

Jews in the Middle East and North Africa

IN THE DECADE since the *Year Book* last surveyed this subject, the Jewish population living in the Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa has continued its gradual decline. Essentially three factors have contributed to the diminishing numbers: attrition through death among an aging population; the lifting of government-imposed barriers to emigration; and the emigration of young adults and their families seeking better educational and economic opportunities abroad.

Throughout the region both governmental policies and popular attitudes have been affected by the momentous global and regional developments in the period under review. Most notable are the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Iraq-Iran War in 1988, the Gulf War that liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation early in 1991, and the opening of direct Arab-Israeli peace talks in Madrid in October of that year. These positive developments have led to improvement in the status of the Jewish communities in some Middle Eastern countries and have also aroused hope among some Israeli and Arab leaders that a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement may eventually usher in a new era of Arab-Jewish coexistence and cooperation in the region.

Others warn against premature euphoria, pointing out that most of the regimes in the region remain autocratic and face severe challenges from both radical leftists and increasingly militant Islamic political groups that oppose peace with Israel and improved relations with the democratic West. For the most extreme of these groups, the distinction between Israeli, Zionist, and Jew is often blurred. In recent years, Arab terrorists have gone so far as to target innocent Jews in Lebanon, and isolated Arab terrorist attacks occurred against Jewish worshippers in Djerba, Tunisia, and Istanbul, Turkey—two countries whose governments accord full rights to their Jewish communities.

In those Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Iraq, from which the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population emigrated in earlier years, and the tiny remnant in each country consists primarily of pensioners over 65, the numbers continue to diminish as the elderly pass on. In Libya, where only a handful survive in Tripoli, there is no organized community. In Lebanon, there is no longer a

functioning community or a synagogue with regular services. Most of the few hundred Jews who remained in Beirut during the years of internecine fighting and the 1982 Israeli war with Lebanon left the country in the mid-1980s, following the Israeli withdrawal and the kidnapping and murder of leaders of the Jewish community by an Iranian-inspired radical Shiite group.

Among countries with still viable and well-functioning Jewish communities and a more healthy demographic composition are Morocco (6,500 Jews), Tunisia (1,585), and Iran (18,000). (It is difficult to obtain precise figures for the number of Jews living in Tunisia and Morocco, since some families divide their time between homes in North Africa and residences and businesses in France and other places.) The regimes in the two North African countries have been protective of their Jewish communities. In recent years they have expressed increasingly open support for the Madrid peace process and have been moving gradually to establish commercial, tourist, and quasi diplomatic ties with Israel. Nevertheless, their Jewish populations have continued to decline, primarily through the emigration of university-age students and young professionals to France, Canada, and Israel.

With the lifting of emigration restrictions in the past couple of years in Syria and Yemen, the Jews of those countries departed en masse, leaving behind small numbers of those choosing to remain.

Yemen

In Yemen, where restrictions on emigration were rigorously enforced until the late 1980s, only a few individual Jews had been permitted to leave for medical care abroad. The approximately 1,000 Jews were virtually cut off not only from their relatives who had left in the massive "Operation Magic Carpet" that brought most of Yemen's Jews to Israel in 1949–50, they were even denied normal phone and postal contact with the rest of the Jewish world. For many years, the anti-Zionist Satmar sect was the only Jewish religious group permitted to send occasional representatives to provide books and other religious articles to the few scattered Jewish communities remaining in the mountains of northern Yemen. While free to pray and study in their homes, they had no organized synagogues or schools.

Significant changes began to occur in 1989, motivated at least in part by the general decline in ideology and the move toward greater political openness and pragmatism that accompanied the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The decline in Soviet influence and interests in the region was the major factor for the "Yemeni version of perestroika," according to Yossi Kostiner, a Yemeni expert at the Dayan Institute of Tel Aviv University. This started in the south and extended to the north with the reunification in 1990 of the two Yemens—the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen, with its capital in Aden) and the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen, with its capital in San'a). (In May 1994 civil war erupted and the south seceded.)

The decline of Soviet influence and aid also made Yemen eager to improve

political ties and economic relations with the United States and thus more susceptible to American pressure. After years of unsuccessful diplomatic efforts, American citizen Yehiel Hibshoosh, an 80-year-old Yemeni Jewish historian and poet, finally received permission in October 1989 to visit the main Jewish communities in Rayda and Sa'ada as well as a number of smaller communities in the north. (The last Jews in the south had left when the British pulled out of Aden in 1969.) While most of the Jews eked out a living as artisans, silversmiths, other craftsmen, and peddlers, they were no worse off than their Muslim neighbors. The only restriction was that Jewish men were not permitted to carry the traditional daggers or rifles that were the accoutrements of Yemeni men in the fiercely independent tribal areas of the north.

Hibshoosh also found no confirmation of the rumors that had spread in the Jewish world that Jewish orphans and young women were forcibly being converted to Islam. The Jewish community maintained its traditional religious piety, the men and boys easily distinguishable from their Muslim neighbors by their long *peyot* (side-curls). He found many large families with many small children, who urgently requested small prayer books of their own. The elders requested Torah scrolls and the opportunity to reestablish contact with their relatives abroad. Hibshoosh met with Foreign Minister Dr. Abdelkarim al-Iryani, who reportedly told him: "From now on the Jews of Yemen who have relatives abroad will be able to visit their relatives where they live, and Jews who hold a U.S. passport and have not been able to visit Yemen will be able to visit the country."

Earlier attempts to organize group visits to Yemen from among the 5,000 Yemeni Jews living in the United States had been encouraged by the Yemeni tourist offices, which were eager to earn foreign currency for their economically hard-pressed country. But these had nearly always been vetoed at the political level, ostensibly because of tribal unrest in the northern areas, where the Jews lived, and the attendant danger to visitors. This was also the official reason for the indefinite postponement of a proposed fact-finding mission by representatives of American Jewish voluntary organizations. Unofficially, it was reported that the security forces in the government and representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the country had vetoed the trip because they suspected that the American Jews' secret agenda was to prepare the ground for emigration of the Yemeni Jews, just as similar visits had led to the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

In January 1990 a delegation of senior Yemeni officials, headed by Yemen Arab Republic president Ali Abdullah Salih, came to Washington. After a meeting with Secretary of State James Baker, Salih told a joint press conference on January 24 that they achieved "a very good understanding" with the American officials on bilateral issues, Middle East issues, and "the peace initiative which is being discussed these days." Baker responded that he looked forward to further improvement in relations and pledged an increase in U.S. technical assistance to Yemen. The following day the Yemeni delegation also met with members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, where Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R., N.Y.) and Rep. Mel Levine (D.,

Calif.) asked specific questions on the problems of the Jewish community and urged that Yemeni Jews be allowed to travel abroad freely. President Salih responded that while he appreciated their concern, it was not a serious issue. "I assure you they have full and equal rights according to the constitution." He declared that "we welcome any Yemenite citizen of the Jewish faith if they do not possess an Israeli passport," adding, "We'd like you to give equal attention to Palestinian rights." He asserted that "we have no different treatment between Muslims and Jews. Even Yemenite Jews who left in 1949–50, if they want to come back, they can."

Discernible but slow progress was achieved over the following months. Several small delegations of American Jews of Yemeni origin were permitted to visit northern Yemen, and three Yemeni Jewish students were permitted to come to New York for religious studies during the summer of 1991. In November a small synagogue and *mikveh* were built for the community in Rayda, and a building was rented for a school in Sa'ada. Yehieh Ibn Daud (David) Subairi, a blind man in his eighties from San'a, was finally permitted to emigrate, repeated requests by his family abroad and by Jewish organizations having fallen on deaf ears for many years. The case of "the old man" had been specifically raised by Congressman Levine with President Salih. In July 1992, upon the intervention of Roger Pinto, the Algerian-born head of the Paris-based Commission for Jewish Communities in Danger, who had been moved by the plight of a deaf and dumb boy he saw during a visit to Yemen in March 1991, the Yemeni authorities gave authorization for the boy and his uncle to go to France for special medical treatment.

