixing my special regard on the Jewish communities in the Mediterranean basin. First of all, I will explain the cultural background of the awakening of Sephardi or Spanish Jews in the Mediterranean world before the emergence of the Zionist movement supported by Ashkenazi Jews alone. A special attention will be paid to some aspect of the educational activities and school network of the Alliance Israélite Universelle that was established in Paris in 1860. Secondly, I interpret Jewish emigrations to Israel after the establishment of Israel in 1948 laying on special emphasis on cases of Iraq, Egypt and Morocco. We can find some features of the emigration of the Jews from these three countries. Finally, I will just mention about the future of ethnic multiculturalism in Israel.

### *3. Assimilationist Cultural Background of Jews in the Mediterranean world: A Case of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*

Needless to say, the Jews in the Mediterranean world were different from one another from place to place and from time to time. The European colonization of the southern shores of the area was a determiner of the fate of indigenous people including the Jews. The most prominent case was the Jews of Algeria under the French rule. The Jews of Algeria become “Europeans”, that is, French, like protégés in the Levant. They were granted French nationalities in 1870 by the Crémieux Decree, which was named after Issac Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880), a most famous emancipated French Jew in the 19th century. Crémieux is one of the children born under liberated circumstances of the French revolution in which Jews were emancipated. He became Minister for justice twice in 1848, that is, during the 1848 revolution and in 1860. He was president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle from 1860 to his death. [Ansky 1950]

The Alliance was the first international Jewish organization for promotion of modern

Jewish cohesiveness in the Muslim world. According to the Alliance's manifesto, it stressed the need for solidarity on Jewish matters, and stated that the Alliance would "serve as a most important stimulus to Jewish regeneration." The aims of the Alliance are: (1) to work throughout the world for the emancipation and the moral progress of the Jews; (2) to help effectively all those who suffer because they are Jews; (3) to encourage all publications designed to promote these results. [Rodrigue 1993 p. 7]

The Alliance had a school network in the Orient on the other side of the Mediterranean. The important network of schools established by the Alliance made rapid progress with the help of large donations by Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-96, German Jewish financier and philanthropist) "to improve the position of the Jews in the Turkish Empire by instruction and education."

I briefly describe the activities of the Alliance in Morocco. The Alliance opened its first school in Tetouan in 1862 and in Tangiers (1869), followed by schools in five major cities (1873-1902). In 1912 almost 5,500 pupils attended 14 schools. As a result, by 1912 there were 71 Alliance schools for boys and 44 for girls all over the Levant, in Baghdad and Jerusalem, Tangier and Istanbul, Beirut and Cairo, Damascus and Salonika. The net result of this was to progressively link "the Jewry of the Mediterranean Islamic countries to the movement of European expansion, detaching it from the fate of the Arab peoples". [Alcalay 1993 p. 200]

At that time, the French administration began to take an interest in these activities and an agreement was concluded between the local government and the Alliance in 1928, whereby Alliance schools were placed under the strict control of the Public Education Department, and were also assured of effective material support. The network of the Alliance henceforth became an integral part of the social and educational activities conducted in the protectorate. The Alliance social relief activities combined with the educational movement to improve the living conditions of the pupils from the *mellah* (Jewish quarter in Maghreb).

In 1939, 45 schools in Morocco had 15,761 pupils. The support of the local authorities enabled the Alliance to continue its work even during World War II. It received a new impetus in 1945. From 14,000 pupils in 1945, the total rose to 28,000 in 1952, the increase in attendance being mainly in the large urban centers of Marrakesh, Fez, Rabat, and Casablanca. The Ecole Normale Hébraïque of Casablanca fulfilled the local need for Jewish teachers. The Alliance also increased its activities in the small communities, and a school was established for every Jewish community numbering 300 to 400 persons. In Casablanca, the Alliance also established a school for sufferers from trachoma, as well as an institute for the deaf and dumb, in collaboration with ORT (the Russian Association for Spreading Artisan and Agricultural Manual Work among the Jews) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. In Palestine, the Alliance agricultural school, "Mikveh Israel (Hope of Israel)" was opened by Charles Netter (1826-82) in 1870 even before the emergence of political Zionist movement; in 1882, an elementary school was opened in Jerusalem. Other schools

followed in the important towns. (Mostly cited from “The Alliance Israélite Universelle” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-Rom Edition, Jerusalem, 1997)

I emphasize here that the Alliance had ironically played an important role in the awakening of their modern Jewishness separating them from Arab neighbors through French educational system long before the emergence of the Zionist movement. But I want to characterize the Jewish awakening of the Alliance as Diaspora-oriented assimilationism, not Palestine-oriented separationism, that is, Zionism as Jewish nationalism. The Alliance educational network helped Jewish graduates from the Alliance schools in the Orient work together with the Zionists. Many of the graduates became involved in Zionist activities in the Orient despite of the Alliance’s strong antagonism against Zionists.

