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Between Egypt and Israel: Egyptian Jews, the Yishuv, and Israeli Society

Alon Tam

Abstract

This article traces the history of Egyptian Jewish involvement with the Zionist Yishuv in pre-1948 Palestine, and the subsequent immigration of Egyptian Jews to Israel and integration into its society. It argues that the ties between the Jewish community in Egypt and the Yishuv were built upon the long history of ties between the former and the Jewish community in Palestine, both before and beyond the mere question of Zionism. The article also shows how the Egyptian Jewish experience settling in Israel complicates common understandings of the Mizrahi experience – which collapse different Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa into a single category – with a single historical experience. Finally, this article destabilizes the commonly accepted view of 1948 as a clear breaking point in the history of Israel in the Middle East, or in the history of the region's Jewish communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Alon Tam is the 2021-22 postdoctoral fellow at the Ye&S Nazarian Center for Israel Studies. He is a social and cultural historian of the Middle East and North Africa in modern time, and of the region's Jewish communities. His research interests broadly include urban history, social relations and identities, historical anthropology, culture, and politics. His current research examines the Jewish community in Egypt, its ties to the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine, and the history of the community's migration to, and integration in, the State of Israel since 1948. Dr. Tam has previously taught at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania, where he also earned his Ph.D. from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He was the Rabin-Shvidler Fellow at Columbia and Fordham, and a Fellow at Penn's Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies.

Introduction

The Lands of Israel and Egypt have a shared history that stretches back to Antiquity. Different rulers of Egypt have campaigned in Israel and ruled it, from Pharaonic times to as late as the 1830s.¹ The movement of people, goods, and ideas between the two countries only rarely ceased. In this framework, the two countries also share an equally long and rich Jewish history; after all, Jews around the world celebrate each year at Passover the very creation of the (Israelite, and later) Jewish people and faith, which were born – quite literally – out of Egypt. Although some chapters of that shared Jewish history are well known and studied, its most recent one is far less so. This article aims to sketch a brief overview of that recent chapter in Jewish Egyptian and Israeli history, taking the late 19th century as its point of departure, and following its historical arc for about a century. The late 19th century witnessed the emergence of Zionism in Central and Eastern Europe, the first Zionist waves of immigration to late Ottoman Palestine, as well as extensive waves of Jewish immigration to Egypt – including from Late Ottoman Palestine. The mid-20th century witnessed the emigration of almost all Jews from Egypt, and about half of those settled in the recently established State of Israel; however, that has not meant that all Jewish connections to Egypt were severed.

By sketching this historical arc, I wish to destabilize the commonly accepted view of 1948 as a clear breaking point in the history of Israel in the Middle East, or in the history of the region's Jewish communities. The establishment of the State of Israel clearly created and accelerated fundamental changes, but it did not abruptly end the region's long Jewish history, nor did those communities start

their engagement with Zionism at that moment. The involvement of Egyptian Jews with the Yishuv (the Zionist community in Late Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine) adds to our understanding of that engagement. In the same vein, the understudied history of Egyptian Jewish migration to Israel and integration into its society add to our understanding of Mizrahi history. As this article shows, the

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connections between the Jewish community in Egypt and the Zionist Yishuv were built on the long history of ties between the former and the Jewish community in Palestine, both before and beyond the mere question of Zionism. It also shows that the Egyptian Jewish experience settling in Israel complicates common understandings of the Mizrahi experience – which collapse different Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa into a single category – with a single historical experience.

Egyptian Jews: A Story of Migration and Social Mobility

Understanding the historical experience of Egyptian Jews during this time period is important to our understanding of their later experience in Israel. Although there has been a Jewish presence in Egypt

¹ In 1831, Egypt's expansionist and fairly independent Ottoman governor, Mehmet Ali Pasha (r. 1805-1848), sent his son, Ibrahim, to conquer and rule Late Ottoman Palestine. Egypt ruled Palestine until 1841.

since Antiquity, most of the Jewish community in Egypt at the middle of the 20th century was a product of recent immigration, one that resulted in an almost twentyfold increase: common estimates gauge the number of Jews in Egypt in 1840 to be around 7000 people, and in 1947, at its peak, to be between 80,000 and 100,000 Jews. The main push and pull factors for this migration were economic: Egypt's major economic boom at the time attracted immigrants from all over the Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Many of those immigrants were Jews: these were Ottoman-Sephardi Jews from Anatolia and the Balkans; Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria-Lebanon, North Africa, Yemen, and Palestine; even some Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews from Romania, Poland, and Russia. Most of these Jewish immigrants had been struggling economically in their places of origin – the Ashkenazi immigrants especially, who counted for about 10% of the Jewish community in Egypt, were mostly poor. The story of the Sephardi Cicurel family is a case in point: Moreno Cicurel was a poor immigrant from Izmir (in today's Turkey) who moved to Egypt in the early 1880s, where he found work as an assistant tailor in one Jewish-owned haberdashery in Cairo. He was able to buy it in 1887, and he and his sons turned it into the most iconic department store in Egypt and beyond.²

