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Jews Under Islam, Honestly

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Jews Under Islam, Honestly

Protection was real and the ceiling was real — each myth survives only by forgetting one of them.

A note before we close. This is the last of three: Part 1, [The Architecture of Islam](#), gave you the structure, and Part 2, [Islam Is Plural, Within Real Limits](#), the pluralism. Two stories compete for the history this part covers: a lost paradise of equals, and a straight line of slaughter from Muhammad to now. Both are false. The record is better in some centuries and lethal in others, and flattened by both of the myths that fight over it. You know my stance from the first two parts, so I will only add that being a skeptic of Islam is no license to lie about the past to make the case. The strongest case for our side is the true one.

Best, Uri

In Fatimid Egypt a thousand years ago, a Jewish dyer or coppersmith paid a poll tax once a year, the *jizya*, and he kept the receipt on his person, because a *dhimmi* who could not produce it on demand could be detained. The tax bought something concrete. It bought his life, his workshop, his synagogue, and the right of his community to run its own courts under its own law, and it marked him as it did. The Quran verse that grounds the tax, *Sura* 9:29, has the People of the Book paying it “while they are humbled,” and jurists spent centuries arguing over what the humbling was supposed to require — whether the collector should take the coin gently, “as one would receive a debt,” in al-Nawawi’s phrase, or whether the payer should be made to feel the transaction in his posture.

We know how it actually ran in that Egyptian workshop, because the man’s community threw almost nothing away. The Cairo Geniza, the discard room of a Fustat synagogue, preserved the paper of ordinary Jewish life for a thousand years, and S.D. Goitein read it. What he found was that the law’s own exemptions — for the poor, the sick, the old — had stopped being honored, so *jizya* season arrived as a season of dread, and the pressure of it pushed some poor Jews toward the mosque. The verse did not change. The mood of the collector did.

That receipt is the thing both famous stories leave out. One story remembers Cordoba — equals trading poetry in Andalusian courts, a lost coexistence Zionism supposedly ruined. The other remembers only the massacres, a straight fourteen-hundred-year line from Muhammad to the present. The receipt belongs to neither. It records a rule-bound subordination: protection that was real, a ceiling that was also real, administered by human beings whose temper on collection day no verse had fixed in advance.

Most people arrive already holding the verdict they came for. The partisan of the golden age wants the coexistence with the subordination sanded off. The keeper of the long memory wants the massacres with the long stable centuries sanded off. They need it to hold still and say one thing.

It never says one thing.

Executive Summary

The history of Jews under Islamic rule is a variable legal-historical record, and the value of getting it right is that an honest account can be quoted by people who distrust both of the reigning myths.

The *dhimma* was real law. It was a rule-bound status that delivered security of life and property, freedom of worship, and genuine communal autonomy — Jewish courts applying Jewish law under recognized Jewish leaders — in exchange for the *jizya* and a set of restrictions that marked Jews as subordinate. It was neither a courtesy nor a euphemism for persecution. Bernard Lewis put the structure best: discrimination was the constant, permanent and built into the system, while violent persecution was rare and atypical.

The golden-age reading oversells. It takes genuine Andalusian attainment — Samuel ha-Nagid as vizier, Maimonides' whole formation — and inflates it into a general rule, erasing a subordination that never lifted even at the peak. The label itself is a nineteenth-century European-Jewish construction, aimed first at Christian Europe and later turned into a weapon against Zionism.

The eternal-persecution reading oversells in the mirror direction. It reads the legal ceiling as continuous assault and collapses long productive centuries into one genocidal through-line, projecting modern eliminationism backward onto a pre-modern order that did not carry it.

The two myths do not oversell equally, and refusing to pretend they do is what makes this citable. Measured against Christian Europe, the medieval Islamic record was less violent, which is where the persecution myth overreaches hardest. The golden-age myth erases a ceiling that never came off.