#### *4. Jewish Emigrations from Arab Countries: An Interpretation*

World War I was the watershed of the Zionist movement since the British mandate for Palestine began as a result of the de-fact occupation policy. The terms stipulated in the Balfour Declaration was implemented in the mandate system, according to which the establishment of “a Jewish national home for the Jews” was facilitated in order to encourage Jewish immigrations and settlements in Palestine. The ratio of Jewish immigrants was decided according to “economic absorptive capacity” in Palestine. Most of new Jewish immigrants came from all over the world in principle, but in reality only from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Only an exceptional immigration from the Orient was the Jewish immigration from Yemen during the two world wars and even before World War I. [Druyan 1981 1982] [Parfitt 1996] [Usuki 1993]

The destruction of European Jewry during World War II helped the international community to support sympathetically the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine. After the War the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Palestine gave way to the final resolution in the United Nations of the Partition Plan of Palestine in 1947, that is, the partition of British Palestine into two national states: an Arab state and a Jewish state. At the last moment of the British retreat from the mandate, Israel declared independence and Arab troops invaded Palestine in May 1948. After the Palestine War, no more existed on earth the land called Palestine, since Palestine was divided by the independent State of Israel, Gaza ruled by Egypt, and the West Bank annexed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Palestinian Arab refugees remained on the fringes of Israel and its bordering Arab states: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

A British observer commented that Israel only exchanged Arab Palestinian refugees in Palestine (its number between 850,000 and 950,000) for Jewish ‘refugees’ in the Arab countries (about one million in number) based upon their theory of “population exchange” called as “double exodus”. [Prittie et al n.d.] Therefore the balance of “payment” between Israel and Arab countries was kept almost equal in terms of population. This is Israeli moral and political

justification of the Jewish emigrations from the Arab countries, even though most of reluctant newcomers to Israel were neither Zionists nor political-motivated people.

Behind the justification lay Israeli presumption of Arab states' historically deep-rooted discriminations and even persecutions against the Jews. For example, looking carefully at Jewish emigration from Iraq during the years of 1950 and 1951, we could probably accept the Israeli justification of the "population exchange" theory in part. [Usuki 1994a 1994b]

The problem is, however, that the Israelis would stretch their justification to other cases such as the Jews of Egypt, Morocco and other countries. Moreover, they also justified their claim that even the Jews lived no less miserable life under Muslim rules in the Arab Muslim world than under Christian rules in medieval Europe. Consequently the general description of the Jews in the Arab Muslim world blurred boundaries between myth and reality in history under the fogs of political propaganda during political and military confrontations between Israel and the Arab states from the 1960s to the 1980s. [Cohen et al 1989]

According to Israeli official statistics, new Jewish immigrants to Israel are categorized into two groups coming from a continent where they lived before immigration: one category is the Jews from Europe and Americas and the other is the Jews from Asia and Africa. In contrast, a popular usage of the terms in Israel is the following: While the Jews from Europe and America are called *Asheknazim* (lit. German Jews), the Jews from Asia and Africa are named *Sephardim* (lit. Spanish Jews). More rigidly or from the viewpoint of religious administration in Israel, by the term *Sephardim* is meant a group of the Jews under the religious judicatory authority of the Sephardi supreme rabbinate whose top is the Sephardi Chief Rabbi on the one hand, and by the term *Ashkenazim* is meant the Jews under the Ashkenazi supreme rabbinate whose head is the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi on the other. [Schiff 1977 pp. 152-169]

As for the Jews from Arab countries, which category are they belonging to, *Asheknazim* or *Sephardim*? Of course, it is natural that *Sephardim* should contain the Jews of the Arab countries from a religious point of view, because they are under the religious jurisdiction of Sephardic rabbinate, that is, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi. But there had been Jewish communities that are not categorized as *Sephardim*; for example, Berber-speaking Jews in the Atlas Mountains are not *Sephardim*. While Berber-speaking Jews had been called *Toshavim* ("Those who settled down", in Hebrew), *Sephardim* had been called *Megorashim* ("Those who were deported", in Hebrew) in the Maghreb countries. Therefore, it is difficult for us to call those Jews who emigrated from Arab countries to Israel as *Sephardim* from a socio-historical standpoint. In present Israeli society, the Jews from Asian and African countries are customarily called *Mizrahim*, by which is meant Oriental Jews or *Edot ha-Mizrah* (Oriental communities). Some researchers prefer to call Oriental Jews distinguished from *Sephardim* as "the Jews of Islam" in historical studies or more recently "the Middle Eastern Jews" in sociology or anthropology, because they want to overcome unequal dichotomy between West/East or Occident/Orient. [Lewis 1984] [Goldberg 1996]



As contrasted with the grouping of Ashkenazim, Sephardim and Mizrahim, the terms such as the Jews of Iraq, Egypt, or Morocco and so on are more current in Israeli society, since the subcategory of original continent where Jews lived before immigrating to Israel is relied upon their original country. After World War I, the Arab world is divided into sovereign states as heirs of British and French colonialism. How did the Jews in the Arab world depend on the colonial powers that ruled their “host countries” where the Jews had lived in diaspora.

