



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Middle Eastern Jewry as a Bridge Between Israel and the Arab World

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The drama series *Um Haroun* (Aaron's Mother), which tells the story of a Jewish family in Kuwait during the 1940s, suggests that Middle Eastern Jewry could serve as a bridge for coexistence and understanding between Israel and its neighbors. Unfortunately, the series has mainly sparked vituperation in the Arab world.

A drama series recently broadcast in the Gulf States, *Um Haroun* (Aaron's Mother), tells the story of a Jewish family in Kuwait during the 1940s under Arab-Muslim rule. On a small scale, the program manages to resuscitate the culture and rich language of the Jews of the Middle East who lived under Islamic governance for about 1,300 years in the status of *dhimmi* (protected persons), and sensitively portrays their delicate situation amid the growth of nation-states in the Arab East. The events in Palestine shattered these communities, including those in which the *Um Haroun* family lived, to the extent that they were eventually expelled from their countries. The lead actress of *Um Haroun*, Hayat al-Fahad, has expressed a longing for the days when large Jewish communities lived in the various Arab countries.

*Dhimmi* status, which was the lot of the million or so Jews who lived in the Middle East until 1948, is based on a supposed pact between the House of Islam and its non-Muslim subjects. In line with this pact, sharp class distinctions were established that included built-in legal indignities and an inferior legal status for Jews, Christians, and members of other religions who refused to accept Islam. The *dhimmis* had to make humiliating tax payments such as the *jizya* (poll tax) and the *kharaj* (a tax on agricultural land and its produce). These taxes, which usually came to more than half the person's income, created great dependency and economic insecurity for the *dhimmis*.

Legal assistance was rare because a *dhimmi's* testimony was considered worthless compared to a Muslim's. *Dhimmis* were not allowed to own weapons, so they could not protect themselves. Certain kinds of work were permanently barred to them and any Muslim had the right to abuse them as much as he wanted. There were also special movement regulations that only applied to them: in certain places it was forbidden for Jews or Christians, who were considered impure, to pass by mosques. For a Jew or Christian who entered a church, or even the Temple Mount during a certain period, the penalty was death.

*Um Haroun's* attempt to show the human side of the great suffering endured by Middle Eastern Jewry has aroused harsh criticism in the Arab world, mainly because of its alleged attempt to promote the trend of *tatbia* (normalization with Israel). The Zionist narrative of Middle Eastern Jewry does not jibe with the Arab-Palestinian narrative, which portrays Zionism as a European colonialist movement that is foreign to the Middle East.

An article on [arab48](#), which is affiliated, among other things, with the more ultranationalist elements in Arab Israeli society, accused the series of "legitimizing the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states," which it considers anathema. The article asserts that, contrary to the Zionist view that the "Arab Jews" were a persecuted group, they formed "part of the Arab nation and a religious minority within it, an essential part of the mosaic of communities that lived in the Arab East and in Muslim Spain," and their move to Palestine was a reflection of "Jewish arrogance." The "Arab Jews" who (supposedly) lived with honor in the House of Islam thought they were coming to a land of milk and honey but instead, so the article claims, encountered humiliation and discrimination at the hands of the European Jews—because Zionism, after all, was no more than a European colonialist movement. Hence, the article asserts, the *Um Haroun* series serves Zionism because it presents a false narrative that sins against the historical truth.

Criticisms in this vein are plentiful across Arab social networks and media channels. In the Middle East there are only "Palestinian refugees." There is no room for other victims.

The State of Israel, over half of whose Jewish citizens are descendants of former *dhimmis*, is an existing fact. The indigenous Jews of the Middle East, like their brethren from other Diaspora communities, returned to their ancestral homeland and together reestablished the Jewish state there. *Um Haroun* insinuates that the Jews of the Middle East could serve as a bridge for coexistence and understanding between Israel and its neighbors. Unfortunately, the series has mainly sparked vituperation in the Arab world.

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