Ballpark estimations about the socio-economic profile of the community speak of about 10% of it being very rich, around 30% being poor, and the rest 60% comprising the various grades of the middle class. This was a result of rapid upward mobility. Jewish immigrants to Egypt used various strategies in order to achieve, retain, and perform that middle-class, or bourgeois, social status. Education

was the most important of these strategies. French schools, and especially the Lycée Français of Cairo and Alexandria, were by far the favorite choice of education for the aspiring Jewish middle class, and parents went to great lengths to secure places for

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their children in the Lycée Français. The benefit was clear: it was a ticket out of the working class, or even out of poverty, and into the rungs of the bourgeoisie. Another strategy for class mobility was moving to the new, swankier neighborhoods in the rapidly expanding cities. Jewish families remember their move from the downtrodden “Jewish Neighborhood” (Hārat al-Yahūd in Arabic) in Old Cairo, a neighborhood “with no running water or electricity,” to the new and modern neighborhoods which were built in Cairo. Furthermore, middle-class Jews used European languages, especially French, as a class marker, and they also used public spaces, such as certain coffeehouses, social clubs, bars, theaters, and more, to perform their modern middle-class identity.³

In their narratives about life in Egypt during the first half of the 20th century, many Egyptian Jews insist there was a Muslim-Jewish-Christian

² Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 8-68; Samir Raafat, “The House of Cicurel,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, December 15, 1994.

³ Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, 36-58; Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Liat Maggid-Alon, “The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: A Gender and Family Perspective [in Hebrew]” (PhD Dissertation, Beer Sheva, Israel, Ben Gurion University, 2018).

conviviality in those shared urban spaces.⁴ This is not a simple nostalgia for a cosmopolitan past: at stake was the social status of Egyptian Jews, their ability to climb up the social ladder, and the prospect of erasing any social or legal disadvantages that were previously associated with their Jewishness. For much the same reasons, Egyptian Jews were drawn to any kind of politics or ideologies that promised to erase religiously-based distinctions, and to ensure equal participation and rights for Jews in Egyptian society. Many Jews, for example, were among the founders of communist and socialist parties in Egypt. Others supported the promise of a religiously-blind Egyptian nationalism.⁵

Egyptian Jews and Zionism

Supporting Zionism was more complicated in this context. On the one hand, it epitomized Jewish revival and empowerment, something that the confident Jewish community certainly championed. On the other hand, it implied Jewish distinction,

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and later also antagonism toward Arabs. As the Zionist-Palestinian nationalist conflict escalated in the 1930s and 1940s, and as the Pan-Arab nationalist

movement grew in Egypt – and with it Egyptian support for the Palestinian cause – the earlier position that saw very little problem with supporting Zionism while avowedly being Jewish Egyptian became less tenable. It is important, therefore, to distinguish here between two historical phases. Take, for example, the minutes of the Cairo Jewish Council meeting from March 1926 that acknowledged with sympathy the establishment of a Zionist organization in Alexandria.⁶ However, a letter written in the 1940s, about 15 years later, by that same council to the representative of the Jewish Agency in Cairo complained about the activity of Ha-‘Ivri Ha-Tza‘ir (local branch of the Zionist Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza‘ir) in the city.⁷

In other words, mainstream attitudes among Egyptian Jews toward Zionism changed over the years as more and more Egyptians equated Jews with Zionism, and as a result, also with anti-Arab (or anti-Palestinian) policies, something that threatened the integration of Jews into Egyptian society. At first, Egyptian Jews were comfortable reconciling their support for Jewish empowerment and revival – or their support for the Zionist project in Palestine – with their strong sense of belonging to Cairo, Alexandria, or Egypt in general. They were comfortable with activities such as those of the Maccabi sports clubs, which were vaguely Jewish nationalist, or even Zionist-affiliated; some wrote enthusiastically about the Zionist movement and its project in Palestine. The peak of Zionist activity in Egypt was the establishment of Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza‘ir youth organization in the early 1930s. Comprising a few hundred members, its first group of Halützim

⁴ Maurice (Moshe) Ouzon, “Memories from Egypt” [in Hebrew] in Bney Hayeor: A Journal for the Heritage of Egyptian Jewry, Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, vol. 2 (2006), 13; Maurice Ouzon, Interview with Author, Bat-Yam, Israel, November 2015.