International Jewish efforts to provide assistance to the Jewish communities in Yemen were hampered not only by the difficult physical conditions in northern Yemen itself, and by the ideological opposition of the Satmar Hassidim—who tried to sabotage the *aliyah* of Yemeni Jews to Israel—but also by fierce rivalry among the Yemeni Jews in the United States. It took long and frustrating efforts by American Jewish human-rights activists to get the Yemenite Jewish Federation of America, headed by Elisha Najjar, to cooperate with the International Coalition for the Rescue of the Jews of Yemen (ICROJOY), which was established in December 1988 under the leadership of Prof. Haim Tawil of Yeshiva University. (Subsequently, at the suggestion of a State Department official, the group changed its name from "Rescue" to "Revival.") In addition, Tzemah Kadi, who created the New York-based Ezrat Yehudei Teiman (Help for the Jews of Yemen), together with his wife, started a small school in Rayda as the first of a hoped-for network of schools. As Larry Cohler noted in a special report from Yemen, the factiousness of the Yemeni Jews mirrored the fragmentation and feuding among the tribal sheikhs in their native land. ("The Last Jews of Yemen," *Long Island Jewish World*, February 26-March 4, 1993.) ICROJOY was considered the most disciplined and responsible group by the State Department and by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which financially supported its efforts, as it had earlier efforts to contact Yemeni Jews.

The major breakthrough did not occur until August 1992, when Yemen began

to implement its promise to permit Jewish emigration. A total of 57 Jews arrived in Israel in that year. According to Dr. Tawil, by the end of 1993 almost 500 had left Yemen and nearly all of the estimated remaining 520 were expected to leave in the near future. With the close cooperation of the Yemeni and American authorities, Gideon Taylor, the director of special projects for the JDC, organized technical and financial arrangements for the travel of the Yemeni Jews out of the country. Most subsequently went on to be reunited with their relatives in the large Yemenite community in Israel, while a few families chose to join relatives in the United States.

The relatively small movement of the Yemeni Jews was funded largely through the regular campaign of the United Jewish Appeal, in contrast to the special Operation Exodus Campaign that had been established to bring out the far greater numbers of Jewish emigrants from the former Soviet Union. Rav Tov, the relief organization of the Satmar, financed the travel of some of the families who came to the United States. As rumors of the departure of Yemeni Jews circulated in the international media, there was concern in the Jewish community that the publicity would cause the Yemeni authorities to halt the process, as had occurred a decade earlier when the Sudan stopped Ethiopian Jewish emigration because its help became publicly known. Consequently, there was surprise when Foreign Minister al-Iryani publicly confirmed that the Yemenite Jews were emigrating. "Yes, the reports are true," he told a reporter from the Associated Press at the end of March 1993. "But we do not sanction their travel to Israel."

Why did the Yemeni authorities, who in the past had been sensitive to negative reaction from the Saudis, the PLO, and the Muslim fundamentalists, make this public admission at the very time the country was preparing for its first democratic election? Economics and geopolitics were primary factors. Because the Yemeni government had sided with Saddam Hussein in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and failed to support the allied coalition in the Gulf War, the Saudis retaliated by expelling some 800,000 Yemeni workers and cutting off aid to the San'a regime. A desperately poor Yemen now looked to the West for help in developing its oil fields; however, Yemen would not get significant American help until it improved its human-rights situation, including allowing free Jewish emigration.

In June 1992, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R., N.Y.) introduced a resolution in Congress calling for "full and free emigration" of Yemeni Jews as a condition of U.S. aid. Although he introduced it in the last days of the session and it was never brought to a vote, D'Amato had been able to round up 30 signatories to his amendment to the foreign operations bill. The Yemenis were certainly aware that similar demands on Syria had easily won the approval of a three-fourths majority of the Senate. Moreover, after the Arab confrontation states and the Palestinians agreed to participate in direct peace talks with Israel in Madrid in October 1991, and especially after Syria announced in April 1992 that its Jews could travel freely, maintaining Yemen's barriers to Jewish emigration became increasingly difficult to justify.

Iran

While all Iranian statistics are of questionable reliability, this is especially true for the numbers of the Jewish community. For various reasons, including a desire to demonstrate their importance and patriotism and to mask the extent of emigration, the number of those remaining in Iran has been inflated. Some Iranian Jewish scholars, such as David Yerushalmi, have placed the number of Jews before the departure of the Shah, in 1979, at between 125,000 and 130,000. He estimated that by November 1989 only 25,000 to 30,000 remained in the country. Other sources, including Lois Gottesman (AJYB 1985, p. 319), give an estimate for the prerevolutionary period of around 80,000, with about 60,000 residing in Teheran, 8,500 in Shiraz, 3,500 in Isfahan, and smaller communities scattered elsewhere. Gottesman estimated that by 1984 the total had declined to 35,000. In their article "World Jewish Population, 1992," elsewhere in this volume, the demographers U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola note: "It is difficult to estimate the Jewish population of Iran for any given date, but it continues to dwindle. . . . The estimate for 1992 was reduced to 16,000."

Although its population is overwhelmingly Shiite Muslim, Iran is a non-Arab country. Under the Shah it pursued a pro-American orientation and avoided direct involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, although it did support Palestinian nationalism at the United Nations. Iran had granted *de facto* recognition to Israel in 1950. It maintained extensive commercial relations with Israel, for whom it was a major oil supplier, and had close but discreet political and intelligence ties with the Jewish state. Shared concern with the dangers of Soviet penetration into the region and expansionist Arab nationalism cemented Iranian-Israeli ties until the overthrow of the Shah by Ayatollah Khomeini and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. One of the first acts of the new regime was to sever all formal relations with Israel. The large unofficial Israeli embassy building was ceremoniously handed over to Yasir Arafat to serve as the embassy of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Oil shipments to Israel were canceled, as was the direct air service that El Al Israel Airlines had long maintained between Teheran and Tel Aviv. This direct link had facilitated the free movement of Iranian Jews to and from the Jewish state.

While the constitution of the Islamic Republic follows the Koran in recognizing Judaism as a revealed religion and the Jews as a protected religious minority (*ahl-al-kitab* [People of the Book] and *ahl-al-dhimma* [People of the Pact]), the Khomeini regime adopted a virulently anti-Zionist ideology, labeled Israel the "illegitimate offspring" of the "Great Satan," and called for armed struggle of the Islamic world to eradicate the State of Israel. The virulent anti-Israel propaganda campaign continued even after the death of Khomeini in 1989.

In the turbulent early years of the revolution Jews suffered from a reign of terror marked by the execution of 11 Jews, confiscation of Jewish property, and the dismissal of Jews from governmental and university positions. Many thousands of Jews emigrated in the turbulent period immediately before and after the overthrow

of the Shah. The new regime barred travel to Israel and generally tightened travel restrictions following the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980, especially banning travel by all young boys and men subject to the draft for military service. Although Jewish schools were permitted to function, they were placed under the control of the Islamic committees and were required to take in Muslim students, to remain open on the Sabbath, to include Islamic religious instruction, and to add anti-Zionist (and indeed anti-Semitic) materials to the curriculum.

Although Judaism remained an officially recognized religion and synagogues continued to function, the combination of physical danger and psychological terror prompted Jews to seek desperately for ways of leaving the country. Some managed to circumvent the barriers to Jewish emigration by acquiring Christian or Muslim identity papers and passports. Thousands of other Iranian Jews seeking freedom risked imprisonment and possible death if caught when they embarked on a hazardous journey over mountains and deserts to reach safety in neighboring countries. Successful refugees who managed to reach Turkey or Pakistan were permitted to move on to Austria and other destinations, where they were aided by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Jewish Agency, and other Jewish relief organizations to join their compatriots in the United States, Europe, and Israel. At a press conference in New York on October 2, 1987, Foreign Minister Alois Mock of Austria revealed that between July 1983 and August 1987 Austria had given temporary asylum to 5,188 Jews fleeing Iran. He stressed that his government was proceeding "without asking too many questions of Iranian refugees and without publicizing individual cases," in order not to jeopardize the flow of refugees in the future or to endanger their relatives who remained behind.

While thousands of Iranian Jews went to Israel, the majority resettled in the United States, primarily in the Los Angeles area in California and Long Island, New York. Among the early arrivals were relatives of wealthy Iranian Jews who, already in the days of the Shah, had sent their children for advanced education in the United States and had helped them establish professional and business careers. But many of those who followed in later years lacked the wealth or connections that would have facilitated their beginning a new life. Most had been robbed of their possessions, and many came with only what little they could carry with them. "The people who are leaving now had really, really tried to stay," Bruce T. Leimsidor, director of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Vienna, told *New York Times* reporter James M. Markham in an interview on November 13, 1986. He added that about two-thirds of the recent refugees had been tortured or otherwise physically mistreated in Iran.

