

# Jews in the Arab Lands - a Brief Historical Perspective from the mid 7th Century until the 19th century, According to Jewish Sources \*

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Both Islam and Judaism have their origins among the Semitic peoples of the Middle East. Differences between the two faiths obviously exist, of course, but in spite of these, the followers of both religions were able to live side by side for many centuries in the lands governed by Muslim rulers. One of the most important reasons for this co-existence is that Islam considers the followers of Judaism "Ahl al-kitab" (people of the Book) and believers in one God and regards their prophets as both holy and as messengers of God. Indeed, there are some Quranic verses to that effect. As people of the book, therefore, it is not surprising that the Jews were usually left alone to practise their religion and regulate their internal affairs according to their own customs and traditions.

According to Abraham Halkin "The extension of internal autonomy to the Jewish communities under Islam made possible the continuance of a Jewish way of life or at least the semblance of it" and in the words of one of the Jewish leaders in Palestine, Yehudai, "When the Ishmaelites (The Muslims) came they left them (the Jews) free to occupy themselves with the Torah". ( N.Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq* pp. 87 and 121 ). There is little information about the condition of the Jews in the Arab lands in the first two centuries of Islam. But the little that we do have shows that the Jews had welcomed the Muslim rulers. According to one report, the Jews of Iraq who had suffered from persecution at the end of Sassanian Persian rule (226-642AD) sympathetically received the Muslim conquerors of the land. It is reported that in 658 AD the head of Punbeditha Academy, R. Isaac (d. 660AD), went out to welcome the fourth Caliph Ali b. Abi Talib with many thousands of Jews and was recognized by him as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community. (S.W. Baron *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* vol.3, p.99).

A statement in an apocalyptic book called "Mysteries of Rabbi Simon bar Yohai" apparently written in part during the days of the Arab conquest of Palestine in the seventh century says "The Holy one blessed be He, is only bringing the kingdom of Ishmael in order to help you (the Jews) from the wicked one". (S.W. Baron, op. cit. vol 3, p. 93) A remarkable development that one ought to mention here is that soon after the Islamic conquest the Jews in general in the Middle East gave up the languages they spoke such as Aramaic and adopted Arabic. This was in striking contrast to the situation in medieval Christendom, where the Jews made very limited use of Greek and virtually none of Latin. ( B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, p.77) The period discussed in this paper had witnessed a number of Muslim empires in the Arab Lands. First of these was the Umayyad Dynasty which lasted until the middle of the eighth century and ruled from Damascus. We have very little information about the situation of the Jews during this period. However, it is related that the Umayyad Caliphs exercised tolerance towards non-Muslim subjects and employed both Jews and Christians, some of whom obtained high posts in the government hierarchy. It is attested that several Jews were in the court of Maawiya the first Caliph of the dynasty and during the reign of Abdul Malik a Jew was in charge of the mint . When Fustat (Old Cairo) was founded in the seventh century a relatively large Jewish community established itself there. The Abbasid empire which

followed, lasted from the eighth to the thirteenth century. When Baghdad was founded by the second Caliph al-Mansur in 762AD many Jews moved to the city to live. Baghdad soon became the centre not only of the Muslim Empire but also of Babylonian Jewish learning and life. Shortly after its emergence as a capital and metropolis, it gradually became the seat, first of the Exilarch (head of the Jewish community) and then of the Geonim (Heads of Jewish Academies) (N.Rejwan, op. cit. p. 99). The traveller Benjamin of Tudela writing in the second half of the twelfth century about the Jews of Baghdad says "There are approximately 40,000 Jews in Baghdad, among them scholars and exceedingly wealthy people. They live in peace and tranquillity and honour under the great Caliph and there are twenty eight synagogues and ten yeshivot (religious schools)." Then he goes on to tell us about the elaborate procession of the Exilarch through the streets of Baghdad. He also mentions that the Muslims called him "our master" (sayyidna) the son of David. In Kufa a major centre of trade and learning, the Jewish community there grew very rapidly. Of even greater significance though was the Jewish community in the city of Basra which rivalled Kufa as an intellectual and commercial centre.

