

Lena Gorska

**The Middle East Conflict and its Displaced Persons – Arab and Jewish Refugees Issue
Analysis and Future Prospects**

For millennia during the Diaspora, *Edot Ha Mizrach*, which means Jewish Eastern communities, spread into North African countries, including Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and even Central and Eastern Asia. Historically, Jews and Jewish communities have existed in the mentioned area sometimes for even more than 2,500 years. One thousand years before the advent of Islam, Jews in substantial numbers resided in what are today Arab countries. Following the Muslim conquest of the region Jews lived under Islamic rule and were given the privileged status of *ahl az-zimma* - second class citizenship but with given permission for limited religious, educational, professional, and business opportunities. The result of protection and guaranteed autonomy created a unique identity of Arab Jews, separate but interrelated to the Islamic culture at the same time.

The establishment of Israel as a Jewish State in 1948 within the heart of *Dar al Islam* caused an uncontrollable outbreak of one of the bloodiest conflicts of our times. Centuries of relatively harmonious Jewish and Muslim coexistence on Islamic land ended. Regrettably, newly born Arab nationalism and anti-imperialistic movements adopted the Zionist discourse in which Jewishness and Arabness were perceived as mutually exclusive. The increase of anti-Zionists and anti-Jewish sentiment in Muslim countries, accompanied frequently with various symptoms of discrimination, endangered the safety of these ancient communities. Consequently, a refugee crisis followed. Most of those ancient Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa were coerced to leave their previous homelands as a result of physical safety and political insecurity. Ironically, in almost parallel to the exodus of Oriental Jews, a comparably equal number of Arab refugees crossed the borders of Israel.

The saga of the Modern Jewish exodus from Arab countries is a historic double drama. In their previous home countries they were recognised as strangers and in the land of their ancestors as not equally Jewish. Discrimination and the loss of the illusions were the common feelings for the majority of the new comers arriving to Israel at that time, after experiencing a social and cultural “clash of civilization”. The Zionistic ideology as an offspring of European nationalism was marked with typical Saidian Orientalism as its main trait, fighting the spirit of Levant. On the verge of independence, Israeli “Modern” society was strongly bound up with Western customs and traditions which would be unchangeable for the next couple of decades. Lagging behind the European standards, which is considered synonymous with enhancement of cultural and technological development. Oriental Jews lived virtually in isolation from the rest of society until the mid 60s’ having a really hard time adapting to their new situation. Israeli establishment,

integration, and absorption policy was insufficient. Previously propagated egalitarian slogans did not have much in common with what was actually being practiced, and these methods were extremely controversial. An example of standard practices within the Israeli *Ashkenazi* establishment, with regards to *Mizrahim* and *Sephardim*, was spraying the newcomers with an insect killer DDT and holding them in transit camps (the *Ma'abarot*) in fear of diseases. This constitutes one of the black pages in the history of Jewish immigration to Israel. The Arab Jews consequently underwent a process of de-socialization, casting last vestiges of their Arabness, and re-socialization, acquiring "modern" affiliations and assimilating to the European Jewish standards.

In contrast to the high profile Arab refugees issue, publicly inconsiderable attention has been paid so far to the question of Jewish refugees from Muslim, and dominantly Arab countries, mostly due to a combination of international cynicism and domestic Israeli suppression of the matter. Numerous scholarly analyses relating to the Arab – Israeli conflict or process of shaping the contemporary society of Israel tend to treat the matter of Jewish refugees from Muslim countries in a superficial manner or indicating its existence for countering the Palestinian demand for the "right of return".

This study is aimed at focusing on the objective scrutiny of the Jewish-Oriental chapter in the history of the Middle East conflict and Peace Process by posing a question of historical relationship between Arab Jews and Zionist Ideology and re-examining the origins of the Middle Eastern refugee crisis while in the process also reflecting on Arab- Israeli conflict.

For this study I will use extensive scholarly literature, as well as digitalized articles published online, and also electronic feedback to them. My research will require use of archives resources belonging to British and Israeli academic institutions specialising in the history of the Middle East and North Africa, such as: The National Archives, Yad Ben Zvi Institute, Misgav Yerushalayim: Center for Research and Study of the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Babilonian Jewry Heritage Center or Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.