The *Times* report of increasing Jewish emigration from Iran coincided with revelations of Israel's role as an intermediary, shipping American weapons to Iran as part of the White House effort both to secure the freedom of American hostages being held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian terrorists and to open a channel for improved communication with allegedly "moderate" elements in Teheran. Apart from its obvious strategic interest in preventing its avowed enemy, Iraq, from defeating Iran,

there was speculation that the Israeli arms sale was also intended to induce Teheran to end the harassment of the Jewish community and remove the travel restrictions. A senior Israeli official denied that the increased emigration was tied to the arms deal. While some believe the Israeli contacts did help persuade some Iranian officials to turn a blind eye to the "illegal" departure of Jews, others note that there was in fact an increase in the harassment of the Jewish community in Iran at this time. Manouchehr Kalimi Nikrouz, the sole Jewish representative in the Majlis (parliament), was arrested on trumped-up charges of alleged sexual misconduct with one of his employees. Former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who was then living in exile in Paris, told Reuters that the real reason for Nikrouz's arrest was to indicate the anger of the Teheran regime over the disclosure by Israeli leaders of the secret U.S. arms shipments to Iran. (*New York Times*, November 28, 1986.) (Nikrouz was eventually exonerated of all charges, released from prison, and restored to his seat in the Majlis.) Some interpreted the crackdown on the Jewish community as a calculated response by the Iranian officials implicated in the arms deal to counter the allegations of militant Islamic opponents that they were yielding to American or Zionist pressure.

After a cease-fire brought an end to hostilities with Iraq in 1988, Iran began to ease its travel restrictions. President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who won reelection to a second four-year term in 1993, has sought to rebuild Iran's war-shattered economy and reestablish economic relations with the West. Consequently, some Iranian Jewish businessmen have been able to travel to the United States and Europe, though entire families are generally not permitted to travel together, and there are severe restrictions on how much money departing travelers may take with them. In recent years, not only passports but also identity cards and licenses for business have listed the applicant's religion. Jewish businessmen from Iran complain that their identification as Jews combined with a concerted government campaign discouraging Muslims from buying from or selling to Jews has significantly hurt their businesses and has also made it difficult to dispose of property. This is in addition to the economic hardship that Jews share with the rest of the population because of the country's economic problems.

The regime officially maintains its militant Islamic ideology, manifested not only in restrictions on the rights of women and persecution of the Bahai but also in its foreign policy, including support for the Hezbollah (Party of God) in southern Lebanon and other militant Islamic groups that reject Israel's right to exist and actively oppose the current Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Reports in 1993 that Iran was actively seeking to obtain a nuclear capability and that both Iran and Syria were purchasing long-range Scud missiles and other advanced weapons from North Korea and China aroused concern in Washington and Jerusalem. Unless there is a significant change in Iranian policy, the present climate of suspicion and animosity between Teheran and Jerusalem does not augur well for the long-term safety and security of the remaining Jewish communities in Iran.

Iranian Jews are concentrated in Teheran, Shiraz, and Isfahan. The Jews in the

provincial cities feel even more vulnerable than those in the capital. According to Iranian Jewish émigrés, in 1986 a Mrs. Nosrat Goel was executed in Shiraz on charges of Zionism, one day after her arrest. In 1989 a Mr. Shamsa was executed there on the same charge, and in 1991 Yousef Hashimeyreti was tortured to death in Shiraz under suspicion of being a Zionist. In May 1992, Feyzollah Mechubad, the 75-year-old *shamash* of a synagogue in Teheran, was arrested and held in Evin prison. The Jewish community reportedly was told that his release could be obtained by a payment of 30 million tuman (variously valued at between \$200,000 and \$4 million, depending on the exchange rate applied). Before the community could complete raising this sum, he was charged with having illegal contacts with Israel, to which he confessed under extreme torture. He subsequently recanted his confession but was executed on February 25, 1994, on Purim, even though Iranian tradition prohibits execution of persons over 75 (he was 77). An autopsy reportedly revealed extensive signs of torture, including gouging of both his eyes. It is presumed that he was killed in retaliation for the massacre of Muslim worshipers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron that had been perpetrated earlier that morning by Dr. Baruch Goldstein.

These executions, while infrequent, have had the desired effect of terrorizing the Jewish community. Adding to their fears has been the occasional publication of blatantly anti-Semitic articles in the press. On the appearance of the book *Blood for the Holy Matzoth*, by Najib Alkilani, which recounts the infamous blood libel in Damascus in 1840, the major Teheran evening daily *Keyhan* carried a lengthy article by Mohammed Reza Alvand (December 31, 1992) entitled "Israel Must Be Destroyed." The entire article is filled with vicious anti-Jewish statements and blames Israel and Zionism for all the world's evils. The Jewish community wrote a rebuttal to this article, which was only printed two weeks later—in an inconspicuous place—after intervention by the president of the Majlis and the Jewish representative in that body.

There is always an officially approved Jewish representative in the parliament, and the Association of Iranian Jews is careful to publicly endorse the government's foreign policy. For example, in the first year of his rule, Khomeini proclaimed the last Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan as "Al-Quds [Jerusalem] Day," and it is marked annually with marches and demonstrations calling for Israel's destruction. The Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran English radio service reported on May 3, 1989, that the Association of Iranian Jews (AIJ) had "today lashed out at the Zionist regime's ignorance of the sanctity of Al-Quds and voiced support for Al-Quds Day." The AIJ's statement pledged: "We, Iranian Jews, will defend the monotheistic values of Judaism against the Zionist regime's racist policies and believe that Al-Quds belongs to all monotheistic religions." The statement called on Jews throughout the world to join in the Jerusalem Day rallies and to condemn Zionism.

The government continues to enlist the local Jewish community in its international public-relations efforts. On March 2, 1993, the *Tehran Times* reported that

the Association of Iranian Jews had issued a statement denouncing Western media allegations of violations of minority rights in Islamic Iran. "The propaganda tirade by colonial loudspeakers is aimed at distorting world public opinion against Iran and its ruling Islamic values," the Jewish Association statement said. The *Times* report continued: "Any fair person in his first few days of stay in Iran will find that religious minorities lead a calm and honorable life in Iran along with the rest of their compatriots." The statement noted that, according to the Islamic Republic Constitution, there are four officially recognized religious minorities in Iran—Armenian Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Assyrians—"all of whom enjoy equal personal and social rights." This benevolent assessment was intended to counter continuing reports of oppression of the Bahais, who are considered heretics from Islam, and the arrest of Christians accused of attempting to convert Muslims. In its annual global survey of human rights for 1993, the U.S. State Department concluded that Iran's Islamic government continues to reinforce its hold on power through arrests, summary trials, executions, and assassinations (*New York Times*, February 2, 1994, p. A9).

Should the current Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli negotiations result in peace agreements, they will place serious strains on the Damascus-Teheran alliance. Israel and the United States will certainly demand that Syria and Lebanon curb the activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard units and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and other Lebanese Islamic militants. Iranian Jews are cautiously waiting to see whether the pragmatic or the ideological elements in the Iranian ruling elite will prevail in dealing with the growing reality of Palestinian and Arab acceptance of the existence of Israel in the region.

Syria

According to a State Department estimate in September 1991, the Syrian Jewish community then numbered some 3,600, of whom 2,900 lived in Damascus, 550 in Aleppo, and 120 in the small, remote town of Qamishli, near the Turkish border. Other estimates put the total at around 4,300.

Some of the more onerous restrictions on the daily life of the Jewish community—such as the requirement that Jews needed advance written permission from the secret police to travel more than four kilometers from their homes in the Jewish quarter—were eased in recent years. Syrian Jews could travel freely within Syria, and they participated actively in the country's economy, primarily as merchants and skilled artisans in jewelry and metals. There were also Jewish doctors and pharmacists. However, Jews were barred from employment in most government offices or public bodies such as banks, and suffered from discriminatory economic and legal practices that restricted their rights to dispose of property through sale or inheritance. Jews are the only group that has their religion entered on their identity cards, although the large red letters of the past have been replaced by smaller notations in black. Jews are able to practice their religion openly.

Until recently there were two Jewish primary schools functioning in Damascus and one in Aleppo. In 1991 the Alliance school in Damascus was rebuilt and expanded by the Jewish community with financial help from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The teachers are Jewish but the principals are Muslim state officials. All synagogues and the one school still open, in Damascus, function under the watchful eyes of the authorities. For example, school attendance sheets must be delivered daily to the secret police, and agents visit the homes of those listed as ill to make sure they are really in bed and have not tried to flee the country.

