

# Zionist or Refugees: The Historical Aspect of the Uprooting of the Jews from Arab Countries and Their Immigration to Israel

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At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, there were approximately one million Jews living in Muslim countries. About half resided in North Africa: Morocco (250,000), Algeria (130,000), Tunisia (85,000) and Libya (40,000), and the other half in the Middle East: Iraq (135,000), Yemen and Aden (50,000), Syria and Lebanon (30,000), Iran (90,000) and Turkey (80,000).<sup>1</sup> Each of these communities was unique, with its own history and characteristics, but in each case the host country was Islamic and all were influenced by Islamic culture and the Muslim attitude towards Jews.<sup>2</sup> Within a twenty-year period, three quarters of these Jews had left their native lands. Today, very few remain, with the main concentrations found in Iran (17,000) and Turkey (17,000).

This phenomenon of uprooting is unique, because the Jewish communities had resided in these lands for hundreds of years or more, with the oldest communities establishing themselves in Iraq and Egypt during the first Exile (following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.). In addition, the process of uprooting was both very rapid and carried a very heavy cost, as the Jews left behind extensive material property. Even the resettlement process exacted a steep social and cultural price as most of these Jews reached Israel when it was still a brand-new, poor country. This was especially true during the first three years of the state's existence, a period in which some 350,000 Jewish immigrants arrived from the Middle East and North Africa.

The various agencies participating in the Jewish exodus explained it in a variety of ways. In the Arab countries, they claimed that despite hundreds of years of harmonious Jewish/Muslim existence, Zionism had disturbed these good relations, causing the Jewish mass emigration.<sup>3</sup> However, most of the Jews in the Arab countries were not party to the Zionist, nationalist vision and, moreover, were not responsible for it so that forcing them to leave was unjust. In response to this dilemma, another explanation was offered, according to which the State of Israel had initiated provocations, including even terrorist acts,<sup>4</sup> along with false, fear-inspiring propaganda, to

motivate the Jews to leave.

The State of Israel explained the phenomenon of the mass emigration from Muslim countries as being the result of the worsening conditions of the Jews in those lands, caused by a combination of antisemitism, leading to political and economic persecution, and ideological, religious and even messianic incentives. According to this viewpoint, the Jews from the Muslim countries had identified the establishment of the State of Israel with the predicted "end of days" and the beginning of the messianic period, and therefore hastened to emigrate to the Holy Land. Moreover, Israel called all the immigrants *Olim* (i.e., pilgrims ascending to Zion), since they were returning to the "Promised Land", granted them full citizen's rights from the moment they set foot on the Land of Israel, and refused to see them as refugees. This attitude exceeded mere nomenclature: *olim* rather than "refugees", "*olim* camps" or "transit-camps" rather than "refugee camps". From the Zionist perspective, no Jew could be a refugee in his/her ancient/new Homeland.

During their initial period in Israel, these immigrants from Muslim countries were too weak to provide Israeli society with a narrative reflecting their experience of being uprooted. Their weakness also dictated their adoption of the Zionist approach, especially since it gave them the advantage of presenting themselves not as persons who

1. OPEN AND SECRET: MASS IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL FROM MUSLIM LANDS (1948-1967) 13 (Haim Saadoun ed., 1999).
2. For more on the history of the Jews in Islamic countries see Norman A. Stillman, *THE JEWS OF ARAB LANDS: A HISTORY AND A SOURCE BOOK*. Philadelphia: 108 (1979); Martin Gilbert, *IN ISHMAEL'S HOUSE: A HISTORY OF JEWS IN MUSLIM LANDS* (2010).
3. Abbas Shibliak, *THE LURE OF ZION: THE CASE OF IRAQI JEWS*. LONDON: 119 (1986).
4. Shibliak's claim was raised primarily in the case of Iraq. For more see Ella Shohat, *Mizrahim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims*, SOCIAL TEXTS 1-35 (1988).

had been forced to migrate to Israel, but rather as ones who had chosen to come. Their portrayal as ideological immigrants strengthened their claims to receive rights promised to them by the State of Israel that had not always been implemented. Additionally, at that time, issues concerning their property and rights were not on the agenda in Israel or the world so that no practical advantage was to be gained in presenting these *olim* as refugees.<sup>5</sup>

