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# In the tracks of Egypt's Jews



-The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora, Joel Beinin, Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005. pp329 -Yahud misr min al-izdihar ila al-shatat (Egypt's Jews: from Prosperity to Dispersion), Mohamed Aboul-Ghar, Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2004. pp246

Albert Arie, an Egyptian lawyer in his mid-seventies, who was born a Jew in Cairo to a Turkish father and later converted to Islam and married a Muslim woman, recently told a journalist from the magazine *Egypt Today*, who was interviewing him about his Jewish background, "What is it about this Jew rush these days? Lately everyone seems to be excited about the Jews of Egypt. Why?"



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**A 1940s photo of members of the Egyptian Jewish community at the Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo, with Grand Rabbi Haim Nahoum Effendi and Cattaui Pasha in the centre**

It is a legitimate question, as there does seem to be a great demand these days for writings on Egyptian Jewry, much as there is a great demand for writings on the history of the monarchical regime in Egypt. Egyptians want to know about the gaps in their modern history, and about topics that were either suppressed during the era of high Nasserism, or when dealt with, were tinted by the ideological biases of the regime at the expense of historical fact.

However, in the case of Egyptian scholars writing on Egyptian Jewry, producing a well-researched work on the topic is not an easy task. A substantial section of the archival material, necessary for any serious research, exists outside Egypt, while that inside the country is either inaccessible or requires multiple permits. Egyptian academia and the Egyptian National Archives are also not, unfortunately, always all that they should be.

Thus, in the absence of conditions conducive to rigorous scholarly research most Egyptian historians, popular or academic for that matter, will tend to rely on secondary sources, interviews

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and newspapers, and this no doubt affects the quality of the work produced.

Finally, the history of the Arab-Israeli struggle since the issuing of the British government's Balfour Declaration in 1917 until the present day has certainly had an impact on much of the work produced on the topic. For a long time, as Beinin correctly notes in his *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, most of the works produced in Egypt before Sadat's peace treaty with Israel in 1979 concentrated on the various aspects of the Arab-Israeli struggle and Zionist interests in the region, rather than on this country's Jewish community.

And while it is true that the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty played a major role in prompting "an interest in the modern history of the Jews of Egypt for the first time in a generation," as Beinin argues in the last chapter of his book, entitled "Opposing Camp David and Remembering the Jews of Egypt," his claim that, "Because Egyptian writers have been motivated by opposition to the terms of the peace treaty, the representation of Egyptian Jews in their recent work is largely negative and even anti- Semitic," is simply not true.

For some reason, many Westerners fail to recognise the distinction Egyptians and Arabs make between Judaism and Zionism. The general Arab viewpoint is that a Jew who chooses to live in Israel, actively participating in that state's aggressive military machinery, is a Zionist, and thus it is not a case of "minimising the distinction between Jews and Zionists," as Beinin argues, but rather that between Israelis and Zionists. Israel is the real problem and not Jews, and it is indeed ahistorical to suggest that Arabs can deal with Israeli nationals who lived in the Arab world before the creation of the state of Israel in isolation from the ongoing aggressive military drive of that state.




This belief, for example, informs much of the work of "The Committee for the Defence of the National Culture," an Egyptian committee that does not seem to enjoy the approval of Beinin, since he says in the book that it was "organized in response to what some leftist intellectuals considered the subversion of Egypt's authentic national culture by Zionist influences". One wonders where the notion of authenticity came from, or how it entered the vocabulary of the said committee, for, as one of the committee's founding members, the present writer can readily testify that, while the committee is certainly anti-Zionist, its members have never believed in one "authentic" culture, whatever that might be. What they have spent a good deal of time discussing and documenting, by contrast, is the many different components of the national culture that they have sought to promote.

In general, while Benin's work is undoubtedly scholarly, his brand of scholarship is not above the subjective dictates of a specific, non-Arab standpoint: he believes, for example, that on 15 May, 1948, the Egyptian government, together with the other Arab states, "invaded Israel", an idea to which most Arabs cannot subscribe.

Thus, while Beinin's scholarly work is of immense value to anyone interested in the history of Egyptian Jewry, there is still a need for equally scholarly works from Egyptian vantage points. However, until this happens, and to satisfy an increasing popular demand to know more about the gaps in Egypt's modern history, a number of works written by amateur historians and journalists are now being produced.

Mohamed Aboul-Ghar's book *Yahud misr min al-izdihar ila al-shatat* on the history of Egyptian Jewry is one of these. And the one real merit of this book is that it has set itself the aim of showing that Egyptians are not anti-Semitic, in which task it of course succeeds.

As a result, *Yahud misr* is a book with the best of intentions, but the best intentions do not always result in a truly valuable publication. Unfortunately, both in form and in content it is a rather ham-fisted volume, often leaving the reader confused, the present reviewer included. Divided into 26 short chapters, together with a conclusion, the book supposedly contains 352 pages, if the table of contents at the end is anything to go by. However, in reality the volume ends on page 239, after which a five- page bibliography follows, together with the table of contents. This uncertain

presentation does not inspire confidence and provokes misgivings regarding the book's content.

Such misgivings turn out to be warranted, since a glance at the table of contents indicates that the author may have bitten off more than he can chew and may be attempting to do too much in too short a compass. How can one usefully discuss topics such as "The Egyptian Jews: Religious Sects and Ethnic Origins," the heading of one of the book's chapters, in five pages? And what can really be achieved in the 10 pages given to "The Jews and Egyptian Economy," one of the longest chapters in the book? As a result, *Yahud misr* is a rather mixed bag of odds and ends, and one feels that no single author could hope to do justice to such a wide range of topics.