The mid-century unmaking of Jewish life across the Arab world — roughly 850,000 people, an aggregate whose “refugee” label is itself contested — turned on specific modern triggers: Arab nationalism, the 1948 war, decolonization, and state retaliation. Lewis and Cohen both trace the specifically eliminationist antisemitism to a nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and Nazi import, carried into the Arab world from outside the classical tradition.

The contemporary dialogue movement is both real partnership and reputation-laundering, and honesty means naming which named organization is which. Casualty figures and population totals throughout are contested estimates.

THE RECORD HAS NO SINGLE VERDICT — AND BOTH MYTHS NEED ONE

Mark Cohen, at Princeton, framed the whole modern argument as a contest between two myths and threw both out. On one side sits what he called the “interfaith utopia,” the picture of al-Andalus as a harmony of equals. On the other sits its inversion, the “counter-myth of Islamic persecution,” the belief that Islam meant to extirpate the Jews from Muhammad onward and hounded them relentlessly for fourteen centuries. Cohen's demand of both

camps runs through all three parts. Each has to come to terms with a history whose facts refuse to line up with anyone's preferences.

The utopia began as history with a target. Cohen traces it to central European Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, writing as Emancipation-era promises of equality went unfulfilled. Muslim Spain was the reproach, and Christian Europe was the audience. In the twentieth century the same picture was picked up and turned around, deployed, in Cohen's words, "as a weapon against Zionism and the State of Israel" — the coexistence Jews once invented to shame Christendom now enlisted to argue that only Zionism had broken an ancient peace.

The persecution reading answered in kind. Cohen named it the "neolachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history," borrowing Salo Baron's older term for the suffering-obsessed historiography Baron had attacked in the 1920s, and he was blunt that it "flourished in the soil of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Its chief popularizer, the writer who publishes as Bat Ye'or, built a whole vocabulary around the coined term "dhimmitude," and Cohen files her at the head of the school. The politics of all this hardened again after September 11, 2001, which made calm inquiry harder to do and more necessary to attempt.

What the earlier installments in this series established is why "how were Jews treated under Islam" cannot resolve to a single answer. Islam is layered — the Quran, the *hadith*, the schools of law, the gap between *sharia* as the ideal and *fiqh* as the human jurisprudence that reaches for it. And it is plural — the *madhhabs* disagree, the regional Islams differ, an Almohad in twelfth-century Marrakesh and a pragmatic Umayyad in tenth-century Cordoba were not running the same program. A subject that varies by century, dynasty, school, and city produces many answers, each anchored to a time and place. That variability is the finding. Both myths exist precisely to suppress it.

Lewis called the golden age of equal rights "a myth," a nineteenth-century European invention. And in the same breath he insisted that Jews under Muslim rule were "both in theory and in practice second-class citizens," but that this "was by no means as bad as the modern connotations of this term might imply."

DHIMMA WAS A LEGAL ORDER OF PROTECTION AND RANK

The word *dhimma* means protection, or the obligation to protect. The persecution reading treats it as a synonym for humiliation and the golden-age reading treats it as a synonym for tolerance. It was a legal status. Conquered Christians, and Jews with them, received security of life and property and the freedom to practice their religion discreetly, in exchange for the *jizya* and a set of restrictions that fixed their rank below Muslims. The protection was not rhetorical. Jewish communities kept their own courts and their own law over marriage, inheritance, and internal discipline, and they kept their own recognized leaders — the exilarch, the geonim — running a communal life the Muslim state left substantially alone. That autonomy is the concrete

content of the bargain, and it is what separates *dhimma* from a program of persecution.