One young woman from Damascus, whose husband and young daughter managed to escape a few years ago, described the feelings of the Jewish community in her testimony to the second International Conference for the Freedom of Syrian Jewry in Paris in May 1988 as follows: "Every time there is a knock on the door, mothers and fathers shake with fear for their children. Will the agents of the Mukhabarat take us to jail or some even more horrific fate? We are constantly spied upon by the authorities and our whole life is one big question mark."

In contrast to the massive emigration of Jews from the other Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, which reduced their numbers from nearly 900,000 in 1948 to fewer than 15,000 at the end of 1993, Syria had forbidden its Jews to emigrate since 1949. Although there had been some easing of travel restrictions in recent years, special regulations still prevented Jews from leaving freely. One problem that was given high priority by the Jewish community was the fate of young single Jewish women. This received heightened attention after four young Jewish women who were attempting to escape to Lebanon were murdered in 1974. Their burned and mutilated bodies were returned in sacks to their parents by the Syrian authorities. For years this inhibited many other women from attempting to leave illegally.

Since more young Jewish men than women successfully fled the country, and because a number of men were not marrying, hoping to start families in freedom rather than trying to escape with a wife and young children, it was feared that many Jewish women would remain single if they were not permitted to leave to seek husbands abroad. It was also feared that the shortage of Jewish men might lead some of the single Jewish women to marry Muslims or Christian Arabs. The State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1991, issued in February 1992, noted: "The Syrian Government closely restricts Jewish emigration, although it stated in 1989 that it would look positively at cases of family reunification and of unmarried Jewish women unable to find suitable husbands in the small Syrian Jewish community." The State Department report indicated that the number of such women allowed to emigrate "jumped dramatically in the middle of 1989, following U.S.-Syrian discussions on this issue, and 20 were given permission in 1991."

Before 1992 the Syrians rebuffed persistent requests to deal with the broader issue of Jewish emigration. Indeed, the State Department report pointed out that "there was no progress in 1991 on the issue of divided families seeking reunification,"

although it noted that "one case was resolved in early January 1992 when two minor children were permitted to join their parents" in the United States. The problem of divided families arose from the fact that in order to enforce the ban on Jewish emigration, the Syrian authorities required Jews permitted to travel abroad to leave behind members of their immediate family as a guarantee of their return. They also had to leave a substantial monetary deposit.

The total cost for exit permits, including official and "unofficial" payments to officials, has ranged from several hundred dollars to as high as \$5,000 per person, or more than double the average per capita annual income in Syria. The State Department report acknowledged that, as a result, it is particularly those Syrian Jews "with significant holdings and financial ties in the country" who have benefited from the easing of foreign travel restrictions in recent years.

Desperate attempts to leave the country continued to occur before 1992. Those who were caught or suspected of planning to travel "illegally" were held in prison by the agents of the Mukhabarat. Amnesty International has confirmed that those arrested were subjected to brutal beatings and other forms of torture and usually denied access to legal counsel. They were routinely incarcerated for two to three years and often emerged from prison physically and mentally broken.

On November 28, 1991, apparently in response to the international advocacy efforts, and as part of a general amnesty prior to President Hafez al-Assad's virtually unanimous reelection, four Jewish men were released. Two of them, Rahmoun Darwish and Joseph Sabato, had been arrested with their wife and fiancée, respectively, on September 25, 1990, allegedly for trying to flee the country. Darwish's wife, who was seven months pregnant, gave birth in prison. The women were released a few months later, after having been kept in abusive conditions and tortured, according to the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry. The other Syrian men freed in November were Subhe and Sa'id Kastika, who had been arrested at the beginning of May 1991, together with their wives, a two-year-old child, and a three-month-old baby. According to the council, "for almost three weeks they were held incommunicado, after which the women, who had been visibly beaten, and the babies were released."

Those who were held longest in prison were Selim Swed, a 51-year-old father of seven, and his younger brother, Eli, a 31-year-old bachelor. Eli had been arrested in November 1987 on his return from a trip abroad, and his brother was arrested at his pharmacy the following month. They were held incommunicado for more than two years in a damp and dark underground cell and subjected to brutal interrogation. Eli reportedly contracted tuberculosis. After numerous interventions, they were finally moved to regular cells in the Adra prison and in May 1991 were sentenced to six years and eight months, including time already served. The trial was closed to the public, but they were reportedly charged with "illegally traveling to enemy-occupied territory" and traveling without valid passports. In response to international complaints over the severity of the sentence, since they had reportedly gone to visit their relatives in Israel, Syrian officials responded that they had "gotten

off lightly," since they might have been charged with espionage, which is a capital offense in Syria.

There was hope that following President Assad's unopposed reelection to a seven-year term in December 1991 the Swed brothers would be released as part of the amnesty granted to some 3,500 political detainees. However, they were explicitly excluded from the general pardon, and their harsh sentence was confirmed by the Damascus authorities in January 1992. They were finally released in mid-April 1992, on the second day of Passover. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) and 68 colleagues—more than two-thirds of the Senate—had written a joint letter to President Assad on March 26 urging him "to free the Sweds and to permit free emigration for all Syrian Jews." Progress on human rights was one of the issues the senators cited as preconditions for improvement in Syrian-U.S. relations. Alice Sardell Harray, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry, stated that, while the council was "grateful that Eli and Selim Swed are free at last and have been reunited with their family, we pray that this gesture is a harbinger of change in Syrian policy toward the 4,000 Jews remaining hostage in Syria."

Although the Jewish community had been scrupulously careful to stay out of domestic political activity, and no Jews were selected for any political post, they were drawn into unprecedented public action during President Assad's December 1991 reelection campaign. In view of the tight control maintained by Assad over public expression and the absence of any opposition candidate, there was much speculation as to why the financially hard-pressed regime felt the need to spend \$80 million on election banners, ubiquitous giant posters of Assad, and daily mass rallies by every possible professional and trade association. One explanation is that all this display was intended to convey to the United States and the world that Assad represented stability and security, was firmly in control, and had the support of his people.

Probably the most bizarre events of the election campaign were two government-organized "spontaneous" demonstrations of support for Assad by the Jews of Damascus. The first was an evening auto rally, which the English-language *Syria Times* described as an occasion for Syria's Jews to drive their "fancy cars" through the streets of Damascus, a not-so-subtle attempt to portray the Jews as the wealthiest of the country's minorities. But when the Thursday night rally failed to attract the hoped-for Western media attention, a march on foot in broad daylight was quickly organized for the following afternoon. This was carried on Syrian television and received worldwide media attention, especially since it was the first time in history that Syrian Jews were permitted to carry banners in Hebrew, as well as in Arabic and English. The banners proclaimed the Jews' expressions of "love and honor for our great leader, Hafez al-Assad." Reuters reported that 400 Jewish schoolchildren, carrying balloons and pictures of Assad, marched with the adults, calling out, "With our souls and blood we redeem thee Hafez." The 2,000 marchers were led by Chief Rabbi Ibrahim Hamra, who shouted with the others, "Hafez Assad is the symbol of national unity." He told reporters that the Jewish community had benefited

greatly from Assad's rule and would vote yes in the referendum. "Whatever we do for President Assad is not enough," he said. He pointed out that "today is Friday and it is a day to prepare for the holy day [Sabbath], but we went ahead with the rally to express our gratitude to the President, who gave us a lot." (*Daily Telegraph*, London, November 30, 1991.)

As Rabbi Hamra hinted, the timing of the rally was not chosen by the Jewish community but was set by the authorities. A few weeks later, Judy Feld Carr, who spearheaded the Canadian Jewish Congress's efforts on behalf of Syrian Jewry, received a message from a friend in Syria, "Please don't be ashamed of us; we had no choice." This activity was also clearly intended for foreign consumption—as a direct refutation of the intensified human-rights campaign on behalf of the Jews of Syria.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had pledged in speeches in Jerusalem in July and in Paris in September 1991 that Israel would work tirelessly until the Jews in Syria, like the Jews of Russia and Ethiopia, were free to emigrate. He mentioned the issue of the human rights of the Jews in Syria in his address at the Madrid peace conference in October, prompting Syrian foreign minister Sharaa to issue a categorical statement that Jews "have lived among Muslim Arabs throughout history, wherever they happen to coexist, without ever suffering any form of persecution or discrimination, either racial or religious."