The situation of the Jews who emigrated to Western countries was different. During the 1950s, voices could already be heard speaking about having been forced to leave and some even said that they had been expelled. This claim was raised primarily by Egyptian Jews, who had been expelled en masse following the 1956 Suez Crisis (Sinai War) and following the 1967 Six-Day War, as well as by the Jews of Iraq, who fled their country at the start of the 1970s, after severe persecution, peaking in 1969 with the hanging of 11 Jews accused of espionage on behalf of the State of Israel and the murder of dozens of others.<sup>6</sup>

But it was only in the 1970s that a group of "Eastern" representatives began to coalesce around the growing recognition that by having relinquished the title of "refugees" they had also relinquished all the accompanying refugee rights having to do with private and community property and assets and various social rights that they had accumulated prior to their exodus. These delegates established WOJAC (the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries), which claimed that the Jews had been forced to leave the Muslim countries under duress, due to political and economic persecution—that they were expelled.<sup>7</sup> This claim paints the Jews from the Muslim countries as victims of the Jewish-Arab conflict, like the Palestinian refugees, since they too had been forced to leave their native land, lose all their property, give up their culture, language, unique values, etc., and come to live in harsh conditions in the State of Israel. As such, alongside the Palestinian *nakbah* (the catastrophe), there was also a "Jewish *nakbah*".<sup>8</sup>

This new position, together with fresh research based on archival materials recently opened to the public, justifies a renewed investigation into the historical background and causes of the Jewish exodus from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. These studies paint a new picture, and though the causes for leaving were different in respect of each country, it is possible to point to a number of common tendencies related to Arab nationalism, colonialism and the Jewish-Arab conflict in the Land of Israel.

The rise of the nationalist movements in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa during the twentieth century was central to fashioning the fate of those regions

and of the Jews, especially since most of these movements did not accept Jews as members, either because of the movements' Islamic nature or because of conflicts of interest relating to colonialism and the dispute over the Land of Israel.<sup>9</sup> The apprehension of the Jews regarding the establishment of independent, nationalist regimes in their native lands increased their desire to cooperate with British, French and Italian colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa. These ties gave them certain advantages by way of legal status and socio-economic standing and, in parallel, led them, to a certain extent, to adopt the cultures of their colonial rulers. However, the struggle that ensued between local nationalism and pan-Arabism, on the one hand, and colonialism, on the other hand, placed the Jews on the side of the despised rulers, and labeled them as collaborators and traitors.

With the onset of the de-colonialization process, the Jews found themselves in a difficult dilemma—should they stay in an independent Arab country, where they might actually lose the rights they had gained (as did happen later on, not only to the Jews, but also to the Copts, the Kurds and others)<sup>10</sup> or, worse still—where they

5. Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Iraqi Jews in Israel: From 'Refugees' to 'Zionist' and Back Again* in POPULATION RESETTLEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS 115-134 (Arie Kacowicz and Pavel Lutomski eds., 2007).
6. Nissim Kazzaz, *THE END OF AN EXILE: THE JEWS IN IRAQ AFTER THE MASS IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL, 1951-2000*: 123 (2002) [Hebrew]; Joel Beinun, *THE DISPERSION OF EGYPTIAN JEWRY: CULTURE, POLITICS AND THE FORMATION OF A MODERN DIASPORA*: 85 (1998).
7. For more on WOJAC see [www.forgotten-million.co.il/wojac.html](http://www.forgotten-million.co.il/wojac.html) (last visited December 10, 2012) and Yehuda Shenhav, *Ethnicity and National Memory: The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) in the Context of the Palestinian National Struggle*, 29(1) BRITISH JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES 27-56 (2002).
8. Ben-Dror Yemini, *The Jewish Nakbah: Expulsion, Massacre and Forced Conversion*, MAARIV (May 16, 2009) [Hebrew].
9. On the problem of minorities in Muslim lands see Maurice M. Roumani, *The Silent Refugees: Jews from Arab Countries*, 14(3) MEDITERRANEAN QUARTERLY 41-77 (2003); Daniel J. Schroeter and Joseph Chetrit, *Emancipation and Its Discontents: Jews at the Formative Period of Colonial Rule in Morocco*, 13(1) JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES 170-206 (2006).
10. On the problem of minorities in the Middle East see Ofra Benjo, *Minorities in Arab Political Discourse*, in MINORITIES, STRANGERS AND OTHERS 51-63 (Shulamit Volkov ed., 2000) [Hebrew].

might suffer pogroms and massacres (as happened to the Armenians in Turkey during World War One, to the Assyrians in Iraq in 1933, to the Kurds in Iraq and to the Christians in Lebanon)? Or, should they migrate to other countries? Added into this local conflict were the ramifications of yet another conflict—the Jewish-Arab battle over the Land of Israel. As this conflict grew worse, so did the impact on the Jews in the Muslim countries. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 marked the watershed in this process.

