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Interview: Magda Haroun, head of Egypt's Jewish community

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Ahmed Belal

"The daughter of Israel's enemy has become the president of the Jewish community in Egypt." So said Yedioth Ahronoth, describing Magda Shehata Haroun, the daugher of a famous Egyptian-Jewish lawyer. She succeeded Carmen Weinstein as president of Egypt's Jewish community in mid-April.

Years ago, Magda's father - Shehata Haroun - refused to emigrate outside Egypt, claiming Cairo was his precious rock that he would not give up for pearls. Patriotism was not just his right, but a duty too, he would say. Shehata Haroun paid dearly by sticking to his principles. His freedom, security and stability were all compromised by staying in Egypt. As a result, his two daughters suffered. He even stayed in Egypt rather than accompany his eldest daughter Mona on a medical trip from which he might not have been able to return.

When Haroun died, Magda invited a French Rabbi to perform the funerary rites before his burial, rejecting one from the Israeli embassy. Her decision was a continuation of her father's struggle against Zionism, which he saw as a racist movement. Like her father, Magda refuses to emigrate overseas.

Al-Masry Al-Youm met with Magda Haroun at the Sha'ar Hashamayim ("Gate of Heaven"), or Adly Street synagogue in Cairo.

She said that she faced a huge, saddening responsibility in representing the Jewish community in its final chapter as part of the Egyptian nation. She fears she won't be able to provide a decent "end of life" to members of Egypt's Jewish community.

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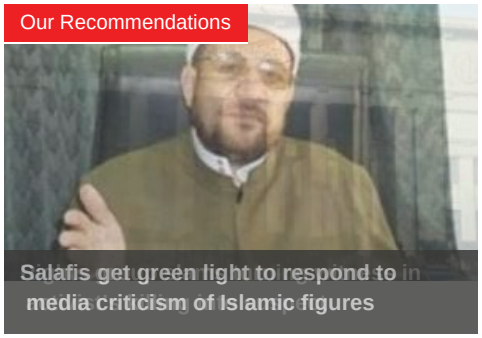
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Q: How do you see the 30 June protests. Did you take part in them?

A: 30 June is the real revolution and of course I took part in it. I will go to join the protesters in their *Iftar* in Tahrir [Square].

Q: How do you see the Muslim Brotherhood's one year in power? And how do you see Egypt after 30 June?

A: That year was both a blessing and a curse--a blessing because the Egyptian people now know who their rulers were and know about their fascist dictatorship. But also a curse due to the economic problems that Egypt faced that year. But there is still a chance to fix things. The Jewish community in Egypt has donated money to the Support Egypt Fund despite their difficult living conditions. All members of the community have agreed to contribute to the fund. Hopefully, a new phase in the history of Egypt will begin, one where there will be no difference between Muslims, Christians and Jews. I hope this good spirit returns and we build our country together.

Q: The Ministry of Social Affairs has canceled a grant-- of LE90,000 a year--which was previously given to the Jewish community. What do you have to say about this and were you officially notified of it?

A: Nobody notified me of it. I learned of it through the press and when I contacted the Shura Council's human rights committee, I learned that the decision has not yet been made. Then a friend told me that a Zionist website described the decision as a slap in the face of Magda Shehata Haroun who has always been proud of her loyalty to Egypt. I felt there was a need to fire back and so I sent a letter to the Shura Council's human rights committee to inquire about the reason why the grant was a secret item of the state budget even though it is an honor for the Egyptian state to be giving attention to the needs of the Jewish community - particularly since they are Egyptian citizens who have chosen to stay in Egypt and away from their families.

Most of the members of the community are elderly women with no source of living. It is not wrong for the state to help them, this is a right they have much like any Egyptian citizen.

In my letter, I said the grant should no longer remain a secret item in the state budget and that it should remain. In addition, I said we had constitutional rights to perform our religious rituals which require that a we have a Rabbi from an Arab country here in Egypt and that we have the food needed during fasting times, as things were under former President Mohamed Naguib.

Q: These are not the first Israeli and Zionist attacks on you. Why do you think this happening?

