

# Exodus of Jews from the Arab and Muslim World

by Michael Curtis



It is generally agreed that the rush to evacuate all U.S. troops and other Americans from Afghanistan by the deadline of August 31, 2021, was marred by chaos and moments of pandemonium. The U.S. was committed to help Americans U.S. legal residents, and Afghans leave the country. Though most have been rescued, some still remain, and others, especially Afghan interpreters who aided the U.S., are in hiding. The official U.S. stated number, though there is some doubt, is that over 122,000 people were airlifted abroad from Hamid Karzai international airport. Debate about responsibility for the chaos at the airport still rages, nationally and internationally.

Little known in the news of the chaos in Kabul, the capital city, is an enticing story of the exit from Afghanistan on September 7, 2021, of a man named Zabulon Simintov, a 62 year-old Orthodox Jew, the last Jew in the country. He is not a heroic figure, a difficult man, who has debts, received food including matzos from Afghans in New York and elsewhere, and was unkind to his wife who lives in Israel, because he refuses to grant her a *get*, the Jewish religious divorce process. He had some saving grace: he did save both the Afghan women's soccer team, and a group of women judges.

Simintov lived in and took care the Kabul synagogue, lived for a time in Turkmenistan, and lived under the Taliban 1996-2001, without problems, but he is afraid of the more extrem terrorist group, ISIS. He is an unusual person, a carpet trader and restaurateur, he was born in Herat in 1959

a town which once had four synagogues, keeps kosher, observes the Sabbath, reads the Torah, prays in Hebrew, is fond of whiskey, and keeps a pet partridge. He was taken out of Afghanistan by bus to a neighboring country, Tajikistan, with the help of an ultra-Orthodox Brooklyn man and an Israeli-U.S. businessman. The group also brought out 30 women and children.

Simintov is unimportant in himself but he represents a historic moment, the last person of the Jewish population which had been in Afghanistan for 2000 years, lived as merchants, landowners, money lenders. In the city of Herat, historic center of Jews there were four synagogues. Antisemitism became more evident in the 1930s, Jews were declared non-citizens, and began emigrating. In 1948 there were 5,000, but by 2005 there were only two Jews left: Simintov and Isaac Levy, who died in 2005, who disliked each other and who lived in opposite sides in the synagogue.

The departure of Simintov is a reminder of the Jewish exodus from Arab and Muslim countries, still acclaimed in the Jewish festivals at Passover and at Sukkot, the festival for giving thanks not only for the yearly harvest, but also for food and shelter when escaping from Egypt.

Jewish communities had existed in the Middle East and North Africa for millennia, since Biblical times. They had been ruled by different empires from the Babylonians on. In Islamic countries, Jews had the status of "dhimmis," second class citizens, the people of the book. Yet when Jews were persecuted in medieval Europe, many found refuge in Muslim lands. This was noticeably the case when Jews were persecuted in Spain and Portugal. Between 1290 and 1421 Jews were expelled for different periods of time, from Egypt, France, Spain, Portugal, and Austria.

After pogroms in Spain in 1391, the Alhambra decree (Edict of Expulsion) in April 1492 ruled that Jews must either convert to Catholicism or be deported. Over 200,000 converted, and an

estimated number of 100,000 were expelled. Portugal granted temporary asylum to Jews but then also deported those who refused to convert. Many of the Iberian Jews went to parts of the Ottoman Empire. The list of those descended from the expelled Iberians is formidable. They include Benjamin Cardozo, Camille Pissarro, Pierre Mendes-France, David Ricardo, and Emma Lazarus.

Between 1948, the creation of Israel, and the early 1970s about 850,000 Jews, mainly of Sephardi and Mizrahi backgrounds departed, fled, usually penniless and leaving assets and businesses worth billions, calculation of \$6 billion in today's money, or were evacuated from Arab countries and the Muslim world. About two-thirds lived in areas in North Africa controlled by France and Italy. Of these, 15-20% lived in Iraq, 10% in Egypt, 7% in Yemen, and 200,000 in Iran under the Shah and in the republic of Turkey. The Ottoman Empire had 200,000 Jews at the beginning of 19th century. By 1972, 600,000 Jews from Arab and Muslim countries had left and reached Israel. Their descendants constitute more than half of the total population of Israel.