⁵ Rami Ginat, A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011); Krämer, The Jews in Modern Egypt, 167-205.

⁶ Proceedings of the meetings of the Council of the Jewish Community of Cairo, March 15, 1926, Box 1, Folder 2, Jamie Lehmann Memorial Collection, Yeshiva University Archives, New York, N.Y.

⁷ Letter from the Council of the Jewish Community of Cairo to the Jewish Agency in Cairo, no date (probably 1940s), Box 3, Folder 9 (J-O), Jamie Lehmann Memorial Collection, Yeshiva University Archives, New York, N.Y.

(‘pioneers’ in Hebrew) immigrated to Palestine and settled in Kibbutz ‘Ein ha-Horesh as early as 1934. Larger groups (Qinīm, or Gar‘inīm in Hebrew) immigrated to Palestine between 1945 and 1947 and settled in a few Kibbutzim, the most important of which was Kibbutz Nahshonīm in central Israel. But that kind of commitment to Zionism remained limited among Egyptian Jews.⁸

Egyptian Jews and the Yishuv

Egyptian Jews maintained other kinds of strong ties with the Yishuv. Although they shared – to varying extents – those conflicting attitudes toward Zionism with other Jewish communities around the Middle East and North Africa, the geographical proximity of Egypt and Palestine and the strong historical ties between the Jewish communities in both countries made the connection between Egyptian Jews and the Yishuv different. The Jewish community in Egypt simply could not have been a remote observer of the Zionist project in Late Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine.

Several historical episodes brought the two communities together. One example is the Ottoman expulsion of some ten thousand non-Ottoman Jews to British-occupied Egypt at the beginning of the First World War in 1914. Most of them were Zionist settlers from Russia and Eastern Europe, such as the early Zionist activist, Joseph Trumpeldor, who together with another Zionist activist and ideologue, Ze‘ev Jabotinsky, formed the Jewish Legion in Egypt to fight with the British against the Ottomans. These Zionist exiles in Egypt were hosted and sheltered by the local Jewish community in Alexandria and Cairo

for the duration of the war.⁹ Many stayed in Egypt even after the war ended. Or, another example is how the Jewish Brigade from Palestine was trained by and stationed with the British armies in Egypt during

Until 1947, the open borders between Palestine and Egypt meant a free movement of people, goods, and ideas. Jews have continued to migrate back and forth between Ottoman or Mandatory Palestine and Egypt just as they had since biblical times. Moreover, trade connections between the two countries were strong – ebbs and flows notwithstanding – and the Yishuv took full part in it.

the Second World War.¹⁰ Those Jewish soldiers from Palestine were also hosted and supported by the local Jewish community in Egypt.

Until 1947, the open borders between Palestine and Egypt meant a free movement of people, goods, and ideas. Jews have continued to migrate back and forth between Ottoman or Mandatory Palestine and Egypt just as they had since biblical times. Moreover, trade connections between the two countries were strong – ebbs and flows notwithstanding – and the Yishuv took full part in it. The Carmel wineries, an iconic industry of the Yishuv, had shops in Cairo and Alexandria (as well as in Beirut and Damascus); the Haifa refineries, another flagship industry of the Yishuv, sold refined oil from Iraq to Egypt. There were also limited cultural exchanges between the Yishuv and Egypt and with its Jewish community in particular, mostly in sports and in music (the Yishuv’s philharmonic orchestra

⁸ For more on Egyptian Jews and Zionism, see: Michael M. Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹ “The Tel Aviv Deportation” in the Central Zionist Archives, World Zionist Organization. <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/AttheCZA/AdditionalArticles/Pages/WorldWarI.aspx>

¹⁰ “Jewish Defense Organizations: The Jewish Brigade Group (1944-1946),” Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-jewish-brigade-group>

performed in Cairo and Alexandria more than 20 times). The ties between the two communities were also mundane and regular: Jews from the Yishuv who could afford it would take the train to Cairo in order to shop at the iconic Cicurel mentioned earlier.¹¹

On their end, Egyptian Jews invested in Jewish enterprises in Palestine, especially in real estate. The Baron Felix de Menasce (1865-1943), for example, head of the Alexandrian community who led the relief effort for the deported non-Ottoman Yishuv members during World War I, visited Palestine after the war and was impressed by its Jewish “young generation” and its enthusiastic plans for Jewish revival. In 1918, he even established the “Pro-Palestine Organization: Committee for Reform of the Land of Israel” in Alexandria and maintained good relations with Chaim Weitzman, who saw him both as a financial resource and as a connection to Egyptian and Arab leadership. Until the breakout of the Great Palestinian Revolt in 1936, De Menasce led a group of Jewish Egyptian investors who purchased land, both agricultural and urban, mainly along the central coast of today’s Israel. These lands were part of Zionist enterprises, although De Menasce preferred private purchases and direct investments rather than going through Zionist institutions. His son, George de Menasce, did not continue purchasing land, but did donate to the Hebrew University and to Habima (the Yishuv’s “National Theater”), two major Zionist cultural enterprises.¹²