The autonomy had a ceiling too. A community could choose its own head, but the choice needed Muslim-authority approval, which was sometimes withheld and sometimes sold to the higher bidder. The *jizya* rested on a single explicit Quran verse, 9:29, which commands taking the tax from the People of the Book “while they are humbled,” and that one word — *saghirun*, humbled or subdued — is the seed of the entire dispute. Jurists grounded the tax in an exchange: non-Muslims paid it in place of the military service Muslims owed, and Abu Yusuf, the chief Hanafi judge under Harun al-Rashid, recorded that where the state failed to deliver protection, the money was to be refunded. Abu Yusuf set a graduated poll tax of 48, 24, and 12 dirhams on rich, middling, and poor, which at the rates of the day was four, two, and one dinars. The Shafii school under al-Nawawi set a one-dinar minimum and urged more from those who could pay it. Classical *fiqh* across the schools exempted women, children, the elderly, the poor, the sick and disabled, monks, and slaves — al-Qurtubi records the consensus that the tax falls “only from heads of free men past puberty.” Actual assessments drifted from the manuals: Ayyubid Egypt levied something closer to 4.16, 2.08, and 1.59 dinars, and the Ottomans often took a lump sum from the whole community. The tax had no single figure, because collection never matched the manuals.

The master list of the non-fiscal restrictions — no new synagogues, distinctive dress, the *zunnar* belt, discreet worship, deference to Muslims, no arms — comes down in a document called the Pact of Umar, and here a careful account has to slow down, because the text is not what it presents itself to be. It frames its rules as conditions the conquered themselves petitioned to accept, from the time of the second caliph. It is almost certainly not that. Cohen argues no version can be dated earlier than the tenth or eleventh century. Tritton treated it as a later construction absent from the early treaties. Stillman holds its provisions “were only elaborated with the passage of time.” Lewis traces the real early hardening to Umar II, around 717 to 720, not the mythic Umar I. And Anver Emon reads the back-dating as deliberate, an attribution designed “to endow the contract of *dhimma* with greater normative weight.” The law-on-the-books is itself a constructed text, idealized after the fact. Anyone who quotes the Pact as a seventh-century snapshot is quoting a later idealization.

Even the written rules were enforced in spasms. The differentiating dress code hardened in the ninth century and then got re-issued at intervals, at the start of a reign or in a time of stress, as a display of piety, and its enforcement kept running into the awkward fact that Muslim states relied on Jewish and Christian scribes and physicians to function. The sharpest single instance is the caliph al-Mutawakkil’s decree of 850, recorded by al-Tabari: honey-colored patches and the *zunnar*, exclusion from office, wooden images nailed to *dhimmi* doors, leveled graves. Even the dead had to be marked down. That is what the ceiling looked like when a ruler chose to press it down

hard. It was an episode — one year, one caliph — and the record does not show it running continuously.

Al-Nawawi urged that the *jizya* be received gently, as one receives a debt, and Ibn Qudama rejected the degrading in-person rituals as lacking any prophetic precedent, while other jurists recorded coercion at collection. How much humiliation the verse actually required was contested inside Islamic law, argued over by Muslims themselves. How that inherited rank operates as a live political grievance in our own century is a real question, and a different one from this.

THE GOLDEN AGE OVERSELLS A COEXISTENCE THAT WAS ALWAYS CONDITIONAL

Samuel ha-Nagid is the figure the golden-age reading is built to hold. For roughly two decades in the eleventh century he served as vizier of the Taifa of Granada, commanded its armies in the field, led Granadan Jewry as its Nagid, and wrote Hebrew verse good enough to sit in the first rank of the age. Cohen names him directly — “head of the Jewish community, poet, Talmudist, and vizier of Granada” — and grants the point the myth is reaching for: “for such illustrious figures in the Jewish elite, those centuries were indeed a Golden Age.” The cultural achievement was as real as the political one. The Hebrew poetry of the period, in Cohen’s words, “bore the stamp of Arabic culture,” a genuine Judeo-Arabic synthesis that runs through Hasdai ibn Shaprut a century earlier and reaches its height in Maimonides. The attainment happened.

