



# PERSPECTIVES

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## **Victimized Again: The Jews of Arab States and the June 1967 War**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Much has been written about the historical marginalization of the 900,000 Jews expelled from Arab states in the wake of the 1948 War. Few know that the June 1967 War played a similar role in accelerating the final demise of these historic communities. It is high time the international community rectified this longstanding injustice by ensuring that these refugees are fully compensated for their suffering and stolen property.

Fifty years after the June 1967 War, the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem released scores of classified files related to this historic event. While most deal with the war and the events that led to its outbreak, some address the predicament of the Jewish communities in the Arab states during and after the war. The picture that emerges is one of pogroms and persecution, at times orchestrated by the government, at times through spontaneous eruptions that occurred with the tacit support of the authorities.

This maltreatment occurred in almost all Arab states, though the level of violence differed. In Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon, for example, the authorities protected the Jews from the rampaging mobs, while in Syria and Yemen, there were isolated attacks on Jews. The most severe persecutions occurred in Libya, Egypt, and Iraq. Israel refrained from any direct public action so as not to give credence to the depiction of these Jewish communities as fifth columns serving the Jewish state's interests. Covertly, however, through its Washington, London, Paris, Rome, Geneva, Brussels, Ankara, and Lisbon embassies, the Israeli Foreign Ministry acted on behalf of these communities.

The American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the UN, and Jewish communities in the West were also enlisted to help out with protest gatherings and media publicity about the Jewish predicament in the Arab states. According to the

documents, the Arab regimes tried to conceal the Jews' persecution from foreign eyes, to deny any governmental involvement in the violent acts that were exposed, and to impose strict censorship so as to ensure that such acts were not publicized.

## **Egypt**

Before the June 1967 War, some 6,000 Jews still lived in Egypt. On the first day of the war, when it transpired that the Egyptian air force and most of the airfields had been destroyed, President Nasser ordered the arrest of 600 Jewish men aged 16 to 70 in Cairo and Alexandria, among them the Alexandria chief rabbi, Haim Douek. The detainees were severely abused. They were beaten regularly and denied food and drink, especially in the initial days of their detention.

All detainees, it should be noted, were law-abiding citizens who were not involved in any illegal activity. They were sent to a number of prisons, including the notorious Abu Zabel, where they suffered three years of ongoing abuse that left post-traumatic impact on some of them to this day. They were released through the intervention of a number of countries, notably Spain, Italy, and France, on condition that they leave Egypt directly from prison, having been warned that harm would be visited upon their Egyptian family members were they to speak about their sufferings in prison. Ovadia Yerushalmi, a native of Cairo who was among the Jewish detainees and is now a pensioner living in Israel, recently published a book (in Hebrew) entitled *The Long Five Minutes*. In it he revealed for the first time, after 50 years of silence, the story of the Jews of Egypt from 1967 to 1970 within the prison walls and amid arrests and persecution.

## **Iraq**

In June 1967, Iraq's Jewish community numbered some 3,000, most of them in Baghdad and Basra. Immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities, about 70 Jews were arrested. They were released many months later after their families paid hefty bribes to the authorities and senior officials.

Along with the arrests, the authorities instilled fear and anxiety in the Jewish community. Jews were forbidden to sell their property or engage in commerce. Their residential telephones were disconnected, and their freedom of movement in Baghdad was curtailed. Many Jews locked themselves in their homes for fear of violent attacks à la the June 1941 Farhoud, in which hundreds of Jews were massacred by their rampaging Arab neighbors who also looted and destroyed their properties. As a result of the 1967 persecution, many of the remaining Iraqi Jews emigrated to Israel.

## **Libya**

There were about 4,000 Jews in Libya at the time of the war. In June 1967, violent anti-Jewish demonstrations were held in Tripoli and Benghazi, leaving 18 dead and dozens

wounded. Jewish stores were looted and burned, as were synagogues and residences. Numerous families locked themselves in their homes until their food began to run out.

The newly released files show that the pogroms were carried out on orders from the government, which wanted to put an end to the Jewish presence in Libya. The government accused the community of treason and supporting the "Zionist entity." Many Jews were threatened by telephone and about 100 Jews were put in detention camps, supposedly to ensure their safety.

Fortunately for the community, the Italian government was enlisted to help with its rescue. Most of its members fled to Italy by air with only a suitcase and a small amount of cash. Despite its covert promise to the Libyan authorities, the Italian government asked Jerusalem to help with the absorption of these refugees, and indeed many of them came to live in Israel. Their arrival was hushed up by the censors so as not to jeopardize the remaining Jews' departure from Libya. Ultimately only 100 Jews were left in the country, and they emigrated in the subsequent years. All Jewish properties in Libya were confiscated and are yet to be returned to their rightful owners.

## **Epilogue**

The 1967 War led to the emigration of thousands of Jews from Arab states as a result of persecution, imprisonment, murderous attacks, cancellation of citizenship, expulsion, and expropriation of property. A small number left out of admiration for Israel's astounding victory.

Sadly, as in 1948, the suffering and distress of the Jewish refugees of 1967 has not received its due attention, either in Israel or in the world at large. Moreover, the looted property of these refugees has become part and parcel of the ongoing saga of the 1948 Arab plunder of Jewish property, which is now estimated at about \$400 billion. The Israeli government and the international community at large must therefore ensure an adequate compensation for this property, whether as an integral part of a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement or as an agreement in its own right to redress a grave historical injustice.

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