De Menasce was not alone. A group of the richest Jews in Cairo, led by Albert Mosseri (of the

aristocratic Mosseri family), invested, built, and owned the iconic King David Hotel in Jerusalem.¹³ To this day, this hotel is the semi-official guesthouse of the Israeli government for visiting foreign dignitaries; its iconic place in Zionist history was earned when its southern wing, which housed the headquarters of the British mandatory authorities and the British army in Palestine, was bombed in 1946 by the Zionist group known as ETZEL (or “Irgun” in British parlance),¹⁴ led by Menachem Begin, later prime minister of Israel. Another famous piece of Jerusalem real estate with a publicly unknown Jewish Egyptian background is “Beit (or Villa) Aghion,” the lavish house that Edward Aghion, a scion of another Jewish Egyptian aristocratic family, built for himself in 1938.

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The rich correspondence between Egypt’s Chief Rabbinate in Cairo and the Yishuv leadership

¹¹ See the special issue of *Cathedra* about the Yishuv and Egypt: Amnon Cohen, Yehoshua Kaniel, and Aharon Oppenheimer (eds.), *Cathedra: For the History of Eretz Israel and its Yishuv* 67 (March 1993).

¹² Avraham Elmaliach, “Committee for Reform of the Land of Israel: Pro-Palestine Organization: An Interview with the Baron Felix de Menasce” [in Hebrew] *Doar Hayom* 37 (Jerusalem: September 19, 1919), p. 2; Irit Amit-Cohen, “Between West and East: The Baron Felix de Menasce – Politician, Entrepreneur and Zionist” [in Hebrew] *Cathedra: For the History of Eretz Israel and its Yishuv* 114 (Dec. 2004), 71-98.

¹³ Etgar Lefkovits, “Egyptian Bank Sues Israel for Dividends,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 27, 2007: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/egyptian-bank-sues-israel-for-dividends>

¹⁴ ETZEL is the Hebrew acronym for Irgun Tzva’i Le’umi, or: the National Military Organization.

¹⁵ Purchase of Houses of Mr. Aghion and Mr. Shoken in Jerusalem [in Hebrew], 1949-1953, Israel State Archive, ISA-PMO-PMO-000vr2e: <https://www.archives.gov.il/archives/Archive/0b07170680014dab/File/0b07170680e9ec92>

in Palestine, kept in the understudied archival Records of the Jewish Community of Cairo (1886-1961),¹⁶ demonstrates the significant and frequent contacts they had: Izhak Ben-Zvi, president of the Yishuv's Va'ad Le'umi (National Council), and later the second president of the State of Israel; Rabbis Isaac Herzog and Ben Zion Ouziel, Chief Rabbis of Palestine; Judah Magnes, president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; and Moshe Shertok (Sharet), of the Jewish Agency, and later Prime Minister of Israel – these were but a few of the Yishuv leaders who constantly wrote to Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum Effendi in Cairo.

The correspondence encompassed all kinds of matters. Some letters discussed the careers of rabbis moving between Egypt and Palestine: Rabbi Ovadia Yosef – eventual founder of the Israeli political movement SHAS – was but one such rabbi who included a position in Cairo in his resumé. Other letters dealt with family matters, especially marriages and divorces between couples from both countries. Still other letters were about sending sick children from Egypt to clinics in Palestine or about taking care of the soldiers of the Jewish Brigade stationed in Egypt. A few letters from the Yishuv's leadership pleaded with its Jewish counterpart in Egypt for help with the Zionist assassins of Lord Moyne, the British Minister of State in the Middle East, who were caught in Cairo in 1945 by Egyptian authorities. But mainly, the leadership of the Yishuv was constantly asking for money, which the largely affluent community in Egypt usually supplied. For example, Judah Magnes, president of the Hebrew University, constantly wrote to the Jewish leadership in Cairo in order to fundraise for the university; this was beyond the contributions that Felix and George de Menasce made to the university. Felix was one of the Jewish world leaders

that Chaim Weitzman invited to the university's 1918 opening ceremony.¹⁷

In sum, the multi-level, multivalent, and constant connections between the Jewish community in Egypt and the Yishuv – whether from Zionist motivations, or more often not – disturb previous understandings of 1948 as a clean break in the modern history of Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. Jewish communities