It was also exceptional. Samuel’s son Joseph ibn Naghrela succeeded him, and on 30 December 1066 a Muslim mob stormed the royal palace in Granada, killed and crucified Joseph, and turned on the Jewish quarter with, in Cohen’s careful phrase, “great loss of life.” The figure usually attached to the massacre, around four thousand, is the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia’s own conversion of a chronicle report of more than 1,500 Jewish families into persons. Cohen gives no number at all. Treat four thousand as an order-of-magnitude estimate from a chronicle tradition, and no more.

The killing was incited by an ode written that year by the Granadan jurist-poet Abu Ishaq al-Ilbiri, and his logic was rank, explicitly. He cast the Jews in the Quranic image of apes and pigs, and framed the offense as a subordinate who had climbed too high: “How can they have any pact when we are obscure and they are prominent? Now we are the humble, beside them, as if we were wrong, and they right!” The very success the golden-age narrative celebrates registered to Abu Ishaq as a breach of the proper order. And a good scholar keeps the frame honest from the other side too: Lewis judged that diatribes like Abu Ishaq’s and massacres like Granada’s were of rare occurrence in Islamic history.

The age ended in something worse than an exception. From 1146 the Almohads — Cohen calls them “the ‘Islamists’ of their time” — swept al-Andalus and the Maghreb with a doctrine that suspended the ordinary *dhimma* bargain and offered Jews and Christians conversion, exile, or death. Three options, from a tradition that had spent five centuries insisting there was no

compulsion in religion. Abraham ibn Ezra wrote an elegy naming the destroyed communities, Fez and Sijilmasa and Marrakesh among them, and the greatest Judeo-Arabic mind of the era became a refugee: Maimonides' family fled Cordoba after the Almohad conquest, reached Fez by 1160, and finally Egypt, where he could again live openly as a Jew. The tolerance the golden-age reading universalizes had just displaced the man it holds up as its crown.

"Golden age" is not a medieval Jewish phrase at all. It was coined by a Lutheran Hebraist, Franz Delitzsch, in Leipzig in 1836, and stretched by German-Jewish historians — Graetz above all, working inside the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* — from a description of Hebrew poetry into a portrait of a whole society. Cohen fixes the motive at the source: they built al-Andalus into a model in order to "chastise their Christian neighbors," and he quotes Lewis on the arc the whole thing traveled, the myth "invented by Jews in 19th century Europe as a reproach to Christians, and taken up by Muslims in our time as a reproach to Jews." The strongest modern voice for the utopia, Maria Rosa Menocal, argues that tolerance was inherent to Andalusian society, and her book earned its readership, but it is a position to weigh against the record. The honest verdict holds both halves. Measured against the far bloodier history of Jews in Christian Europe, Cohen writes, the golden-age picture "contained a very large kernel of truth." It contained a ceiling too, and the ceiling never came off.

"ETERNAL PERSECUTION" MISTAKES A LEGAL CEILING FOR A PERMANENT ASSAULT

Salo Baron, the great twentieth-century Jewish historian, coined the phrase "lachrymose conception of Jewish history" in a 1928 essay to attack exactly this habit of mind — the reading of the Jewish past as an unbroken chain of tears, which he thought obscured everything Jews did between the attacks. The strong ground is real, and it is bloody. Fez in 1032, where a Berber chief's forces killed something on the order of six thousand Jews after taking the city, on Hirschberg's estimate, which like the Granada figure comes from chronicle report rather than a count. Granada in 1066. The Almohad regime from 1146, the one clear medieval program of convert-or-die. These happened, they were atrocities, and any account that waves them away as invention forfeits its credibility. The persecution reading owns them.