Preceding the decision regarding the partition of the Land of Israel, representatives of Arab countries warned of imminent, violent attacks that might befall the Jews, asserting that they might be slaughtered in the Arab lands in response to the establishment of a Jewish state.<sup>11</sup> There had been some incidents of pogroms as early as the 1940s; in May 1941, Jewish shops in Basra, Iraq were robbed and, in the beginning of June, the citizens of Baghdad attacked, injured and murdered their Jewish neighbors, stealing much of their property.<sup>12</sup> Another pogrom occurred in 1945, this time against the Jews of Tripoli, Libya.<sup>13</sup> The U.N. decision regarding the partition of the Land of Israel and the establishment of a Jewish state brought in its wake a wave of attacks. At the start of December 1947, there were pogroms in Aden, during which about 80 Jews were murdered, 120 injured and homes and shops ransacked and burnt. The damage was so extensive that the community could not be rehabilitated.<sup>14</sup> Also in Halab (Aleppo), Syria there were outbreaks of violence that caused great damage to Jewish homes, stores, offices and public facilities. Violent incidents in Damascus, and other places in Syria during 1948 caused the deaths of dozens of Jews.<sup>15</sup> The same happened in Egypt and in Oujda and Jrada, Morocco<sup>16</sup> and in Tripoli, Libya, where the Jews came under attack once again. In 1948, the popular, violent pogroms were accompanied by state sanctioned persecution in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The persecution included arrests, blackmail, mass layoffs and the revocation of exit permits.

With the conclusion of the battles and the end of Israel's War of Independence, the exodus of the Jews from the Muslim countries began and three Jewish communities—those of Libya, Yemen and Iraq—arrived in Israel almost in their entirety. Thousands of Jews also arrived from Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Morocco and Tunisia. The immigration from these countries spanned almost twenty years.

Despite the existence of new research, there are still topics that require more investigation: a) the nature of the colonial powers - Great Britain and France's contribution to the uprooting of the Jews is not clear, albeit all three communities that relocated en masse were tied to British colonialism. It is not clear whether there

was an overall British policy in regard to the Jewish exodus; b) the existing studies barely deal with the local Jewish aspect of this phenomenon. It is not clear how the Jews organized their departure. What were the stages of their emigration process? What became of the private and community property of the emigrants? Many of these Jews passed through various transit-camps located in Aden, Iran, France, Italy and elsewhere and very little is known about this.

This article focuses on two communities - those of Yemen and Iraq - whose stories of being uprooted have been well researched.

### The migration of the Yemenite Jews to Israel

Yemenite Jewry was the first community to come, almost in its entirety, to Israel. In 1948, there were 40,000 Jews in Yemen, living under a *dhimmi* status, subject to segregation and humiliation. In the twentieth century, Yemen was a poor country, isolated and shut off, fending off outside influences and especially barring contact with modern influences. The likelihood of a meager subsistence in such a country and news of better living conditions in the Land of Israel, coupled with the ideology of returning to the biblical homeland, motivated the ongoing process of Yemenite-Jewish migration, which began in 1881 and did not stop following the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel was virtually the only option for Yemenite Jewry.

Between December 1948 and March 1949, Israel airlifted almost 10,000 Jews out of Aden. Most were Yemenite refugees, though some were actually Jews from Aden.

11. See Yaakov Meron, *The Expulsion of the Jews from the Arab Countries: The Palestinian's Attitude towards It and Their Claims*, MEDINAH, MEMSHALAH VE-YAHASIM BENLEUMIYIM 28 (1992) [Hebrew].
12. See Esther Meir-Glitzstein, *The Farhud* in HOLOCAUST ENCYCLOPEDIA available at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org) (last visited December 10, 2012).
13. See Yaakov Hajjaj-Liluf, RIOTS IN LIBYA (1945, 1948, 1967): BACKGROUND, COURSE, RESULTS AND RESPONSES, available at [www.livluv.org.il](http://www.livluv.org.il) [Hebrew]. (last visited December 10, 2012).
14. Reuben Ahroni, THE JEWS OF THE BRITISH CROWN COLONY OF ADEN: HISTORY, CULTURE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS: 209 (E.J. Brill ed., 1994).
15. Michael Lasker, *In the Shadow of the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Arab Nationalism: The Muslim-Jewish in Syria, 1948-1970*, PAAMIM 66, 77 (1996) [Hebrew].
16. Yaron Tsui, A TORN COMMUNITY: THE JEWS OF MOROCCO AND NATIONALISM (2002) [Hebrew].