The numbers remaining in Arab countries and Iran are small, as figures show in comparison between 1948 and today: Egypt 80,000, now 100; Iran 65,000 now 8,300; Iraq 140,000, now 5-7; Libya 35,000, now 0; Sudan 350, now 0; Morocco 250,000, now 2150, Yemen 63,000, now 50; Tunisia 105,000, now 2,000; Turkey 80,000, now 14,000.

Jews left or were forced to leave Arab countries for a variety of reasons: general and persisting antisemitism, pogroms, property confiscation, persecution, death threats, torture, removal of citizenship, poverty, and expulsion. To this was fulfillment of yearning to return to Zion, with affiliation for Zionist objectives, and desire for better economic status and personal security.

The first waves of removal from Arab and Muslim countries in

the late 1940s and early 1950s were from Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. Exodus from Egypt increased after the 1956 Suez crisis. Other factors pushing Jews out were OAS violence in Algeria, and antisemitism in countries controlled by the Soviet Union.

Iraq once had a well integrated, relatively prosperous Jewish community, prominent in trade, banking, with representatives in the legislature and executive. Conditions changed after the creation of Israel. Pogroms, influenced by Nazi ideas, took place, a prominent Jew Shafiq Ades, chief agent of Ford in Iraq, was publicly hanged, followed by bombings in 1950 and 1951, special taxes and restrictions on professional activity. Jews were deprived of civil and economic rights. Zionism was made a crime. In those years. Jews were saved by operations Ezra and Nehemiah which took 120,000 to Israel, and other 20,000 left: in all 95% of Iraq Jews left.

Egypt, remembered in Passover services, once had 16 important Jewish schools, 5 in Cairo, 9 in Alexandria, 2 important Jewish hospitals, retirement homes, more than 60 synagogues, and a Jewish population of 75,000. After Israel was created, Jews were attacked, and under the rule of Nasser, Jews were persecuted and expelled.

Jews in Iran are traced back to Babylonian exile, 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, maintaining an ethnic and religious identity, but the majority speaking Persian. By the rivers of Babylon, "there we decided to stay." In 1948, Jews numbered 140,000, before the Islamic revolution 1979 they were 80,000. In an official census 2012, the number was 8,756.

In North Africa, Jews have been present since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. They suffered during World War II and in the postwar period. Some, 530 children, were saved by Operation Mural in 1961 led by author David Littman who at 28 in Casablanca organized the airlift of children from Morocco in guise of

supposed holidays in Switzerland.

During the last century, more than 50 million have been displaced because of conflict, and millions of refugees reside in countries in which they now live. Among them are Jews and Palestinians. There of course stark differences. Jews travelled large distances to get to Israel. Palestinians travelled a few miles, if any, to remain in a similar society, linguistically and culturally.

First, Palestinian refugees, usually numbered in 1949 as 600,000 with assets of \$3. 9 billions, today's money, are foremost in any discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The number according to Palestinian spokespeople has grown in several generations to five million. To deal with them, these refugees have a special agency, UNRWA, founded in December 1949, the only one of its kind to deal with a specific issue.

Can the Jews who left Arab and Muslim countries also be counted as refugees, and thus constitute a parallel story to be resolved simultaneously? Can they get belated justice? If so, Jews who left Ara countries and now live in Israel can be counted as a core factor and be significant in any resolution of the Middle East conflict.

In any case the story of Mr. Simintov reminds us that the Jews were forced to leave Arab countries, and the exodus was formidable. Moreover, the paradox remains in much of the Arab and Muslim world. In this topsy turvy world, the more successful the story and progress of Israel, the more difficult and perilous the position of Jews in that Arab-Muslim world.