The multi-level, multivalent, and constant connections between the Jewish community in Egypt and the Yishuv – whether from Zionist motivations, or more often not – disturb previous understandings of 1948 as a clean break in the modern history of Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. Jewish communities throughout that region – especially the one in Egypt, due to its geographical proximity – have always had continuous connections with Palestine and its Jewish community, including with its Jewish Zionist community later on.

throughout that region – especially the one in Egypt, due to its geographical proximity – have always had continuous connections with Palestine and its Jewish community, including with its Jewish Zionist community later on. These connections included constant Jewish migrations to and from Palestine, as well as economic, cultural, and political ties. Of course, 1948 was a turning point that brought about considerable change, even upheaval, especially to Jews in Egypt. However, 1948 did not mark the beginning of their ties with the Yishuv, but rather a change in them.

¹⁶ The Jamie Lehmann Memorial Collection at Yeshiva University.

¹⁷ Records of the Chief Rabbinate [Cairo], 1886, 1936-1959, Box 3, Box 5, Folder 1, Jamie Lehmann Memorial Collection, Yeshiva University Archives, New York, N.Y.; Elmaliach, "Interview with the Baron Felix de Menasce."

Egyptian Jews in Israel

The fact that Egypt led and lost the war effort in 1948 against the nascent State of Israel affected its Jewish community, perhaps more than other Jewish communities in the region. Egyptian Jews were identified with Israel and Zionism, whether they were supporters or not, and suffered bouts of harassment. Although these were not yet government policy, and were limited to certain political groups, some Jews had already begun leaving Egypt. The fundamental change came in the mid-1950s, when Egyptian Jews were caught in the crosshairs of an escalating Egyptian-Israeli conflict. On the one hand, the revolutionary regime that came to power in Egypt in 1952 championed pan-Arabism and anti-colonialism, led a pan-Arab war effort against Israel, and pushed the ones it identified as “foreigners” out of Egypt. On the other hand, aggressive Israeli actions, such as the 1954 Operation Susannah (Lavon Affair),¹⁸ or the 1956 Suez Crisis, implicated Egyptian Jews as collaborators with the enemy. The result was a quick demise of the Jewish community in Egypt: in 1957, the Egyptian government arrested and deported thousands of Jews and pushed many others out of Egypt by various means (e.g., dismissal from jobs, stripping of citizenship, sequestering businesses and property, and more). Most Jews left Egypt in 1957, and the rest left around 1967 and 1973: after that date there was no functioning Jewish community in the country. About 50,000 Egyptian Jews – around half of the community – immigrated to Israel, with the reminder moving to France, the Americas, and elsewhere around the world.¹⁹

The history of Egyptian Jews settling in Israel and integrating into its society is largely yet to be told or researched. Egyptian Jews organized fairly quickly after arriving in Israel, which runs contrary to a few arguments in Israeli public discourse – even in scholarship on Mizrahim – about a lack of organization and leadership among Mizrahi immigrants to Israel, which supposedly accounted for

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their hardships when integrating into Israeli society. On the contrary, the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel was established as early as 1949 and was one of the first Landsmanshafts established in Israel.²⁰ It was founded by the judge Emmanuel Yadid-Halevi (1905-1972) and a group of new Jewish immigrants from Egypt. Yadid-Halevi was born in Beirut, studied law in Egypt, and practiced in Alexandria until he immigrated to Palestine in 1942; he was appointed judge in 1945. Moise Sanua, the secretary of the Jewish Community Council in Cairo, arrived in Israel in 1948 and became the first General Secretary of the new Association alongside Yadid-Halevi as its first president. Rabbi Moshe Ventura, who was