Indeed, the author might have benefited in terms of methodology from Beinin's book, a major source for his work, much of which is Beinin served up in simplified form for Arabic-speaking readers. Perhaps this is where the problem lies, for while Beinin is a professional scholar working on a topic he is well- equipped to deal with, Aboul-Ghar is a professor of medicine and a leading gynaecologist and obstetrician who admits to having written this book in "whatever time could be extracted from my practice and scientific research". Such an effort is to be genuinely applauded, and the author's research and sincerity are not in doubt. However, it is hardly surprisingly if *Yahud misr* sometimes reads like the shorthand notes of someone conducting his private studies in public in whatever spare moments he can find for them.

In his introduction to the book Aboul-Ghar says that "being myself an academic researcher in the field of medicine, I know how to source my materials and how to provide footnotes. However, in this book I have chosen instead to address the general reader interested in this country's history, and have therefore presented all my sources and references at the end of the study." Yet, turning to the end of the book, one finds that there are no end notes, and that instead there is only an extended bibliography. This is a disappointment for readers wishing to discover the exact provenance of Aboul-Ghar's materials and to follow up on their own reading.

The same kind of uncertainty affects the contents of the book and the style in which it is written, Aboul- Ghar's stated aim of writing for the general reader apparently leading him to share whatever he has found interesting in what he has read and to present it in no clear order. Again, while many of Aboul-Ghar's comments are pertinent and interesting, readers having access to books in English and in Arabic are likely to prefer the greater professionalism of Beinin's book, while readers having access only to Arabic might be better served by a translation.

A typical comment concerns André Aciman's memoir *Out of Egypt*, a book which enjoyed some international exposure when it was published in 1994. Aboul-Ghar says "after finishing the book, my general impression was that the author is frank and honest, and that he has narrated the history of his family with simplicity and precision. Perhaps the reason for that lies in his having sat with many of the elderly members of the family documenting and checking his material, and that most -- if not all -- of the family members mentioned by the writer were dead by the time his book appeared, which saved him the embarrassment of their reading the book. [In the book] his family is depicted as it was, with all its good and bad feelings towards the Egyptians."

This informal, chatty tone works well in certain sections, especially in the last 30 pages where the author interviews a number of Egyptian and formerly Egyptian Jews on their memories of Egypt before the creation of the state of Israel and shortly afterwards. There is some valuable material here not found in Beinin or elsewhere. However, in general the author's tone jars somewhat, since one is often left wondering why he has chosen to intervene in the narrative with comments such as, "in my opinion this is a fair assessment," or the opposite, given that he is not, as he would be the first to admit, an authority on the topic.

Moreover, the book is replete with the kind of hearsay that has all too often characterised much Egyptian writing on the history and fortunes of Egyptian Jews. One famous example of this that has now acquired a certain notoriety concerns the so-called Lavon Affair of 1954, code named Operation Susannah, which can only be understood with a bit of historical background.

As Beinin explains, "In July 1954, Israeli military intelligence ordered an espionage network of

Egyptian Jews it had formed three years earlier to launch Operation Susannah -- a campaign to firebomb the main Alexandria post office, the United States Information Service Library in Cairo, the Cairo train station, and several movie theatres in Cairo and Alexandria." Members of the network were apprehended in Egypt, tried and given sentences ranging from execution to long periods of imprisonment. Two were acquitted. After 14 years in Egyptian prisons, four members of the network -- Marcelle Ninio, Robert Dassa, Victor Levy and Philip Natanson -- were returned to Israel as part of a prisoner exchange deal following the 1967 Arab- Israeli war.

In 1978, a book appeared in English recounting the story of these four, as told to the Israeli journalist Aviezer Golan. The name of the book was *Operation Susannah*, and by the early 1980s it had been brought to the attention of a popular Egyptian journalist, who published his own account of the affair, borrowing liberally from the English publication without mentioning that he was doing so.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with popular books, the translation was not always correct, and the Susannah of the title, which the English book properly says is the name of a common flower in Egypt, became *Suzanah*. Suzanah then began to acquire a life of her own as a Mata Hari- type female spy, subsequently rearing her head in many Egyptian books dealing with Israeli espionage. She is also mentioned in Aboul-Ghar's book, where some people are quoted as saying that they knew her personally.

On page 226, for example, Youssef Darwish, a highly respected senior Egyptian lawyer of Jewish background, says he knew Suzanah and that she lived near him for some years. However, Darwish knows very well that there is no such person as Suzanah, and he is probably referring to Marcelle Ninio, one of the four released in 1967 whom many people knew personally at the time.

Indeed, I know at least half a dozen Egyptian women who knew Ninio well, since she was an inmate of the Qanater Women's Prison in the late 1950s and 1960s, as were they. The point to make is that if the afterlife of the Lavon Affair, aka Operation Susannah, and the story of the phantom Suzanah, is still of interest then why not check the sources first hand, or even read the account given in Golan's book?

Last month, I met a Western academic and well- known authority on modern Egypt who was visiting the country briefly. Our conversation turned to the modest contributions made by Egyptian historians to the writing of Egypt's modern history, especially in Arabic. Where, asked this man, is "the authoritative Egyptian biography of Nasser?" The question hurts, because it seems that for some time to come we shall have to depend on foreigners to write the history of modern Egypt, as well as on the few Egyptians working in foreign languages, if we want to read anything that is rigorous, let alone authoritative.

The publishers of *Yahud misr*, an institution established at the end of the 19th century, say the book was a bestseller, and I can well believe them. It provides shorthand notes on almost everything related to Egypt's Jewish community over the last two centuries, a topic which is currently much discussed and is of great interest to the general reader. However, this is all the more reason for the publishers to have exercised greater editorial control, in order to produce a book in presentable shape and to avoid the kind of mistakes that unfortunately mar the present one.

**By Mona Anis**

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