

Jews from the Middle East and North Africa

In 1948, between 900,000 and 1,000,000 Jews lived in the Middle East and North Africa; today only around 5,000 Jews, less than 1% of that number, remain.

Jews have been part of Middle Eastern culture and life since the beginnings of Judaism. Indigenous Jewish communities lived throughout the Middle East and North Africa for millennia. These Jewish communities existed in relatively stable and substantial numbers until the middle of the twentieth century when Jews in Arab lands and Iran were displaced by persecution.

Muslim conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries brought many different groups under Muslim rule. Jews in these areas, like Christians and Zoroastrians, were given “dhimmi” status. Dhimmis were officially protected, but also faced a variety of restrictions and had to pay a special tax. The exact restrictions and degree of enforcement varied across time and place. At times, Jewish communities faced severe persecution. At other times, Jewish communities had relatively harmonious relations with the Muslim majority and prospered.

With the rise of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century, the status of Jews in Middle Eastern and North African countries changed, often for the worse. This change became acute immediately before and after the Arab states’ attack on the new State of Israel in 1948. For example, in Syria, as a result of anti-Jewish pogroms that erupted in Aleppo in 1947, 7,000 of the town’s 10,000 Jews fled in terror. In 1941, armed Iraqi mobs, with the complicity of the police and the army, murdered 180 Jews and wounded almost 1,000 in what became known as the Farhud pogrom. After the creation of Israel, the Iraqi government made “Zionism” a capital crime, and Iraqi Jews were systematically deprived of their livelihoods, forced to give up their citizenship, and had their properties and assets confiscated by the government. In Egypt, more than 70 Jews were killed by bombs in the Jewish Quarter of Cairo. In 1948, pogroms in several Moroccan cities killed 44 Jews and an informal economic boycott of Jews began. After the U.N. General Assembly resolution on the Partition Plan, Muslim rioters engaged in a bloody pogrom in Aden and Yemen, which killed 82 Jews. Later, after the French left Algeria, the authorities issued a variety of anti-Jewish decrees prompting nearly all of the 160,000 Jews to flee the country.

About two-thirds of the approximately 900,000 Jews displaced from the Middle East and North Africa resettled in Israel, where they were granted full citizenship. The other one-third of these refugees resettled in other countries. In virtually all cases, as Jews left their countries of origin, individual and communal properties were confiscated without compensation. They did not receive any compensation from the governments that confiscated their belongings.

Overwhelmingly most of the Jewish refugees do not seek to return to their former homelands where they were persecuted. They prefer to live in their new homes where they have integrated fully. Because they were able to integrate into the societies where they settled, little is heard about these Jewish refugees.

Since 1947, over 681 U.N. General Assembly resolutions have been passed on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Of these, 101 exclusively deal with Palestinian Arab refugees. No U.N. resolution has



been passed that deals exclusively with the Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

In recent years, the omission of the plight of the Jewish refugees from history and public discourse has begun to be recognized. On April 1, 2008, the U.S. Congress passed *House Resolution 185*, which addressed this omission. The resolution recognizes the importance of acknowledging all victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict and states that U.S. officials participating in Middle East discussions should ensure that any reference to resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue “also include a similarly explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries.”

Jews Who Fled to Israel from Arab Lands between 1948 and 1967