A concurrent resolution of the U.S. House and Senate passed in October had called upon the Syrian government to immediately release all Jewish prisoners accused of traveling "illegally" and to grant Syrian Jews the right to travel freely. The members of Congress also urged the president to call on other countries to make similar appeals to Damascus and to seek a United Nations investigation on "the present condition of Syrian Jews and the status of respect for internationally recognized human rights in Syria." Individual members of Congress demanded that Damascus be denied U.S. economic benefits until it permitted free emigration. A State Department official wrote to concerned Jewish leaders in Chile in September, "Human rights conditions in Syria continue to be a matter of concern to the U.S. Government, and we continue to make this subject, including the restrictions placed on Syrian Jews, a prominent part of our diplomatic dialogue with the Syrian government."

The European Parliament, which had passed several resolutions on Syrian Jewry in the past, adopted a new resolution on November 21, 1991, deploring the failure of the Syrian government to permit the Jews to leave, and noting that "the perilous situation of the Jews had been made even more critical by the publication of a book by the Syrian Minister of Defense, Mustafa Tlas, which repeated the calumnies accusing the Jews of ritual murder." (The book in question, entitled *The Matzah of Zion*, recounted the infamous Damascus blood libel case of 1840, in which a Christian clergyman had falsely accused the Jews of using the blood of a Christian child to prepare their unleavened bread for Passover. At a meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in February 1991, the Syrian representative

had recommended the book to fellow members of the commission as evidence of the malevolent nature of the Jews. As noted above, a book on the same theme was published in Iran the following year.)

Demonstrations sponsored by the European Union of Jewish Students calling for freedom for the Jews of Syria were held in front of Syrian embassies throughout Western Europe and in Moscow on December 1, the first night of Hanukkah. Similar demonstrations were held in many cities in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. On January 14, 1992, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the National Jewish Community Relations Council, and the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry joined in placing an advertisement in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, headlined "There Are Still Hostages in the Middle East!" It described the 4,000 Jews of Syria as a "captive community" and demanded that "the Jews of Syria be allowed to leave now."

In the course of the bilateral Syrian-Israeli talks in Washington in January 1992, the Israeli delegation again raised the issue of Syrian Jewry and asked that the Syrian government give them permission to leave freely, "in accordance with international norms and obligations, and in accordance with a resolution passed recently by both houses of Congress." Ambassador Muwaffak al-Allaf, the head of the Syrian delegation, was sharply critical of congressional involvement in an issue he defined as a Syrian "domestic" matter. But the efforts which the Syrians made to respond to the criticism, including the well-publicized Jewish demonstration in Damascus, indicated a heightened measure of Syrian sensitivity to international public opinion. President Assad had in fact felt moved to declare to a group of Lebanese members of parliament visiting Damascus on December 12, 1991, that "everybody in Syria, including Syrian Jews, enjoys the right to leave the country." United Press International called it an "unprecedented statement," one indicating "a dramatic shift."

On the eve of the resumption of the bilateral Syrian-Israeli talks in Washington on April 27, 1992, the State Department announced that it had received confirmation from the Syrian Foreign Ministry that, in a recent meeting with the country's Jewish leaders, President Assad had declared that "all members of the Syrian Jewish community will be accorded the same rights as those enjoyed by all other Syrian citizens." The most important part of the announcement was the indication that "Syrian Jews will be allowed to travel abroad *as families*, on business and for vacation" (emphasis added). Jewish emigration was still not permitted, and departing Jews were officially issued only tourist visas, meaning that they could not take more than a limited amount of personal goods and money with them. Yet the promise to remove the requirement that immediate members of the family remain behind offered the opportunity for whole families to leave and for divided families to be reunited with their relatives in the United States and countries other than Israel. (The Jewish community of Syrian origin is estimated at over 30,000 in the metropolitan New York region alone.)

Damascus had assured Washington that, in future, Jews seeking to travel would only have to pay the normal exit visa fees. The State Department also stated that

the "Syrian Government has removed difficulties encountered by its Jewish citizens with regard to the sale and purchase of property." The State Department announcement hinted at Syria's failure to live up to past promises when it concluded: "We look forward to the full implementation of these decisions affecting Syrian Jews."

The cumulative effect of interventions on behalf of Syrian Jewry may have finally convinced the Syrian president that there was more to be gained than lost by ending his anachronistic policy. Not only had other Arab states permitted their Jews to leave, but with the floodgates of the former Soviet Union open to Jewish emigration—and with some 350,000 having by then already gone to Israel—the argument that permitting Syrian Jews to leave would contribute to the military power of the Israeli enemy seemed more ridiculous than ever.

When Rabbi Hamra publicly declared his support for President Assad as the symbol of Syrian national unity, he was reflecting the true feelings of the Syrian Jewish community. There is much concern that should Assad disappear from the scene, either through natural causes or by an assassin's bullet, the country might again be racked by factional strife, and Islamic fundamentalist protest movements might come to power. The sudden death in January 1994 in an automobile crash of Assad's 33-year-old son Basil, whom the president was grooming as his successor, heightened concern over the country's political stability and intensified the Jewish desire to leave. While demanding that all remaining restrictions upon them be removed, Syrian Jews appreciate the fact that Assad has protected them from radical Palestinians and other hostile forces and fear that their position would be far worse than it is at present if the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood took over.

As noted above, in the peace talks in Madrid and Washington, Prime Minister Shamir and the Israeli delegation repeatedly demanded that Syria give its Jews the right to leave. This placed the issue squarely within the context of the Arab-Israeli dispute. This was in contrast to the strategy of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry and other advocacy groups, which had always been to emphasize that freedom for Syrian Jews was a human-rights issue that should be taken up in the context of the American-Syrian dialogue rather than in the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was necessary as long as the Syrians used the state of war between Syria and Israel as justification for their restrictions on Jewish travel, saying they had no way of assuring that Syrian Jews would not go to Israel and strengthen the military capacity of the "Zionist enemy."

Some observers believe that, in addition to seeking to improve his image in the United States, President Assad's gesture to permit Jewish families to leave was intended as a confidence-building measure in the negotiations with Israel, to induce Jerusalem to modify its stand on the Golan Heights. The June 1992 elections in Israel, which saw the defeat of the Likud party by the Labor party and the replacement of Yitzhak Shamir by Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister, held out hope of rapprochement. General Rabin, who as chief of staff in 1967 had commanded the Israel Defense Forces' capture of the Golan Heights, made it clear that his government was prepared for territorial compromise in exchange for peace, including

withdrawal from the Golan Heights, subject to appropriate security arrangements. However, despite this significant ideological shift from the Likud position, the bilateral Syrian-Israeli negotiations during 1992 and 1993 failed to achieve a breakthrough. Moreover, Assad would not participate in the multilateral negotiations on such vital regional issues as shared water resources, environmental problems, economic development, arms control, and refugees, arguing that Israel should not benefit from the fruits of peace before it had met Syrian demands.

The remaining Syrian Jews once again became pawns in this larger dispute. Between April 27, 1992, and mid-October 1992, some 2,850 Syrian Jews were given permission to travel, according to the State Department's Report on Human Rights for 1992, issued in January 1993. The report noted that "the Government, however, remains opposed in principle to Jewish emigration, and Jews must have their applications for passports and exit visas approved by Syrian military intelligence." In the second half of October, the Syrian authorities suddenly reduced the number of new exit permits to a couple a week, mostly for individuals. Knowledgeable Middle East observers attributed the slowdown to the impending American presidential elections and Assad's subsequent attempt to use the release of the remaining Jews as a bargaining chip in his relations with the new administration in Washington.

Assad's renegeing on his promise spurred renewed diplomatic and political efforts on behalf of Syrian Jewry. On May 23, 1993, Senators Edward Kennedy (D., Mass.) and Charles Grassley (R., Iowa), together with 71 other members of the Senate, sent a letter to Clinton urging him to address directly the issue of Syrian Jewry. On July 15, President Clinton sent a strong reply to the signatories of the Senate letter affirming his commitment to Syrian Jews, assuring them that "I have not, and will not, let this matter slip from our attention." The response from Damascus to high-level American diplomatic interventions remained the same. Both President Assad and Foreign Minister al-Sharaa assured Secretary of State Warren Christopher on his first official visit to Damascus, in February 1993, as they had President George Bush and Secretary James Baker, that no new ban had been imposed, and that the reduction in exit permits was due solely to "bureaucratic" problems. Yet by early December there was still no discernible change, and the Syrians were doling out the exit permits one at a time.

