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What happened to the Jews of Egypt?

You wouldn't know it from walking around Cairo today, but there used to be a vibrant Jewish population in Egypt. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, this 80,000-strong community was a pillar of the country's political, economic, and cultural life — and then it died out, collateral damage to the political and religious ...

BY DAVID KENNER | MARCH 27, 2013, 12:43 PM

You wouldn't know it from walking around Cairo today, but there used to be a vibrant Jewish population in Egypt. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, this 80,000-strong community was a pillar of the country's political, economic, and cultural life — and then it died out, collateral damage to the political and religious hatreds of the past six decades.

Today, a film opens in Cairo that aims to explain what happened. "Jews of Egypt" is the product of five years of work by director Amir Ramses, who self-funded the project with his producer, Haitham al-Khamissi. I sat down with Ramses in a Cairo cafe, and he explained to me that his documentary not only aims to explore the history of the country's Jewish community, but also to present a cautionary tale as Egypt goes through yet another period of upheaval.

"There's an attempt to narrow how you identify the word Egyptian: You have to be a certain religion, and a certain sect in that religion. But then also you have to have a certain political point of view, and an ethical point of view that matches what the majority thinks," Ramses said. "The film states clearly we were Jews, Christians, Muslims...That's how open-minded we were, that's how tolerant we were. I made the film as a warning sign to not lose that."

Ramses experienced firsthand how these ideas can still provoke government suspicion. Egypt's Culture Ministry stalled in issuing him a permit to screen "Jews of Egypt" commercially — and finally, one day before the scheduled opening, he was informed that there would be a delay because the national security agencies had asked to review the film.

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"Let's be honest, national security in Egypt has a paranoia...they themselves have this notion that I'm trying to fight in the movie, where every Jew is an Israeli Zionist spy who's working against the government," Ramses said. "They've been raised into this paranoia. Cheap adventure novels, comic books, even history books in school orient you to this."

Ramses credits the subsequent public outcry for his success in eventually gaining the government's approval to screen the film. But he still castigated the national security apparatus and the Culture Ministry for what he said was an illegal attempt to censor his film. "You just can't be a police agency and break the law," he said.

Even after clearing the government hurdles, Ramses still faces an uphill battle in healing the wounds of the past. The beginning of the end for Egypt's Jewish population came in 1948, when Egypt's declaration of war against Israel coincided with a series of bombings in Jewish neighborhoods and against Jewish-owned businesses — spearheaded, according to historian Joel Beinin's The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry, by the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1954, the disastrous Lavon Affair — where Israeli intelligence agents recruited Egyptian Jews to bomb Western sites in Egypt in an effort to convince Britain to maintain control of the Suez Canal — further heightened religious tensions.

The position of Egyptian Jews became completely untenable during the 1956 Suez War, where Israel, France, and Britain joined together in an attack on Egypt: In response, President Gamal Abdel Nasser's government promulgated emergency decrees that provided a pretext for the arrest of Jews without charge and the seizure of their priority. Many more Jews were expelled or fled — in both cases, they were issued documents that explicitly stated they would not be allowed to return.

"The rule is that if you left after '56, and signed [a document saying] you will not come back to Egypt, if they forced you to do that...you are still banned up until today," Ramses said. "Which is stupid — we are at a point in history where we have a peace treaty with Israel, where Israelis who are not Egyptians can come to Egypt with just a stamp on their passport, while Egyptians who have never set foot in Israel...are still banned."

Absurd government restrictions, struggles over the place of minorities in society — it all sounds familiar. The past is never dead. It's not even past.

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