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For a Righteous Cause

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THE ARAB WORLD: EMBRACING HERITAGES, CORRECTING FALSEHOODS

Toxic antisemitic and Holocaust-denying literature has proliferated in the Arab world for over a century, largely in response to the achievements of the Zionist movement. On the other hand, discussion of the histories of Jews in Arab lands, including their most glorious chapters, was sidelined, and even prohibited. This created a vicious cycle: As a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Arabs were presented with distorted, malicious images and chronicles of Jews and Judaism that did not spare a single pejorative stereotype, which, in turn, negatively impacted the prospects for peaceful settlement of the conflict.

This is now changing.

During 2022, the Arab World has witnessed a fresh spirit of openness towards Jews and Judaism. The trend was primarily evident in The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Morocco. Yet considerable positive examples were also recorded in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The embrace of Jewish heritage in Arab countries is related to normalization processes with Israel. It is also affected by campaigns against Islamist radicalism that cultivate social environments of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

In the UAE, Jewish communal life is already flourishing, including the development of educational facilities, the opening of kosher restaurants, the construction of Jewish synagogues, mikvehs, and cemeteries, and the reception of new rabbis from abroad.[1] In Bahrain, the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities launched in January 2022 a project to renovate the old Jewish cemetery located in the capital Manama.[2]

Over the past years, Saudi Arabia has also experienced a gradual emergence of an unofficial Jewish community with an unofficial chief rabbi, Jacob Herzog. With the consent of Saudi authorities, he provides for the religious needs of Jews who came from all over the world to work in the Kingdom, such as Sefer Torah and kosher food. He is currently raising funds to build a mikveh.[3]

Morocco has the largest Jewish community in the Arab world, estimated at 3,000 people. Interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit presented the monarch in July 2022 with new measures, including the establishment of a National Council of the Moroccan Jewish Community responsible

1 Yoni Michanie, "Meet the Rabbi Who Made It Possible to Live a Jewish Life in the UAE," *JNS*, October 4, 2022, https://www.jns.org/meet-the-rabbi-who-made-it-possible-to-live-a-jewish-life-in-the-uae/.

2 Hudahaifa Ebrahim, "Only Jewish Cemetery in Gulf States Gets New Life as Peace Flourishes," *The Medialine*, January 16, 2022, https://themedialine.org/life-lines/only-jewish-cemetery-in-gulf-states-gets-new-life-as-peace-flourishes/.

3 Zvika Klein, "Meet Jacob Herzog, Saudi Arabia's Self-Proclaimed Chief Rabbi," *Jerusalem Post*, July 23, 2022, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-712621.

for "safeguarding the cultural heritage and religious influence of Judaism and its authentic Moroccan values."[4] In August, Morocco inaugurated the Beit Yehuda Museum of Jewish History in Tangier.[5]

Following decades of politically motivated antisemitism in popular media, in religious sermons, and in textbooks, there are promising signs of change also in Egypt. Since 2014, the Egyptian regime has changed its policies and discourse towards Jews and Judaism. Civilian initiatives accompany governmental policies of renewed interest in Egypt's Jewish heritage. Both contribute to creating a new Egyptian collective memory that is more likely to reembrace Egypt's Jewish past and reconcile with it.

This phenomenon is partly encouraged by the desire of the regime to reconstruct Egyptian national identity, with Judaism as a part of that identity. The current official identity discourse includes two fundamental components. One is a negative component that conceptualizes Egyptian identity as the antithesis of the Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The other component is positive, and it presents Egypt's nationalism as a multi-layered pluralistic synthesis of identities and heritages: Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arabic, Mediterranean, African, and – to a certain extent – also Jewish.[6]

This embracing spirit is supported by some independent Egyptian scholars who argue that due to the mass expulsion of Jews from Egypt during the Nasserist era, their country has lost much of its "genuine" liberal character as a diverse, open, and tolerant society. For them, the revival of Judaism is part of Egypt's quest to rediscover itself.[7]

The regime is investing efforts in supporting the renovation of neglected Jewish sites. Following the renovation of the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria two years ago, in September 2022, it was reported that the ancient Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo is also about to reopen its gates for tourists and the handful of Jews who still reside in Egypt.[8]