Shortly thereafter, a mass Jewish exodus from Yemen began. In April 1949, the Yemenite Imam, Ahmad, granted the Jews permission to leave, on condition that they sell all their property. The British authorities in Aden were ready to allow them passage via Aden. In light of this, an agreement was reached between the State of Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the British rulers in Aden, with the cooperation of the Imam, to set in motion a plan to transfer the Jews.

The Yemenite Jews descended rapidly to the South. They came most of the way on foot or on donkeys. Only towards the end of the trek, in the regions of Sana'a and Taizz, were they placed in vehicles.

It is commonly, though erroneously, accepted that the Yemenite Jews were mostly rural and poor, in fact, however, they owned quite a bit of property, including lands, homes, agricultural assets and money. They sold all their property to their Muslim neighbors or to representatives of the Imam for ridiculously low prices, or, in some cases, simply abandoned their property and left. While en route to the southern border, they were obliged to pay various *laissez-passer* fees and travel taxes, not to mention the outrageous prices they paid for carfare to the border. In addition, there were many incidents of muggings and property theft on route. They reached Aden completely impoverished.

News of the Jews streaming towards Aden began to reach the organizers of the immigration in Aden and Israel during the months of June and July, 1949. The British in Aden demanded that Israel accept 20,000 immigrants within two months, although, a short time earlier, they had talked about a gradual process over the course of two years. At that time, Israel was dealing with difficult immigrant absorption problems, thus causing the British demand to become the source of a stormy argument in the Jewish Agency leadership. However, Israel was obliged to absorb all the immigrants immediately, regardless of their age and state of health. No doubt, this was a very bold decision, one not typical of absorbing countries. Nonetheless, any refusal to accept Jews would have been in direct contradiction to the Israeli ethos and the basic interests of the State of Israel, not to mention that it would have put an end to the window of opportunity to bring over this Jewish population, perceived as being a positive one and one likely to successfully integrate into the productive workforce in the State of Israel. Moreover, under the circumstances, with the Jews amassing at the southern borders of Yemen, rejection by Israel might have ended in catastrophe.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, the catastrophe was not prevented. The airlift that the JDC had undertaken to supply did not work. In September 1949, thousands of Jews from Yemen were

crowded into a transit camp ("Hashed") near Aden, which was unprepared to receive them. There were not enough buildings to house the people; there was insufficient staff and only a scant medical team; there was also a shortage of medicine, food and even water. As a consequence, over a period of a few months, some 30,000 immigrants reached Israel, most of whom were in terrible health, suffering from hunger, exhaustion and illness, including malaria and tropical ulcers. The children and babies suffered from digestive tract infections and dehydration.

Many people paid with their lives during that journey. It is known that many died en route in Yemen, although there is no comprehensive data on the extent of mortality and no testimonies have been collected. However, there is data regarding the hundreds of emigrants who died in the transit camp in Aden and the hundreds more who died of starvation or disease near the Yemenite border, after the British forbade their departure for more than a month, as well as regarding many more who were already mortally ill when they arrived at the tent camps in Israel.

Thus, it seems that the uprooting of the Jews from Yemen cost them not only their homes and native land, not only their property and assets, but also the lives of hundreds of their kinfolk. There is no doubt that the Israeli government and the JDC were responsible for this situation, because they were not properly prepared for it, but one must bear in mind that all these harsh events occurred on lands under the dominion of the Imam Ahmad, who, according to the Quran, was obliged to protect the Jews as long as they remained within his realm, and within the British Protectorate of Aden, which displayed apathy towards the fate of the Jewish refugees and did nothing to help them.

In the light of this awful situation, David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first Prime Minister), made a bold decision—to evacuate the transit camp in Aden immediately and bring everyone in it to Israel, including those who were critically ill. In his speech before the Israeli Parliament on November 21, 1949 he explained:

We must first do everything we can, the possible and the impossible, to bring them here, to this State of Israel. Let them not wander about in camps in Aden or on the roads of Yemen. Even if some of them are

17. For detailed, corroborated research see Tudor Parfitt, *THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION: THE JEWS OF YEMEN, 1900-1950* (E.J. Brill ed., 1996).

destined to die, it is better that they die here, in our Land, among their brethren, and not in that foreign place.<sup>18</sup>

The Jews of Yemen were the only ones in the mass of immigration of the 1950s who traded all their wealth, property, health and even life itself to come to the Holy Land.<sup>19</sup> However, this huge sacrifice was never really recognized; it is not engraved on the collective Israeli memory and is even absent from the formal memorials of the State of Israel.

