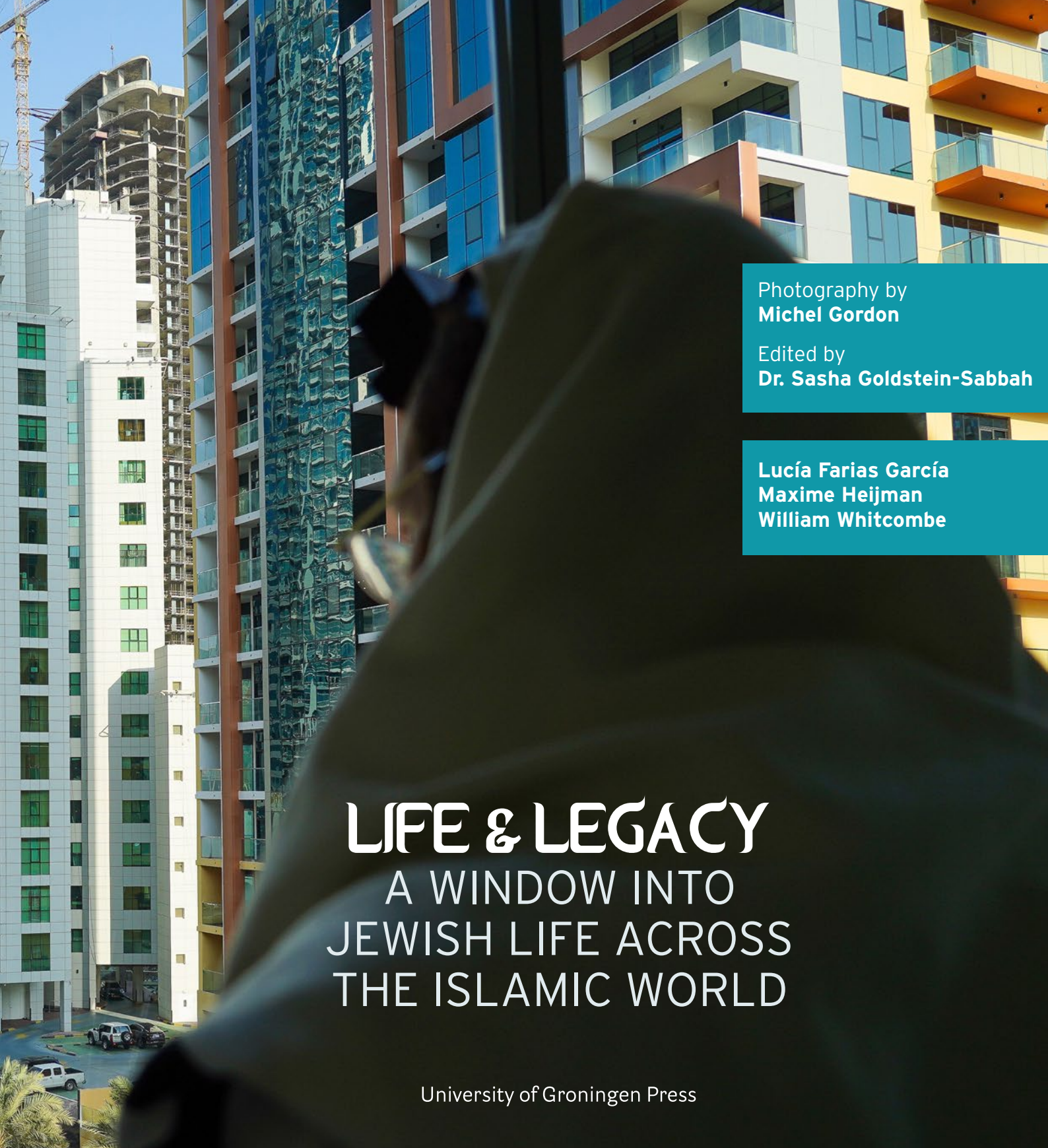

Photography by
Michel Gordon

Edited by
Dr. Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah

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Maxime Heijman
William Whitcombe

LIFE & LEGACY

A WINDOW INTO JEWISH LIFE ACROSS THE ISLAMIC WORLD

University of Groningen Press

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INTRODUCTION

Michel Gordon

The search for mystical knowledge, to explain the creation of the universe, is one of the many concepts and ideas that unite Muslims and Jews, and something I have striven to explore throughout my photographs. When the Israelites received the Torah, they sang in unison *na'aseh v'nishma* (we will do and we will listen), *action* precedes *reception of knowledge* – surely an imprudent position. However, the Talmud explains that such recklessness can be interpreted as a secret wisdom revealed by the angels, the most obedient of God's creatures. Representing an "intuitive knowledge" that is impossible to find in books.

Similarly, a Muslim friend took me to the abandoned part of the city al-Jazirah al-Hamra in the United Arab Emirates, in a vain attempt to find a *jinn* (spirit) who would reveal part of this same secret knowledge to him. Someone told me that the secret is hidden in the dot above the letter ب of Bismillah, or the dot inside the letter ב of Bereshit, both the first letters of the al-Qur'an and the Torah respectively.

Some of this intuitive and mystical knowledge I might have found in the *matzeva* (tombstone) of my great-uncle Hershel. He said – and it is imprinted on the stone – "Judaism is a form of love". Is it possible that the angels revealed part of the secret to him? I travelled through Islam, to encounter a wonderful mix of cultures, travelled back in time to the Mahallat al-Yahud (Jewish quarter) of Bukhara, imagined my grandmother in her youth carrying bread on her head in the Mellah of Rabat, ate a delicious *samak masgouf* (grilled carp) on the banks of the Didjilah in Baghdad, celebrated Shabbat in the great synagogue of Tehran and made merry during Simchat Torah festivities in Dubai – harbinger of a new chapter of rich Jewish life in Islam.

More than cohabiting with Muslims in Islamic spaces, Jews actively participated in the formation of Islamic Empires and, throughout its history and across its geography, influenced and were influenced by Islamic culture. The famous historian Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Tabari – in his book on *History of Prophets and Kings* – quotes a Damascene Jew who offered the caliph 'Umar a *salam aleikum* (greeting): "Peace be upon you, O Faruk! You are the master of Jerusalem. By God, you will not return until God conquers Jerusalem." Moments later, the caliph entered Jerusalem with his faithful companion, Ka'b al-Ahbar, a Yemenite Jew converted to Islam, responsible for the transmission of Jewish traditions to Islamic ones. It's impossible to see the richness of Islamic history and culture without including Jews in the picture.

Judaism and Islam are like interlocking pieces of a marvellous mosaic: different coloured tiles composed on a translucent white background, fired, melted, glazed, and oxidised by time into a single piece of wonder.

INTRODUCTION

Norman A. Stillman

A Modern-Day Benjamin of Tudela

Michel Gordon has yet again continued in the great tradition of intrepid Jewish travelers, such as Benjamin of Tudela and Petahya of Regensburg in the twelfth century, Elijah of Ferrara, Meshullam of Volterra, and Obadiah da Bertinora in the fifteenth, Samuel Romanelli in the eighteenth, Jacob Sapir, Joseph Halévy, and Benjamin II in the nineteenth, who journeyed from the Western world to the lands of the East, and sought out and described their brethren who lived there. Gordon continues this great tradition recording the people and the sights, not with his pen like the travelers of old, but with his camera. His first photographic vade mecum, *Um Judeu no Islã [A Jew in Islam]*,[1] appeared in 2009. He is a master photographer with a keen eye for salient detail – be it nature, architecture, or the human physiognomy. When he first traveled to North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia between 2001 and 2009 on his photographic journey, there were still vestigial remnants of once flourishing and culturally rich Jewish communities there. Now, a decade and a half later, in many places, these communities are all but gone and only physical structures remain, and in some instances, as he documents, these are in ruins. In one instance, however, he visited a totally new community with no historical roots in the region. The present collection includes images from his earlier peregrinations as well as his most recent ones.

Historical Background to the World Visited by Michel Gordon

At the conclusion of the Second World War, there were nearly 1,200,000 Jews living in the Islamic world – more than 800,000 of them in the Arab lands, some 80,000 in Turkey, 90,000 in Iran, and the rest in the Central Asian republics and

1 Editora Maayanot: São Paulo, 2009.

Afghanistan.[2] Many of these Jewish communities had their roots in Antiquity, before most of what we call today Arab countries had any Arabs, and before what we call Turkey had any Turks. And in the Persian-speaking world, the Jewish presence goes back to the Babylonian Exile, which was absorbed into the Persian Empire in the sixth century B.C.E.

When Gordon visited Iraq in 2022, only four identifying Jews remained out of a population of ca. 135,000 at the end of World War II. Although there is no Jewish life as such in Baghdad, a number of Jewish sites are maintained, and the woman who opened a synagogue for him to visit, confided in him when she learned that he was a Jew that she too was actually Jewish, but that nobody there knew it. In Syria, which had a population of ca. 20,000 at the end of the Second World War, only five elderly Jews remained in Damascus, where they officially constituted a "community." During his visit in 2010, Gordon took a photograph of its president, Albert Kamoo, who passed away in 2022 and was in charge of maintaining Jewish properties, such as the synagogues and the cemetery, and who maintained contact with international organizations. Lebanon's Jewish population had declined from 10,000 to a little more than two dozen individuals when he visited it in 2003. There is no public Jewish life there. Egypt, which he visited in 2003, had only a score of Jews left, a tiny reminder of the 75-80,000 individuals who comprised the community in the period between the world wars.

