

# The Guardian

## A different kind of catastrophe



**David Cesarani**

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Millions of TV viewers saw the teams in the most recent series of *The Apprentice* trying to obtain a kosher chicken in Marrakech, but few will have figured out why it was so difficult, other than the fact that Marrakech is a Muslim city, and why the task was rather poignant.

The thousands of British visitors who go to Morocco each year probably have no idea that the country once had a thriving Jewish population of 250,000. As recently as 1955 there were over 50,000 Jews in Marrakech alone. But how many tourists struggle through the maze of alleyways to reach the mellah, the old Jewish quarter, or the cemetery with its graves going back to the 17th century? The destruction of the Jewish communities of North Africa and the Middle East is a forgotten scandal that deserves to be remembered. Over 800,000 Jews left their homes, often in brutal circumstances, between 1948 and 1968, yet their suffering and loss has hardly been recognised by a world community that is otherwise highly sensitive to the plight of refugees and the displaced.

For all these reasons it is laudable that the US-based organisation Jews for Justice from Arab countries (JJAC) is today holding a congress in London and organising a lobby of parliament to raise awareness of this historic wrong. Anyone who believes in the correctness and the logic of restitution and compensation for those driven from their homes and robbed by the Nazis or the Soviets can hardly deny that there is a case to answer here.

It is estimated that the governments in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen pocketed billions of dollars from abandoned or expropriated Jewish properties and assets. Moreover, Israel and the world Jewish community spent millions more absorbing the impoverished refugees who flooded into the new state of Israel in the late 1940s and the late 1950s. In an era of apology and reparation this is, surely, the appropriate subject for an international conference. However, there is another and questionable side to the campaign mounted by JJAC. Its

policy statements always place recognition of the flight, forced emigration and expulsion of Jews from Arab countries within the framework of a "just settlement" of the Middle East conflict as a whole.

More specifically, JJAC advocates note that the number of Jews driven from their homes between 1948 and 1968 is marginally greater than the number of Palestinian Arabs displaced during the creation of the state of Israel. They argue that in working out a just settlement for the Palestinian refugees it is important to bear in mind the allegedly parallel and superficially similar "ethnic cleansing" of Jews from Arab lands. The implication is that room exists for a quid pro quo. The demand in the Arab world for the "right of return" for the Palestinians, or its commutation into substantial compensation, can be traded for cancellation of the claims of Jews from Arab lands against the countries that ejected them.

At this point the campaign veers into very uncertain and contested territory. Some of the Jews who left Arab countries were evacuated more or less voluntarily by the Israelis, such as the 50,000 poverty-stricken and messianically inspired Jews of Yemen who arrived in the Jewish state thanks to "[Operation Magic Carpet](#)" in 1948-49.

The 140,000 [Jews of Algeria](#) were French citizens who opted overwhelmingly to move to France after Algerian independence in 1962. In a narrow legal sense they chose repatriation. They hardly belong in the same bracket as, say, the 125,000 Iraqi Jews who were driven out in the early 1950s, after the state passed laws depriving them of their citizenship and expropriating their property. There were also persistent allegations that in Iraq and Egypt the Israeli secret service stoked up the appearance of anti-Jewish hostility by faking attacks on the Jewish community.

Before going into the question of compensation these allegations need to be investigated and resolved.

Finally, the campaign stands to open a can of worms regarding the treatment of the Jews from Arab lands who were resettled in Israel. Wealthy Baghdadi Jews, the Jewish bourgeoisie of Morocco and Algeria, Jews from Aden and Egypt with British nationality and Iranian Jews tended to chose France, Britain or the US. It was the poor, unskilled, ill-educated Jews who poured into Israel.

During the 1950s, tens of thousands languished in ma'abarot, camps made up of tents and pre-fabs in semi-desert areas. Ashkenazi Jews, from Europe, despised them. The immigration agencies worked hard to erase any trace of Arab culture, including the rich Judeo-Arabic languages and traditions they brought with them.

Within a short time, the so-called "oriental" Jews of Israel, the "edot mizrachi" or Mizrachim, were in revolt. There were riots by new immigrants in Wadi Salib, a slum district of Haifa in 1959. During the early 1970s their own "Black Panthers", inspired by the US movement, staged demonstrations in the development towns in which the Mizrachim had mostly been dumped.

But their greatest act of revolt was rallying behind Menachem Begin and his Likud party. Likud was swept to power in the general election of 1977, and emphatically confirmed in office in 1981, by Mizrahi and orthodox voters seeking revenge on the Ashkenazi-dominated Labour party and establishment that had patronised them since the foundation of the state.

The Jews from Arab lands who settled in Israel deserved compensation, from Israel. And, to a large extent, they got it. The Mizrachim are now a well-integrated and affluent pillar of Israeli society.

It would be perverse in the extreme if Palestinians were made to pay the price for the way Jews from some (not all), Arab countries were treated in an odyssey that culminated in bad treatment from some (not all), of their fellow Jews in Israel.

So, although there is an overwhelming case for examining the dispossession and displacement of Jews from parts of North Africa and the Middle East, and indeed a case for restitution and reparation for a proportion of them, it is not appropriate to place this quandary in the context of solving the Middle East conflict. And it is quite simply obnoxious to play their suffering off against the misery of the Palestinians. These two wrongs will never make a right.