

The Middle East Rediscovered the Jews

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June 2020

A. Introduction

The much-acclaimed television series “Umm Haroun” produced for Ramadan month viewing, describes the life of Kuwait’s Jewish community in the 1940s. It has generated stormy discussion throughout the Middle East about Jewish-Arab relations. The show’s airing on the Saudi MBC channel, flying in the face of harsh BDS and radical Islamic criticism, is hardly random. It reflects a decade-long process of interfaith Jewish-Muslim dialogue and growing interest of Arab and Muslim states in Judaism and the Jews. The process is evident in official meetings and rabbis’ visits to Arab capitals, restoration, renovation and establishment of synagogues in Egypt, Morocco and Dubai, conciliatory messages by Arab leaders, legislation amendments in several Arab states, positive remarks by senior Muslim clerics and even in literary and cinematic endeavors.

These sea changes are inherently linked to sweeping geopolitical changes affecting the Middle East over the past two decades, starting with the 9/11 attacks and the US invasion of Iraq and through the Arab Spring and Iran’s ascendancy as a regional power. Most of these changes have been top-down in direction, begging the question of whether the message of the ruling elites is trickling down successfully to the broader public. It is important to understand whether this trend could have diplomatic implications for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and strengthening ties between Israel and other Middle Eastern states.

This article reviews the changed attitudes of Arab states (especially the “core” states of the Middle East) toward the Jews from the turn of the millennium to the present. It places these changes in a broad diplomatic context, which also relates to improved ties between Israel and Middle Eastern states and these states’ strengthening alliance with the US. The article presents the difficulties of Arab regimes and societies in differentiating between Jews and Israel, briefly describes widespread manifestations of anti-Semitism in the second half of the 20th century in Arab culture and media, and reviews the changing geopolitics and awareness in Arab states that have affected the development of interfaith discourse between Jews and Muslims.

The article argues that a significant turnaround has occurred over the past two decades in the attitude of Arab regimes toward the Jews by virtue of the geopolitical changes in the Middle East and a desire to project enlightenment and modernity to the West. The resulting increased Jewish-Muslim dialogue could imbue future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with an added dimension and contribute to their success.

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B. Distinguishing between Jews and Israel

Since 1948, Arab regimes have sought to make a clear distinction between Jews and the State of Israel and thereby pre-empt Israeli and Western accusations of anti-Semitism. This artificial distinction, which initially stemmed from the theory that only a minority of the world's Jewish community would live in Israel, did not stop the regimes in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and other Arab states from striking out at their Jewish residents, expropriating their property, excluding them from public life and eventually expelling them.

Thus, although the official line of Arab regimes always targeted the State of Israel and the Zionist movement, rather than the Jews, the situation became increasingly complex starting in the 1950s. Egyptian and Syrian caricatures depicted Jews as malicious, evil creatures in the best tradition of European anti-Semitism, textbooks from Jordan to Algeria presented negative descriptions of Jews, and imams often compared Jews to apes and pigs when addressing worshipers in mosques. Movies and television, too, portrayed Jews in a negative light and Jewish residents of Muslim states as Israeli spies disloyal to their country, fraudsters and cheats. Saudi Arabia banned the entry of Jews (other than high-level guests it invited) and at the height of the second *intifada* (beginning in the year 2000), many store windows displayed signs banning dogs and Jews.

At that time, it seemed that 1,400 years of Muslim-Jewish and Arab-Jewish co-existence had ended on a jarring and defiant note. The most grotesque manifestation of the attempt to distinguish between Jews and Israel was the Arab world's affiliation with the small, ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist *Neturei Karta* community, whose adherents often attend funerals of Arab leaders, visit Tehran and demonstrate in Europe and the US with Palestinians against the State of Israel. Even the Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties with Israel did not dispel suspicious attitudes toward the Jews. Clerics, journalists and writers continued their harsh rhetoric against Israel and the Jews, with some adopting extremist, hostile Islamist language that identified Jews as the enemies of Islam and of Muslims.