### The migration of the Iraqi Jews to Israel

In 1948, approximately 135,000 Jews lived in Iraq, constituting three percent of the country's total population. Most of them lived in the major cities, with 90,000 in the capital, Baghdad, where they accounted for about a fifth of the population. After the establishment of the Iraqi state under a British mandate in 1921, the Jews were given citizenship with equal rights. Modernization and westernization in the Jewish community sped up, Jews were accepted into the civil service, their economic status improved and their educational system was expanded.

In the 1930s, after Iraq gained its independence, the status of the Jews began to deteriorate. This was manifested by waves of dismissals from the civil service, restrictions being placed on Jewish commerce and banking, and finally, in June 1941, the *farhud* (pogrom) broke out in Baghdad. On May 15, 1948, Iraq sent troops to fight against Israel. It suspended civil law, instituted emergency laws and concurrently launched an official, organized campaign of persecution against the Jews in Iraq. In mid-July 1948, the Iraqi Parliament declared Zionism a crime punishable by between seven years in prison and death. The Jews' freedom of movement was restricted, wealthy members of the community were fined heavily, thousands of Jews lost their jobs and hundreds of Jews were jailed. In September 1948, Shafiq Ades, an Iraqi-Jewish millionaire who had allegedly sold surplus military equipment to Israel, was executed. The incident was a severe shock to the sense of security of Iraqi Jewry. The Iraqi Jews were collectively portrayed as Zionists.

In late 1949, the emergency regime in Iraq was lifted and thousands of Jews fled to Iran. This illegal emigration created economic turmoil and aggravated the anti-Jewish atmosphere in Iraq. By March 1950, the Iraqi government had passed a law permitting Jews to emigrate, but it said nothing about their property. Was this law meant to expel the Jews from Iraq? According to legal scholar, Carole Basri, the persecution, harassment, confiscations and expropriations, all of which were carried out under cover of legislation, make it clear that the Jews suffered from

ethnic cleansing in the Arab world.<sup>20</sup> The Iraqi government explained it differently, saying that: "It has been found advisable not to prevent those wishing to do so from leaving Iraq for good, forfeiting their Iraqi nationality."<sup>21</sup>

Israeli and British archival documents indicate that the Iraqi government was trying to get rid of a few thousand young people who were perceived as troublemakers. But the registration for emigration exceeded all expectations. Within a month, some 47,000 Jews had signed up to leave and, eventually, the number reached 104,000. A few thousand more reached Israel via Iran. Altogether, the vast majority of the community left.

How can we explain this massive emigration? Why did Iraqi Jewry leave en masse? The British archival documents point to a snowball effect set in motion by inept Iraqi government policy regarding Jewish emigration and botched implementation of this policy. These factors exacerbated the economic crisis in Iraq, thus intensifying agitation against the Jews and further undermining the Jews' sense of security, leading a growing number of Jews to want to leave the country. The middle and upper classes—importers, exporters, commercial agents, and retailers—were particularly active in this process.

From then on, the security and economic situation of the Jews in Iraq deteriorated rapidly.

By the end of 1950, Iraq was trying to send off everyone who had registered to emigrate, immediately and at almost any price.

A new stage in the deterioration of the situation of Iraqi Jewry began on January 14, 1951, when a grenade was thrown near the emigration registration center located in the Mas'udah Shemtov Synagogue in Baghdad, killing three people and wounding about 20. This, combined with British and American pressure, prompted Israel to launch an emergency rescue operation for Iraqi Jewry. On March 10, 1951, the Iraqi Parliament blocked the assets of Jews who had given up their citizenship. This new law

18. RECORDS OF THE KNESSET 3, 1 (November 7, 1949) [Hebrew].

19. For specific consideration of the heavy cost exacted during the Yemenite immigration, in lives and property, see Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *THE EXODUS OF THE YEMENITE JEWS: A FAILED OPERATION AND A FORMATIVE MYTH*: (FORTHCOMING 2012).