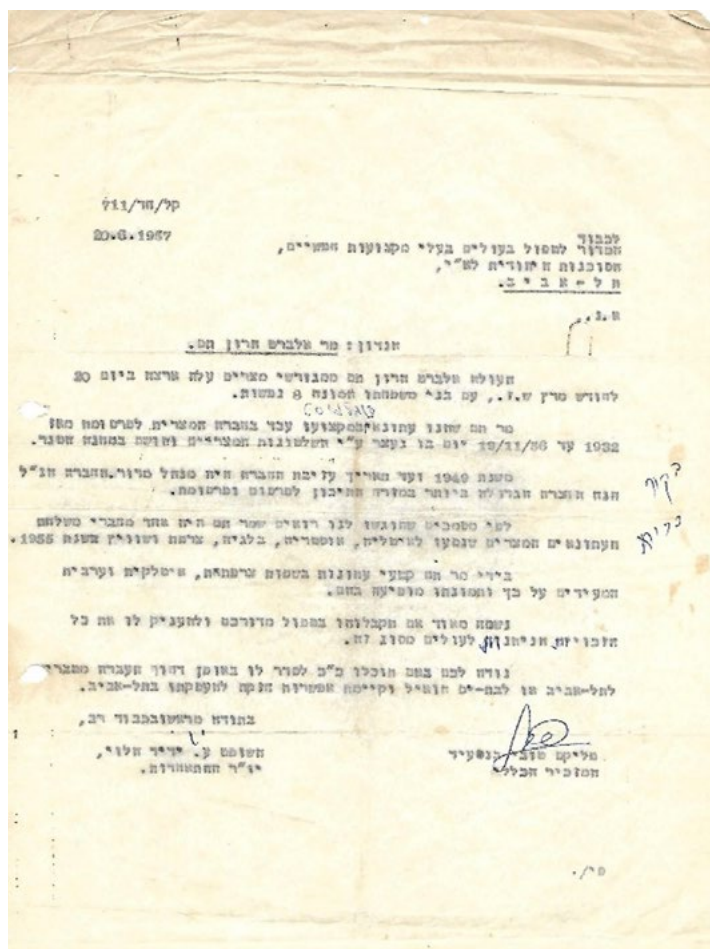
¹⁸ Operation Susannah, known widely in Israel as the Lavon Affair, was a failed Israeli covert operation conducted in Egypt in the summer of 1954. As part of the false flag operation, a group of Egyptian Jews were recruited by Israeli military intelligence to plant bombs inside Egyptian-, American-, and British-owned civilian targets. The attacks were to be blamed on Egyptian political and opposition groups with the aim of creating a climate of sufficient violence and instability to induce the British government to retain its occupying troops in Egypt's Suez Canal zone. The Egyptian Jews were quickly arrested by Egyptian authorities, and publicly tried. For a consideration of the effects of these highly publicized trials on Egyptian perceptions of Egyptian Jews, see: Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

¹⁹ For more about the dispersal of Egyptian Jews, see: Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970*; Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

²⁰ A landsmanshaft is a mutual aid society, benefit society, or hometown society of Jewish immigrants from the same town or region. Both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi immigrants established such organizations when they arrived in Israel.

Alexandria's Chief Rabbi, and Felix Ben-Said, who was involved in community organizing back in Cairo, were also heavily involved with the Association in Israel during its first years. Thus, we can discern a certain leadership pattern: community organizers in Egypt took up similar roles in Israel. Most, but not all, were involved to some degree in Zionist activities in Egypt: presumably, such credentials and connections provided the Association with more access to state structures of power.²¹

The main activity of the Association in its early years was to help the new immigrants settle in Israel. With its headquarters in Tel Aviv, it opened branches in several of the towns where Egyptian Jews settled, and these branches hierarchically reported to Tel Aviv. It also had several general committees that were tasked with offering these immigrants with financial assistance or loans comprised of funds collected mostly from the Jewish Agency, government ministries, and various donations. Other committees were tasked with connecting the immigrants with those state bureaucracies, or with banks.²² Take this letter of reference for the author's own grandfather, Albert Tam, written three months after he and his family of eight arrived in Israel. It is signed by Yadid-Halevi and Ben-Said, the leaders of the Association at the time, and it was addressed to "The Department of Immigrants in the Professions" in the Jewish Agency. In the letter, the Association's officials attested to my grandfather's successful career in advertising back in Egypt and asked the Jewish Agency to take up his case, that is, to help him find a suitable job and to give him "all the rights" (i.e. social benefits) that this



Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, Letter of Recommendation for Albert Tam, 1957. Tam Family Archive.

kind of immigrants were entitled to. They also asked for the family to be urgently moved from the ma'abara (Transit Camp)²³ in Tiberias to Tel-Aviv or Bat-Yam, a burgeoning blue-collar city south of Tel-Aviv, since there were more job opportunities there. In what might have been considered a quick turnaround, it took the family about a year or less to move from the ma'abara in Tiberias to the ma'abara in Bat-Yam, and about two more years to move to a new housing project (Shikūn, in Hebrew) in Bat-Yam. My grandfather never found a job in advertising

²¹ Levana Zamir, "56 Years of Activity in the House of the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel in its Residence at Pinsker Street in Tel Aviv" [in Hebrew], *Journal of Egyptian Jewish Heritage* 3 (January 2013).

²² Minutes of the Executive Committee, Nov. 4, 1958; and Minutes of the Executive Committee, April 4, 1960, Archive of the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel.