In the years since, highly significant change has taken place. Anti-Semitic incitement in the Gulf media, and in Egypt and Jordan to a certain extent, has markedly declined, and Arab regimes have launched projects to restore Jewish heritage sites abandoned and neglected for decades (synagogues and cemeteries in Egypt, cemeteries in Morocco, and more). Gulf states launched an impressive interfaith dialogue with the participation of rabbis from the US and Israel, and an American-Israeli rabbi even met with the Saudi King, an event that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

Many Arab states have shared interests and enemies with Israel, but as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, they choose not to publicize their relations with the Jewish state for fear of incurring a harsh public response. On the other hand, relations with "world Jewry" and promotion of interfaith dialogue gives Arab states added points in the West without having to endanger themselves by publicly consorting with Israel. To a certain extent, Arab states are trying to make the same distinction between Jews and Israelis these days, too. However, this time some Middle Eastern states are also conducting behind-the-scenes cooperation with Israel and the two sides are expressing mutual willingness for gradual rapprochement.

C. Winds of Change in the New Millennium

In fact, it was just after the second *intifada*, a period characterized by incessant incitement against Israel and displays of egregious anti-Semitism, that a surprising and interesting shift took place. It had more to do with the new geopolitical situation emerging in the Middle East than with Israel and the Jews. Following the 9/11 terror attacks, Saudi Arabia sought to shift course and improve its image, the US invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein and Iran's standing as a regional power solidified. In addition, globalization and the internet provided access to the contents of the Saudi and Egyptian media and to the imams' exhortations in the mosques, and these shocking displays of anti-Semitism generated outrage on the part of the Jewish organizations in the US and the world, and often also by Western states.

The signal for the launch of a new era in relations among the Arab states, Israel and the Jews was given in April 2002, when Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin-Abdulaziz presented the Arab League with a Saudi initiative, later known as the Arab Peace Initiative for Middle East peace. Even so, when the Arab League adopted the blueprint, Saudi media was still rife with anti-Semitic blood libel and calls for retribution against the Jews, described as those who "betrayed the prophets, the sons of pigs and apes".

With time, however, the Saudi media, and especially the popular *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper began running reports and articles expressing positive views of Israel. In one of those articles, then Editor-in-Chief Abdel Rahman al-Rashed argued that Israel was less dangerous to the Arabs than Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. These days, this has become a pervasive argument, but in 2006-07, it was a rare view, and al-Rashed's comment generated a storm in the Arab media, which was mostly far more critical of Israel and the Jews.

At about the same time, the Saudi internet magazine *Elaph* started running memoirs by Prof. Shmuel Moreh about his childhood and Jewish community life in Iraq. His vivid writing prompted a wave of nostalgia in Iraq, and prompted an outpouring of yearning by readers for shared life with the Jewish community that had lived in Iraq until the early 1950s. In 2017, upon Moreh's death, *Elaph* published an emotional eulogy whose writer referred to the painful and humiliating expulsion of Iraq's Jews and to Moreh's mixed feelings of love and insult about his homeland. Prof. Moreh, who headed the Association of Academics from Iraq in Israel, conducted dialogue and fertile cooperation for many years with a series of Arab intellectuals in Iraq and elsewhere. He was not a political leftist and his links with Arab colleagues did not focus on issues of peace and the division of the land, but on the shared culture and history of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. Far from the limelight, this cooperative endeavor yielded joint literary writings, research and essays.

In the second half of the first decade of the millennium, the tectonic shifts in the Middle East – Saddam Hussein's fall and the ascension of Iran – lent legitimacy and a measure of openness to these ties. Subsequently, the long-standing ties between the Bahraini monarchy and leaders of the Chabad movement were also revealed, and that was just the beginning. A small Jewish community lives in Bahrain and one of its members even served as a parliament member and was subsequently appointed Bahrain's ambassador to the US, where she worshipped with a Chabad congregation. The Emir of Bahrain, Hamed bin-Issa al-Khalifa has a close, longstanding relationship with senior Chabad rabbis who often visit Bahrain and meet with the Emir on his US visits.