After a four-hour meeting with Assad on December 5, 1993, Secretary Christopher told reporters in Damascus that the Syrian leader had pledged to issue exit visas for all remaining Jews by the end of the month. Although there was indeed an increase in exit permits issued in the following weeks, 1993 ended with several hundred Syrian Jews still awaiting documents.

Frustration over the continuing delays and the apparent reimposition of the requirement that some family members remain behind prompted the organized Jewish community in the United States to hold a rally at the Syrian Mission to the United Nations on Sunday, December 5. The rally was cosponsored by 28 national and local Jewish groups, including such umbrella organizations as the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and the Conference of Presidents of Major

American Jewish Organizations. Set for the weekend before Hanukkah, a time traditionally devoted to recalling Jewish triumph over religious persecution, the rally also coincided with the Assad-Christopher meeting in Damascus. American political and religious leaders joined more than 400 members of the Jewish community gathered on a cold and rainy day, carrying banners that proclaimed "President Assad Keep Your Word" and "Freedom for Syrian Jews."

Alice Sardell Harary, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry, described the hardships caused by the disruption of the emigration process. Those who had already left gave up their money, their businesses, their homes, and all their assets in order to "breathe the sweet air of freedom." The 1,400 who were still awaiting permission to leave to join their families abroad found their daily life disrupted. She noted that the school in Aleppo had closed and that there was only one kosher butcher to serve the remaining Jews in the three cities of Damascus (1,100), Aleppo (around 150), and Qamishli (fewer than 100). Many Jews were out of work and non-Jews would no longer extend them credit, knowing that they wanted to leave. (Prior to the mass departures, it was estimated that 50 percent of the Jewish population was middle class, 10 percent upper class, and about 40 percent at or near the poverty level.)

To illustrate the sorry state of the remaining remnant of the ancient Syrian Jewish communities, she noted: "Just six months ago we had ten baby boys who had not yet had a *bris* [circumcision] because there was no longer a *mohel* [ritual circumciser] in Syria. The oldest of the babies was eight months. It took so many months before the Syrians would agree to grant a foreign *mohel* a Syrian visa."

By the end of 1993, according to the State Department, more than 85 percent of the Jewish community had been granted exit permits, while 500–600 requests still awaited approval. Mrs. Harary confirmed to the author that, as of the beginning of February 1994, all Jews requesting exit permits had already received them. While some 1,100 Jews were still in Syria, most were expected to leave within a few months, some reportedly waiting for the end of the school year and warmer weather. It is estimated that some 300 to 400 Jews—primarily the wealthy and well established—will choose to remain in Syria.

Should a formal peace agreement be concluded between Syria and Israel, and if Damascus lifts the ban on travel to Israel, some Syrian Jewish sources in New York believe that about half of the recent immigrants will choose to resettle in Israel rather than remain in Brooklyn.

Morocco

Anxiety and concern for the future cast a constant shadow over the daily lives of the small Jewish communities even in those Arab countries where generally moderate and pro-Western rulers have tried to protect them. Although Morocco has a relatively free press, several political parties, and labor unions, King Hassan II crushed a 1972 coup attempt and has used draconian measures to quell perceived

threats to his regime. The long-term stability of that regime will depend on his ability to improve the economic opportunities for a growing population by attracting increased foreign investment and tourism and to meet the popular demand for greater political participation and free expression. At the same time, he will have to restrain Islamic fundamentalists and other extremist elements that may threaten his regime.

In 1990–1991 Morocco felt the repercussions of the Gulf crisis, which exacerbated existing weaknesses, with high inflation and widespread unemployment continuing to fuel an economic malaise. The king managed to straddle the fence during the Gulf War, condemning the Iraqi invasion and sending troops to Saudi Arabia, but then announcing that Moroccan troops would never fire a shot against an Arab brother. Hassan permitted popular demonstrations in support of Saddam Hussein, in which some 300,000 Muslim fundamentalists reportedly participated, and as a result of which property was damaged and some 30 Muslims were killed. Although some of the demonstrators shouted anti-Semitic slogans, the king's police prevented the demonstration from turning into a pogrom.

After the war, he positioned himself quickly in support of the American-sponsored peace efforts, with Morocco joining 11 other Arab countries in the multilateral stage of the peace process, which convened for the first time in Moscow in January 1992. Hassan officially received Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in Rabat in September 1993, on their return from the Washington signing of the Declaration of Principles with PLO chairman Yasir Arafat. The French-language Moroccan paper *Le Matin du Sahara et du Maghreb* reported on September 9 that the executive of the World Gathering of Moroccan Jewry had met in Paris and issued a declaration full of effusive praise for the king's "courageous," "visionary," and "pioneering" activities in support of the historic Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement and pledging its support for broadening the peace process to include all the Arab states of the region.

The appointment in 1993 of Serge Berdugo, the leader of the Jewish community, as minister of tourism and the appointment of other Jews as financial advisers to the king reflected the hope that as peace took root, Moroccan Jews in France, Israel, and Canada, as well as many American and Western European Jews who were not of Sephardi origin, would increasingly be attracted to visit Morocco as tourists and even to invest in the country's development. The king has eagerly encouraged tourism and investment from American Jews and from Moroccan Jews living abroad.

Within the Jewish community, the pattern of institutional closure continued, as the population slowly decreased in size, falling to around 6,500 in 1993, according to Linda Levi of the Joint Distribution Committee. In Morocco, as in other countries with a dwindling Jewish population, there was a tendency to move from the small provincial towns to the major cities, where viable community institutions still functioned. In 1991 the JDC closed the homes for the aged in Rabat, Fez, and Marrakesh and transferred the residents to a home in Casablanca. The school in

Meknes was also closed. Tangier was the only community in the provinces to retain its homes for the aged, which JDC helped fund.

The Casablanca community continued to display a dynamism beyond its size, with more than 20 synagogues functioning on a daily basis, and 1,296 students attending Jewish day schools during the 1993–94 academic year. This represented nearly all the community's school-age children. Because of the financial pressures, the JDC actively encouraged consolidation in the four subsidized school systems: Otzar Hatorah, Lubavitch, Ittihad (formerly known as the Alliance Israélite Universelle), and ORT. A new Lubavitch youth center was opened in Marrakesh in 1992, and the JDC also helped fund their youth centers in Casablanca and Meknes, as well as summer camp programs for some 400 children sponsored by various Jewish groups. More than 500 Moroccan Jews received welfare assistance from the local community with JDC help; some 1,700 needy persons of all ages benefited from health services provided by OSE (Oeuvre Secours aux Enfants), with JDC support.

The two Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla had a combined Jewish population of around 1,500. In response to efforts to encourage communal self-sufficiency, the Melilla community in 1992 informed JDC that it now could manage to finance its own communal needs, but in Ceuta the JDC continued to provide part of the costs of Hebrew classes for 40 youngsters.

Algeria

Most of the 140,000 Jews who were living in the country when Algeria won its independence in 1962 moved to France. Although the governing National Liberation Front (FLN) was in the early years an ardent champion of the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the secular, socialist Algerian regime was careful to protect the local Jewish community. For instance, in May 1988, when the last functioning synagogue was desecrated by vandals who tore Torah scrolls, ripped prayer books, and broke furniture, Minister of the Interior El-Had Khedri met with Roger Said, the president of the local Jewish community, to promise that the police would seek out the vandals. The police arrested eight teenagers and charged them with robbery after stolen Jewish objects were found in local stores.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Algeria experienced growing political turbulence and the spectacular ascent of Muslim fundamentalists in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which pledged to turn Algeria into a Muslim state run according to Sharia law. The success of the fundamentalist party, even among many nonobservant Algerians, is attributed to various factors, including high long-term unemployment (over 30 percent) among the rapidly growing and youthful population, disillusionment with the unfulfilled pan-Arab and socialist promises of the FLN, and widespread reports of favoritism and corruption among the FLN elite that had governed the country since independence.

An Islamic takeover in January 1992 was prevented by an army-led coup that first unseated President Chadli Benjedid, then declared a state of martial law, appointed

a five-man junta, and finally arrested FIS leaders. After the military outlawed Islamic groups in 1992, they began an armed insurrection, and the country was placed in a state of emergency.