Among the communities visited by Gordon that are still holding their own despite a precipitous decline in population, are Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan. Morocco is certainly the most vibrant, even though only some 2,000 Jews remain from a population that once numbered 280,000. Even before official diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel were reestablished in 2020, the monarchy had for decades been maintaining unofficial relations with the Jewish State, fostering relations with Jews of Moroccan origin or descent abroad, and showing a benevolent recognition of the country's Jewish heritage in maintaining and restoring Jewish historical sites and including the Jewish heritage in the public

2 See Sergio Della Pergola, "Demography", in: *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* II, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010 and online), Table 5. (All of the population figures are from here.)

school curriculum. Morocco is the home to the first Jewish museum in the Arab world, established in 1997.[3] One of King Muḥammed VI's closest advisors, André Azoulay, is Jewish, and another Jew, Serge Berdugo, served as Minister of Tourism under Ḥasan II, and since 2009, has been Moroccan Ambassador-at-large. Thousands of Jews of Moroccan origin visit the country – including from Israel – and are welcome there for tourism, for music festivals featuring Jewish performers, and for pilgrimages to holy sites on saints' days (*Hillulot*). Indeed, the vibrancy of Jewish life in Morocco is without parallel in the Islamic world.[4]

The Tunisian Jewish community, which Gordon visited in 2004, is not flourishing like Morocco, but is holding its own under considerable stress. Between 1,000 and 1,300 Jews remain out of 80,000 three generations ago. Most of them live on the island of Djerba, where they maintain a strong religious and cultural tradition. The historic Ghriba Synagogue there is an important pilgrimage site drawing thousands, mainly from France, for the Hillula each year on Lag B'Omer. Sadly, it has been the scene of terrorist incidents in 1985, 2002, and 2018.[5]

The three other historical Jewish communities in the Islamic world visited by Gordon – Turkey (with 15-20,000 Jews), Iran (with 8-15,000), and Azerbaijan (between 7,800 and 16,000 Jews) – are maintaining communal life and institutions, but the first two, like Tunisia, are doing so under heavy social and political constraints. In marked contrast, the Jews of Azerbaijan live in a country that has strong commercial and defense relations with Israel.[6]

3 See Mohamed Elmedlaoui, "Musée du Judaïsme Marocain de Casablanca, *ejiw* III, p. 498.

4 See Norman A, Stillman, "Moroccan Jews in Modern Times: Orientations and Reorientations" in *European Judaism* 52:2 (Autumn 2019): 7–17; and idem, "Judaism in the Maghrib," *Handbook of The Maghrib,* ed. George Joffé (Routledge) forthcoming in 2023.

5 Stillman, "Judaism in the Maghrib," forthcoming.

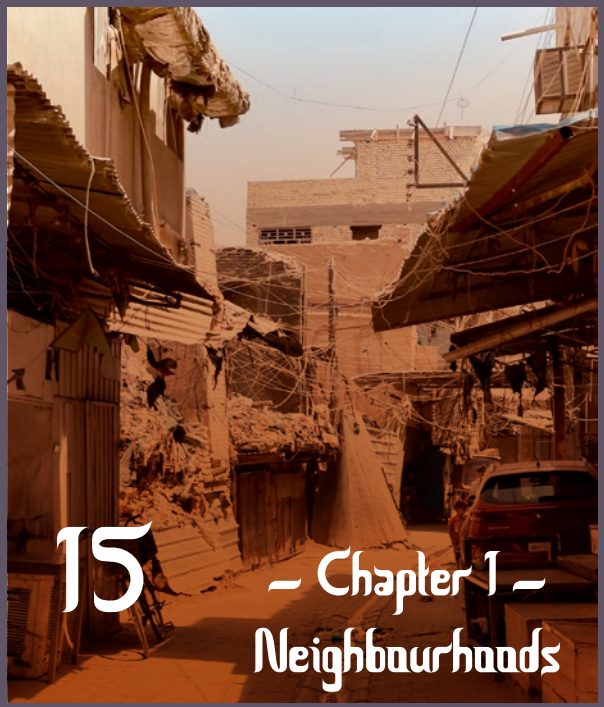
6 See World Jewish Congress, "Azerbaijan," at www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/AZ.

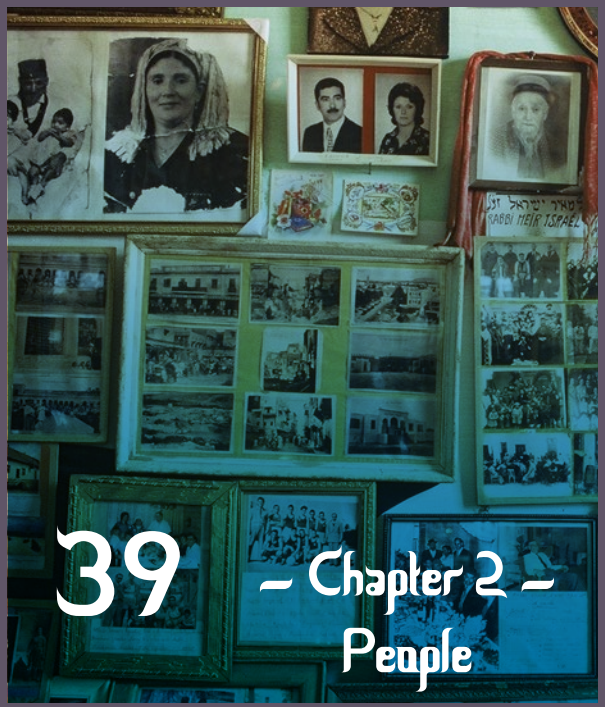
Finally, a few words should be said about the new and flourishing Jewish community in the United Arab Emirates visited by Gordon in 2020 and 2021. It has been growing rapidly from some 200 individuals less than a decade ago to – by some estimates – 700-1,000 today. The main community is in Dubai. All of the Jews are expatriates and are under the protection of the royal family. Many work for international corporations. With the Abraham Accords in 2020, the development of the community increased rapidly, and many Israelis come as tourists and on business. The U.A.E. has also taken in Jewish refugees from Yemen and has given them inducements to remain, such as rent-free housing and monthly welfare checks.[7]

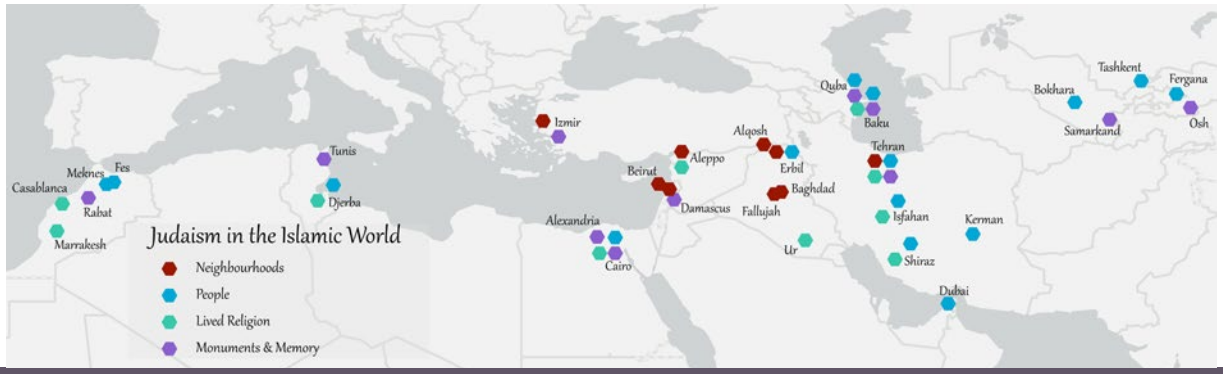
With this new collection of images, Michel Gordon has provided us with further glimpses into a vanishing Jewish world.

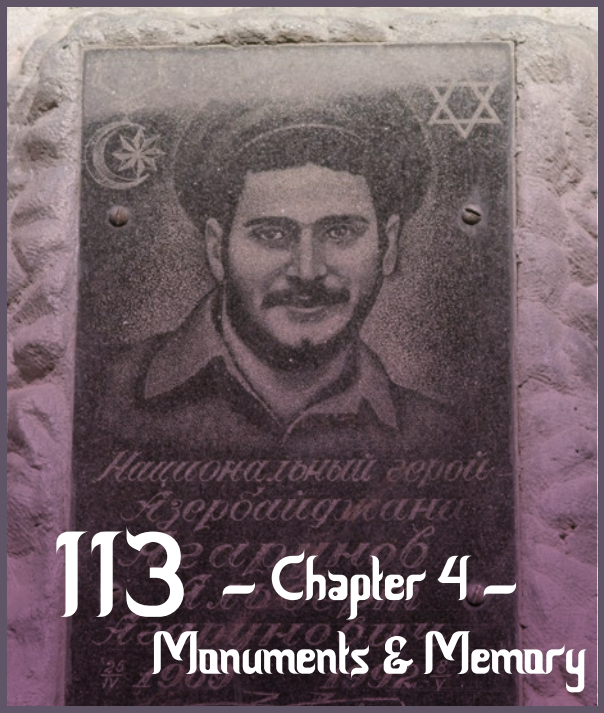
7 Elli Kriel, "United Arab Emirates," *ejiw* online edition, forthcoming. "The Arab world is re-embracing its Jews". *The Economist* (January 18, 2022) at https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/the-arab-world-is-re-embracing-its-jews/21807243.

CONTENTS







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BÜYÜK İNDİRİM
NE ALIRSAN
49
69
79
99

– CHAPTER 1 –

NEIGHBOURHOODS

What is a Jewish neighbourhood? Too often we think about "ghettoisation," or forced residence in a specific area of a city or town. However, religious observance is undeniably a major factor in the creation of Jewish neighbourhoods. To be able to walk to a synagogue, have access to a *mikvah* (ritual bath), or purchase fresh meat from a kosher butcher, are all acts integral to everyday Jewish life, meaning that Jewish neighbourhoods were an inevitability. In fact, in the Muslim world Jews were only occasionally required to live in specific districts, instead most Jewish neighbourhoods developed organically over time.

It is not surprising therefore that individuals tied by religious, linguistic, or tribal traditions would opt to live close together. In North Africa and the Middle East, many historically Jewish neighbourhoods trace their origins back to the Ottoman Empire, when cities were divided into *mahallas* (wards), the empire's smallest administrative unit. Quite often, a city would have a mahalla with a high concentration of Jews, and other neighbourhoods where specific Christian denominations would settle. The idea of a Jewish neighbourhood is so ingrained in the region that in 2015, Egyptian television produced a soap opera for Ramadan entitled *Harat al-Yahud* (The Jewish Quarter).

Today, the majority of historic Jewish neighbourhoods in the Muslim world are no longer inhabited by Jews. However, Jewish heritage is still visible in many cities if you know where to look. Street names may remember Jewish notables, buildings may contain traces of Jewish religious art, or there may simply be a niche in a door where a mezuzah once hung. In recent years some countries have even gone as far as to restore traditional Jewish neighbourhoods as a way to reclaim national culture and attract tourists. This does not mean that Jewish neighbourhoods have completely disappeared from the region: small, vibrant Jewish neighbourhoods still exist in both Morocco and Iran.