D. The Road to Washington Passes Through the Synagogue

Following the Arab Spring, which began a decade ago and spawned a political and societal earthquake in the Middle East, the Arab world went into decline, revealing its internal cracks. The Muslim Brotherhood won Egypt's first democratic elections and came to power in Tunisia, too. Arab regimes throughout the region felt threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamist groups, on the one hand, and sensed the Iranians breathing down their necks, on the other.

The Arab League summarily expelled Syria, which went on to develop great dependence on Iran to fight its war against Sunni rebels. Qatar, which refused to toe the line and cooperate with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt against the Islamic Brotherhood and Iran, became a pariah; Libya, Yemen and Syria plunged into the abyss of civil wars; and the short-lived rule of the Islamic Brotherhood came to an end in Egypt after yet another revolution in June 2013. The Sunni regimes threatened by Iran and internal instability harbored hopes that the US would support them and protect them from possible threats. This Arab weakness prompted many Arab states to reconsider ties with Israel as a potential partner against shared dangers rather than a hostile state.

The prevailing view in the Middle East perceives the road to Washington passing through Jerusalem and the Jews as those who "run the world" (or at least the US). This was the context for the shift in Arab policy with the contacts established between the heads of security agencies, rulers, clerics and various lobbyists from the Middle East and Israeli and American Jewish politicians, clerics and businesspeople. Discreet ties had existed previously, but were now intensified and at the same time new contacts were formed, some more overt than in the past. The new road to Washington, it turned out, passes through the synagogue.

The latest and most interesting phase began four-five years ago. In Egypt, the regime of Abdel Fattah a-Sisi stabilized. In Saudi Arabia, a new star emerged, Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Salman who hooked up with Abu Dhabi strongman Mohammed bin-Zaid. A new administration came into office in Washington, and the Jewish card, not necessarily the Jewish-Israeli one, played especially well, with many visits by Jewish clerics to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, such as Bahrain and the UAE. One of the most significant was the Riyadh visit by Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee in early 2020, including a meeting with King Salman. Not so long ago, Saudi Arabia was still prohibiting visits by Jews, so this was not simply a cosmetic change, but a true turnaround.

The number of anti-Semitic utterances by clerics in the Gulf States as well as in Jordan and Egypt has significantly declined in recent years. Anti-Semitic publications in the Gulf and Egyptian media also significantly declined (in the Gulf this is a continuous trend, with the exclusion of Qatari media such as *Al-Jazeera* and other news outlets in Qatari hands).

Abu Dhabi transformed itself into the capital of world tolerance, holding a number of conferences with the participation of senior clerics (representing monotheistic religions), including American and Israeli rabbis. In 2022, a new synagogue will be inaugurated in Abu Dhabi within the framework of the unique interfaith Abraham House project. Israeli journalists allowed into Bahrain to cover Jared Kushner's "economic workshop" (June 2019) at which he presented the economic part of the Trump Plan also visited the small synagogue in Manama. It was revealed that a synagogue has been functioning in Dubai since 2008 to

accommodate religious Jews and visiting Israelis wishing to pray. At a 2017 event held by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the King of Bahrain publicly denounced various anti-Israel boycott initiatives, and in 2019, Israel's Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar took part in an interfaith conference in Bahrain.

The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations in the US, under the leadership of Malcolm Hoenline, held high-level meetings bringing together Jewish-American leaders with Arab and regional leaders (among them Egyptian President a-Sisi and Turkish President Erdoğan). American Rabbi Marc Schneier met many times with ministers and other leaders in the Gulf to promote interfaith dialogue and relations with Israel. Ahead of the 2022 soccer World Cup, Qatari authorities announced that they would grant entry to Jews and Israelis to watch the games and would even ensure they have kosher food.