In all these centres of Islamic culture and literature, educated Jews developed a considerable taste for literature in Arabic whether it was poetry, philosophy, history or other subjects. They even used the Arabic language to discuss Jewish theology. David Sasson says the following about the Jews in Basra in the ninth century: "We find scholars and medical men who were born in Basra officiating in Palestine and in Egypt". ( N.Rejwan op. cit. pp. 83-84). In this period some important works were written by Jewish scholars such as the first Arabic translation of the Bible by Saadia Gaon who lived in the tenth century in Iraq. It is worth mentioning here that some Jewish authors in this period, encouraged by the tolerant scholarly climate, felt free to criticise the basic tenets of the Muslim faith and were often outspoken in their critique while enjoying a wide circulation of their work without any overt hindrance by the authorities. An example of this is a book, written by a prominent member of the Jewish community, the philosopher, Ibn Kammuna (d.1285) who lived in Baghdad, entitled "Critical Inquiry into the Three Faiths". The author allotted to Islam almost two thirds of the book in which he defended Judaism and criticised the Muslim faith. (N Rejwan, op. cit p. 161). Such literature did not cause any immediate reprisals from the Muslim authorities and, most significantly, we have no record of the burning of any Jewish books by Muslim authorities ( S.W.Baron, op. cit.vol.3, pp 133-134). A good deal of easy social intercourse particularly in earlier times existed amongst Muslims, Christians and Jews who, while professing different religions, formed a single society in which personal friendship, business partnerships, intellectual discipleships and other forms of shared activity were normal and, indeed, common. A testament to this social cooperation is the fact that Jews often attended Muslim festivities and family celebrations, and entertained Muslim friends in their homes (S. W. Baron op. cit.vol 3 pp.132-4). In the sphere of trade Jewish merchants were free to travel throughout the empire to do business in different types of merchandise. In this regard the Jews were not subject to occupational restrictions such as we find in Europe in the period we have discussed. After the Mongol conquest of Iraq in1258 the Jews suffered and indeed did the rest of the population. We have little information about the Jews in this turbulent period. In Palestine, another centre of Jewish learning, religious schools were established and their academy in Tiberias, headed by Gaonim, flourished. This city was also the centre for a group of scholars who for the first time developed vocalization for the Hebrew Bible and standardized its text around the eighth century. Some scholars believe that this work was influenced by what the Muslims had done in regard to the Quran a century earlier. (See J. H. Hassan "The Jewish Qaraite Sect pp.83-84 ). The Jews in Palestine also began to build new synagogues, the most famous of which was the synagogue of Anan b David, (founder of the Jewish Qaraite sect) which was built in the ninth century. This sect also called on its

followers to emigrate to Palestine from many different countries. Consequently it became the main centre of their activities and learning. In Egypt the number of Jews increased when according to documents from Cairo Geniza a considerable number of Iraqi Jews emigrated there from the mid eighth century and established a separate community called the Iraqi congregation ( N.Rejwan, op.cit. p 98). During the Fatimid Period many Jews who had only recently settled down in North Africa moved to Egypt with them in 969 AD when they conquered the country.

At this time Egypt became the centre of a vast and powerful empire which at the end of the tenth century, included Syria and Palestine as well as almost all of North Africa. The unification of these countries brought a period of prosperity to the region in both industry and commerce from which the Jews also benefited. Of even greater importance perhaps was the characteristically tolerant attitude adopted by the Fatimids towards non-Muslims. They permitted the construction and repair of non-Muslim houses of prayer, and according to some Jewish sources they even granted financial support to the (yeshivot) Jewish religious schools in Palestine. Encyclopaedia Judaica, Fatimids). They also intervened to solve Jewish sectarian disputes. The only ruler of this dynasty to depart from the policy of tolerance towards non-Muslims was al Hakim (d.1020) who, in fact, also discriminated against some sections of Muslim society, such as women. Towards the end of his rule, however, he did change his policy. The first vizier of the Fatimids was Jacob ibn Killis (991), a Jew who converted to Islam but remained loyal to his former coreligionists. He appointed a Jew "Menassah al-Qazzaz" to head the administration in Syria. (Encyclopaedia Judaica, ibn Killis) Al-Kazzaz utilized his power on behalf of the Jews and granted many of them positions in the government. His son Asiya was also a high ranking official. In the eleventh century the office of the Nagid (head of the Jewish community) was established and some of these Nagidim also became court physicians.