20. Carole Basri, *THE JEWS OF IRAQ: A FORGOTTEN CASE OF ETHNIC CLEANSING: POLICY STUDY NO. 26:5* (2003).

21. Words spoken by the Iraqi Minister of the Interior, Saleh Jabr in the Iraqi Parliament in Shiblak, *THE LURE OF ZION*, 133.

caused extreme dismay, because the emigrants had entrusted their assets to relatives and friends, assuming they would be able to sell them off gradually. As a consequence, these people arrived in Israel as persecuted, destitute deportees.

The Denaturalization Law was not intrinsically a "deportation", but some of its components were quite problematic:

1. The immigrants received *laissez-passer* documents rather than passports, which meant that they could not go anywhere other than Israel and could never return to Iraq.

2. Those who changed their minds after registering and wanted to stay in Iraq were forced to leave anyway.

3. The Iraqi government nationalized all Jewish property after a year had passed.

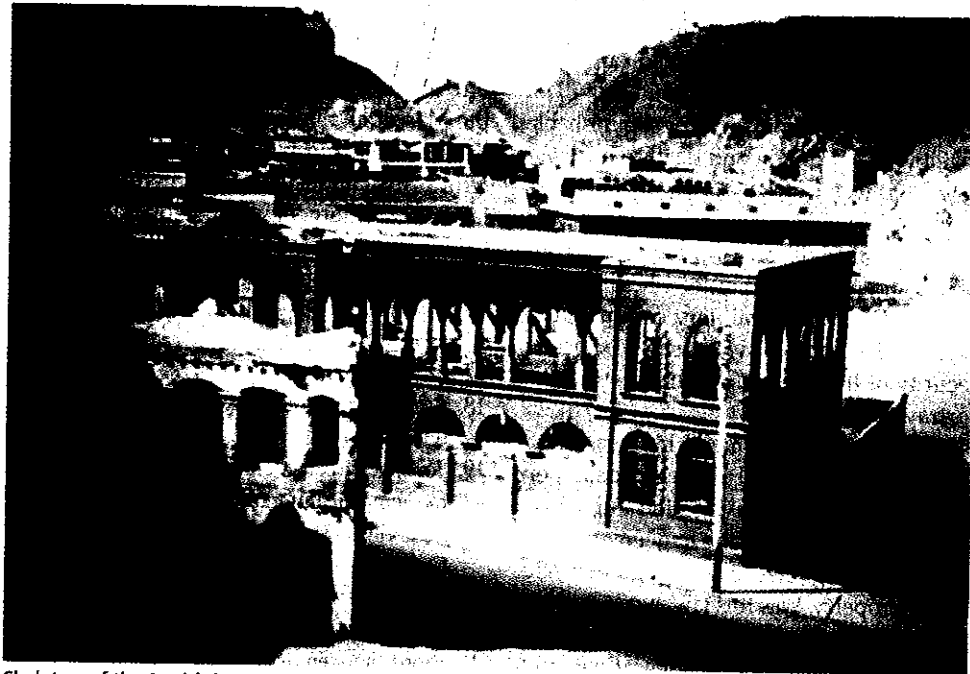
4. Formally, the Iraqi Jews were not "refugees", but in the end they found themselves destitute, living in temporary tent camps in a strange land, without their property and without the option of returning to their native land.

In summary, this short article considers the stories of the uprooting of approximately 340,000 Jews from Muslim countries during the first years of the State of Israel. Their stories reveal a complex reality integrating local, regional and global processes that fashioned the fates of the Jewish communities of the Middle East. Struggles set against the background of nationalism and anti-colonialism unsettled the status of the Jews in these countries, while the Israeli

War of Independence, the establishment of the State of Israel and the ongoing conflict made the lives of the Jews in those countries very dangerous. At the same time, these historic changes also provided the Jews with a new option—to migrate to Israel. As part of this process, the Jews in the Arab countries were obliged to relinquish their native lands, their assets, their property, their economic rights and even their most important cultural assets. In the case of Yemen, many even lost their lives. During this mass exodus, the Jews from the Arab countries became impoverished refugees. From this point on, a long process of rehabilitation began in the State of Israel or in other diasporic, immigrant countries. Even though the State of Israel rushed to grant them full citizenship upon their arrival and they were never considered to be refugees - in light of their socio-economic condition and self-perception, there is no doubt that they were, indeed, refugees. ■

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*Her new book, about the mass immigration of Yemenite Jews to Israel, "A Failed Operation and a Formative Myth: Yemen Exodus 1949", will be published in February 2012.*



Skeleton of the Jewish boy's school in Aden, following the pogrom of December 3, 1947.  
From Leon Betensky collection.  
Courtesy of Aya Betensky