²³ Ma'abara (plural: Ma'abarot) were immigrant transit camps established in Israel in the 1950s, constituting one of the largest public projects planned by the state to implement its socio-spatial and housing policies. The ma'abarot were meant to provide temporary accommodation for the large influx of Jewish immigrants arriving to the newly independent State of Israel, but most of those who it settled there were immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. In time, they became a symbol of discrimination against those immigrants and their descendants.

again: instead, he worked a series of menial unskilled jobs, and so did his teenage children, until his skills and language proficiencies landed him a managerial position at the Israel Aerospace Industries warehouses. It was a coveted position in Israel's economy at that time, since it meant having stable employment, connection to the state, and a salary that put the family in the higher echelons of the working class.

Beyond offering help with settling in Israel, the Association also served as a social hub for the Jewish immigrants from Egypt. It had a standing "cultural committee," and an "education committee" that awarded modest scholarships to students.²⁴ Famous Jewish Egyptian essayist Jacqueline Shohet-Kahanoff wrote about the women who entered the Association's premises in Tel-Aviv to seriously inquire how one was supposed to get by in this new country without the help that they were used to in their bourgeois homes in Egypt: the live-in maids, servants, and laundry assistants. Indeed, the Association tried to recreate a semblance of the bourgeois life of Cairo and Alexandria by organizing social events such as dances in Café Bustan on Dizengoff Square in Tel Aviv, organizing sports tournaments, hosting Bar-Mitzvas, or serving as a synagogue.²⁵

Actual statistics about the socio-economic makeup of these immigrant populations are notoriously rare. The few sets of data that are available can provide some general indications, such as a 1998 questionnaire-based survey conducted by Levana Zamir, a recent president of the Association, which yielded a representative sample of about one thousand responses.²⁶ This and other pieces of evidence, mainly

from oral history accounts, suggest that a significant portion of Egyptian Jewish immigrants have indeed succeeded in reentering the lower middle class in Israel. Most of these immigrants were stripped of their possessions by the Egyptian government when they left, but they did arrive in Israel with some cultural and social capital, such as language proficiency, work experience in various professions, and bourgeois habitus.²⁷ Many were first sent to the transit camps, especially to the ones in Tiberias and Bat-Yam. Some anecdotal evidence, which needs more corroboration, suggests that many Egyptian Jews moved out of the camps quicker than other Mizrahi immigrant groups, and settled in housing projects in blue-collar cities such as Bat-Yam and Holon. A sizeable group also settled in Haifa.

As mentioned earlier, there were also groups

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of Egyptian Jews who settled in Kibbutzim, before and after 1948. Historian Joel Beinin described the encounter between the very ideological, French educated, bourgeois-intellectual Egyptian Jews – who were more committed to their communist agendas –

²⁴ Minutes of the Executive Committee, Feb. 12, 1959; and Minutes of the Executive Committee, April 4, 1960, Archive of the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel.

²⁵ Zamir, "56 Years of Activity."

²⁶ Levana Zamir, *The Contribution and Achievements of Egyptian Jews in Israel during the State's 50 Years, 1948-1998* [in Hebrew], 2nd ed. (Tel Aviv: Publication of the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, 2003).

²⁷ The minutes of the Executive Committee from early 1959 do note that new immigrants from Egypt keep arriving "every week" and that "most have means," however, the overall preoccupation of the Association with financial aid for the immigrants indicates that most arrived with very little resources. Minutes of the Executive Committee, Feb. 12, 1959, Archive of the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel.

and the Ashkenazi Kibbutzniks who received them. These Jewish immigrants were East-European, less-educated, more work-oriented, and more committed to Zionist nationalism than to pure communism. The encounter between the two groups inevitably created tensions around social hierarchy and power, which were interlaced with inter-ethnic conflict. These were exacerbated by the ideological splits that swept the Kibbutzim in the 1950s and 1960s. Such frictions ended with some of the Egyptian Jews leaving the Kibbutzim to pursue a working- or middle-class life in Israel's big cities. Some Egyptian Jews did stay in the Kibbutzim, however, which is significant in the context of current public and scholarly debates that usually pit Mizrahim and Kibbutzim against each other.²⁸

However, most Egyptian Jews sought urban living and professional employment. Many in the community found employment in banking and accounting, using networks formed back in Egypt. For example, the British bank Barclays explicitly decided to re-employ all of its former employees from Egypt, who were dismissed and pushed out by the Egyptian government, and arrived in Israel. Discount Bank and Mercantile Bank also employed many from the community who were bank employees back in Egypt. Unsurprisingly, these banks also financed the activity of the Association with comfortable loans or small donations. Using their Arabic and familiarity with Egyptian society and culture, many Egyptian Jews were recruited into the various Intelligence units in the Israeli army and other security organizations, alongside Jewish immigrants from Iraq; many joined the Israeli police too. Many, especially women, went into education. Others can be found in almost every profession and industry in Israel, including hi-tech,

medicine, trade and retail, hospitality, engineering, diplomacy, and academia.²⁹

Egyptian Jews left a significant imprint on Israeli culture too: suffice it to mention Moshe Mizrahi, one of the most important Israeli film directors, or novelists such as Yitzhak Gormezano-Goren, Ronit Matalon, and Orly Kastel-Bloom, who led the literary trend of Mizrahi nostalgic literature. Egyptian Jewish immigrants continued their involvement in sports as well, which were very