During this period some Jews reached very high positions among them Abu Sa'ad al-Tustary (Abraham b. Yashar) who had the power to make and break viziers, a power which he did in fact exercise (N.Stillman, The Jews of the Arab Lands, p.51). In the early 12th century the chief minister of agriculture was a Jew called Abu al-Munajja (Solomon ben Sha'ya) who ordered the digging of the canal which still bears his name. According to some Jewish authors the Jewish community of Egypt in the Early Middle Ages was affluent, influential and on the whole stable and secure and well organized. There was a sizeable Jewish population in Egypt during the eleventh and twelfth centuries and over ninety cities, towns, villages and hamlets with Jewish inhabitants are known (N.Stillman op. cit. p. 48-52). Life continued to be well organized and Jewish cultural and religious activities were maintained during the time of the Ayyubids (1121 AD-1250 AD) who ruled from Egypt to East Asia in the East and Yemen in the South. This new dynasty showed tolerance towards Jews and Christians. In 1190 Saladin allowed the Jews to settle again in Jerusalem after the Crusaders had compelled them to leave the city and consequently their numbers in Palestine increased. In Syria a lengthy list of physicians and government officials is mentioned by the Hebrew poet Judah al-Harizi when he visited the country in the 1st quarter of the 13th century. Egyptian Jewry benefited from the stable regime and Jewish scholars from Christian countries came to join the communities. The most famous Jewish scholar and philosopher who lived at this time was Maimonides, who was also a physician of Saladin. The autonomous organisation of the Jewish communities in Egypt remained intact and continued under the leadership of the Nagidim during the rule of the Mamluks. This dynasty were former slaves brought by the Ayyubids from Russia and the Balkan peninsula who came to power in Egypt in 1250 AD and also ruled over Palestine, Syria and adjacent regions in North Africa and Asia Minor.

Although the Jews in this period did experience limitations and restrictions imposed on them by the government and there occurred the occasional violent popular outburst, these never turned into massacres such as took place in the wake of the Crusades (75). Any discrimination that did take place in this period against the Jews was not aimed specifically at them but also included Arabs who, for example, were not allowed to dress like the Mamluks or ride horses. In Spain the Jews not only welcomed the Muslims when they conquered the country in 711AD but in fact they actively made alliance with them against the Visigoths. This seems to be a very rare occurrence in the history of the Jews. (N. Stillman, *The Jews of the Arab Lands*. pp.24 and 54) The immediate sequel to the conquest was that many Jews who had left Spain at the time of religious persecution by the Visigoth kings and their descendants, returned from North Africa where they had found shelter. The economic situation of the Jews in Spain prospered and they were successful in many occupations including medicine, agriculture, commerce and crafts. Jewish scholarship and culture flourished alongside its Arab counterpart and was influenced by it. A real Jewish cultural revival began in the tenth century when Cordoba was a centre of both Arab and Jewish culture. This was the time of the political rise of the court physician, diplomat and statesman Hasdai b. Sharput who headed diplomatic negotiations with Christian rulers on behalf of the Caliphate. Another personality who should be mentioned here is Samuel Hanagid (d.1055) (known by the Arabic name of Ibn Nagrila) who was both scholar and poet and served as vizier and commander of the army of Granada for more than 25 years. Furthermore, he was also head of the Jewish community in Islamic Spain. It is interesting to note that he too was the author of a criticism of the Quran which was cited by the contemporary Muslim historian and philosopher Ibn Hazm. (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Ibn Nigrila). Some Jewish contemporaries of Samuel Hanagid in Saragossa and Seville also rose to the ranks of Vizier and in the words of Norman Stillman, author of *"The Jews of Arab Lands"* "no office, except that of the ruler, seemed out of the reach of a talented and ambitious Jew" (p. 57). B.J. Bamberger states in his book *"The Story of Judaism"*, "Oppressed for centuries under the Christian Goths, the Spanish Jews began a new and happy era in the eighth century when the peninsula was conquered by the Arabs. Under a series of enlightened Moslem rulers they attained a status of security and honour such as they had not known since their own national life was destroyed. In numbers, wealth and prestige the Jewish community of Spain became by far the greatest in the world. The civilisation to which they belonged was the most advanced seen by Europe between the decline of Rome and the Renaissance." (p.154).