In Egypt, authorities restored Alexandria's spectacular Nebi Daniel synagogue, re-opened the Shaarei Shamaim Synagogue in Cairo after decades for a Hanukkah prayer service, and renovated the ancient Jewish al-Bassatine cemetery. Mohammed al-Issa, a senior Saudi who heads the Muslim World League visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and published a *Washington Post* opinion piece urging Muslims to learn about the Holocaust and remember it. Iraq and Sudan invited Jews who had left their countries to return, Egypt and Kuwait produced TV series about the lives of Jewish communities in the Arab world ("Harat al-Yahud" and "Umm Harun"), and Morocco, of course, has long allowed unique ties to flourish between its religious and cultural institutions and Jews of Moroccan origin.¹

E. Reshaping reality

Is it possible to reshape public opinion and change the views of the masses in the Middle East regarding Judaism, Jews and Israel after long decades of incitement, hatred and anti-Semitism? Obviously, such change takes time and one cannot expect to wipe out in an instant long-held superstitions and stereotypes. Even if the rulers in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Riyadh or Manama have realized that rather than fighting against Israel, they are better off fighting with Israel against Iran, that does not mean that masses of Arab citizens of these states are of the same view.

The BDS movement is gaining traction in Jordan and Egypt, and becoming increasingly dominant. Its activists have successfully sabotaged performances of artists who appeared in Israel, and have called to boycott TV series featuring the stories of Jewish communities in the Arab world – unless their producers attack Israel (as was the case with the "Umm Harun" series). While the Saudi MBS network aired the story of Kuwait's Jewish community, Egyptian networks were broadcasting a futuristic series called "The End", which called for the destruction of Israel and the Jews' return to their countries of origin. The anti-Semitism plaguing Islamist circles has not disappeared, either.

¹ The important developments in Morocco were not included in this article, which mostly focuses on the Arab states geographically closer to Israel, those that fought with it or conducted against it malicious campaigns with anti-Semitic overtones. For a detailed presentation of the Jewish component in Israel-Morocco relations, see Einat Levi, "[Israel and Morocco: Cooperation Rooted in Heritage](#)," *Mitvim Institute*, September 2018 and "[Israel-Morocco Cooperation in 2019](#)," *Mitvim Institute*, April 2020.

When Muslim Brotherhood activists seek to malign the Egyptian President or other Arab rulers, they “frame” them with a Jewish genealogy or accuse them of serving as lobbyists doing the bidding of the Jews. Displays of anti-Semitism are still prevalent on Arab networks. At the same time, along with the usual displays of hatred, there is also quite a bit of interest in Israel and the history of the Jews in Arab lands and in the Jewish heritage in those countries. The younger generation in the Middle East appears far more curious about Israel, perceived as a regional military and technological power, as well as about the Jews’ past in the Muslim and Arab world. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ increased Arab-language presence on social media opens a window for Arab-speaking users onto these worlds, although more can and should be done in that respect.

The State of Israel could have used this current window of opportunity provided by changing attitudes toward Israel and the Jews to promote pro-peace policies and co-existence. A return to the negotiating table with the Palestinians would have allowed Israel’s Arab partners to emerge from the shadows and move on to the next phase of recognizing Israel as the national home of the Jewish people without fearing that such a move would have repercussions for domestic stability or for their relationship with the Palestinians. Interfaith dialogue plays an important role in promoting peace, as well as in eradicating superstitions and stereotypes about the Jews. The peace processes in Northern Ireland South Africa, in which clerics played a significant role in the reconciliation and the preservation of change achieved by the politicians, testify to this crucial role.

Presumably, the trend of interest in and closeness to Judaism and the Jews, which started in several Arab states some two decades ago and now forms an integral part of their policies, will not disappear – even if it does not augur a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian channel. However, absent such a breakthrough, this trend will not fulfill its full potential in terms of improving relations not only between religions and regimes, but also between peoples. The Jewish card could help states in the region burnish their image in Washington, but it alone cannot bridge the existing gaps and create a true partnership between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Hopefully, the new Israeli government will take advantage wisely of these encouraging signs to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and thereby contribute to the stability and security of the State of Israel.