What it does not own is the century in between and the centuries on either side. Its structural mistake is to read a subordinated legal status as a standing program of violence. The law prescribed rank, and the massacres were breaches of it. Two comparisons make the ceiling visible. The classical Islamic world produced no general expulsion on the Christian model — England in 1290, France repeatedly from 1306, Spain in 1492. And the blood libel and the well-poisoning charge, the machinery of medieval Christian antisemitism, were Christian-European inventions that entered Islamic lands late, carried in by Ottoman-era Christian subjects and surfacing in the Damascus affair of 1840, not descending from classical *fiqh*. Cohen's explanation for the gap is theological and unsentimental: Christianity

carried a built-in anxiety about why the Jews still existed, the Jew as the singular witness against the Church's claim, while Islam met the Jews as one protected People-of-the-Book minority among several, without the same fixation.

The honest thing here cuts against my own side. Cohen spent a book on that comparison and came out the same way. Set beside Christian Europe, medieval Islam was less violent toward its Jews, and it was never the utopia the golden age remembers. Lewis reached the same place from his own sources. So the persecution myth overreaches further on the pre-modern centuries. It claims continuous assault, and frequency is what the comparison actually measures. The golden-age myth errs on a different axis, and no comparison with Christendom touches it. Lewis compressed the whole distinction into one sentence: "Discrimination was always there, permanent and indeed necessary, inherent in the system and institutionalized in law and practice. Persecution, that is to say, violent and active repression, was rare and atypical." The discrimination is what the utopia erases. The rarity is what the persecution myth erases.

Reviewing Bat Ye'or's book, Sidney Griffith called it "a polemical tract, not responsible historical analysis." Robert Irwin found it relentlessly and one-sidedly polemical and noted that many of its ordinances were temporary and often unenforced. Cohen calls the term "misleading." The concept survives in advocacy writing. The field has left it behind.

And the persecution reading carries a specifically modern charge that its medieval costume hides. Cohen's point in naming it neo-lachrymose was that it hardened in the twentieth century as a rebuttal to the Arab deployment of the utopia myth against Zionism, a twentieth-century political move wearing medieval dress. The live edge of this is post-October-7. The Cambridge scholar Yaron Peleg argues that calling the atrocity of 7 October 2023 a "pogrom" imports the model of a sporadic massacre of a powerless Eastern-European Jewry, and that the framing "wipes away 100 years of Zionist history and resurrects old Jewish grievances." The reading is Peleg's, and it sits beside a fact it does not touch: October 7 was an eliminationist atrocity. The overreach is the separate historical claim that the atrocity proves an unbroken fourteen-century essence running back to Muhammad. What the pre-modern record supports is subordination punctuated by episodic violence. Fourteen centuries of it never amounted to a standing war of extermination.

THE MIZRAHI EXPULSIONS TURNED ON MODERN POLITICAL TRIGGERS

Roughly 850,000 Jews left, fled, or were expelled from the Arab world and Iran across the two decades after 1948. That figure is an aggregate, summed across many countries and many years and mixing the expelled, the endangered, and the recruited, and its "refugee" label is contested by Shenhav, Shohat, and others on the Mizrahi left. Carry it as a measure of scale, no more. The distribution alone breaks any single cause: on the eve of 1948, just under two-thirds of these Jews lived in North Africa, with about a sixth in Iraq, a tenth in Egypt, and the rest scattered from Yemen to the Maghreb. "The Arab world" was never one legal environment, and it did not act as one.

On 1 and 2 June 1941 a pogrom tore through Baghdad and killed somewhere between 150 and 180 Jews, with community estimates running higher. It erupted in a specific political vacuum, the collapse of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani's pro-Axis coup as British forces retook the city, and it was fed by Nazi-embassy propaganda and the presence of the exiled Mufti Amin al-Husseini. No standing religious injunction produced it. And here is the fact that undoes the "they always hated us" reading of it: the Farhud did not empty Iraq. Legal emigration would not open until 1950, so staying was not yet a choice. But many younger Iraqi Jews spent the decade throwing themselves into Iraqi communist and reformist politics, betting on a shared future. That was a choice, and a massacre had not foreclosed it.