Jewish community centre in Tehran, Iran | 2015

Bataween neighbourhood in Baghdad, Iraq
One of the main locations of the 1941 "Farhūd" (anti-Jewish riots) | 2022

Images of Imam Ali, considered to be the first Imam of the Shiites displayed in the former Jewish neighbourhood of Taht Al Takia in Baghdad

Baghdad, Iraq

Less than one hundred years ago, the Jewish community of Iraq was the largest in the Middle East, thriving in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Today, there are virtually no Jews left in the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates. The majority of Iraqi Jews fled the country between 1949-1952, and those who remained migrated in the ensuing decades. In some cases Jewish holy sites have been taken over by Muslim communities and in other cases they have simply been destroyed. With practically no Jews left in Iraq, the preservation of Jewish heritage in the country is almost impossible.

Although many associate the *Farhud* in 1941 (the anti-Jewish riot which caused millions of dollars of damage to Jewish property and killed somewhere between 180-600 Jews) as the beginning of the end for the Jewish community in Iraq, the reality is more complicated. The Iraqi government recognised this event as a heinous act of anti-Jewish violence and partially indemnified the community for their losses. Furthermore, the return of the British to Iraq in 1941 and the key position of the country during World War II meant that in the period between 1942-1946 Iraqi Jews experienced a safety and prosperity that few other Jewish communities knew in the same period. The decline of Iraqi Jewry is closely tied to the political and economic situation of the country as a whole at the end of the 1940s, which was far from ideal – inflation, unemployment, and anti-British sentiment made for an extremely unstable political milieu. These local problems, coupled with the defeat of the Arab armies after the birth of the state of Israel in 1948, ultimately led to a rapid dissolution of the Jewish community, which until today is not completely understood.

The majority of Jews left Iraq as part of operation Ezra and Nehemiah, organised by the Israeli government. Upon immigration, primarily to Israel, Iraqi Jews were stripped of their nationality and their property was confiscated by the state. Today, Iraqi law guarantees the reinstatement of citizenship to individuals who gave up their citizenship for political or sectarian reasons. It does not apply to Jews who emigrated and lost their citizenship as a result of the 1950 laws.

After 1951, only around 6,000-8,000 Jews were left in the country, their position continued to decline, particularly after Israel won the 1967 war and the Ba'th Party took power in 1968. Following these events, Jews were arrested, dismissed from government jobs, and their property was confiscated. By 1971, only 1,500 Jews remained in Iraq and this number continued to decline until no one was left.

Today, the culture and traditions of Iraqi Jewry are preserved in both Israel, where the majority of Iraqi Jews fled between 1949-1952, and throughout the Jewish diaspora. The second largest centre of Iraqi Jewish life is the New York metropolitan area, followed by London. Jews of Iraqi heritage continue to preserve their language and culture, and hope for a day when they can visit the land of their ancestors.

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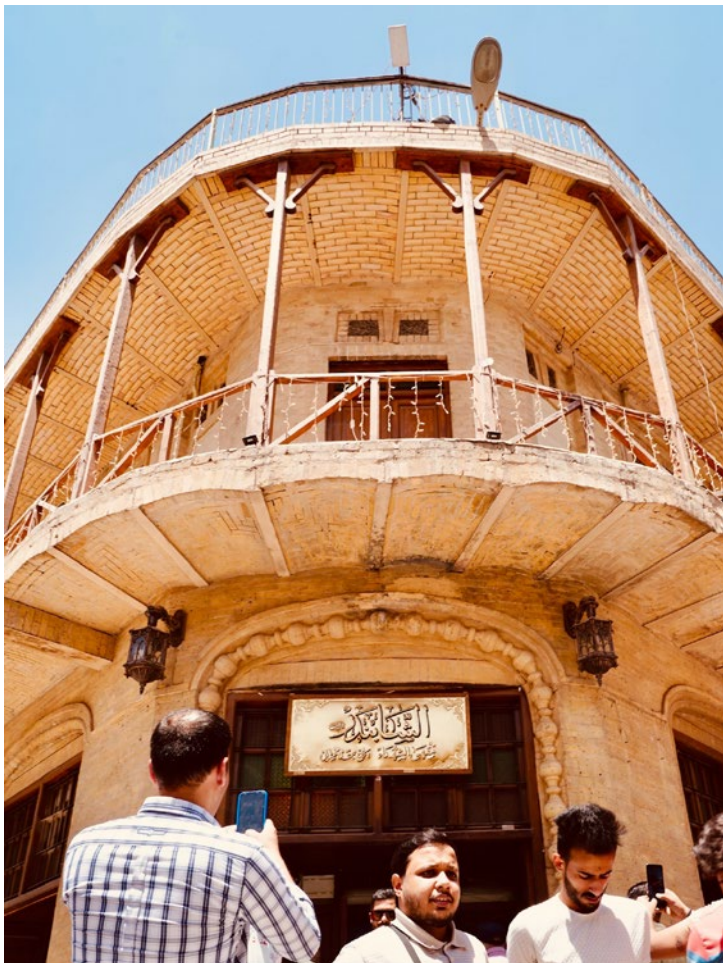

Cafe in Bataween neighbourhood.
Baghdad, Iraq | 2022

Modern Bataween in Baghdad, Iraq, once
a vibrant Jewish neighbourhood | 2022

House formerly inhabited by Jewish families. The majority of Jews left Iraq in the period between 1949-1951 due to political and economic insecurity. Baghdad, Iraq | 2022

Minaret destroyed in the battles of Fallujah in 2014. Fallujah was formerly known as Pumbedita, home to one of the most important centres of Jewish learning from 259-1040 CE. Iraq | 2022

Mausoleum of the prophet Nahum in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the town of Alqosh | 2010

Showing where Jewish friends lived in Erbil in the 1950's. Iraqi Kurdistan | 2010

Beirut, Lebanon

The Jewish community of Beirut was historically small, gaining significance in the 19th century, as Beirut emerged as an important port city and a political and cultural centre under the Ottomans. The Beirut Jewish community emerged as Jews from Sidon, Tripoli and other areas began to move to take advantage of the prosperity of the city, settling in the Wadi Abu Jamil district – which would soon after become known as the Jewish quarter.

Jewish families were particularly represented in the areas of trade and finance. Beirut eventually became a centre of Jewish culture, with the publication of several Jewish magazines and newspapers, including the Arabic-language Jewish newspaper *al-Ālam al-Isrāīlī* (The Israelite World), which was read throughout the region. The Jewish community would continue to grow after Lebanon gained independence in 1946 and after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, as Jews from Syria and Iraq settled in Lebanon due to the worsening situation of Jews in those countries.

This growth, however, would be curtailed as the stability of Lebanon itself began to deteriorate with the onset of the first Lebanese Civil War in 1958. Although the Jewish population attempted to maintain a neutral position during the war, being neither Muslim or Christian, the Jewish quarter suffered due to its strategic position within the city, putting it in the middle of the crossfire. From this point forward the Jews of Lebanon began to decrease. The increased presence of Palestinian refugees following the 1967 war further contributed to rising hostility, which would later peak with Israel's military intervention in the second Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989.) During this period, Lebanese Jews were no longer viewed as neutral and were subject to direct hostility as leading community members were kidnapped and murdered due to their perceived association with Israel. At the same time, the Jewish quarter also faced further destruction, with the roof of the Magen Avraham Synagogue being bombed by Israeli jets during the siege of Beirut.

Renewed Beirut, one of the formerly Jewish neighborhoods. Lebanon | 2003

This war marked a turning point for the Lebanese Jewish community, and today, only a few Jewish families remain in Lebanon, living largely in secrecy. In the 21st century, the Lebanese Jewish community exists as a Diaspora community, which strives to preserve its language, culture and religious traditions around the globe. In the 21st century, the Magen Avraham Synagogue was restored to its original beauty in part due to the efforts of the Lebanese Jewish Diaspora.

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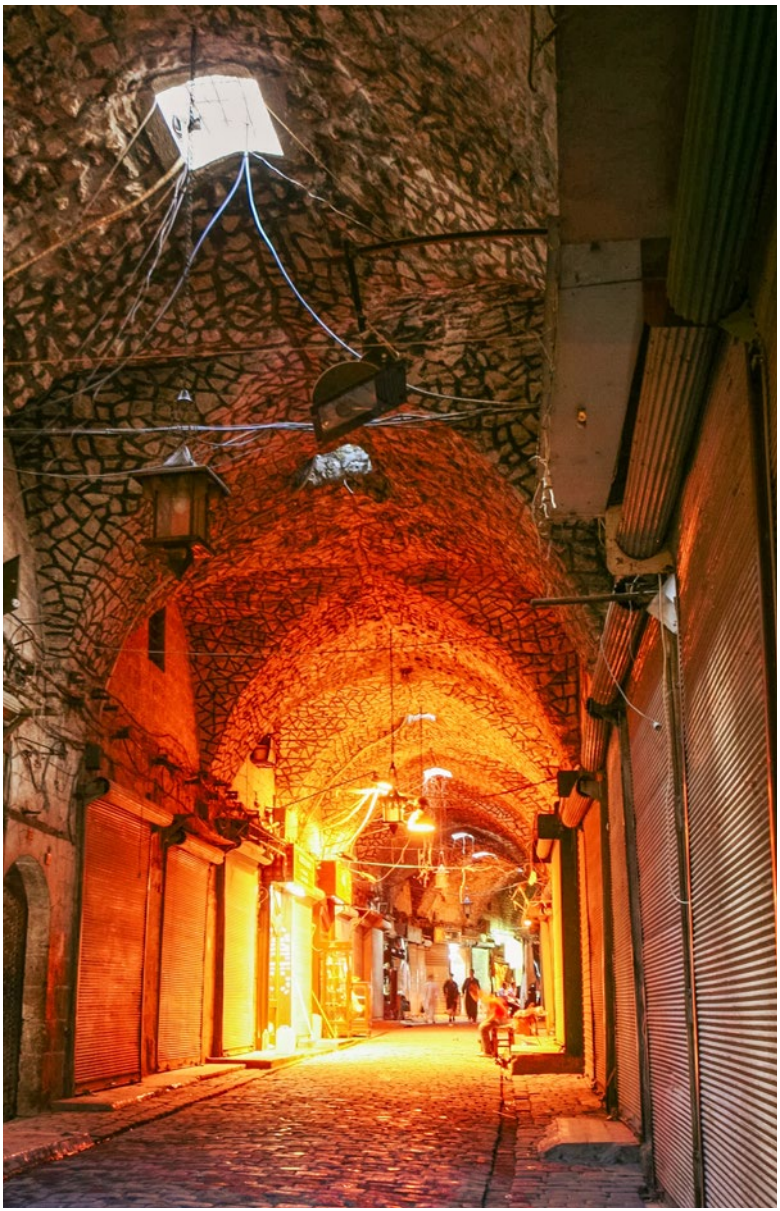
Bab al-Faraj Clock tower in Aleppo, Syria Some believe that the six pointed star pattern in the balustrade is a reference to the city's historic Jewish community, but this is purely myth | 2010



