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Another side to the Jewish story



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Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC) thinks that Middle Eastern Jews and Palestinian refugees should somehow be offset against each other – the rights of one side counterbalancing the rights of the other. It's a neat argument: Jews were forced to abandon material assets and leave Arab countries; Palestinians similarly fled or were expelled from their homes. Ergo, the region witnessed an exchange of populations and if Palestinian refugees are to be compensated by Israel, so too must the Jewish "refugees" from the Middle East, by the Arab nations that expelled them.

Nice try, but there are many reasons why this formula is all wrong. First off (as David Cesarani points out), it's tasteless. There is no need for the fate of these two peoples, Middle Eastern Jews and Palestinians, to be so fused materialistically. Middle Eastern Jews may indeed have a claim to lost assets, but those genuinely seeking peace between Israel and its neighbours should know that this is not the way to pursue it.

Second, defining Jews from Arab lands as "refugees" is problematic – and many Middle Eastern Jews would be angered by it. Countless Israelis recount leaving former homes in Arab countries and illegally, dangerously migrating prior to 1948. Such experiences do not include a component of expulsion: they left because they wanted to.

Broadly, you could say that any Middle Eastern Jew ("Oriental" or "Mizrahi" Jew) who defines their migration to Israel as "Zionist" cannot also be a refugee: the former label has agency and involves a desire to live in the Jewish state; the second suggests passivity and a lack of choice. Demanding the refugee label to bloc-define this group denies every other scenario: such as that Jews weren't all driven out of the Arab world; that they didn't all want to leave; or that many actually chose to do so.

What's more, if you take the line that Zionism both caused Palestinians to leave their homes and brought Middle Eastern Jews to Israel, then the refugee offset equation is, as the Israeli professor [Yehouda Shenhav](#) puts it, a form of "double-entry accounting".

Jewish Agency officials knew that their activities in Palestine could imperil Jews in the Middle East (see the work of Israeli historian [Esther Meir-Glitzenste](#)). They chose to carry on with those actions and committed to "rescuing" those Jews if things did take a turn for the worse. If Zionist officials themselves worried about a backlash in the Arab world, how can Israel then be absolved of responsibility for the Jewish exodus from those countries?

But let's get to the heart of the matter. What JJAC seems keen to establish is that Arab countries treated Jewish citizens with contempt and cruelty, fuelled by antisemitism. This formulation perpetuates the myth of Arabs and Jews as polar opposites, destined to be eternal enemies. It shirks the plain fact that Jews lived in Arab countries for over two millennia, for the most part productively and in peace. Even historians like [Bernard Lewis](#) say that. Sure, there were hostile periods, but nothing like the waves of anti-Jewish persecution experienced in Europe. The conflict between Arab nations and nascent Israel made it practically untenable for most Jews in the Middle East to stay put – and both sides of the conflict are to blame for that. In other words, Oriental Jews weren't simply "pushed" out of Arab countries; they were also "pulled" towards Israel.

"Pulled" because by the early 1940s Zionist emissaries were operative in the Middle East. They helped set up underground organisations that sought to inspire Jews to migrate to then Palestine.

Scores of Middle Eastern Jews recall that Jewish Agency officials dazzled them with stories of a better life in Israel. Many of them felt betrayed when they set foot in the new Jewish state – and continue to feel that way today.

But Oriental Jews were equally "pushed" out because, often, Arab governments did little to encourage them to stay. For instance, the Iraqi government passed a series of anti-Zionist laws during the 1948 war with Israel, but it didn't properly define Zionism so the laws were wide open to abuse and often experienced as anti-Jewish. The government, a British puppet and under constant threat amidst Iraqi nationalist calls for independence, used the Palestinian issue to deflect attention – sacrificing its Jewish community to this end.

Middle Eastern Jews were stuck between two opposing currents, Zionism and Arab nationalist anti-colonialism – and squeezed out in a pincer manoeuvre.

But this situation at national level did not always sour relations on the ground. Talking to Middle Eastern Jews now in Israel, there are many positive tales about former days in Arab countries: good lives; full rights; friendly Muslim neighbours. These recollections jar with the picture JJAC paints, of a rampant Arab antisemitism during this period.

Of course, we could only focus on the bad and write what the Jewish historian [Salo Baron](#) called a "lachrymose" version of events. But what's the point? The Middle Eastern Jewry comprises many threads and, compared with European Jewry, has a distinct

history, heritage and culture. This legacy, in all its dimensions, should not be hijacked to fuel further rage and acrimony in the Arab-Israeli conflict.