



PERSPECTIVES

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Arab Countries Say “We Miss the Jews”

by Dr. Edy Cohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Having persecuted and purged their Jews as punishment for the rebirth of Israel, many Arabs now realize they shot themselves in the foot.

A million Jews lived in Arab countries in the 20th century. Today, just a few thousand are left, mostly in Morocco and Tunisia.

The purging of the Jews caused a crisis in almost every Arab country from which they came. Despite their relatively limited numbers, the Jews' impact on society, culture, economy, and trade was crucial to the development of those countries, and their loss was felt. After the Jews were evicted from Iraq and Egypt, for example, those countries experienced crisis after crisis.

There is now a palpable longing in most Arab states for the Jews to return. Many believe that only with a Jewish presence will their countries blossom and develop as they did in the past.

The Jewish contribution to Arab states was significant. In Egypt, the gold market flourished with a Jewish presence and continues to do so to this day, even though the Jews were thrown out and their stores ransacked. Jewish symbols like the Magen David remain engraved on Egyptian shops, in markets, and on buildings. The older generation still remembers the prosperity of the time when Jews were in possession of their stores.

It is no coincidence that Cairo has decided to invest tens of millions of dollars in the restoration of synagogues throughout Egypt. The most recent is the renovation of the once magnificent Eliyahu Hanavi (Elijah the Prophet) Synagogue, in which \$6 million is being invested.

It is not only the Egyptians who want to coax back the prosperity that accompanied the Jewish presence. A few months ago, new Sudanese Minister of Religion Nasser Aladin called on Sudanese Jews whose families were forced to emigrate in the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel to return. In Lebanon, over a million dollars has been invested in the restoration of the Magen Avraham synagogue in the Wadi Abu Jamil neighborhood in West Beirut, near the Lebanese parliament.

Perhaps more than any others, it is the Iraqis who long for the return of their Jewish brethren, and Iraqi Jews who long for their former homeland. In recent years, a number of Facebook accounts have opened in Israel to renew the connection between Iraqi Jews and the Arabs beside whom their ancestors lived in harmony for over a thousand years prior to the advent of Islam.

The Iraqi Jews were wrenched from their former home, but their contribution to the country is felt to this day. Like Jewish minorities in other countries, the Jews of Iraq concentrated on trade, crafts, light industry, governmental and municipal services, and banking. The impact of Jews on commerce and banking was especially significant. The eight banks operating in Baghdad in the 1940s were all founded by Jewish families, and most of the clerks of Jewish and foreign banks were Jews. The first Iraqi Minister of the Treasury, Yehezkel Sasson, was Jewish. He laid the foundations for Iraqi taxation, economics, and the state budget. In one of the protests against corruption in Iraq a few years ago, Sasson's name was held up on signs declaring he was not corrupt like the current politicians.

Today, there is only one Jewish minister to be found in the entire Arab world. Roni Trabbolsi serves as Tunisian Minister of Tourism, the third Jewish minister to serve since Tunisia's founding.

Arab countries of old flourished in large part because of the contribution of their Jews. But then, in some countries, there was an exchange of populations: the Jews were forced out and Palestinian Arab refugees arrived in their place. The wealthy and educated Jewish population was replaced by a weak and poor population, a cultural shock that particularly affected Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

With the rise of xenophobic Arab/Muslim rejection of the State of Israel, the Arab states that could not beat Israel on the battlefield punished their Jews instead. Now, years later, there is a growing realization of the counter-productivity of that injustice, and many are calling for the Jews to return. Some Muslims are even calling for a tax levied on non-Muslims in Arab countries to be returned to the Jews.

Despite this growing sentiment, Arab leaders continue to choose for the most part to look the other way, not only refusing to protect the Jews but actively contributing to their persecution. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Arab states suffer serial economic

failures and never-ending wars and disputes. Some Muslims believe this is a punishment by Allah for their failure to protect the Jews, as they were instructed to do.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on January 1, 2020.

Dr. Edy Cohen is a researcher at the BESA Center and author of the book The Holocaust in the Eyes of Mahmoud Abbas (Hebrew).