Al-Madina Souq in Aleppo, Syria. Al-Madina Souq is the largest covered historic market in the world. It was once home to many Jewish owned shops | 2010

Syria

The modern history of Syrian Jewry is just as tragic as the contemporary history of Syria as a whole. On September 22, 2022, *The Jerusalem Post* announced the death of Albert Kamoo, the president of the Jewish community of Syria, stating in the article that only a handful of Sephardic Jews remain in the country. These last Jews are two elderly women, and two men in their sixties. The historic Jewish quarters Damascus and Aleppo had, are now abandoned, are inhabited by other citizens or were destroyed during the civil war. The photographs taken in 2010 show that the Jewish neighbourhoods were abandoned well before the civil war broke out. The first image depicts the market hall *al-Madina Souq* in Aleppo, and the second photo is Maharat ah-Yahud, the Jewish quarter in the old city of Damascus. In both instances there is almost nothing left of the historical Syrian Jewish community.

Syrian Jewry, although never large in number, was historically a vibrant community culturally, socially and economically connected to its Christian and Muslim neighbours. Over the course of a century, Syrian Jewry has shrunk from tens of thousands of people at the start of the twentieth century, to fifteen thousand in 1947, to almost none in 2022. Those who are left in Syria today, are of an advanced age and it is likely that within a decade there will be no Jews left in the country.

The reasons for their demise over the course of a century are both economic and political. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Jews left Syria for Egypt and the Americas due to economic hardship. Political tension between Zionists in Palestine and Arab Nationalists in Syria also grew during this period, leading to sporadic outbreaks of violence against Syrian Jews. In the period leading up to Syrian independence in 1946, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1949, these sporadic outbreaks became regular occurrences, and in the summer of 1948 several synagogues in Aleppo were set on fire, and in Damascus, Jews were killed by a series of bomb explosions.

Following 1948, the border between Israel and Syria was closed, and emigration of Jews out of Syria was heavily restricted. Nevertheless, many Jews found ways to leave, often settling in Lebanon. Post-1948, both government and public hostility towards the Jewish community continued to grow as Syrian Jews were often portrayed as a symbolic proxy for the state of Israel. Although emigration was officially illegal and thus very dangerous, with each decade more Jews left Syria. In 1992, in part due to American diplomatic intervention, the Syrian government removed the emigration restrictions, and between 1992 and 1994, most of the four thousand remaining Jews left the country, leaving only around two hundred Jews in Syria by the mid-1990s. As early as the 1950s, Jewish communal life in Syria became virtually impossible. In addition to violent attacks, Jews were barred from participating in politics and had their bank accounts frozen by the government. Beyond anti-Jewish sentiment, which led to the dissolution of Syria's Jewish citizens, Syrian Jewish heritage has also suffered in the past decade due to general political instability caused by the civil war and ISIS that led to the destruction of synagogues and historic buildings, virtually erasing the physical legacy of Jews from Aleppo and Damascus.

Emma Corts

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This page and next page: *Harat al-Yahud*, the Jewish quarter in Damascus, Syria | 2010

Outside of Brik al-Hara, a kosher restaurant serving local Tunisian food on the island of Djerba, Tunisia | 2004

The rooftops of Izmir, Turkey, once home to one of the largest Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire | 2019

A bust of Dario Moreno, on the street that bears his name. Moreno was a popular Turkish-Jewish singer from Izmir during the 1950s and 1960s. Izmir, Turkey | 2019

CHAPTER 2
PEOPLE

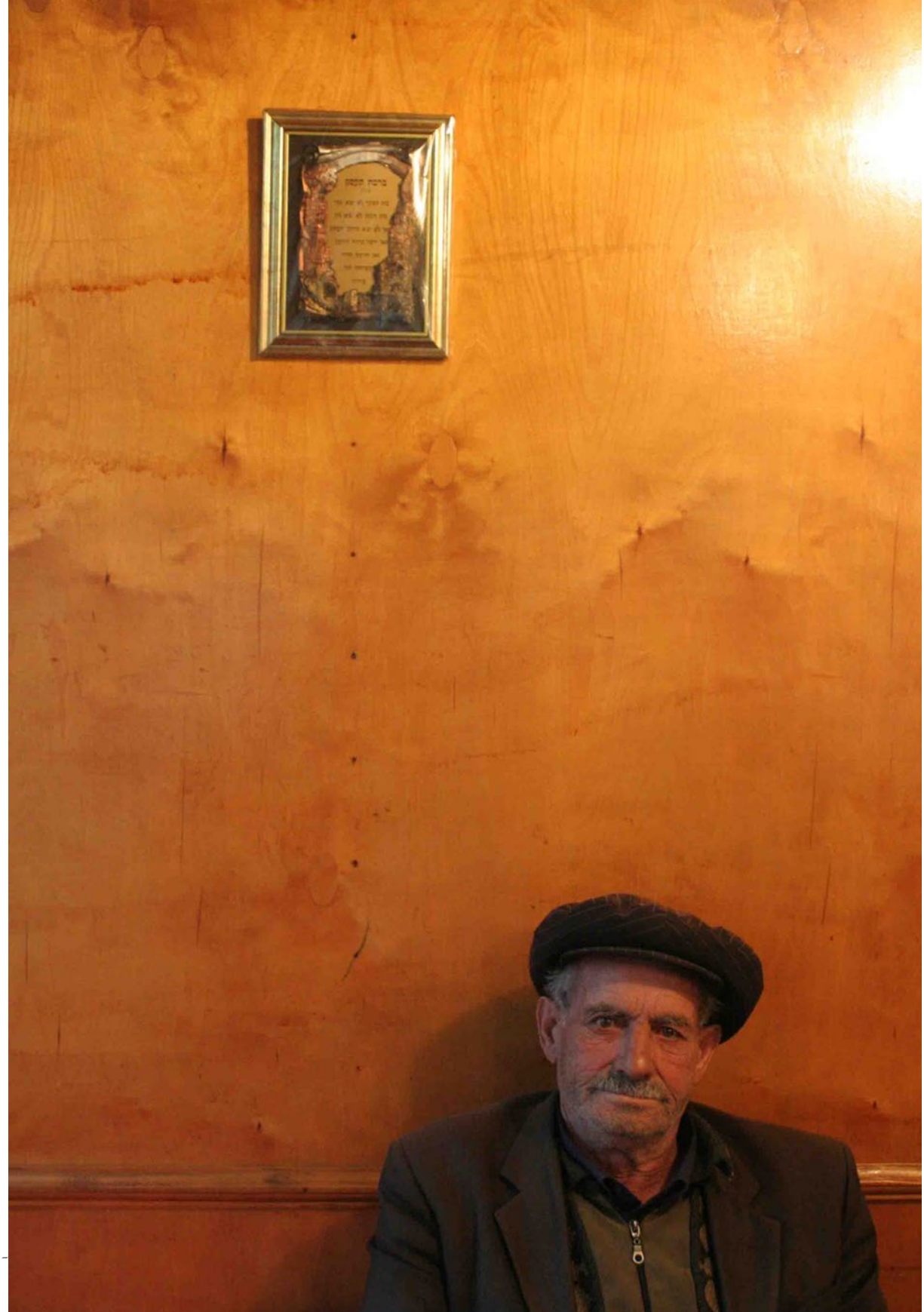
At the heart of any neighbourhood are its residents. Throughout this book you can find many faces; the common link between these people is that they connect in some way to Jewish heritage in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

It is impossible to identify someone's religious background from their physical features, especially in the Islamic world. Historically, Jews and Christians were required to wear clothing to distinguish them from Muslims, but today, this is no longer the case. However, many Jews choose to make their religious identity public through their clothing. For example, Jewish men may choose to wear a *kippah* (skullcap), either all the time or only when they are engaged in a religious activity, such as a prayer or a festive meal. Similarly, some married Jewish women cover their hair with a scarf or a wig. As demonstrated throughout this book, the specific style of head covering or clothing is defined by place of origin and is very much influenced by local culture.

This is not to say that every person connected to Jewish heritage is Jewish. Far from it, many Muslims and Christians appear in this volume as well, as caretakers of Jewish holy sites, or simply showing where their Jewish friends and neighbours once lived. The connecting link between each of these people is their commitment to the heritage of their homeland.


РЕЩАЕТСЯ!

On this page, and the surrounding pages, Georgian Jewish men in Baku, Azerbaijan | 2006



Azerbaijan

It might come as a surprise that Azerbaijan, situated in the South Caucasus region of Eurasia, with a Muslim majority population of just under 10 million people, has a long history of Jewish presence dating back to the 5th century BCE. Local legend says this community descended from Jews that fled the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. The many ruins of ancient synagogues found in various parts of the country serve as archaeological evidence of this long Jewish presence in Azerbaijan.

Although Jews have resided in some regions of Azerbaijan for centuries, they started moving to the capital, Baku, from the 1830s onwards. Primarily due to the late 19th-century Oil Boom, the Jewish community expanded quickly and became an essential part of the multicultural fabric of Baku. Nevertheless, in the late Soviet era, numerous Jews emigrated to other countries, including Israel, Russia, and the USA, due to economic factors. However, Baku is still home to several thousand Jewish inhabitants.

Baku is home to diverse Jewish groups, among which the most numerous historically were Ashkenazim (European Jews) who arrived in the early 19th century and established institutions such as schools, libraries, clubs, and cultural centres. Another important group are Jews of Georgian descent who arrived at the turn of the 20th century and preserved their Georgian language and traditions along with their Jewish faith. Lastly, there are the Mountain Jews, who have lived in Azerbaijan for many centuries, speak a distinct Persian-influenced language called Juhuri, and constitute the third largest Jewish group in Baku.

The Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan are not Ashkenazim or Sephardim (of the Iberian Peninsula), instead they descend from the Jews of the Persian Empire. Despite facing many challenges over the years, they have kept their faith and developed unique traditions and religious practices that incorporate elements of Kabbalah and other strands of Jewish mysticism. Historically, Mountain Jews have worked in small trades, crafts, and carpet weaving. Girmizi Gasaba (Red Village) is believed to be the oldest Jewish town outside of Israel, and it serves as the cultural centre of Azerbaijani Mountain Jewish life.

The Azerbaijani government has created an atmosphere of tolerance that has allowed the Jewish community to flourish. The constitution of Azerbaijan guarantees religious freedom and declares no state religion.

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Mountain Jews in the city of Quba, Azerbaijan | 2006

One of the last members of the Jewish communities in Cairo, Egypt | 2004

Cairo, Egypt

The Jewish community of Egypt, which once numbered more than 70,000 people, today has only six Jews, all of them women. It is only a matter of time before this number will fall to zero.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, multiple waves of immigration caused Egypt's Jewish community to swell. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Egypt was at its peak with 75,000 Jews. Although Jews tended to live in specific quarters, which included Jewish businesses, schools, and synagogues, they constantly interacted with their Muslim neighbours. Cafés, nightclubs, weddings, and of course places of employment were all an Egyptian melting pot that included Jews, Muslims, and Christians. The 1929 Egyptian National Law made formal citizenship a possibility for virtually all Jews. However, for reasons not completely understood, only about 10,000 Jews claimed Egyptian citizenship.

The position of Jews in Egyptian society began to deteriorate leading up to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and only worsened when Egypt went to war with Israel. Multiple measures were taken by the Egyptian government to monitor the Jewish community. These included the censoring of mail, tapping telephones, forced closure of Jewish associations and organisations, and temporarily requisitioning Jewish-owned goods. This was followed by a wave of arbitrary arrests, violent riots and attacks against Jews that left dozens dead or wounded. Emigration was first prevented by the Egyptian regime, but the population still declined, as people left for Israel with the help of the Zionist underground.

Beginning in 1955, the situation for Jews declined markedly due to the policies of the new Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the ideology of pan-Arabism, and the Suez War of 1956. During this period, the rights of Jews were systematically reduced and eliminated. As a result, approximately 23,000 Jews fled or were expelled from the country, with 14,000 settling in Israel, while the rest settled primarily in Europe and North America. The Egypt and Syria Alliance, which resulted in the United Arab Republic, and their defeat during the June-war in 1967,

further pushed Jews to leave Egypt – many were arrested, imprisoned, and exiled from the country along with their families. By 1970, there were scarcely 250 Jews left.

In 2020, the U.S. State Department estimated there were less than ten Jews in Egypt. However, according to Magda Haroun, the head of Egypt's dwindling Jewish community, only six Jews remained in 2013, all elderly women with no source of income. There are no more men present in this community, mainly because, over time, Jewish men converted to Islam as Egyptian law prohibits non-Muslim men from marrying Muslim women, whereas a Jewish woman is permitted to marry a Muslim man. The last women of the Jewish community rarely meet, only at feasts and funerals. In contemporary Egypt, Jews are often portrayed as traitors and spies, and thus these women keep a low profile fearing that others will find out they are Jewish.

The current Egyptian regime, including president Abdul Fattah El-Sisi, has done little to combat antisemitism, or to educate the Egyptian population about their country's Jewish history and its imminent end. The government is unilaterally rescuing and renovating synagogues and cemeteries, so that the Egyptian Jewish legacy can be rightfully placed next to the Egyptian Pharaonic, Coptic, and Islamic civilizations. The completion of projects is celebrated with opulent ceremonies covered by the press, but that is where it ends. Synagogue access is highly restricted, and these monuments remain largely empty.[17]

The future for Egypt's Jewish community does not seem bright. Magda believes that she will be the last Jew left in Egypt, bearing the sad responsibility to represent the final chapter of Jewish life in Egypt. However, she continues the mission to preserve Egypt's remaining Jewish culture and perseveres in her mission to keep the Jewish synagogues open and receiving people, just like Egyptian mosques and churches.

Rahma Bekhit

The *shamash* (guardian) of the synagogue in Isfahan, Iran | 2001

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A Jew in the city of Kerman, Iran, waiting for others to compose the *minyan* (prayer quorum) | 2001

A Jewish family in Shiraz, Iran | 2001

› A man holding a *shiviti* (amulet), a meditative representation of a verse from the Psalms, Tehran, Iran | 2001

יהוה
הצדיק
מרדכי
ציון
ציון
תמיד

Girl on Valiasr Street in Tehran reading Michel Gordon's first book *A Jew in Islam* | 2015

A Jew showing the Torah scroll in the Yazd synagogue in Yazd, Iran | 2001

Current owners of a house where Jews once lived in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan | 2010

Collection of pictures in Jewish Museum in Fes, Morocco | 2004

Morning prayer inside the Slat Al-Azama synagogue in Marrakesh, Morocco | 2004

Jewish woman in the *mellah* (Jewish quarter) of Rabat, Morocco | 2004

Pictures on the wall of the Jewish community centre in Damascus, from left to right Basha al-Assad, Chief Rabbi Jacob Saul Dwek (b.1829 - d.1919), and Hafez al-Assad | 2010

President of the Jewish community of Damascus at the local community centre | 2010

Jewish women on the Island of Djerba, Tunisia | 2004

Island of Djerba, children returning from school, Tunisia | 2004

Dubai, UAE

Although small, the Jewish community of the United Arab Emirates is perhaps the most dynamic Jewish community in the Middle East outside of Israel. In particular, Dubai is fast becoming a major hub of Jewish life on the Arabian Peninsula. Although Dubai has no historic Jewish community, over the past few decades a discrete expat community developed as Dubai itself has emerged as a global business centre. For years this small community kept a low profile organising prayer and religious observance in private homes. However, this quickly changed in February of 2019 when the UAE established diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. Often referred to as the Abraham Accords, this event marked a major turning point for the Jewish population of the UAE. Although the Abraham Accords are not recognised by all of the Emirates and continue to receive criticism, these accords have been overwhelmingly positive for the Jewish community in the UAE.

Today, Jewish communal institutions in Dubai are expanding at a fast pace; a religious school, kindergartens, synagogues, *mikvahs* (ritual baths) and multiple kosher restaurants have all been established in the past four years. With the recognition of Judaism by the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, Judaism has become a public facing religion in Dubai. Observant Jewish men in Dubai wear *kippot* (skull caps) in the street without any fear of harassment, in contrast to some European countries where Jewish communal leaders discourage their members from displaying outward signs of their religion due to rising antisemitism. In 2020, Hanukkah concerts and candle lightings were held at the foot of the Burj Khalifa, the most prominent building in the centre of the city. Although the UAE government is often criticised for human rights violations and undemocratic principles, the Abraham Accords appear to be a success.

It is estimated that somewhere between 500-3000 Jews live in the UAE, although these numbers are impossible to verify. The majority of Jews are expatriates from

A Jewish man holding his *kippah* (skullcap) in the Chabad House, the Jewish community center in Dubai, UAE | 2020

A Jew from India attending morning prayer services in Dubai, UAE | 2020

English-speaking countries and/or Europe. Many Israelis have also moved to the UAE as a consequence of the Abraham Accords. Dubai has also become a popular tourist destination for Israeli Jews due to its close proximity to Israel and its burgeoning kosher food industry. The establishment of a Jewish community in Dubai, although complicated and at times criticised, gives hope for many people that the future of the region will be more inclusive and diverse.

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A Chabad Rabbi in Dubai, UAE | 2020

Shamash (guardian) of the synagogue in Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2006

Jewish woman in Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2006

Jewish girl at home in Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2006

Praying after a meal during Passover. Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2006

Rabbi of Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2006

Bukhara, Uzbekistan

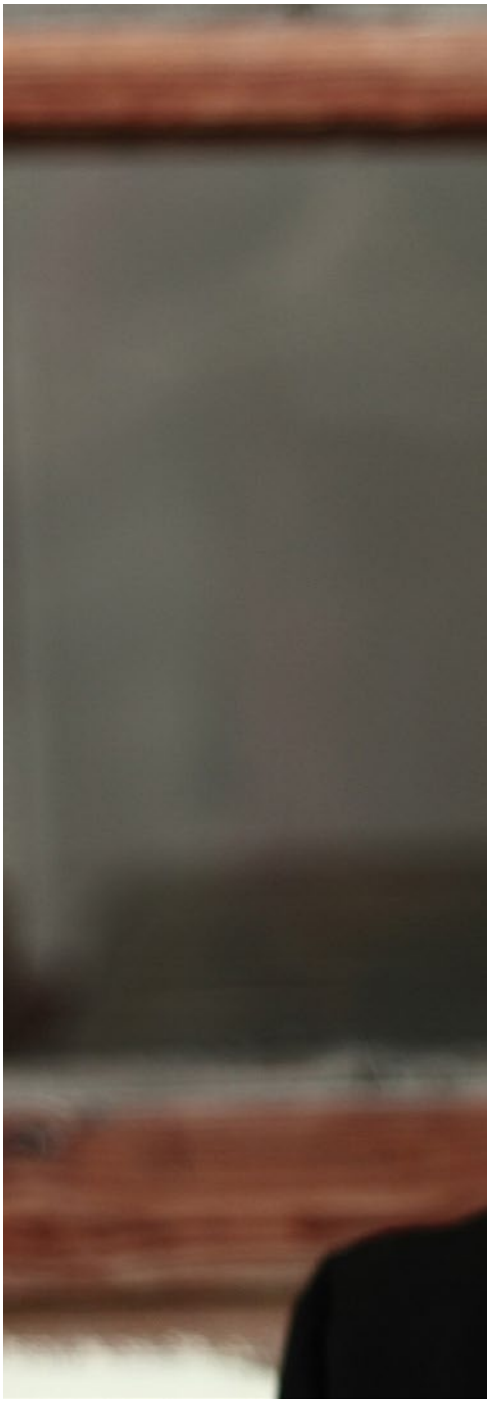
The man in the photos is a rabbi of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, and he stands in one of the last two remaining synagogues in the city. Although not much is left of the once grand and historic Jewish community of Bukhara, a small community remains.

