

Egyptian Alexandria Jewish girls during Bat Mitzva. *Courtesy: Nebi Daniel Association photo collection*

A reading into the history of Egyptian Jews: Grand narratives and fragile identities

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the absence of a homeland. To have been able to stand outside all social relationships was something extremely beautiful — this complete openness and lack of prejudice that I experienced with my mother, it was something charming. But for freedom you pay dearly. This condition could not continue in the hour of liberation (the foundation of the state of Israel) for more than five minutes.

— Hannah Arendt (edited excerpt from this 1964 interview with Günter Gaus)

Perhaps the greatest lesson the history of Egyptian Jews can teach us is how fragile identity is in the face of the modern state, nationalism and ideology. It demonstrates how a set of extremely complicated and contradictory relationships and experiences cannot easily survive the scrutiny of concepts like citizenship and historical phenomena such as the fight against colonialism.

In October, a group of interested persons sat down together in Cairo for the second of the Mada Encounters seminar series on history and cultural memory. During the discussion, we traced the history of Egyptian Jews since the beginning of the twentieth century to see how a social group — whose members are largely no longer considered Egyptian citizens — was able to participate fully in all aspects of life and meld with so-called Egyptian society for an entire century, only to be checked by a disruptive political-legal development embodied in the idea of nationality. Egyptian Jews, diverse as they are — thus

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"I discovered that many Jews were patriotic, and that you cannot stereotype that Jews are traitors. It's not true. Yes, some of them supported the Zionist movement, but others were against it."

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thwarting any sweeping attempt at analysis — represent a piece of the puzzle for anyone attempting to come to terms with the reality that existed in the pre-modern nation state.

The complex relationships Egyptian Jews forged with Egyptian society reflect the consequences of the concept of nationality. Historical developments put Egyptian Jews at odds with the changing political, social and economic reality in Egypt and the Middle East, which led to a huge number of Jews being deported and others escaping to Europe, America or Israel. For many people, the ensuing sense of absence has evoked a terrible nostalgia. But this has not tackled the mechanisms that permitted the state of exceptionalism in which Egyptian Jews existed, and ignores the consequences of the social engineering by which a group of people are removed and a society re-shaped in the name of "national liberation" or "fighting colonialism". Indeed, nostalgia ignores the fact that, wittingly or unwittingly, this group was an integral part of the country's history and the elements that make up its heritage surround us. Confronting this demands more than mere tears over a bygone past.

In order to understand how the 100,000 Egyptian Jews living in the country in 1948 ended up as immigrants or exiles — leaving behind what some have estimated to be fewer than 200 self-identifying Egyptian Jews after 1967 — we have to look at the historical context in which coexistence and prosperity turned into exile and demonization.

The Jewish community in Egypt formed through a series of migratory waves, including the Karaites in the 7th century and the Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century. Despite diversity in racial backgrounds (Arabized, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews) and religious practices (Karaite and Rabbanite), they all experienced in

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one way or another the same historical context.

Before the rise of national and independence movements, the Ottoman millet system implemented in the Middle East had guaranteed a degree of independence for some non-Muslim sects (in building their own schools and places of worship, for example) even as they remained subject to a hierarchy in which Muslims came top. So long as the Ottoman state continued to dominate a large part of the Middle East, ideas such as citizenship and nationality were not manifested with the political and legal connotations they have now; for all those subject to the sultan were considered “subjects of the Ottoman state” who could move among its mandates with a lot of freedom. This might explain why many immigrants to Egypt (Jewish or otherwise), during and before the nineteenth century, were not preoccupied with nationality as a general idea. Nor were they concerned with proving their “Egyptian nationality,” because “nationality” was not contingent on “citizenship” as the two would only be connected later in history. Further, Foreign Capitulations (imtiyazat), conferred privileges on some foreigners, and the ease with which people in Egypt could buy many nationalities (such as Italian, Russian and Spanish) prompted many to do so. Those who did largely saw in these deals nothing beyond formal purchases of privileges, while their “patriotism” or “loyalty” to Egypt remained unquestioned.

This fluidity, which permitted the coexistence of several loyalties, changed for three main reasons. First, the rise of



In 1949, David Ben-Gurion said of Yemeni Jews arriving in Israel: “They are behind us by more than 2000 years."

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Egyptian nationalism and the emergence of independence movements forced the question of what the Egyptian nation is and who its citizens are. Despite its slogan, “religion for God, the homeland for all,” nationalism produced fascist movements (such as Misr al-Fatah, or Young Egypt, for example) that limited the definition of an Egyptian to only Muslims of two Egyptian parents. Those who didn’t fit these proscribed criteria came to be perceived as either foreigners or foreign agents. Second, the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially after the war of 1948, pushed the Arab League into issuing several secret decisions to embassies and foreign affairs ministers (not circulated in the media except much later) concerning Arab Jews living in Arab states that perpetuated racist practices, leading to marginalization and eventually exile. Third, the military framework that dominated from 1948 to 1973 (the period of the wars with Israel) dictated a security perspective in dealing with anyone with any relation to Israel – including the remaining Egyptian Jews.