According to first-hand reports from Algiers, the small and aged Jewish community, which in 1990 numbered around 150 persons, had declined to fewer than 100 in 1993, through natural deaths or emigration. The remnant of this once flourishing community has kept a low profile and has not thus far been directly touched by the fighting. However, they suffer from the unstable political situation and the deteriorating economy. Most of the Jews are over 60, and all but two have French citizenship. (They continue to be free to move to France.)

The Joint Distribution Committee provides supplementary cash grants to seven elderly Jews lacking sufficient means. Subsidized medical care is provided to the remaining Jews when needed by the local Little Sisters of the Poor, a Catholic religious order.

In 1991, as the FLN loosened the reigns of control and the first multiparty political election campaign swung into high gear, anti-Semitic slogans became a regular tool in the arsenal of the opposition groups. There were no physical attacks on the local Jews, the aim being to focus on the "international Jewish mafia." Opposition and independent papers carried anti-Semitic articles, including reprints of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Islamic Salvation Front propaganda regularly invoked "the Jews as Middle East invaders and as the rivals of Islam." Shortly before his arrest on June 30, 1991, FIS leader Sheikh Abbas Madani accused the authorities of dispersing Muslim demonstrators with smoke grenades purchased from "American Jews." In subsequent clashes, Muslim fundamentalists taunted members of the security forces as "dogs, Jews and heretics." Roger Pinto, the head of the Paris-based Commission for Jewish Communities in Danger, complained that the embattled government "doesn't denounce anti-Semitism" and gloomily predicted that "the ongoing instability can only serve to strengthen existing tensions." (Edith Beck, "The Freedom to Be Anti-Semitic," *Jerusalem Report*, December 26, 1991.) Algerian Jews recall that anti-Jewish riots after the 1967 Six Day War resulted in much damage and the conversion of all but one synagogue into mosques.

Tunisia

The total Jewish population of Tunisia had declined to around 1,585 by the end of 1993.

In a bloodless coup in November 1987, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's "president for life," was deposed by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, his prime minister. The ailing 84-year-old "father of the nation" had ruled Tunisia since leading the country to independence from France in 1956. He had actively protected the Jewish community in the face of anti-Israel demonstrations in 1967. However, growing Islamic fundamentalism in recent years and virulent anti-Semitism, fanned by inflammatory broadcasts from neighboring Libya, resulted in several incidents against Jewish institutions.

The most serious of these occurred during Simhat Torah prayers in October 1985 in the ancient El-Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba. A crazed Tunisian security guard, posted by the government to protect the 140 worshipers, suddenly turned his weapon on the congregation, killing 4 persons and wounding 11. The gunman also killed a Tunisian policeman who tried to resist, whose police car he grabbed to flee toward the Libyan border, where he was finally captured. He was convicted and sentenced to a mental institution. The incident came a few days after Israeli forces had bombed the PLO headquarters on the outskirts of Tunis, in retaliation for a Palestinian terrorist attack on three Israeli civilian tourists in Cyprus. One unconfirmed report said that the synagogue gunman was the brother of a Tunisian guard killed in the Israeli raid on the PLO headquarters. Whatever the reason, it demonstrated how vulnerable innocent local Jews in the Arab world are to repercussions of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The incident also caused the Tunisian authorities to have serious second thoughts about the wisdom of their offering to host the PLO after it was kicked out of Beirut in 1982. The presence of militant Palestinians and potential terrorists in the country had reportedly hurt Tunisia's image as a mecca for tourism, which was the country's main source of foreign exchange.

Within days of assuming power in 1987, Ben Ali met with the leaders of the Jewish community to assure them that he would continue to protect them. While Ben Ali has maintained the country's generally pro-Western orientation, he also restored relations with Libya, which had been broken off by Tunisia in protest against Col. Muammar Qaddafi's campaign of subversion. For a while he also eased up on local fundamentalists, whom he had helped to suppress when he served as Bourguiba's minister of the interior.

However, in the face of renewed Islamic militancy, Ben Ali intensified his vigilance and has quietly worked with the pro-Western governments of Morocco and Egypt in an attempt to stem the Islamic tide in the Maghreb. In 1991 and 1992, the government again resorted to draconian measures designed to eradicate the now outlawed An-Nahda Islamic party from the political landscape, including press restrictions and the imprisonment of 265 party leaders for plotting to assassinate the president and overthrow the government. In elections held in March 1994, Ben Ali won virtually unanimous reelection. The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally Party won heavily in elections to the Chamber of Deputies, with four opposition parties taking 19 out of 163 seats under a new liberalized electoral system.

Although the potential for Islamic resurgence remains a concern, there is no immediate threat to the Jewish community. Both the government and the Jewish community look forward to benefits deriving from the success of the Arab-Israeli peace process. The government hopes to reap financial dividends, in which Tunisian Jews and their tens of thousands of relatives abroad may well play a helpful role. A recent sign of the priority given by the government to attracting Jewish tourism and investment was the red-carpet welcome given Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruk of France in September 1992 on his first visit to Tunisia since he left the country as a youth in 1959. Sitruk was escorted to the presidential palace in Tunis by motorcy-

cle outriders with sirens blaring, and the state media gave extensive coverage to his visit. Ben Ali reportedly believes that the former Tunisian Jews—particularly those who prospered in the French textile industry—could be attracted to invest in his country. As a further sign of his eagerness for rapprochement with the Jewish world, Ben Ali promised to release the assets of Tunisian Jews resident in France and made a pledge of \$200,000 to restore the capital's Jewish cemetery. As for the nearly 100,000 Tunisian Jews who emigrated, Ben Ali told Sitruk, "They are at home here, and can come whenever they want." It soon became clear that this welcome also extended to Tunisian Jews who had settled in Israel.

Although Tunisia never opened formal diplomatic relations with Israel, Israeli officials were welcomed to participate when Tunisia hosted multilateral discussions on refugee issues in 1993, and four Tunisian students participated in agricultural training courses in Israel under the auspices of the Israel Foreign Ministry.

The historic el-Ghriba Synagogue in the Hara Sghira section of Djerba has long drawn Tunisian Jews from across the country, from France, and even from the United States to participate in the special three-day *hiloula* celebrations around Lag B'Omer (the 33rd day following the first day of Passover). (According to an ancient legend, the original synagogue, rebuilt on the same site in 1920, contains a stone from Solomon's Temple, which was brought by a mysterious Jewish woman who carried it with her from Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. The stone is believed by some to possess the magical power to grant wishes.) What is unusual is that in May 1993 the Tunisian authorities actively encouraged the participation of Tunisian Jews from Israel as well. Indeed, the kitchens of seven tourist hotels in this resort area were made kosher especially for the occasion to accommodate the 2,000 Jewish visitors from abroad. The government also invited a group of American Jewish writers to cover the events, to meet with government officials, and to tour the Jewish communities in Tunis and Djerba. In this Tunisia was following the example of Morocco, which had carried out a similar program in 1980, resulting in a significant increase in American Jewish tourism to that country.

As in Morocco, the declining population forced a consolidation of institutions. In Tunis the JDC is helping to finance the remodeling and enlargement of one old-age home in order to accommodate the residents of another building, which will be sold. The JDC also provided support for the only remaining Jewish school in Tunis, a Lubavitcher institution with 75 children aged 3 to 16, most of whose families came to Tunis from Djerba. Funds were also provided to two schools in the Hara Kbira section of Djerba, a girls' school and a yeshivah for boys, with a combined enrollment of 245, and *talmud torah* classes for seven youngsters in Hara Sghira.

It should be noted that, although the total Jewish population of Tunis—estimated at 700–900—exceeds that of Djerba, with a Jewish population of only 670, the far higher percentage of Jewish children going to day schools in the latter reflects the different character of the two communities. The Jews in the capital are generally

Francophone and more assimilated, while the Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking Djerban Jews remain traditional and place a high value on Jewish observance and scholarship. There are also demographic differences, the Jews of Tunis tending to be older on average with small families, the Djerbans younger, with large families and many young children. When they emigrate, the Jews of Tunis tend to go to France, while those from Djerba prefer to settle in the Holy Land.

The JDC provided financial assistance to 185 indigent Jews, mainly single elderly persons, and also helped subsidize the salaries of two ritual slaughterers and provided Passover supplies. Other communal needs were paid for by Tunisian Jews themselves. However, as the local economy continued to deteriorate, they turned increasingly to Tunisian Jews in France to finance special needs, such as new heating equipment for the old-age home and for help in cleaning up the Tunis Jewish cemetery.