The renovation efforts are led by the head of the Jewish Community of Egypt, Magda Haroun. In recent years, Haroun has become a symbol of religious co-existence in Egypt. As she put it in an interview last April, her home is the only one in the country where the three monotheistic

4 EJC, "King Mohammed VI Endorses New Authorities for Moroccan Judaism," *European Jewish Congress*, July 14, 2022, https://eurojewcong.org/news/communities-news/morocco/king-mohammed-vi-endorses-new-authorities-for-moroccan-judaism/.

5 Safaa Kasraoui, "Morocco Inaugurates Museum Dedicated to Jewish History in Tangier," *MWN*, August 21, 2022, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/08/350897/morocco-inaugurates-museum-dedicated-to-jewish-history-in-tangier?s=09.

6 Ofir Winter and Assaf Shiloah, "Egypt's Identity during the el-Sisi Era: Profile of the 'New Egyptian,'" *Strategic Assessment* 21, no. 4 (January 2019), 66-67, 74.

7 "Egypt's Jews Spread Out to the Exhibition, and Critics: A Model of Pluralism in the Face of Identity Conflict [Arabic]," *al-Ahram*, July 13, 2021, https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/News/815613.aspx.

8 Ahmed Gomaa, "Egypt Set to Open Ben Ezra Synagogue," *Al-Monitor*, October 3, 2022, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/egypt-set-open-ben-ezra-synagogue#ixzz7gyIBFfqT.

religions live together: a Jewish lady, a Christian Catholic husband, and two Muslim daughters from her Muslim ex-husband.[9]

As part of Haroun's efforts to revive Jewish culture in Egypt, the Drop of Milk Association for preserving Egypt's Jewish heritage, which she heads, held an online conference in October 2021 about the history of Maimonides as one of the most influential Jewish figures in Egyptian history. This conference brought together speakers from Egypt, the USA, and Israel.[10]

The growing embrace of Jewish history involves recognition of the Holocaust for what it actually was. In January 2022, Egypt actively participated in the UN General Assembly session that adopted a resolution condemning Holocaust denial. The Egyptian Ambassador to the UN conveyed the Arab consensus on the resolution, stating that the "memory of such a black hole in history must be kept alive in the global consciousness so that it is never repeated."[11]

A week later, the US Embassy in Cairo and the Washington-based US Holocaust Memorial Museum marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Four Seasons hotel on the banks of the Nile River.[12] A columnist for the daily *al-Ahram*, the veteran politician and researcher Usama Ghazali Harb, called for recognizing the Holocaust as "one of the greatest crimes of mass extermination in human history."[13]

Egypt's literary scene provides encouraging demonstrations of changing approaches to Judaism. "Touring the Cairo Book Fair this year, one cannot ignore all the books and novels that deal with the Jews of Egypt," noted a July 2021 article in *al-Ahram*.[14]

The Cairo International Book Fair of 2021 introduced no less than 12 new books, including historical books and literary novels, about Jewish history, with titles such as *Jews of Egypt in the Twentieth Century: How Did They Live and Why Did They Leave?*; *Jews of Egypt in Popular Proverbs, Jokes and Aphorisms*; *The Jews of Ancient Egypt*; *Al-Da'ud Building*; and *The Last Egyptian Female Jew*.[15] Several other books on similar themes were published in 2022.

9 Elsaha, "We are the Only House in Egypt… [Arabic]," Facebook, April 24, 2022, https://m.facebook.com/ElsahaEGAlHurra/videos/561970258682050/?extid=WA-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&ref=sharing.

10 The Drop of Milk Association, "Maimonides from Córdoba to Cairo: A Journey through Time and Knowledge," October 3, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/events/cairo-egypt/maimonides-from-c%C3%B3rdoba-to-cairo-a-journey-through-time-and-knowledge/389229196033683/.

11 Dalia Ziada, "Courting Jews: The Latest Trend in Arab Politics," *Meem Center*, February 12, 2022, https://www.meemcenter.com/post/courting-jews-the-latest-trend-in-arab-politics-english.