In North Africa, the Jews in general led a relatively peaceful existence and those of Hafside Tunisia, in particular, enjoyed the most tranquillity of any North African Jewish community during the period of the Middle Ages. Only the narrow minded al-Mohads who ruled in North Africa and Southern Spain at one point forced Jews and Christians to convert to Islam. The later al-Mohads, however, modified their stance and permitted non-Muslims to practise their religions. (Lewis 52). Jewish authors stress that the al-Mohad period was a definite aberration in the history of the Jews in the Arab lands, or any Muslim country for that matter. Salo Baron says that al-Mohad extremism was exceptional and proves the general rule that under Islam the Jews resided in their respective countries as of right, and not merely on temporary sufferance (op.cit, vol 111. p.127). In the 13th and 14th centuries, some Jews in the Further Maghreb, as Morocco was called in Medieval Arabic, rose to high positions. One of these was Aaron b. Batash, who was a Vizier during the reign of Abd al-Haqq b. Abi Sa'ad (1421-1465) (N. Stillman, op.cit. 79) and Abraham Cabassa, head of the Spanish community in the Kingdom of Marrakesh who was minister to the First Saadian Sultan in the 16th century. His brother Samuel was financier of the court and another brother Isaac controlled Morocco's foreign trade.

The fifteenth century saw the rise of a new and powerful Turkish Dynasty, the Ottomans, who conquered much of the Middle East and North Africa. As Muslims they continued to allow the Jews in their domains to practise their religion and regulate their internal affairs. The Ottoman government was happy to provide a haven for large numbers of Jewish refugees from the Iberian peninsula. Sultan Beyezid II (1481-1512) welcomed the Sephardic Jews into his realm and issued firmans (decrees) to his provincial governors specifying the terms of Jewish settlement and ensuring the protection of the newcomers (87) Beyezid is said to have considered Ferdinand of Spain a fool for impoverishing his own kingdom while enriching his (N.Stillman, op. cit. 87). The Jewish refugees from the expulsions of 1492 and 1496 were soon followed by Marranos (Jews who had been compelled to accept Catholicism) fleeing the terror of the Inquisition. When Egypt, Syria and Palestine all became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1517 large numbers of refugees began taking up residence in these countries as well. (N.Stillman, op. cit pp.82-88) The prosperity and relative security of the sixteenth century was enjoyed by Jews in most of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In each province, Jews lived their own independent communal life (Stillman p.90). and some of them such as Don Joseph Nasi, Solomon b. Ya'ish and Moses and Joseph Hamon became very influential at the Sublime Porte. The Turks created the position of Hakham Bashi (Chief Rabbi) and the position of Sarraf Bashi (Chief Banker) a position which usually had a Jewish occupant. Jewish communities were internally organized and stable but the decline of the Empire after the sixteenth century was, of course, reflected in the life of Jews in the provinces of the Empire. The rise and fall of the False Messiah Shabbatai Zvi in the seventeenth century, whom many Jews believed in and followed from Poland to Yemen did nothing to help their situation and in fact caused harm to many of their communities. Few prominent scholars are known to us from this period. One of them is Joseph Caro (d. 1575) the author of a well known manual on Jewish law called 'Shulhan Arukh'. Another is Isaac Luria (d.1572) the famous Cabbalist. Both of these scholars lived in Palestine. After reforms were introduced by Sultan Muhamad II (d. 1839) and continued by Sultan Abd al-Majid (d.1862) the situation of the Jews and the Christian minorities greatly improved and they participated fully in cultural and economic life and began to hold government posts, to establish businesses and to found schools for their children.

Throughout Ottoman times the situation of the Jews in Arab lands was generally peaceful and undisturbed. In summary one can perhaps state the following points: Throughout the centuries Jews lived in the Arab Lands and managed to live together in relative peace and harmony. They did not experience anti-Semitism, expulsions or massacres nor were they forced to live in ghettos as Muslim law never called for segregated quarters for different faiths. Also they were not forced to convert as the overwhelming majority of Muslims accept the Quranic dictum "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) Those that did convert were usually welcomed and well treated and they were absorbed rapidly into Muslim society. Of course there were some exceptions but these, fortunately were very few.

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