It is uncertain how Jews came to settle in Central Asia, but historians agree that they arrived via the ancient Silk Road after being exiled from the land of Israel in the 6th century BCE. Throughout history, Bukhara's Jewish community was both inside and outside the dominant Turk-Persian culture. They lived in relative freedom due to their status as the "People of the Book," which allowed them a certain degree of tolerance and protection in exchange for their compliance with some discriminatory measures. Despite these limitations, they were devoted to their communal music and culture, something that proved to be a major factor in the Bukhara Jews' ability to preserve their private and distinct traditions for generations. The occupation of Central Asia by the Russians at the end of the 19th century was accompanied by an anti-religious policy against Jews and Muslims. As a result, most synagogues and mosques were forced to close. Over time, however, this policy was eased and although Jews suppressed or concealed their beliefs and practised their religion in secrecy, they were very successful in public life. However, after 1990, the Jewish community shrank drastically due to mass migrations from Bukhara to Israel and the United States.

Today, the Jewish population of Bukhara is divided into two small communities, each led by a rabbi. The future of the synagogues and these small communities is precarious due to a lack of private funds to preserve the buildings and the absence of aid from the Uzbek government. While the government does not assist in preserving Jewish sites, the importance of Jews to Bukharan cultural heritage is recognized on the World Monuments Fund website. However, this is an international organisation focused on safeguarding cultural heritage worldwide, and not an Uzbek initiative to preserve or remember Jewish heritage.

Furthermore, it is difficult to keep Jewish traditions alive due to assimilation into Islamic culture, which – coupled with the high cost of maintaining a traditional Jewish lifestyle in Uzbekistan – contributes to Jewish families leaving Bukhara. Today, only a fraction of what were once thousands of Jewish families remain in Bukhara – of which only two keep kosher homes – and the community is on the verge of disappearing.

Emma Corts



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Rabbi of Bukhara, Uzbekistan | 2012

Shamash (guardian) of the synagogue at Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan | 2012

Community member displaying the "Menorah" (local Jewish community newspaper) in Russian, Tashkent, Uzbekistan | 2006

Chabad Rabbi in Tashkent, Uzbekistan | 2006

Young Jews in front of the synagogue of Tashkent, Uzbekistan | 2006

Entrance to the Algaze synagogue in Izmir, Turkey

– CHAPTER 3 –

LIVED RELIGION

One of the most visible and enduring monuments to Jewish life across the Islamic world are synagogues, which throughout history have served as places of both worship and study. For many reasons, these buildings are sensitive locations, often surrounded by multiple levels of security, and thus prove a challenge to photograph. For example, the El Ghriba in Djerba requires numerous security checks before entering the synagogue complex. When Gordon was travelling in Syria, close attention was paid to those photographing the Jewish site, with Syrian authorities going as far as to note the names of those passing by the building.

The preservation and continued use of these locations is of great significance both to Jewish communities, as they are a testament to diversity in Judaism, and to national governments, as they are a testament to the diversity of Islamic societies. Few countries in the Middle East and North Africa continue to have functioning Jewish communities, but this does not diminish the importance of these sites, and in some cases even elevates their importance. The Grand Synagogue in Tunis and the Magen Avraham Synagogue in Beirut can both be considered monuments to communities that today exist as diasporas, and perhaps provide a glimmer of hope that one day these communities will return.

These religious sites have also served as sanctuaries for written documents and communal records. The most famous example being the Cairo Geniza held in the Ibn Ezra synagogue complex, which at one time contained over 400,000 documents accumulated over 850 years in Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Aramaic and almost every language known to the mediaeval world – providing a priceless historical resource that scholars have been studying for over a century.

A former *Talmud Torah* (religious school) in Meknes, Morocco | 2004

Rabat, Morocco

The oldest archeological evidence of Jewish presence in Morocco is found at the Roman site of Volubilis and dates to the third century CE. However, many legends attest to a Jewish presence that is much older. Today, Jews only represent a tiny percentage of the Moroccan population, yet their history and contributions to Moroccan society are central to Moroccan national identity. At its height in the mid-twentieth century, the number of Moroccan Jews totalled around a quarter of a million, today it is only around 1,500-3,000. However, this remains the largest Jewish community in North Africa.

The City of Rabat

Rabat is situated between the shores of the Atlantic coast and Bouregreg River. The city was founded along with its sister city Salé in 1150 by Kalif Almohad Yacoub el-Mansour. Known as the first capital of Morocco, in 2022 Rabat's population had already surpassed one million residents. In 2012 Rabat was deemed "City of Light Cultural Capital of the Kingdom" as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Rabat and Its Jewish History

Rabat is home to one of the youngest Mellahs in Morocco, the commonly used term for a Jewish quarter in Morocco. Although the precise origin of the word is unknown, some believe that *Mellah* derives from the word for "salt" or "salt mine" in Arabic. Between 1806 and 1808 the Mellah of Rabat was constructed, 400 years after the first Mellah in Fes. Before its construction, Jews lived among the Muslim population in the Medina. Although not segregated, the lives of Jews and Muslims were disconnected and their relationships were strained. Jews were subject to steep land and living taxes, intermarriage was prohibited, and certain types of dress were restricted.

The Mellah of Rabat was built on the site of fruit orchards and at the utmost exterior of the Medina's walls. The enclave functioned to separate but still protected the Jews living under the reign of Sultan Moulay Slimane ben Mohammed.

Bet El Synagogue in Casablanca, Morocco. Often referred to as the Oranaise Synagogue as it was founded by Algerian Jews | 2004

Efforts to Preserve Jewish Heritage

Jews have since deserted the traditional Mellah, with the majority of the population now residing in the city. Today the Mellah functions as a marketplace where merchants, street vendors and other activities are scattered along the roads. The Moroccan Jewish population finds itself ageing as younger generations move abroad. There are various efforts to preserve Jewish heritage, not only in the city of Rabat but also nationwide. Mellahs are now considered "living museums" in need of architectural and historical preservation.

In the last 20 years more diversity and pluralism has been accepted, celebrated and recognized as beneficial for the development of the country. Judeo-Moroccan history has been incorporated into Moroccan school curriculum. Preserving places of meeting and worship like synagogues facilitates a space for Jewish celebrations such as the lighting of the candles of Hanukkah or celebrating Mimouna, a Jewish-Muslim Moroccan holiday at the end of Passover. By fostering interreligious dialogue and preserving Jewish heritage, Morocco combats extremism and the demonization of religious, cultural and lingual diversity.

JoAnn Augustus

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Synagogue of Baku, Azerbaijan | 2006

Talmud Torah (school) in Aleppo, Syria. The image above is from 2003 and the image below is from 2010

Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt | 2004

Library of Jewish Studies in the Ibn Ezra complex in Cairo, Egypt | 2004

Sha'ar Hashamayim Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt | 2004

Synagogue of Isfahan, Iran | 2001

Synagogue of Shiraz, Iran | 2001

Iran

The presence of Jews in Iran is believed to date back to 586 BCE, following the conquering of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and the ensuing Babylonian Exile. Given the long history of Jews in Persia, it is unsurprising that one of the *megillot* (scrolls) of the Hebrew bible tells the story of a Jewish woman, Esther, who became queen of Persia. To this day, Jews still make pilgrimages to the tombs of Esther and Mordecai (her uncle) in Hamadan during the holiday of Purim.

Throughout their long history, Iranian Jews have both prospered and faced discrimination, examples include being forcibly converted under the Safavid dynasty and being required to wear yellow clothes to distinguish their community members. In contemporary Iran, Jews also face discrimination due to their perceived connections to the former regime of the Shah and constant accusations of clandestine connections to the state of Israel. This political precarity has driven many Iranian Jews to emigrate, primarily to Israel and the United States. Today, it is estimated that around a quarter of a million Jews of Iranian heritage live in the state of Israel, opposed to the 8,000-10,000 Jews still residing in Iran. Despite having considerably diminished in number, Iran's Jewish population remains significant within a regional context, consisting of the third largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel and Turkey.

Within Iran, Jewish life is protected through a *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 Islamic revolution, deeming Iranian Jews as an integral part of Iranian society, and specifically differentiating them from the state of Israel. In return for pledging their allegiance to the theocratic regime within Iran, which is apparent in the ubiquitous photographs of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei within Jewish centres and synagogues, Iranian Jews are permitted to worship openly, and carry on their traditions.

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Synagogue decorations, Tehran, Iran | 2001

Abrishami Synagogue of Tehran, Iran | 2015

Farsi translations of Jewish text with Persion style minatures. Tehran, Iran | 2015

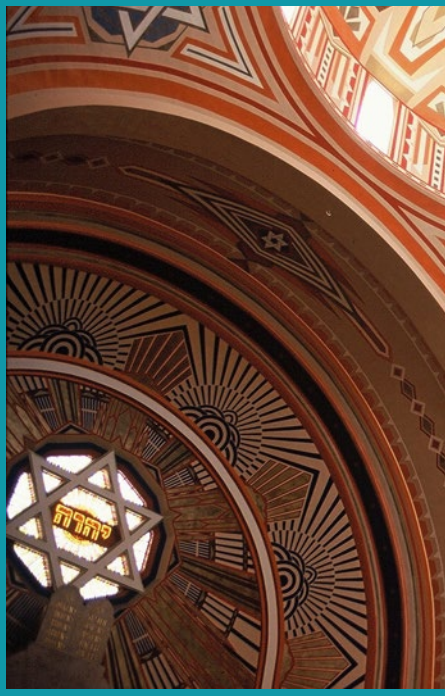
A *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) of a synagogue in Tehran, Iran | 2015

The Gemara (rabbinic discussions in the Talmud) in Farsi. Tehran, Iran | 2015

Prayer for being to called to the Torah in both Hebrew and Farsi, Abrihami synagogue in Tehran, Iran | 2015

Farsi edition of the antisemitic conspiracy text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Tehran, Iran | 2015