12 Kamal Tabikha, "US Embassy in Egypt Marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day," *National News*, January 24, 2022, https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/01/24/us-embassy-in-egypt-marks-international-holocaust-remembrance-day/.

13 Memri, "Egyptian Politician: The Holocaust was 'One of the Greatest Crimes of Mass Extermination in Human History,' which 'Shocks the Human Conscience throughout the Generations,'" *Memri*, August 26, 2021, https://www.memri.org/reports/egyptian-politician-holocaust-was-one-greatest-crimes-mass-extermination-human-history-which.

14 "Egypt's Jews," *al-Ahram*, July 13, 2021.

15 Muhammad Sayyid Ahmed, "Book Fair – Twelve Novels and Books that Delve into the History of Egyptian Jews [Arabic]," *Masr360*, July 20, 2021, https://masr360.net/ثقافة-وفنون/معرض-الكتاب-12-رواية-وكتابا-ينقب-في-تاري/.

While some positive government actions towards Jews could be interpreted as instrumental means to improve Cairo's standing in Washington, to present a moderate Egyptian face to the world, or to boost tourism,[16] literature is a somewhat different story. It is made for internal consumption and reflects popular cultural and social dynamics. Most of the books published as part of the wave of Jewish interest are characterized by their balanced approach and even nostalgia for Egypt's Jewish past.

Two books stood out more than others in their reception by the reading public. One is *Mitzrayim: Tales and Families of the Jews of Royal Egypt*, published in 2022. Its author, the historian Midhat 'Abd al-Raziq, stated in the introduction that his motivation in authoring his study was that the Arab library still lacks an integrated literary work that discusses Jewish families, their lives, and their impact on Egypt.[17]

The book examines the stories of 15 Jewish families who lived in Egypt from Muhammad 'Ali's era to the Nasserist one. It is divided into three tales, with titles in both Arabic and Hebrew.

'Abd al-Raziq refrains from the use of common negative stereotypes of Egyptian Jews as stingy, petty, and dishonest. Rather, he notes the positive qualities of the Jewish Egyptian merchants of old times, including integrity, accuracy, and expertise. For instance, he describes the Cattaui family who contributed to the economic development of Egypt with the establishment of the banking system following the arrival of Ya'qub Cattaui to Egypt in 1801.[18]

According to the book, Egyptian Jewish families were involved in a sizeable number of charitable activities designed to help poverty-stricken people, be they Jews or Muslims.[19] One example of Jewish benevolence and tolerance is that of Da'ud 'Adas, who owned famous clothing stores in Cairo and Alexandria, such as Rivoli, Hano, and Benziyon. In 1945, he printed a Ramadan Imsakiah (a schedule that includes all prayer times) on the occasion of the holy month and distributed it to passers-by in the streets and to worshipers in mosques.[20]

'Abd al-Raziq accurately accounts that during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, Zionism was not perceived as a threat in Egypt. In 1897, Egyptian nationalist activist Mustafa Kamil met the visionary of the State of the Jews, Theodor Herzl, and asked for his support for Egypt's independence.[21]

Another book that shines for its positive attitude is Usama al-Shadhli's novel *Shimon al-Masri's Papers*, which was published a year before *Mitzrayim*. It tells the biblical story of the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt through the eyes of a seven-year-old boy named Shimon, who recorded the events of the journey.

16 Haisam Hassanein, "Sisi Restores Jewish Heritage in Egypt," *WINEP Policy Analysis*, December 14, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sisi-restores-jewish-heritage-egypt.

17 Midhat 'Abd al-Raziq, *Mitzrayim: Tales and Families of the Jews of Royal Egypt* (Cairo: al-Rawaq Publishing, 1st ed., 2022), 10 [Arabic].