I cannot discuss in detail here what the Arab nation is, but if we define Arab as those who speak Arabic and inherited their shared cultures based upon Arabic, why is it impossible to describe the Jews from Arab countries as “Arab Jews” in Israel as mentioned above? There are the same terms as “Arab Jews” in other languages: for example, *Yahūd al-‘Arab* in Arabic or *les Juifs arabes* in French.

I have so far discussed the terminology of the Jews from Arab countries. I want to describe discord in Zion from within in relations to their identity formation. Most serious debates have often burst out since the establishment of Israel: that is “Who is a Jew?” question. [Giladi 1990]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than a million Russian Jews flew into Israel. Some Israeli high officials frankly admitted that almost half of new immigrants were not Jews! New Russian immigrants have posed serious questions for Israeli society: they don’t want to be assimilated into the Israeli society; they don’t learn Hebrew but cling to Russian language and culture; they don’t prefer Mediterranean cuisine, but Russian cuisine in Israel.

Some sociologists however suggest that the new Russian immigrants are a litmus paper for ‘normalization’ of the Israeli Jewish society. Most of Jewish Israelis considered Israel to be the ‘special’ state granted by God, but they have to accept secular non-Zionist, even non-Jewish, Russians as a reality.

### 5. *Future of Multiculturalism in Israel*

Here we define “multiculturalism” as a catchall term that refers generally to the project of making education more inclusive of the perspective of women, minorities, indigenous people, and non-dominant multiple cultures in recognition of the increasingly diverse character of life in a particular society of the single modern nation-state. We should distinguish between multicultural ‘project’ and multicultural ‘fact’. [Willet 1998]

How is the definition applicable in Israeli society?

Concerning the multicultural ‘fact’, the Israeli society can be regarded to be de-fact multicultural, comprising conflicting or opposing social groups on three levels: the first is Ashkenazi/Sephardi or European/Oriental division on the ethnic level. The second is hiloni/dati or secular/religious division on the religious level. The third is Jewish/Arab division on the national level, according to my definition of multiple divisions of contemporary Israeli society. [Cohen 1995]

As for the multicultural 'project', we cannot say that it would be easy for Israel to achieve. The ethnic, religious and national divisions of the Israeli society are hard to be conciliated within the framework of the "Jewish state". A new ultraorthodox religious political party however came out in Israeli political scene in the middle of the 1980s: Shas party. The Shas is a Hebrew acronym of the Sephardi Guardians of Tora. The Shas Party is a parliamentary representative of religious and ethnic groups in Israeli society: Ultraorthodox Oriental Jews. The Shas party bridges ethnic and religious divisions of the Israeli society.

As for ethnic division among Israeli Jews, there emerged an Iraqi Jewish woman intellectual living in the United States who engaged in a kind of dialogue with the Palestinians as a Jewish victim of Zionism, as an Arab Jew or as an Oriental. [Shohat 1988 1989]

Concerning national division in Israeli society, since Israel has developed her 'internal colonialism' against indigenous Palestinians living in Israel [Zureik 1979], Israel has to confront her 'original sin' as a colonizer. [Beit-Hallahmi 1992]

Politically speaking, Israel stands on a double standard in terms of principle as a nation-state. The State of Israel is defined as the Jewish state as well as a democratic state according to the Declaration of the State of Israel, which is almost equal to the Constitution. However, how can an Arab citizen with Israeli nationality enjoy his or her own national right as a part of the Arab nation, if Israel remains the Jewish state? The answer is perhaps negative. But they could become a part of the Israeli Nation if Israel abandons Zionist ideal in the future. [Evron 1995] Otherwise they continue to be a national minority or *mi'ut* within an ethnic Jewish Israel. [Rouhana 1997] Is it possible for Israeli-Arab citizens (or Palestinian citizens) to change the Declaration through free elections to the advantage of the Arab nation or Palestinian nationalism, if Israel is a democratic state in an ordinary sense? The answer is perhaps "No" for most of Jewish citizens of Israel. [Sa'di 1992]

New attempts to reconstruct psychologically essentialized borders of Palestine/Israel have been made in order to recover mutual understanding of the two peoples. [Boyarin 1996]

Also new Israeli historians try to rewrite histories of Palestine by way of accepting the Palestinians as 'Others'. [Pappé 1999] [Peleg 1994] [Kimmerling et al 1993]

In conclusion, multicultural 'project' cannot find out its own place in the Israeli society in terms of the coexistence of multiple cultures and the existence of mutual impacting cultures in the single nation-state in the near future.

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