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Private Motive for Egypt's Public Embrace of a Jewish Past

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN** SEPT. 6, 2009

CAIRO — Egyptians generally do not make any distinction between Jewish people and Israelis. Israelis are seen as the enemy, so Jews are, too.

Khalid Badr, 40, is pretty typical in that regard, living in a neighborhood of winding, rutted roads in Old Cairo, selling snacks from a kiosk while listening to the Koran on the radio. Asked his feelings about Jews, he replied matter-of-factly. "We hate them for everything they have done to us," Mr. Badr said, as casually as if he had been asked the time.

But Mr. Badr's ideas have recently been challenged. He has had to confront the reality that his neighborhood was once filled with Jews — Egyptian Jews — and that his nation's history is interwoven with Jewish history. Not far from his shop, down another narrow, winding alley once called the Alley of the Jews, the government is busy renovating an abandoned, dilapidated synagogue.

In fact, the government is not just renovating the crumbling, flooded old building. It is publicly embracing its Jewish past — not the kind of thing you ordinarily hear from Egyptian officials.

"If you don't restore the Jewish synagogues, you lose a part of your history," said Zahi Hawass, general secretary of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, who in the past has written negatively about Jews because of the clash between Israel and the Palestinians. "It is part of our heritage."

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Egypt has slowly, quietly been working to restore its synagogues for several years. It has completed two projects and plans to restore about eight more. But because of the perception on the street — the anger toward Israel and the deep, widespread anti-Semitism — the government initially insisted that its activities remain secret.

"They told us 'We are doing these things, but you can't tell anybody about it,' " said Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international Jewish affairs for the American Jewish Committee. "This was such a reverse of what we experience in Eastern Europe, where governments don't do much but want to present the picture they are doing things. In Egypt they were doing things, but, 'Shhh, don't let anybody know!' "

So why the sudden public display of affection for Egypt's Jewish past?

Politics. Not street politics, but global politics.

Egypt's minister of culture, Farouk Hosny, wants to be the next director general of Unesco, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. In the context of this conservative Islamic society, Mr. Hosny, 71, is quite liberal, running afoul of Islamists when he criticized the popularity of women wearing head scarves, for example.

But to appease — or please — his local constituency, he said in 2008 he would burn any Israeli book found in the nation's premier library in Alexandria. He has apologized, but that has done little to end the attacks on his candidacy to lead an organization dedicated to promoting cultural diversity.

So his subordinates sped up the restoration process. After a year of study, the work began in June. They pitched a blue tent, and held a news conference — two, in fact — right inside the old synagogue around the corner from Mr. Badr's shop. Mr. Badr said that was when he realized that the building with no roof and cemented-over windows was a synagogue.

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Restoration work being done last month at a synagogue where Moses Maimonides once worked and studied in Cairo. Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

It is a historic one, actually, named after Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, a physician and philosopher who is considered among the most important rabbinic scholars in Jewish history. He was born in Córdoba, Spain, in 1135, moved to Alexandria and eventually to Cairo. Known in the West as Moses Maimonides, he worked and studied in the temple until his death. Mr. Hawass said it was last used in 1960 and then was allowed to crumble, even as a new mosque was built right next door.

But the news conference only seems to have stoked more skepticism, as charges arose that the work was ordered up only to silence Mr. Hosny's critics.

"The irony is they have done something," Rabbi Baker said. "It goes back at least several years now. They didn't want to do it in a formal relationship with us. They said, 'We accept this as our responsibility to care for our Jewish heritage, so we will do things ourselves.'"

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For Egyptians like Mr. Hawass, who seems most comfortable around Pharaonic tombs and mummies, speaking about Egypt's Jewish past with pride has required a degree of finesse. Mr. Hawass has in the past refused a suggestion by the American Jewish Committee to consider building a small museum to house Egypt's historic Jewish artifacts, as the government has done to preserve many of Egypt's Christian artifacts.

As he strode through the old Jewish quarter recently, waving his handwritten list of all the Jewish preservation projects he is now overseeing, Mr. Hawass said that he would not build a Jewish museum in Cairo until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was resolved.

"If you make a museum like that while Israel is killing Palestinian children, people will kill me," he said. "What we are doing now is not for the Jews; it is for us, for our heritage," Egypt's Jewish heritage.

This tends to be the thinking throughout the neighborhood. The older residents, like El Sayyid Yousef, 62, who moved here when he was 12, had a perspective shaped by the sweep of history. Mr. Yousef said he remembered having Jewish neighbors but never thought of them as Jewish. They were just Egyptians, like everyone else, he said.

"When we grew up, after 1967 we started to understand the sensitivities," he said. "Because of what happened in the war, you would walk in the street and if you saw a Jew you would want to kill him."

That was the case for Jews all over Egypt, who with each Arab-Israeli war left or were forced out. There are fewer than 100, some say fewer than 80, Jews left in Egypt today, making the preservation projects all the more important, Rabbi Baker said.

It is unclear whether the projects will help Mr. Hosny in his bid for the Unesco position. And they may cause many residents to attack the government for spending money on them. "We can remove it and build a mosque in its place" was Mr. Badr's suggestion.

Even so, the effort has already inspired Mr. Yousef and his son, and perhaps others, to begin to see beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, which for so many has defined faith, culture and heritage.

"As Muslims or as Christians, it might not be ours, but as Egyptians it is ours," Mr. Yousef's son, Sameh, 27, said of the synagogue after sitting quietly for much of the conversation. "It may not be our religion, but as a building it is our heritage."

Mona El-Naggar contributed reporting.

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