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popular in Egypt as part of its modern bourgeois and masculine culture, especially basketball. The team of the illustrious Maccabi Alexandria was shunned by Maccabi in Israel, as well as by the Israeli basketball league. It therefore transformed into the successful basketball team Hapo'el Holon, the arch-rival club of Maccabi. Egyptian Jews were active in the Israeli religious world too: a few graduates of the modernizing orthodox Yeshiva Ahava wa-Achava in Cairo went on to establish seminaries in that same tradition around Israel's underserved peripheral regions. Perhaps the only prominent Egyptian Jewish political activist in Israel was Dr. Vicky Shiran (1947--2004), a criminologist, sociologist, poet, film director,

²⁸ Beinun, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, Chp. 5.

²⁹ Zamir, *Contribution and Achievements*, 37-98.

media personality and activist, who was involved in Mizrahi protest movements from the early Black Panthers movement in the 1970s, to the later Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, and the Mizrahi feminist movement Achoti.³⁰

In sum, it seems that most Egyptian Jews succeeded in integrating into the Israeli middle-class, at least into its lower echelons, or succeeded in producing a socio-economic basis which their children (second-generation immigrants) built on until their families became part of Israeli middle-class. I argue that they did so by successfully employing some of the same strategies that worked for them, or for their parents and grandparents, as poor immigrants in Egypt who experienced rapid upward social mobility. Many of those I interviewed for my research emphasized their knowledge of foreign languages, like French and English, which were in demand in Israel, as a skill that helped them secure well-paying jobs. They also emphasized their insistence on relocating as fast as possible to urban centers with more employment opportunities.³¹

Above all, they emphasized education as the

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primary vehicle for upward social mobility, just as it had been in Egypt. One of my interviewees put

it this way: she and her family arrived at the Transit Camp in Tiberias. After a while, they were offered new housing (Shikūn) in Tiberias, which was the ultimate dream of camp dwellers. It was therefore shocking that my interviewee's mother refused it. She preferred taking on more menial jobs so she could rent a makeshift room on the roof of one of the buildings in Florentine, a downtrodden neighborhood of Tel-Aviv back then (today it is a hipster hub). Her reason: Tiberias didn't have good schools, nor a university, and she wanted to put her children through university, which she did. Other Jewish Egyptian immigrants told stories about completing their high school education – which was considered higher education back then, both in Israel and in Egypt – or even university, while living in the transit camps. Investment in education was paramount for those immigrants from Egypt in helping them ascend the Israeli social ladder.³²

Summary and conclusions

This article traced a historical arc that began with highlighting the many ties between the Jewish community in Egypt and the one in pre-1948 Palestine, be it the local Ottoman Jewry or the Zionist Yishuv. This offers a new perspective on 1948 as a clean break in the shared history of Israel and the Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa, and it also underscores the fact that there was such a shared history. Mainstream historiography has focused mostly on the organizational history of the Zionist movement in the region, while its revisionist historiography has argued that the commitment of most Jews in the region to Zionism was limited and did not come at the expense of their sense of belonging to the countries in which they lived. Both

³⁰ Zamir, *ibid.*

³¹ For example: Levana Zamir, Interview with Author, Tel-Aviv, Israel, November 2015.

³² Levana Zamir, Interview with Author, Tel-Aviv, Israel, November 2015

strains have neglected their actual engagement with the Yishuv, whether from Zionist motivations, or (mostly) not. This engagement recontextualizes the Yishuv in the Middle East and its Jewish history, extracting it from a single Euro-centric framework.

By tracing the migration and integration of Egyptian Jews into Israeli society – using mainly archival material, oral history, and memoirs – I suggested that they successfully replicated social strategies for upward social mobility, as well as social organizing, which had worked for them in similar situations back in Egypt. Beyond contributing to the social history of Israel in general, this Jewish Egyptian story also offers some correctives to certain Mizrahi discourses that have been formed in recent decades, ones that rely mostly on the experiences of the largest Mizrahi communities that immigrated to Israel – namely the Iraqi, Moroccan, and Yemeni communities. The Jewish Egyptian story underscores the centrality of socio-economic class to the matrix of constructed ethnicities and power that makes up Israeli society in a way that disturbs the sharp dichotomies between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. <

The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Y&S Nazarian Center for Israel Studies at UCLA.