

JEWISH – ARAB COEXISTENCE

A multidisciplinary exploration

Abstract

The primary aim of this dissertation is to provide a critical analysis of the scholarly literature on the long historical, social and cultural processes that characterized Jewish-Arab coexistence in the Muslim Arab societies of the Middle East and North Africa. For this purpose I survey:

- A. a large body of primary sources that have for the most part not been available in Hungarian. These include: parts of medieval Muslim, Christian and Jewish travelers' itineraries and diaries, British and French diplomatic correspondence, documents from the British and US Intelligence Services and the Alliance Israélite Universelle archives, WZO correspondence and my interviews with Syrian and Iraqi Jews living in Israel.
- B. a substantial amount of analytical and exploratory literature that provides theories and hypotheses formulated by highly qualified and experienced scholars in a number of fields. These scholars include Heinrich Graetz, Ignaz Goldziher, Raphael Patai, H.Z. Hirschberg, Y. Ben-Zvi, S.D. Goiten, S.W. Baron, Bernard Lewis, Norman A. Stillman, and W.P. Zenner.

On the basis of my survey I then examine the veracity of several rather wide-spread assertions popular in western liberal scholarly circles, such as:

- a. In the Muslim Arab world, Jews on the whole fared better than they did in Christian societies.
- b. The breakdown of a presumably peaceful Jewish-Arab coexistence was caused by the appearance of the great powers and/ or European Zionists in the Middle East and North Africa

Given the multi-faceted scholarship on the coexistence of the two communities, a multi-disciplinary approach is best suited for this project. In particular, I will be utilizing methods deriving from disciplines such as theology, social and cultural history, cultural anthropology, ethnography, and social psychology.

The dissertation is structured into three main parts.

In the first part, I provide an overview of Jewish-Arab relations during the period starting from the emergence of Islam and ending with the appearance of the great western powers in the Middle East and North Africa. I examine closely the socio-psychological and theological roots of anti-Jewish sentiment in Islam, I provide an overview of the life and possibilities of the Jewish communities in the Omayyad and Abbasid caliphates, and explore life under the relatively more tolerant shiite Fatimid rulers. After analyzing the situation of the Jews in Andalusia, I discuss the overly idealized image of the "Arab-Jewish Golden Age" commonly found in scholarship, including in the influential work of Heinrich Graetz. By contrast, I explore the political, social and theological reasons underlying the harsh persecution of the Jews in North Africa under foreign monarchs, and portray the life of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire from a socio-economic and a cultural-anthropological perspective.

The second part of the dissertation deals with the new challenges of modernization introduced by the European colonialists, which restructured the Middle Eastern and North African societies, leading to economic and social competition between the Muslim majority and the despised minority groups. This situation created a fertile soil for the European-born political anti-Semitism, which, together with the extant social tensions, resulted in the emergence of blood libels, which were without precedent in Arab lands, and accusations of blasphemy at the end of the 19th century. The spread of the Jewish conspiracy theory after the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Arabic [Cairo, 1925], the adoption of fascist and Nazi ideologies by the Arab nationalist movements (*Baath, Muslim Brotherhood, Phalanges Libanaises, etc.*), and the anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist political activities of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Husseini, all led to the cumulative insecurity of the Jews in Arab lands and eventually to the pogroms during the Second World War.

In the third part of this study, I examine the responses that Jews in Arab lands made to the challenges of modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These responses took several distinct forms:

- a. A European type of assimilation, whose main supporter was the French Jewish world organization, the Paris-based *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, which contributed to the transformation and reformation of Jewish education in the ME and NA. This assimilation resulted in the appearance of a highly westernized new generation that distanced itself from the surrounding Arab culture.
- b. Participation in the Arab national revival, which was the most common response among the Jewish upper class in Egypt. I provide a brief overview of Jewish involvement in Egyptian government, politics, the Arab media and literature.
- c. Political Zionism, whose promoters were the European Zionist Jewish immigrants, and Jewish refugees, who fled from Palestine to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In contrast to the European Jewish religious circle, the Sephardi community leaders embraced the Zionist idea enthusiastically, as did a large number of Oriental Jews. In my analysis I also touch on the contradictory attitude of the WZO toward the Zionist activities of the Middle Eastern and North African communities.

In the post-war era, the Zionist response became the most relevant one after the Holocaust and prior to the birth of the modern state of Israel, especially given also the flare up in anti-Jewish sentiment in the Middle East and North Africa, and the cold reception that French and British societies gave to westernized Jews from the former colonies.

Arab-Jewish coexistence can be described as the peaceful cohabitation of a master and a servant, i.e. Jews in Arab lands lived relatively peacefully, preserving their religious and communal autonomy by accepting the status of the belittled and often humiliated minority, of the dhimmi and – with some, often disastrous exceptions –, anxiously avoided any interference in Muslim Arab affairs.

The new challenges of the modern era, especially the impact of Western culture on the Middle East and North Africa, have resulted in a twist of this microcosmos. The ensuing cold peace between the two coexisting communities came to an end with the different attitudes and responses to the possibilities of the emerging globalized world.