What emptied Iraq a decade later was legislation. In March 1950 the government of Tawfiq al-Suwaydi passed the Denaturalization Law, the "Tasqit," letting Jews emigrate only by renouncing their citizenship inside a one-year window, and in March 1951 it passed a second law freezing the assets of everyone who had denaturalized, converting departure into dispossession and feeding the proceeds to the state treasury — not that anyone in Baghdad called it a confiscation. Operation Ezra and Nehemiah then airlifted around 120,000 to 130,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel, leaving about 6,000 behind, and a community with 2,500 years in Mesopotamia was gone in under two years. A bombing campaign against Jewish targets ran through Baghdad in the same window, and its authorship is genuinely contested — some historians read the bombs as Zionist-underground provocations to speed the exodus, others reject the claim, and a 1960 Israeli inquiry found no proof of a Jewish organization's responsibility. Esther Meir-Glitzenstein supplies the decisive check: about 86,000 Jews had already registered to leave before the deadliest bombing in January 1951, so the mass decision preceded the violence and the bombs cannot carry the causal weight assigned to them.

The pattern repeats with different mechanisms in each country. Egypt's exodus tracked the wars: a community of 65,639 counted in 1947 fell to around 8,500 by 1960 and to roughly 800 after 1967, with 21,000 to 25,000 expelled outright in 1956 and 1957 after Suez, some given between a day and a week to go, under Nasser's decrees branding Jews enemies of the state. Centuries in a country, and a week to leave it. Yemen left almost entirely by air, some 49,000 people carried out in Operation Magic Carpet between late 1948 and 1950, financed and organized by outside Jewish agencies — the clearest case of pull. Libya's Jews were driven out by pogroms, more than 130 killed across Tripolitania in November 1945 and more in 1948, after which over 90 percent of the community left once emigration became legal. The administration in Tripoli at the time was British, and it did not stop them. And the Maghreb tells the decolonization story most cleanly of all. Morocco's Jews left mostly after independence. Most of Algeria's roughly 140,000 Jews held French citizenship under the 1870 Cremieux Decree, and at decolonization they went overwhelmingly to France, with fewer than one in ten going to Israel. Where citizenship set the destination, the destination was Paris.

So who pushed, who pulled, and who simply fled. All three were real, and they mixed differently in every country. States expelled, through Iraq's denaturalization and asset freeze and Egypt's enemy-of-the-state decrees and deadlines. Ambient danger drove others out, the Libyan pogroms and the insecurity that followed 1948 across the region. And Zionist agencies pulled, through Magic Carpet and Ezra and Nehemiah and, in Morocco, Operation Yachin, recruitment of the kind the sociologist Yehouda Shenhav has criticized for treating Arab Jews as labor for the new state. A single verdict on that mix would be false to the record. Declining a single verdict is not a way of saying nothing wrong was done. The coercion was concrete and it was grave — the deadlines, the seized property, the vanished communities — and refusing to reduce the exodus to one cause keeps the mechanism honest. Lewis and Cohen both trace the virulent, eliminationist strain of modern Arab anti-semitism to a nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and Nazi import, carried in first by nationalist Christian Arabs and only later Islamized. The rupture that unmade these communities was modern and political. The injustice stays named.

DIALOGUE THAT COSTS SOMETHING

The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding dates to 1989, NewGround to 2006, KAICIID to 2012, the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council to 2016. The entire movement postdates the *dhimma* order by nearly a millennium, so present goodwill is not evidence about the historical record, and no interfaith brochure settles anything argued above. The movement varies as much as the history does, and the test that matters is where the money comes from, whether the body is free to act, and whether it will bear a cost and criticize its own side.