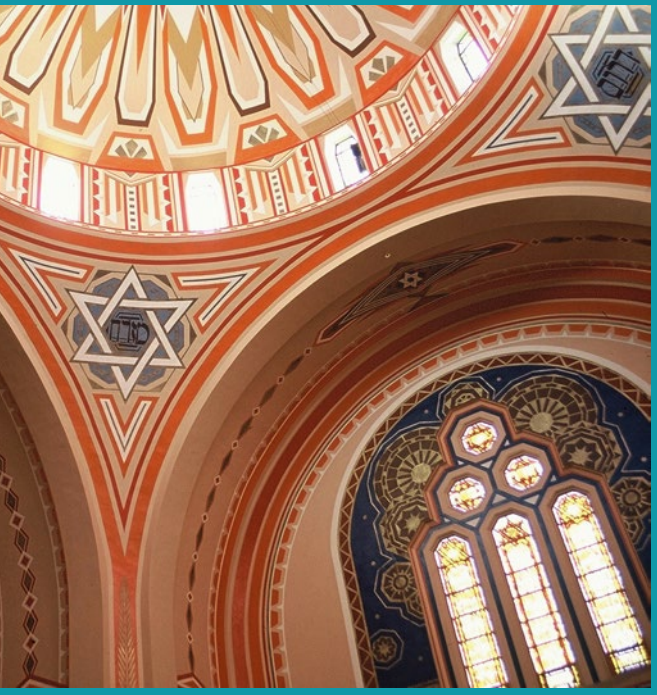
Tunisia



The Jewish presence in Tunisia is said to predate the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE). Over millennia, Tunisian Jewry adapted to live under multiple rulers and empires. Dual events, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the end of the French protectorate in 1956, marked a decisive turning point for Jewish communities across Tunisia as many emigrated to France and Israel. This trend was accelerated following two events that had a pronounced effect on the Jewish community of Tunisia. The first was the Bizerte crisis of 1961, where fighting broke out between French and Tunisian troops following the request that the French vacate the Bizerte naval base. The second crisis occurred following the Six Day War, which sparked the Tunis riots in which the Great Synagogue of Tunis was attacked alongside Jewish businesses and property. These crises severely affected the community, leading to a pronounced drop in the Jewish population due to migration. According to French statistics, in 1956 the Jewish population numbered 32,000 Tunisian subjects and around 6,500 French and Italian citizens; by 1976 this number had dropped to 4,600.

Today, the biggest physical reminder of Jewish life in Tunis is the Grand Synagogue or Temple of Osiris, named after the French philanthropist Daniel Osiris who funded the construction of the synagogue. Built in the 1930s, the Grand Synagogue was fashioned in the art deco style. After falling victim to the Tunis riots of June 1967, the Temple was renovated in the 1990s under President Zadine Ben Ali, at which time bright colours were added to the original, predominantly sober, white interior. Today, the synagogue is primarily a tourist attraction, while the remaining Jewish community prefers to maintain a low profile and worships at smaller sites around the capital.

In addition to the Jewish community on the Tunisian mainland, a small discrete Jewish community resides on the island of Djerba. According to legend, this group settled in Djerba in 586 BCE after the destruction of the First Temple, leading to the belief that their island was in fact an extension of the Holy Land. The island's relative isolation and singular history has engendered unique religious practices found nowhere else in the Jewish world. Much like the rest of Tunisia, the



Grand synagogue of Tunis, Tunisia.
It is currently not in use | 2004

Crypto-synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia | 2004

The Al-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia | 2004

community's size has diminished and today, the Al-Ghriba Synagogue is the only active synagogue on the island. However, Djerba remains a sight of pilgrimage for both Yom Kippur and, in the spring, for the festival of Lag Ba 'Omer. During the latter, both Jewish and Muslim islanders celebrate together with traditions such as the painting of eggs with wishes for fertility and good luck in the coming year. These are then placed within the inner sanctuary of the synagogue. Despite facing the risk of terror attacks such as the truck bomb attack of 2002, the festival managed to attract an estimated 6,000 to 7,000 visitors in 2019.

The Al-Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia | 2004

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Beit Israel synagogue in Izmir, Turkey | 2019


RESTORASYON
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1995
JOZEF KOHEN
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JOZEF LYDİE BENMAYOR
EZRA ŞAUL
ELİ ŞAUL
İZAK TELYAS
REBEKA JOZEF KANYAS
SELİM GURCİ
MARİE HERTZL BİLMAN
BEKİ YAKO AJİ
SUZAN SALVATOR ESKİ NAZİ
MOİZ ESKİ NAZİ
COYA HAYİM GİNNİ (JİMİ)
SİLVİA ALAN COVEY
MARİE AROCHAS SOUHAMI
İVET JOZEF ESKENAZİ
SİLVİA ADNAN FRANKO
JAK ve JÜLYET ELİEZER
ELZA HAYİM RODİTİ
LİNA SAMİ KALOMİTİ
MARKO SEVİNTİ BEN COYA
AVRAM LEVİ BEN MAZALTOV
İZAK - RAŞEL ABUAF
RAŞEL KOHEN BAT SULTANA
JAK - ELİZ ABUAF
LEON RUSO BEN RAHEL
İZAK HAYİM BEN ZİMBUL
ALBER ARDİTİ
HAYİM VİKTOR BONOMO
ERMOZA İSRAEL SADİS
SABETAY ESKİ NAZİ
SARA MARKO RUSO
BEKİ ŞARLO BENVENİSTE
ELAZAR ALALUF
DORETA HAYİM CELARDİN
ELİ ŞARDAS BEN SARA
RAHAMİM REGASTEN SABAN
BEN SULTANA
ESTER ELİ BENVENİSTE
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İSHAK ve LUNA HABİF
ZİMBUL RUBEN HAYİM
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Brit Mila chair, used for circumcision ceremonies, Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Ceremonial hat of the *Haham Bashi* (Chief Rabbi) of Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Shalom synagogue in the Konak neighbourhood of Izmir, Turkey | 2019


5705

Izmir, Turkey

As Turkey's third largest city and second largest port, it is unsurprising that the city of Izmir has had a history shaped by migration. Its culture is a fusion of Muslim and non-Muslim, produced from exchanges between Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Levantines, and Turks. The blend of food, dress and religious practices lends a strong legacy of the communities that resided in Izmir over many generations.

Fleeing the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, Spanish and Ladino speaking Sephardic Jews emigrated to Constantinople and other cities in modern day Turkey. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, 34 synagogues were erected in Izmir. Of the thirteen synagogues still existing today, nine are within the Kemeralti quarter on *Havra Sokak* (Synagogue Street). At its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, the Jewish population of Izmir included approximately 40,000 members.

Today, the Jewish population in Izmir is approximately 1,400, with 20,000 to 30,000 Jews remaining in Turkey. Still, there are traces of the once prominent Jewish community, not only in Izmir's heritage sites but also in its street culture. *Havra Sokak* continues to have one of the largest open markets in the world. Overlooking the Aegean Sea, vendors sell fish, meat, and Sephardic cuisine like *Boyoz*, a flaky pastry that has become associated with the city. Similarly, Jewish history in Izmir also lives through the legacy of notable figures like Dario Moreno, a renowned Turkish-Jewish Ladino singer during the twentieth century for whom a street is named.

Alongside this continued cultural activity, the heritage of the Jewish community in Izmir is also being preserved. The Izmir Jewish Heritage Project (IJHP) is led by the Kiriaty Foundation, in collaboration with Izmir's municipality and the Jewish community, to restore remaining synagogues to function as cultural monuments and living museums. In the future, each site will include exhibitions with information about local customs and history of the individual synagogues and their congregants, thus preserving Jewish heritage and culture in Izmir for future generations.

JoAnn Augustus

The Algazi (Alghazi, Algaze) synagogue, also known as the Kal de Ariva (Upper Synagogue) in Judeo-Spanish, was built in 1724 in Izmir by the prominent Algazi family | 2019

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Synagogue courtyard in Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Ladino sign stating 'It is forbidden to speak in the community' found in the interior of a synagogue in Izmir, Turkey. The sign is meant as a warning to be quiet during religious services | 2019

Memorial plaque in an old synagogue in Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Public notice in Judeo-Spanish at the Beit Israel school and Synagogue in Izmir, Turkey | 2019

Tapu document (title deeds), confirming the permanent lease of state-owned land to the Jewish community in Izmir.


77
La Sinyora Sinagogu
La Signora Synagogue
190

The Signora (Geveret) Synagogue in Izmir, Turkey is a Sephardi synagogue from the 1840s | 2019

The Hevra Synagogue
in Izmir, Turkey | 2019

The Portuguese synagogue in Izmir, Turkey | 2019

– CHAPTER 4 –

MONUMENTS & MEMORY

In Judaism, one of the greatest *mitzvot* (commandments) that one can observe is preparing a body for burial. Indeed, Jewish rituals related to death, burial, and mourning are intricate and extensive. Cremation is forbidden as it is believed that the body should return to the earth to await the coming of the Messiah. Similar to Muslim practice, the body is cleaned, wrapped in a shroud, and then buried in a simple casket. Jewish law requires that a body be buried as quickly as possible. One reason for this is to allow the mourners to focus on their personal grief during the seven day mourning period – *shiva*.

Throughout the Muslim world, Jewish cemeteries are a testament to both the uniformity of Jewish practice and the specificity of each Jewish community and its adoption of local customs and cultures. Whereas practices surrounding the preparation of the body, funeral, and mourning period are uniform, each cemetery speaks to a specific history and culture, with the style of tombstone often reflecting local aesthetics. The languages present on the tombstones also tell a story. In North Africa, which was colonised by the French, the majority of Jewish tombstones from the twentieth century include both Hebrew and French inscriptions. Similarly, the caucuses' tombstones inscriptions are often in Hebrew and Cyrillic, a relic of Russian imperialism.

In many countries Jewish cemeteries have fallen into ruin. The dissolution of the Jewish community meant that no one remained to maintain the cemeteries. However, in other countries, Morocco in particular, cemeteries are being restored and Muslim caretakers are ensuring that the legacy of the communities will continue for decades to come.