18 Ibid., 21, 56-79.

19 Ibid., 61-62.

20 Ibid., 97-98.

21 Ibid., 315.

Shimon is a descendant of an Israelite father and an Egyptian mother. He is portrayed in the book as tolerant and receptive towards others, whatever their beliefs, and as someone who was able to preserve his humanity despite the horrors that surrounded him during the Exodus.[22] According to the author, his novel attempts to explore the behavior of an individual in a society that is in a state of wandering.[23]

One of al-Shadhli's fans is the religious affairs advisor to the Egyptian president, Sheikh Usama al-Azhari, who expressed his admiration for the novel, saying it "will continue to have a very special place for me, making it one of the best I have read."[24]

Al-Shadhli's book received extensive coverage in the Egyptian media.[25] In July 2022, the Alexandria Cultural Library held a symposium about the book.[26] In October 2022, Dar al-Rawaq, the novel's publisher, announced that Saudi MBC Studios obtained the rights to adapt the novel into a TV series.[27]

There were some critical views about the historical scrutiny and the religious accuracy of the recently released pro-Jewish books. Moreover, a few readers expressed fear that embracing and friendly approaches toward Jews could create sympathy among young people for Israel and marginalize the Palestinian cause.[28]

For instance, a researcher of Israeli affairs, Ihab 'Abd al-Gawwad, suggested that these books intersect with the desire of the American administration to revive Jewish-Arab ties in the Middle East.[29] Still, the books were not banned, neither by the regime nor by storeowners, and their critical reception was overall positive – indicating that times are, perhaps, changing for the better.

22 Usama al-Shadhli, *Shimon al-Masri's Papers* (Cairo: al-Rawaq Publishing, 1st ed., 2021), 609-610 [Arabic].

23 Suha al-Saman, "'Al-Masri al-Yawm' Interviews Usama 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Shadhli, Author of the Novel 'Shimon al-Masri's Papers': My Novel Discusses 'Social Wandering' and 'Loss of Direction' [Arabic]," *al-Masri al-Yawm*, October 19, 2021, https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2442712.

24 Nidal Mahmud, "Usama al-Azhari on the Novel 'Shimon al-Masri's Papers': One of the Best Novels I have Read [Arabic]," *al-Dustur*, August 20, 2021, https://www.dostor.org/3545888.

25 Mustafa Taher, "Usama al-Shadhli Discusses His Novel 'Shimon al-Masri's Papers' on Nile Cultural Channel [Arabic]," *al-Ahram,* September 6, 2021, https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2947349.aspx.

26 Muhammad al-Gharib, "Usama al-Shadhli: al-Azhari is a Religious Man Who Combines Literature, Thought, History, and Political Understanding [Arabic]," *al-Balad*, July 24, 2022, https://www.elbalad.news/5370615.

27 Rana Ashraf, "Transforming the Novel 'Shimon al-Masri's Papers' into a Dramatic Work – Details [Arabic]," *al-Balad*, October 8, 2022, https://www.elbalad.news/5473548.

28 Ahmed, "Book Fair [Arabic]."

29 Al-Sayyid Shhatta, "The Search for the 'Hidden' – The Secret of Egyptians' Passion for Searching the History of Absent Jews [Arabic]," *Raseef 22*, February 2, 2022, https://raseef22.net/article/1086305.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Encourage Religious Pluralism and Tolerance.** The Egyptian authorities should be encouraged by Western governments and international organizations to continue and promote policies that create a climate of religious pluralism and tolerance towards Jews and Judaism, and religious minorities at large. State cultural institutions, such as the General Egyptian Book Organization, should continue supporting the publishing of balanced history books and novels on Jewish history, as well as promoting them in the media. The Egyptian Ministry of Education should incorporate some of the new historical books on Egyptian Jewry in the national curriculum.
2. **Welcome and Support.** Israel should warmly welcome displays of tolerance toward Jews and Judaism and render support, including financial, to initiatives that aim to revive Jewish heritage in Egypt and other Arab countries. Israeli Jews who migrated from Arab states can play a role in bridging the gaps of time and place through tourism, education, and culture exchanges.
3. **Joint Initiatives.** Israel and Egypt should establish joint governmental and civil initiatives with the participation of descendants of the Egyptian Jewish community. Such activities can enable neighbors to express their appreciation for each other, revive their forgotten shared history, and build their common future.

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