The Jewish population in outlying Tunisian towns continued to dwindle, with only some 70 remaining in Sousse, 55 in Sfax, 50 in Zarzis, and 40 in Nabeul.

Egypt

The local Jewish communities in Egypt are a pale shadow of their ancient glory. Only some 250 persons, mostly aged, remain, chiefly in Cairo and Alexandria. There is also a tiny Karaite community.

The Joint Distribution Committee gave assistance to some 50 elderly and impoverished individuals, providing health care in partnership with the local communities, and covering 90 percent of the costs of two small homes for the aged. (The Alexandria home was closed in 1992.) The JDC also helped organize festival meals and group recreation for the elderly population, consisting largely of widows living alone.

Since the conclusion of the Egyptian peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the community is no longer as isolated as it had been, and Jewish tourists and business executives from various countries, including relatives from Israel, have often helped in providing a *minyan* for Sabbath services in the main synagogue in Cairo. The ancient Ibn Ezra Synagogue, site of the famous *genizah*, has also recently been restored and reopened to visitors.

Although President Hosni Mubarak has taken an active role in seeking to mediate between Israel and the PLO and between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the fate of the members of the aging Jewish community depends more on Mubarak's success in domestic affairs—in countering the growing fundamentalist challenge to his regime and maintaining the principles of secularism and religious pluralism which he officially endorses.

Iraq

After the conclusion of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, Saddam Hussein approved restoration of a synagogue in Baghdad, and Jews were again permitted to travel.

According to a report in the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* (December 12, 1991), 26 Iraqi Jewish men and women had arrived in a European country after obtaining official permission to leave Iraq. They said that only 81 Jews remained in Baghdad, most of them in their seventies.

The allied bombing of Baghdad in January 1991 as part of Operation Desert Storm did not damage the main synagogue, although its windows were shattered by the blast of nearby bomb explosions. However, the war revived concern not only for the physical safety of the tiny Jewish community but also for the fate of its valuable historical archives and its many precious Torah scrolls. Haham Solomon Gaon of Yeshiva University in New York has tried for years to get Iraqi permission to export these materials, urging major Jewish organizations to undertake a more active campaign to protect the cultural heritage of this ancient Jewish community.

Lebanon

During 1993 the Lebanese authorities authorized the removal of 50 Torah scrolls from Beirut and their export to other Jewish communities. This was mute but poignant evidence of the dissolution of this ancient and once flourishing Jewish community.

In October 1991 there were reportedly only two Jews—an elderly brother and sister—still living in the Wadi Abu Jamil section of West Beirut, where the main synagogue had closed in 1984. There are reportedly between 50 and 100 Jews living in Christian East Beirut, their average age being around 65. The dozen or so younger Jews are mainly students at the city's universities. Explaining his decision to remain, one young Jew told an Israeli reporter, "There have been Jews here for the past 2,300 years. We're one of the 17 officially recognized sects. We don't want them to become 16 one day." (*Jerusalem Report*, October 24, 1991.) In addition, some Lebanese Jewish businessmen whose families reside in Europe make periodic trips to Beirut in hopes of participating in the massive reconstruction effort that is now under way, on the assumption that peace will finally come to that troubled country.

The last American hostages held by Shiite groups in Lebanon were released in 1991, and toward the end of 1993 Syrian president Assad offered his help and that of the Lebanese authorities to ascertain the whereabouts of seven Israeli soldiers captured or missing in action; however, there has been absolutely no progress in determining the fate or even recovering the bodies of nine Lebanese Jews kidnapped in Beirut in the mid-1980s. On July 24, 1987, Joseph Mizrahi, acting president of the Lebanese Jewish community, asked the present author to convey a personal appeal to UN secretary-general Pérez de Cuéllar urging him "in the name of the most elementary human rights" to use all of his moral authority to help the Jewish

community recover the remains of the murdered Jews so that they could be laid to rest "in accordance with Jewish traditions."

The Organization of the Oppressed on Earth, which in July 1989 announced that it had hanged U.S. Marine Lt. Col. William Higgins as an "American spy," kidnapped nine Lebanese Jews in 1984 and 1985. Ideologically and operationally linked to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah (Party of God), a group bearing this name first surfaced in Beirut in December 1985, when it announced the execution of two of the Lebanese Jews it had kidnapped earlier. Two additional Lebanese Jewish hostages were killed by this group in February 1986, because, it said, Israel failed to meet its demands to release all Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners held in southern Lebanon. Only the first three victims were found, dumped on the streets of Beirut. The coroner reported that the body of the third victim, Abraham Benisti, bore signs of torture and that he had been shot twice and strangled.

The Organization of the Oppressed claimed that those executed had all been "spies" for Israel, but a close investigation of their personal backgrounds demonstrates that none of the victims had been involved in Lebanese politics or in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The only thing they had in common was that they were born Jewish and had remained in Muslim-controlled West Beirut after most Lebanese Jews had fled the strife-torn city. The random nature of the attacks on the helpless Jews was made clear in a statement by the group on December 28, 1985, warning that unless all its demands against Israel were met, it would kill not only those it had already kidnapped but would strike against other Jews "on whom we may lay our hands."

Among the best known and most highly respected of the Jewish victims was Dr. Elie Hallak, a pediatrician who was called "the doctor of the poor" because he often treated without fee needy Lebanese and Palestinian patients, irrespective of their religious or political affiliation. In a poignant public challenge to the kidnapppers, his wife, Rachel, described his benevolent career and the unsuccessful efforts by his many friends to secure his release. Her open letter was published in the Lebanese press and in *Le Monde* (Paris), March 5, 1986.

Well-placed Lebanese sources believe that the motivation of the Organization of the Oppressed was not purely ideological or political. More mundane motives were also at work: The poor Shiites coveted the homes and communal properties of the once prosperous Jewish community and sought to pressure the kidnap victims—who included the president, vice-president, and secretary of the Jewish community—to turn over title to property and bank accounts to persons designated by the terrorists.

This radical Shiite band claimed to have executed a total of nine Jews whom it had abducted, but, as noted, only three bodies were ever recovered. The terrorists refused to release the bodies of any of the later victims, declaring that they would not do so until Israel withdrew from "all occupied territory." In a statement published in *An Nahar* on June 20, 1987, the Organization of the Oppressed reiterated its refusal to release the bodies and vowed to "continue to chase the Zionist

invaders and their agents wherever they may be until this cancerous gland is uprooted.”

Until a few years ago there were persistent but unconfirmed reports that Isaac Sasson, 72, president of the Jewish community, who was kidnapped in 1985, and some other Jewish hostages might still be alive. Salim Jammous, 65, the secretary-general of the Lebanese Jewish community, was abducted near the main synagogue in the Wadi Abu Jamil section of West Beirut on August 15, 1984. Since his body has not been found and no announcement has been made of his death, his sister continues to believe that he may still be alive. She has continued to write letters to the press urging that his fate be placed on the table in the current Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli peace talks. In Paris, Roger Pinto in 1993 continued to urge European governments to press for information on the Jewish hostages.

In a statement on August 11, 1991, President George Bush underscored that “there will not be—there can’t be—totally normalized relations [with Iran or Syria] as long as people are held against their will.” Mr. Bush called on those with influence “to work for the release of all hostages, regardless of their nationality.” The president also called for “an accounting of those who may have died while in captivity.”

The relatives of the missing Lebanese Jews believe Syrian president Assad can play a crucial role in bringing this about. Syria’s effective control of Lebanon was demonstrated when Syrian security forces warned that they would attack the headquarters of radical Shiite groups unless the terrorists promptly released Jérôme Leyraud, a French doctor who had been kidnapped on August 8, 1991, in Beirut, and threatened with death by a new terrorist group opposing additional hostage releases. Dr. Leyraud was freed within 60 hours.

To keep the issue before the public, Roger Pinto organized a demonstration in Paris on June 7, 1993, which was attended by several leading French personalities and relatives of the Lebanese Jewish hostages. On July 7, Pinto and Bernard Gahnassia, secretary-general of Siona, the French Zionist group, met with Cornélio Somaruga, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in Geneva, and asked him to pursue the question of the fate of the Jewish kidnap victims with the Lebanese, Syrian, and Iranian governments. It remains to be seen whether the recent rapprochement between the United States and Syria and the hoped-for peace agreements between Syria and Israel and between Israel and the Syrian-dominated Lebanese government will finally bring an end to the ordeal of the Lebanese Jewish hostages and their families.

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