A: Because I am holding on to my father's legacy which was perpetually attacked by the Zionist press. Many people do not understand that I belong to my country regardless of my religion. Zionism is a racist movement that discriminates between people on the basis of religion. They do not understand that I am loyal to my country, not Israel. It was our father that nurtured those feelings of fierce loyalty in us.

When someone asks why we have not left the country, I feel provoked. Why would we leave the country and emigrate? And where would we go? Why do some people think that all the Jews should emigrate to Israel? Do all Muslim emigrate to Saudi Arabia?

Q: When your father, Shehata Haroun, was asked to choose between his country and his elder daughter Mona, he chose his country. Can you tell us more about this?

A: In 1954, my sister was diagnosed with leukemia when she was four years old. From what I hear from my family, my father loved her like crazy and he took her along with him to every place he went to. When she got sick, the only treatment available in Egypt was blood transfusion. My father donated blood to her every day because they shared the same blood group. But the doctors said they could not do anything more for her and told my father to to take her to France [for treatment]. He asked for permission to travel but was told he would not be allowed back. He said that nobody should force their will on him and Mona died.

Q: How did you expect the conditions of the Jewish community in Egypt to be, and how did you actually find them, after you became the president of the Jewish community?

A: I used to say a lot that [Haroun's sister] Nadia and I will be the ones to close the door on the history of Jews in Egypt and my mother used to tell me that Shehata Haroun had prepared us for the day.

He nurtured our feelings of belonging to the country and he taught us about our rights and duties as Egyptian Jews. But the burden is heavy.

I did not mix much with members of the community, only at feasts and funerals. Just thinking about their affairs is difficult because it is all about trouble, from a humanitarian point of view. The elderly live in fear because of the image of Jews being promoted as traitors and spies. They fear people finding out they're Jews.

I fear I will not be able to provide them with a decent ending to their lives or to fulfill my pledge to safeguard the Jewish legacy and restore it. This legacy is part of me as an Egyptian Jew.

Q: What are the major problems that you face as the president of the community?

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A: Besides what I just said, I have concerns regarding the determination of Jewish property. So far, I do not have all the required documents for that and I also fear my position will be politicised even though it is of a purely humanitarian nature.

Q: Many Egyptians frown upon the presence of Jews in Egypt. How do you explain this?

A: This is because Egypt's history has been falsified, not only with regards to the Jews but also many other things. If a person wants to progress then he or she must know their history well. It is time to correct the path, we have to know our history well. The youth have an opportunity and tools for knowledge which I hope they will use because they are our hope. Indeed, there were Jews in Egypt, most of whom have left Egypt but they did not do so willingly. They were forced to leave and only a few of those who left Egypt went to Israel. The establishment of Israel has put us, Egyptian Jews, in trouble because it is a country built on religious foundations.We paid the price. I hope this does not happen with other communities. I beg those leaving now not to leave because the burden is heavy and the sadness deep to be the one to close the door on the history of a section of the Egyptian society.

Q: Have you faced any problems as a result of the religion slot on your ID?

A: First, religion is about how you treat people, but that does not mean that the religion slot on my ID has not caused me trouble because of people's ignorance. For instance, I had to wait two years to get an ID. When I went to issue an ID, the employees were surprised about my religion and they kept inquiring if it was right to wrong. They even asked me if I were Egyptian or not. In the last step before the issuing of the ID, the employee sitting at her computer called her boss and pointed to the religion slot and he told her “to write it as it is, this is a religion of God." When I went to correct something in my birth certificate, the employee asked me if I were Egyptian and I said yes but then he objected, saying that I was born at al-Saqf al-Israeli Hospital--the name of the hospital where I was born in Alexandria--and so I asked him if someone born at the “Railways Hospital” would have a "railways nationality" or another born at the Italian Hospital an Italian nationality. He asked to see my passport. After he saw it he asked me to write down my address and phone number and when I asked why, he said for "security reasons." I refused to write them and he did not issue me a birth certificate.