Parallel to these historical developments, a set of legal procedures effectively perpetuated the idea of Jews being “outsiders” or “foreigners”. The Nationality Law of 1929 left 40,000 Egyptian Jews without a national identity, the Foreign Capitulations were revoked in 1937, the 1949 Company Law placed a limit on the number of foreigners a company could employ, and finally Jewish property was nationalized in 1956 and in 1960-1961.

A quick glance at Egyptian Jewish history reveals a very diverse society that could not readily stand as a unified entity to fight for its own interests. On the other hand, this history also reveals the complexity of its relationships within Egyptian society. In our seminar, examining specific texts helped shed light on diverse Egyptian Jewish experiences and open new horizons for re-imagining Egyptian Jews and

their history.

The crisis of "Arab Jews" as a category of analysis

The historical truth that Jewish communities existed and were completely integrated in Arab states in every aspect of life, to the extent of using Arabic for all facets of life, even religious practices, is often overlooked. Ella Shohat's article *Reflections by an Arab Jew* helps place the "Arab Jew" as a category with its own historical specificity beyond the dichotomy of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that of Jew against Arab. Shohat (b. 1959) shows that, in fact, before the eruption of the 1948 war, there were Jewish communities that did not perceive themselves separately from the Arab societies to which they belong, culturally or linguistically. They perceived their identity and culture as Arab. Their development of Hebrew dialects influenced by Arabic and its sounds is perhaps the clearest sign of the Jewish Arab history that has been wiped out and crushed by Arab societies. When members of these sects of Arab Jews integrated into Israeli society, they continued to retain their "Eastern" or "Mizrahi" accent, which differs from the "Western" or "Ashkenazi" one, and so they became stigmatized. The systematic discrimination against Arab Jews in Israel, which is now an integral part of their identity, became another side of their demonization by Arab states as foreign agents. Every party to the Arab-Israeli conflict took advantage of Arab Jews to settle scores with one another, and so the narrative of the European Jews' collective marginalization and exile became reformulated to apply to the Arab Jews' expulsion from Arab states, nationalization of property, and so on. The Israeli state alleged that this was equivalent to the expulsion of the Palestinians, while Arab states announced that all Jews were agents of Israel and continued to nationalize their assets and property in order to eliminate a group of

questionable loyalty.

Shohat's term "Arab Jew" thus becomes a seemingly contradictory term whispering a historical truth collapsed by political and security considerations, regardless of the real existence and experience of this group of people.

Easterners, agents and strangers

In her writing, Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917-1979) demonstrates clearly how fragile the identities that existed before the nation state became in the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which reconfigured and reshaped them. Kahanoff, who left Egypt in 1940 to study in the US and then France before settling in Israel in 1954, writes about the experience of Sephardic Jews as a basic constituent of the national bourgeoisie and the rise of national capitalism in early 1920s Egypt. We discern that she belonged to a class that profited from the Foreign Capitulations. Her cultural referents were European, almost completely isolated from Egyptian society, except in rare moments usually marked with sadness and tragedy. Kahanoff talks about the experience of Jews living as strangers in Egypt, a part of society, yet isolated. "It was rare that men and women belonging to different communities — that is, whose children could not marry — would sit together on a veranda, and rarer indeed that they would share a meal," she wrote in her unfinished novel Tamra. "These subtle, invisible barriers were what prevented intermarriage between children of people who did business together, or went to the same places. Even if one was invited, one did not linger too long."

Kahanoff's experience, as a stranger among strangers in one way or another, drove her to reformulate a parallel concept to the Arab Jews, that of "Levantine". She uses it to refer to the Jewish societies that lived and integrated in

Mediterranean countries, sharing with their customs, traditions and world-views. Kahanoff seems to be trying to formulate this concept to overcome the crisis of categorizing Jews according to racial background and language, yet also to emphasize the difference between the experience of eastern Jews and European Jews, especially with regard to the Holocaust, which resulted in a completely different relationship with eastern societies until the eruption of the 1948 war. Eastern Jews' historical and personal narratives did not hinge on tragedy and annihilation.

The Egyptian Jews: A different narrative

The defeat of 1967 made clear that the state's security-military outlook, in which the label of the "Egyptian Jew" was not in line with the state's perceived security in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, would drive it to deny Egyptian identity to its Jewish citizens. The state, thus, started a relentless campaign to exile or force them to leave.

This development is central to the stories of both the Egyptian Jewish lawyer Shehata Haroun and the Rome Group, as the Egyptian communist movement abroad was known, under the leadership of Henry Curiel. Despite the repeated arrest and detention of Haroun, who also wrote about his experience, he refused to leave Egypt and insisted on retaining his Egyptian nationality until his death. The struggle of Egyptian Jews in the communist movement and their insistence on supporting initiatives for common understanding and closeness between Egyptian communists and progressive and communist movements in Europe and Israel during the 1950s and 1960s, as exemplified by the Rome Group and Haroun's efforts, is a parallel narrative to that of departure, exile and the willing or unwilling separation of Egyptian Jews from their contexts.

Imposing a single narrative on Egyptian Jewish history makes it difficult to examine that history and its legacy. Choosing to admit the diversity and multiplicity of the lives of Egyptian Jews and their various relationships with Egyptian society contrasts with the many efforts to exploit this experience in superficial, crude and political ways (by suppressing it or through naive, exaggerated representations). Reading Egyptian Jewish testimonies thus becomes an attempt to see new horizons for envisioning the future of this heritage and history.

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