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The approaching end of Egypt's Jewish community

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The Egyptian Jewish community is facing the ugly truth that its existence is coming to an end. The population of Jewish Egyptians

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has fallen from 75,000 to 80,000 in 1947 [1] to only seven today [2]. Most of those left are elderly women, who need daily medical care.

I met Nadia Haroun, the deputy leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, for the last time in November 2013. I remember that day because I met her at the same time as her older sister Magda, the community's leader. Nadia was smiling while telling me, "Magda told me a lot about you, I was looking forward to seeing you." For me, I couldn't quite believe it. "Today I met two Jews? I was the one looking forward to that."

The Jewish community is the oldest religious community in Egypt, and it has faced a wave of propaganda, defamation and hate speech. That legacy is still felt today through stereotypes and slurs that persist in everyday language.

I was criticized for writing an article in Arabic entitled, "We are sorry, Jews." Critics wondered how a Christian could defend Jews, when they took part in the crucifixion of Jesus. Ironically, many of those critics are Muslims extremists, some of whom may themselves be discriminating against Christians.

Unfortunately, Egyptian history is full of violations of the essential rights of minorities and vulnerable groups.

On November 2, 1945, anti-British, anti-Zionist (and anti-Jewish) demonstrations took place in Cairo on the occasion of the 28th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. A synagogue was burned down, 27 Torah scrolls were desecrated, and a soup kitchen, a home for the aged, a shelter for poor transients, the Jewish hospital, the quarters

autobiography?



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of the Art Society and several Jewish public buildings were damaged or destroyed [7].

After the 1948 war, a hostile environment against Jews strengthened, as they were suspected of acting as a “fifth column” for Israel. After the 1952 coup, Jews were subject to detention, deportation and sequestration. At least 900 Jews had been arrested as of December 7, 1956 [8]. In the mid-50s, then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser started his policy of nationalization, which had a devastating impact on the Jewish community, as they controlled a broad sector of the Egyptian economy. American diplomats noted that sequestration decisions were filed against 539 Jews by name and 105 firms, in addition to Jews covered in the sequential orders filed against British and French nationals [9].

In November 1956, the regime modified its citizenship and nationality laws in order to keep Jews and other minorities from becoming Egyptian citizens [10]. The situation became more complicated at the end of November, by when at least 500 Egyptian and stateless Jews had been expelled from Egypt [11], not including a considerable number of Jewish citizens of Britain and France. Most of the expellees were heads of families. They were ordered to leave the country within two to seven days. In most cases, the individual served with a deportation order was responsible for supporting his family, so all members of the family would have to leave the country [12]. Thus, this measure lead finally to the mass migration of Jews. They almost vanished from Egypt.

A small number of Jewish families stayed in Egypt, among them leftist activist Chehata Haroun and his family. According to Haroun’s daughter, Magda, when her father tried to fly her older sister to Paris for treatment, Egyptian



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Whilst the human rights movement has traditionally focussed on exposing police violations, fighting for economic justice and raising the ceiling for freedom of expression, a battle for personal rights has also emerged as a priority, especially in...

authorities agreed only to give him an exit visa with no return, so he left his daughter to die and never left the country [13]. When he died in 2001, his family had to bring a French rabbi to perform the ritual prayer for him, because they did not have a Jewish rabbi in Egypt.

The same happened with the death of Nadia.

Nadia died in March 2014, and I had the honor to attend her funeral. Egyptian state officials did not attend, although they typically attend funerals of Al-Azhar sheikhs or bishops from the Coptic Church. Nadia left her older sister Magda alone to carry the burden of the Jewish community in Egypt.

Early this month, it was the first anniversary of Nadia's death, and Magda went to her older sister's grave along with her current Christian husband and her Muslim daughters to perform their rites. She found that a group of youth had desecrated her sister's grave. They also insulted her and insulted Judaism [14]. I can't imagine how Magda felt about that. It's very hard for anyone to see his beloved ones insulted in life and death, just because they had a different religion.

Despite the fact that we have the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the world, they have been left vulnerable to desecration and vandalism. Cemeteries are not the only neglected part of Jewish legacy in Egypt. According to Magda, there are about 12 Jewish synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria left without maintenance. The majority were closed because there is no one left to pray there.

Furthermore, there are registers belonging to the Jewish community in Egypt, which are part of history that need to be digitalized and safeguarded. The original written Torah also needs to be restored and kept in a museum, along with

other parts of the heritage of this dying community.

Magda told me once about her deepest fear — that after she is gone, what remains of Egypt's Jewish heritage will be lost. I remember Magda's speech at her sister's funeral. She just looked in my eye and said, "It's your history, Mina." Then she turned to one of her friends and said, "It's your history, Mohamed."

About six decades of propaganda and hate speech finally led to the end of this country's Jewish community. The same hate speech led to the forced evictions of the Baha'i from Sohag in 2009 [15]. The same hate speech led to the brutal murder of four Shia men in June 2013 [16]. The same hate speech led to a swell of sectarian violence against Christians, with dozens of churches burned down, and dozens more Christian homes and stores looted since 2011.

Hate speech and lack of equal protection under the law inside the community creates a hostile environment for minorities, where violence could be justified. Since 2011, at least 40 incidents of sectarian violence occurred in Egypt [17]. Most of these incidents followed hate speech, which incited the perpetrators to commit the attacks. Since 2011, sectarian violence took the lives of at least 100 Egyptians, where the absence of accountability and lack of protection for vulnerable groups had become a common feature [18].

We should learn from our mistakes. We should start preserving our Jewish heritage and restore synagogues. We should face hate speech and discrimination. We should stop sectarian violence and bring its perpetrators to justice.

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[1] Beinin, Joel. The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

[2] An interview with Magda Haroun the current President of Jewish community this month.

[3] Gamal El-Din, Abdel Aziz. “History of Egypt” : From the beginning of the first AD century until the twentieth century, based on Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’s manuscript “History of the Patriarchs”, Cairo,2006, part1,p 99.

[4] Gamal El-Din (2006), p.105.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Gamal El-Din (2006), p.107.

[7] M.Laskier, Michael. EGYPTIAN JEWRY UNDER THE NASSER REGIME, 1956-70, New York, 1991.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Tignor, Robert L. Capitalism and Nationalism At the End of Empire: State and Business in Decolonizing Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya, 1945-1963. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. p134.

[10] M.Laskier, Michael. EGYPTIAN JEWRY UNDER THE NASSER REGIME, 1956-70,New York, 1991.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] An interview with Magda Haroun the current President of Jewish community in May 2014.

[14] An interview with Magda Haroun the current President of Jewish community this month.

[15] US Department of State, Annual report on international

religious freedom, 2009.

[16] Amnesty International, “Egypt: President Morsi must send clear message against attacks on Shi’a Muslims”, DATE, available online.

[17] Egyptian Commission For Rights and Freedoms, Unpublished research , “Minorities In Egypt”, March 2015.

[18] Ibid.

Jews in Egypt | sectarianism | religious discrimination | religious minorities | hate speech