Some of it passes. NewGround, founded in Los Angeles in 2006, runs a structured fellowship of about twenty people a year who meet twice a month from November to June plus two retreats, and it is an independent group fiscally sponsored by Community Partners and housed at the city's Human Relations Commission, reporting work with more than thirty-five Muslim and Jewish organizations. Civic funding, municipal siting, a sustained format — that passes the autonomy test. The Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, founded in 2010 by Sheryl Olitzky and Atiya Aftab and now counting several thousand women across the United States, went further than most by refusing the comfortable rule that keeps Israel-Palestine off the table. Its own site lists education and dialogue on Israel-Palestine as a core focus, and after October 7 it paid a real price for that choice, repositioning as "Women for Peace" and issuing ceasefire and Gaza statements that fractured the image of frictionless fellowship. A group that keeps the hardest subject on the table, and bleeds for it, is doing something other than theater.

The Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council is the hardest call in the section. The American Jewish Committee and the Islamic Society of North America launched it in November 2016, co-chaired by Stanley Bergman and Farooq Kathwari, with a mandate to fight anti-Muslim bigotry and antisemitism and to defend the rights of religious minorities. The Middle East Forum's

objection is on the record and worth weighing: ISNA's contested lineage, the charge that the whole council launders Islamist actors. Those are real data points. They also cannot be waved at the council's documented output — the regional councils, the minority-rights and hate-crime advocacy, the AJC standing in as an equal and hard-nosed partner. What the record does not show is who funds the council or what it has ever said against its own side, so two of the three tests go unanswered here. Weigh the partner's record. Do not let one association void the enterprise, and do not let the enterprise excuse the association.

Other bodies fail the first two by design. KAICIID, founded in 2012 by Saudi Arabia, Austria, and Spain, is an intergovernmental organization governed by a Council of Parties that includes Saudi Arabia — the Kingdom bought its Vienna home, the Palais Sturany, for about 15.5 million dollars in 2011. Jewish participation is genuine: Rabbi David Rosen sat on its five-religion board. But a body whose founding member is Saudi Arabia is structurally unable to criticize Saudi Arabia, and the limitation showed the moment the politics turned. In June 2019 the Austrian parliament moved to quit the headquarters treaty over the Kingdom's human-rights record, triggered by the death sentence facing the teenager Murtaja Qureiris, and KAICIID relocated to Lisbon in 2022. The Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, opened in March 2023 with a mosque, a church, and the first purpose-built synagogue in the Gulf in roughly a century, is a genuinely significant facility and a UAE state initiative at the same time, and its managers have been careful since October 2023 to keep it clear of any explicit link to Israel or the Abraham Accords — which tells you they understand the linkage would puncture the “authentic dialogue” framing. And the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding runs its interfaith work, the Weekend of Twinning that launched in 2008 with fifty twinning events across twenty states and Canada, through Rabbi Marc Schneier, who is also an unpaid special adviser to Bahrain's King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence and an open advocate of Gulf-Israel normalization who credits himself with planting the seeds of the Accords. The interfaith and the state-normalization run through a single actor, and the line between partnership and PR runs right through him. The difference from the council is that ISNA is a partner, and Schneier is the Foundation.

Elham Fakhro, in her 2024 study of the Accords, calls it “tolerance washing” — the use of interfaith spectacle to deflect Western criticism of human-rights records while the Gulf monarchies burnish a reputation for tolerance even as they repress Shiite Muslims at home. The blanket dismissal on the other flank, that all Muslim-Jewish dialogue is *da'wa* or *taqiyya* (the latter a persecuted believer's concealment of his own faith to survive, a world away from the strategic deceit the charge imagines), a machine for extracting Jewish concessions, cannot explain the groups that bear cost and criticize their own side. The defensible move is to name which organization is which, and to keep naming as the records change.

THE MIZRAHI-MEMORY FIGHT IS A LIVE POLITICAL CONTEST

Israel has written this argument into its own statute book twice. A 2010 Knesset law requires any government entering peace talks to raise compensation for Jews from Arab lands whenever Palestinian refugees are raised. A 2014 law established November 30 as a national day to mark the departure and expulsion of Jews from the Arab countries and Iran, and the date was chosen for its proximity to the November 29, 1947 Partition vote — the calendar itself making the causal argument that the Jewish exodus answered the same rupture as the Palestinian one. Nobody picks that date by accident.