Q: How do you feel as an Egyptian Jew when you find the media, including state-owned media, attacking Jews and smearing their image?

A: We are not the only ones under attack. Christians and moderate Islam also come under fire.

Q: Intentionally or not, some in Egypt (and beyond) believe the Jews are invariably loyal to Israel. What do you think?

A: My loyalty is to my country where I was educated, where I grew up, fell in love and got married. I am loyal to the country that made me. I do not think that a French or English Jew would be loyal to Israel. Indeed, he or she would defend their religion but would also defend his or her country. The same applies to Egyptian Jews.

Q: Could that be because some do not differentiate between Judaism and Zionism?

A: The failure to draw a distinction between Judaism as a religion and the Israeli state is the result of ignorance, which is to blame on social science curricula and teachers... I remember that in a social sciences lesson, the teacher described Jews as dogs and I was the only Jew in class and all the students looked at me. I stood up and left the class. When I went back home, I told my father about what happened and he told me that children in Israel, too, are told that Arabs are dogs, so I felt better. The problem is that the person who said so is a teacher that is supposed to be raising children, so when someone like her says so it is a catastrophe. Much like some people mix up al-Qaeda and Islam, others mix Israel and Judaism up. Just like not every Muslim is a member of al-Qaeda, not every Jew is an Israeli. Regarding Israel’s Law of Return, which states that all Jews should return to Israel, these are their own man-made laws.

Q: For reasons related to the Egyptian government and the president of the Jewish community, the affairs of Egyptian Jews were shrouded in ambiguity. Is this ambiguity going to remain under your presidency?

A: Magda Shehata Haroun is an open book. I have to address this villification of Jews and remove the ambiguity surrounding the community. The Jewish synagogue has to remain open and receive people just like mosques and the churches. If there are security concerns that result from ignorance, such as fears that someone might walk into the synagogue and bomb it thinking he would go to heaven, the whole of Egypt will lose. Everyone should be open to everyone. I hope that one day I will see a Jewish Museum in Egypt, one that will contain artifacts and daily life tools so that the people would learn that we are not different. We eat, drink and pray and we have common traditions even when it comes to burial rituals. The coming generations need to know that we were part of this country. We have Islamic and Coptic museums and I hope there will be a Jewish one.

Q: Egyptian officials were absent from the funeral of the former head of the Jewish community. How do you view this?

A: They may have been busy. The issue of Jews in Egypt is a marginal issue compared to other much more important issues. However, there are party officials who came and I thank them for their attendance.

Q: Were you concerned about the Jewish community when the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power?

A: I feared for the future of Egypt, just like every Egyptian fears for his or her country. The Jews are part of this country.

Q: To what extent has Egypt changed compared to the Egypt Magda Haroun knows?

A: Egypt has changed a lot. But Egyptians have not. Those beautiful Egyptians have not and we will return like we were in the past, where the people check on their neighbors and greet them in feats and kids play without asking each other about their religions. Mina will play with Mohamed but Maurice will no longer be there.

Q: You have not visited Israel so far, are you thinking of visiting it anytime soon?

A: Not now and not in the future. Like father, like daughter. Let me tell you, some people have been critical because the the Israeli ambassador attended the funeral of the last president of our community, but I say this man came to perform a duty and to pray, so was I expected to kick him out? This is the House of God. If I enter a mosque or church, I wouldn't want anyone to kick me out. But then, was I the one who accepted his presence in Egypt in the first place?

Q: Does the Jewish community receive any support from Israel, even if religious in nature?

A: Not at all. The community does not receive any support from Israel.

Q: The Jewish cemetery in Bassateen is one of the oldest in the world, and you said before it is in decrepit condition. Has its condition in any way improved?

A: Its condition is bad and the informally-built area around it is in even worse condition. The only thing I can do is build a fence around it but I have to have resources to do that. My dream is to see the entire Bassateen developed because it is in very bad condition. When the area will be developed, the residents of Bassateen will be the first to take care of the Jewish cemetery and we will participate in its development so they know that Jews are not devils or spies.

Edited translation from Al-Masry Al-Youm

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