Memorial of a young Jewish man who died at the Nagorno Karabakh War in Baku, Azerbaijan | 2006

Cemetery of the mountain Jews In Quba, Azerbaijan | 2006

Jewish cemetery in Alexandria, Egypt | 2004

Entrance to a Jewish cemetery in Cairo, Egypt | 2004

Tombstone with a Farsi inscription in a Jewish cemetery of Tehran, Iran | 2001

Jewish cemetery in Beirut, Lebanon, located on the green line, which divided Beirut in two parts during the civil war (1976-1990) | 2003

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan – with a population of under 7 million inhabitants – is today home to about 500 Jews, mostly concentrated in the capital city of Bishkek, with smaller Jewish communities in the cities of Osh, Kyzyl-Kiya, Karakol, Tokmak, and Kant. However, the history of Jews in the region stretches back several centuries. During the latter half of the 19th century, as the Russian Empire expanded its territories to include Central Asia, Jewish communities began to form in what is now Kyrgyzstan, with both Bukharan and European Jews immigrating to the area. By the 20th century, the community had grown significantly, and during World War II, there were over 40,000 Jews living in the area, including many refugees from Nazi-occupied Soviet territories. However, the population has since decreased due to emigration, with many Jews leaving for Israel or other countries.

Today, the composition of the Jewish community is a mixture of Jews of Bukhara and Sephardic heritage. Most people are secular, and only a few individuals regularly attend synagogue services. Nonetheless, the Jewish community in Kyrgyzstan remains active. The main synagogue – built in 1941 – and a Jewish school still operating in the capital city of Bishkek, are at the centre of Jewish life. Although Kyrgyzstan has historically been a tolerant country, antisemitic incidents have occurred, especially during moments of political insecurity. As recently as 2022, the Jewish school was threatened with eviction from its building, possibly motivated by anti-Jewish sentiment within the municipality, indicating the precarious nature of the Jewish community in Kyrgyzstan. The school was saved due to both foreign intervention and the eventual issuing of a presidential order to protect the school. However, one wonders whether a Jewish community will remain in the coming decades.

Jewish tombs in Osh, Kyrgyzstan | 2012

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Tomb of Daniel, the prophet, in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The site remains a place of pilgrimage. Legends says that Daniel is still growing which explains the large size of the tomb | 2006

Entrance of the Jewish cemetery in Fes, Morocco | 2004

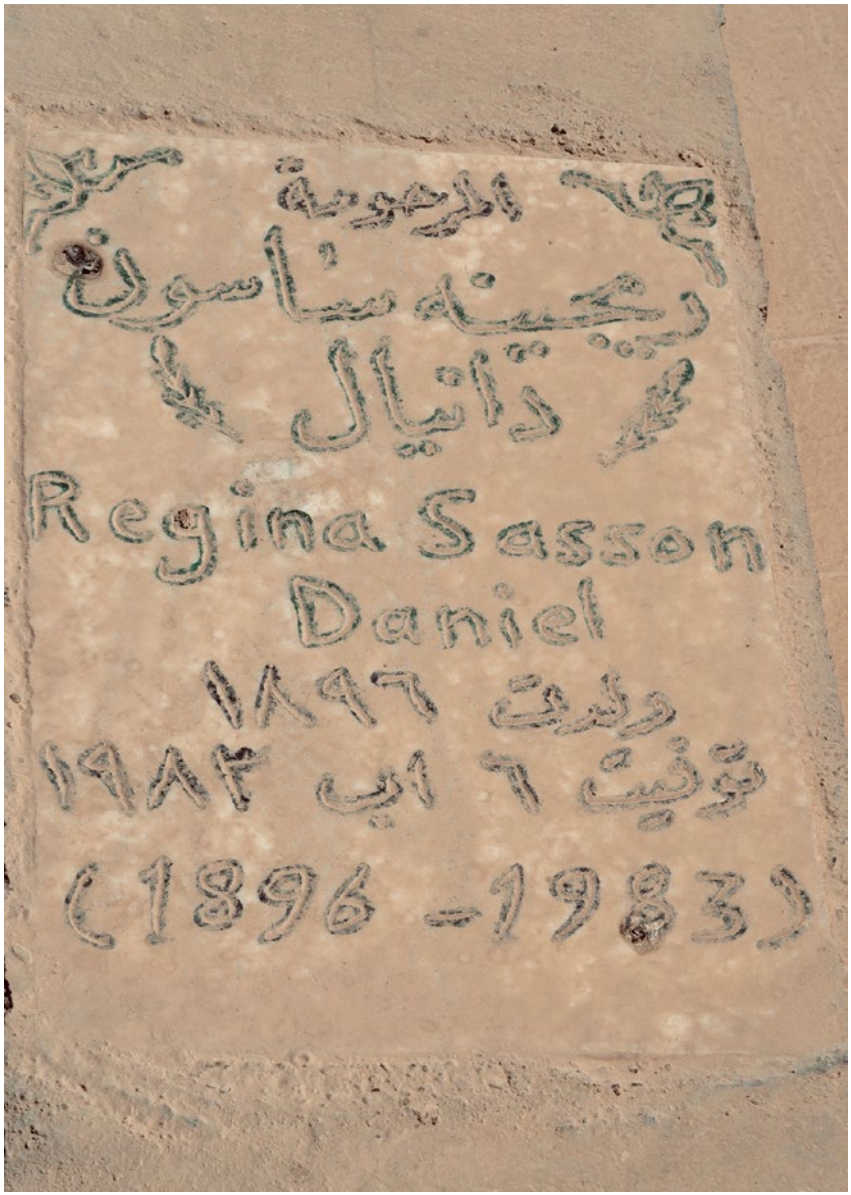
Jewish cemetery in Rabat, Morocco | 2004

Tombstones in the Jewish section of the Borgel synagogue in Tunis, Tunisia | 2004

Monument to Tunisian Jews deported during World War II at the Borgel Cemetery in Tunis, Tunisia | 2004

The tomb of Nahum, a minor prophet from the Hebrew Bible is one of the oldest remaining monuments to Jewish life in Iraqi Kurdistan | 2022

Tombstones from the Jewish cemetery in Baghdad, Iraq | 2022



Tombstones from the Jewish cemetery in Baghdad, Iraq | 2022

THE LIFE & LEGACY OF JEWS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Each shabbat Jewish communities around the world recite *HaNoten Teshua* (He who grants deliverance), a prayer for the welfare of the local government and a pledge of loyalty to the nation in which they live. Today, such prayers are ubiquitous to Jewish liturgical traditions around the globe. It is thus unsurprising that in Dubai groups of Jews come together each week and pray for the United Arab Emirates. And yet, it is also remarkable, as only a few years ago the thought of such a public Jewish presence was almost unthinkable. Similarly, a century ago it would have been impossible to imagine cities like Aleppo, Alexandria, or Baghdad without their Jewish inhabitants, who were part of the fabric of local society.

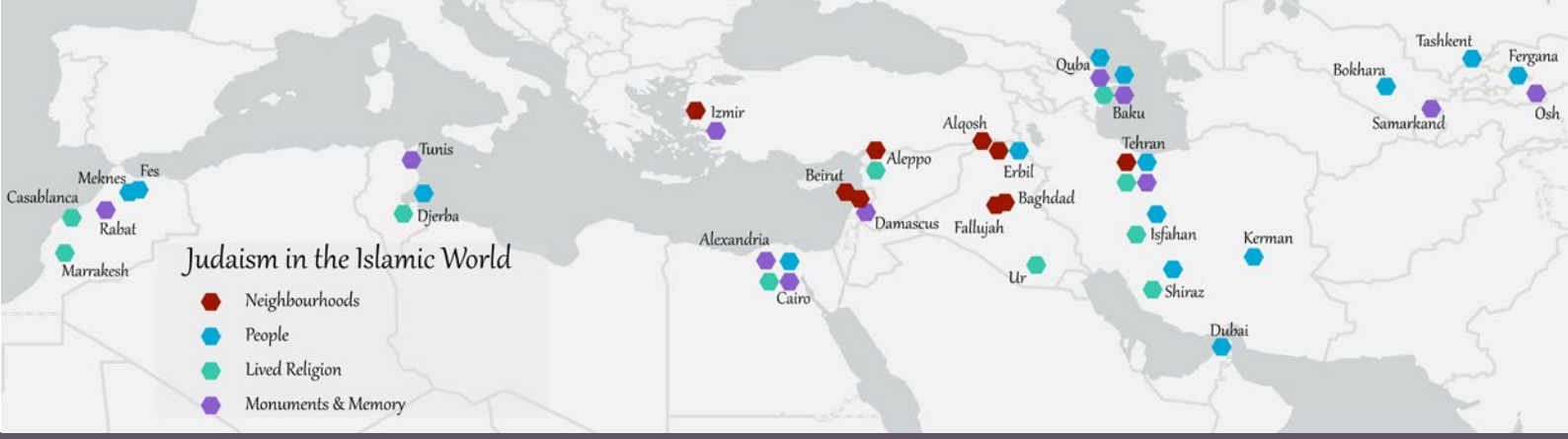
As the images and essays of this book demonstrate, the only remnant of Jewish life in many places across the Muslim World is a crumbling synagogue and an abandoned cemetery. It would be easy to focus on the sad memory of communities that disappeared and their traumatic stories of communal dissolution. And yet, Jewish life has not completely disappeared from the Islamic world.

To this day, small groups of Jews preserve their local traditions while fully aware that their communities may completely disappear in less than a decade. In some small pockets of the region, Jewish life is reinventing itself in unexpected ways. The El Ghriba synagogue on the Island of Djerba and the Tombs of Esther and Mordechai in Hamdan remain important pilgrimage sites. Morocco, whose current Jewish population hovers between 2,000-4,000 residents, is experiencing a Jewish cultural renaissance through heritage tourism. It is estimated that over 15,000 Jews travelled to Morocco for Passover in 2023, Jewish museums and kosher restaurants are opening in cities across the country, and synagogues are once again being filled during the main pilgrimage holidays.

In other places like Beirut and Cairo, synagogues have recently been restored to their original glory. Although there is currently no community to use these spaces, the legacy is there, waiting for Jewish life to return.

Dr. Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah

INDEX BY COUNTRY AND CITY



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Visions of the Middle East and North Africa

Volume 1

Titles published in this series are developed in collaboration between the Middle Eastern Studies programme at the University of Groningen and University of Groningen Press.

Through stunning images, maps and insightful commentary, this book offers a glimpse into the diversity, historical legacy, and rich culture of Jewish communities within the Muslim world. From the growing Jewish community of Dubai to ancient synagogues and shrines, these photographs capture the beauty and complexity of Jewish life around North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Above all, this photographic book serves as a reminder of the enduring spirit of the Jewish people and the diversity of lived experiences within Islamic societies.

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In the words of the photographer Michel Gordon:

'ALL OF THESE PICTURES ARE A PROCLAMATION OF LOVE'

VIMENA

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