The recognition camp — Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, the older World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries, the World Jewish Congress, the American Sephardi Federation — argues parity. Its clearest statement is U.S. House Resolution 185, which holds it “inappropriate and unjust” to recognize the rights of Palestinian refugees “without recognizing equal rights” for Jewish and other refugees from Arab lands. The argument runs on paired numbers: roughly 850,000 to 856,000 displaced Jews set against the UN’s roughly 726,000 Palestinian refugees of 1948, a figure contested from both directions, marshaled to establish a rough symmetry of scale. The 850,000 is itself a contested aggregate. The numbers are doing political work, and everyone deploying them knows it.

The post-Zionist Mizrahi left contests the deployment, and it does so from inside the Israeli academy. Ella Shohat argues that the campaign for “justice for the forgotten Jewish refugees from Arab countries” silences “the violent dispossession of Palestinians summed up in the word Nakba, as if one event annulled the ethical-political implications of the other.” Yehouda Shenhav calls the analogy folly and told Ynet that “it is wrong to conflate the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab nations with the Palestinian issue,” because “Israel expelled the Palestinians and turned them into refugees,” while the Jewish exodus mixed expulsion, flight, and organized aliyah. Shenhav presses a further point that stings both sides: casting the Mizrahim as passive refugees contradicts the Zionist story of ideological aliyah, since, as he puts it, “if a Jew is a refugee, he forgoes the possibility of being active.” He reads the whole campaign as a negotiating instrument, built to block the Palestinian right of return and shrink Israel’s compensation exposure.

The recognition camp answers that stripping the Mizrahim of the refugee label is itself the political move. Lyn Julius documents that more than 99 percent of these ancient communities vanished within about fifty years amid real expulsions and seizures, and she stresses the asymmetry that Jewish refugees were resettled as full citizens while Palestinians and their descendants were kept in refugee status. And there is a third position that belongs to neither camp: the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, founded in 1996 by Shenhav, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and others, which critiques the Ashkenazi-Zionist narrative and resists having Mizrahi history conscripted as an anti-Palestinian weapon in the same breath. The stakes are internal, because Mizrahi Jews are the largest origin group in Israel’s Jewish population, so how to remember the exodus is also a question about Mizrahi standing inside Israel, and

the fight is domestic before it is diplomatic. The claim keeps resurfacing in peace-process seasons, as it did around the 2018-19 U.S. plan, which is when critics say the compensation demand is really engineered to offset the right of return.

The comparative-memory scholars Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg argue that both national narratives negate the other side's suffering to protect their own claim, and that the honest move is to refuse the zero-sum entirely — recognizing Mizrahi grievance need not deny Palestinian loss. Map the contest. And for a Jewish readership that lives this history as expulsion, one thing has to be said without hedging: declining to adjudicate the deployment is not declining to affirm the events. Even Shenhav, the framing's sharpest critic, does not dispute that the communities were uprooted. The communities were ancient, the loss was real, and the memory is not the propaganda. What people build with the memory is the fight, and that fight is politics, argued in a Knesset that turned it into law.

The man in Fatimid Egypt paid his *jizya*, kept his paper, ran his community's courts, and lived under a ceiling that no verse and every collector's temper defined between them. His life was neither the coexistence the golden age remembers nor the pogrom the long memory remembers. It was a variable order, better in Cordoba under a tolerant caliph and lethal in Granada the year a mob killed a vizier and turned on his community, subordinating everywhere and exterminating almost nowhere, until modern nationalism arrived with citizenship laws and asset freezes and did in fifty years what fourteen centuries of *fiqh* had not. Both myths need it flattened into one, because a flat record can be picked up and swung. A variable one can only be read.

This is the last of the three. There is no fourth part coming, and there does not need to be. The tools are on the table. Use them honestly, and you will not need the myths.

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