Muslim-Jewish Relations

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Summary and Keywords

Muslim-Jewish relations began with the emergence of Islam in 7th-century Arabia, but contacts between pre-Jewish Israelites and pre-Muslim Arabs had been common for nearly two millennia previously. These interactions inform the earliest relations between Muslims and Jews and serve as precursors to the social, cultural, religious, political, and institutional relations between Muslims and Jews from the 7th century to the present. Areas and periods of particular importance are 7th-century Arabia with first contacts between Jews and the earliest Muslims, 8th–9th-century Middle East with the establishment of legal and social status of Jews in Islam, the 9th to 14th centuries in many parts of the Muslim world with the development of great Jewish intellectual advances under Islamic influence, the subsequent decline of the Muslim world and its negative impact on Jews and other minorities, the period under colonial powers with the rise of national movements and the subsequent transition to independent nation-states that includes the rise of both Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms, and the current status of Muslim-Jewish relations today. Common issues include language production; cultural production including literature, hermeneutics, and systematic thinking; legal developments, political relations, religious commonalities and differences, and economic relations and partnerships.

Keywords: dhimma/dhimmi, Pact of Umar, Medina Agreement, Torah, jizya, Israel, Zionism, colonialism, Judaism, jihad, Muslim conquest

Pre-Islamic Relations in Bible and Talmud

The Hebrew Bible identifies human communities through a schema of kinship relationship. All humanity derive from the primordial couple in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8ff), whose descendants branched into various populations and nations. Some of these are identified with known locations in the ancient world, and with professions or social-economic modes of existence such as pastoral, agricultural, or urban organization. The peoples are sometimes named as such, such as “the Ashurim, the Letushim and the Le’umim” (Gen. 25:3), or they are identified through an eponymous ancestor, such as
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Midian, the originator of the Midianites (*midyanim* Gen. 25:4, 37:28). Because human divisions in the Bible are constructed primarily on family lineage, religious identity is kinship-based as well and tends to be described in terms of tribe, each worshipping its own god(s). The Israelites are a tribal community professing a certain religious tradition.

In the complex kinship map of the Hebrew Bible, the same ancestral branch that produced the precursors to the Israelites produced the precursors to Arab peoples identified as such by their names, geographical locations, and kinds of livelihoods (Gen. 10:21–31, 11:10–32). Some identify geographical or political communities in southern Arabia, such as ḡatarmavet/ḥaḍramawt, *shvāʾ/sabaʾ*, uzāl/azalla or perhaps Ṣanʿāʾ (Gen. 10:26–28). According to the worldview represented by ancient Israel, therefore, the Israelites considered themselves to be related, though not closely in this case, to a branch of peoples associated with South Arabia but not identified specifically through the name, “Arab.” A closer genealogy is found in Genesis 25, which associates Arabian peoples to Abraham through his wives Qeturah and Hagar, whose offspring include *midyān/madyān*, *shvāʾ/sabaʾ* (again), *ddān/ddān al-ʿulā, īfā/ghwāfa*. The offspring of Ishmael point to northern Arabia and the Syrian Desert with the names *nvāyōt/al-anbāṭ*, *qēdār/qidri* or *qudari*, and names associated with oases such as *dūmā/dūmat al-jandal* and *tēmāʾ/taymāʾ* (Gen. 25:13–14). The Romanized Jewish historian Flavius Josephus later circulated the biblical kinship connection in his popular *Antiquities*. In later parts of the Hebrew Bible, some of these same names reappear in association with social-economic realia associated with ancient Arabia, such as the southern Arabian spice trade (Isa. 60:6–7). In some cases individuals such as “Geshem the Arab” (*geshem haʿaravi*) are identified specifically as Arabs, and in this case, his name appears both in its Hebrew and Arabic form (Hebrew *geshem*/Arabic *gashmu*—Neh. 6:1–6).

Some of the references are neutral or positive, such as the Isaiah 60 reference to divine redemption in which the riches of Arabia will be brought from afar to the Temple in Jerusalem. Others, however, relate negatively to peoples identified as Arab (Neh. 6). All biblical references to foreign peoples must be read within the context of the overarching geopolitical situation, in which most tribal communities lived in a state of tension with their neighbors that would not infrequently erupt into hostilities. Ancient Israelis thus had a certain level of interaction and familiarity with Arab peoples through both peaceful commerce and war.

Relations between Jews and Arabs continued throughout the Second Temple Period (530 BCE–70 CE). The ancient community of Edom located south and east of Judea was ethnically Arab in origin, and its ancient Edomite kings are listed in Genesis 36 with Arab names such as Husham and Hadad. The kingdom was reduced over the centuries and called in Latin Idumaea, which was converted *en masse* to Judaism under the Hasmonean King John Hycranus (d. 104 BCE) and brought under Jewish rule. The Arab Nabatean kingdom traded with the kingdom of Judea during the same period, until both were eventually taken under the control of Rome.
This familiarity between Jews and Arabs continued for generations after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism in Roman Palestine (1st-7th centuries). By this time, two great Jewish centers had developed in what the Jews called the Land of Israel (Palestine) and Bavel (Babylon, meaning Mesopotamia under Persian and Greek rule). These two centers produced the most important post-biblical Jewish literature of the Talmud, one version of which was produced in the Land of Israel, the other in Bavel. Post-biblical Jewish references to pre-Islamic Arabs can be found in these productions, which emerged gradually between the 1st and 7th centuries CE. In the Talmud, Arabs can be called ‘arāvāʾē (Arabs), yishmāʿēlīm (Ishmaelites), or tayyāyē, an Aramaic/Syriac word derived from the ancient Arab ṭayyiʾ tribe. As in the biblical corpus, references to Arabs in the Talmud vary from positive or neutral to negative, though Arabs are not singled out particularly from other foreign communities for good or bad. Stories are told of travels in the desert led by a brilliant Arab guide (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 73b), of an Arab with uncanny wisdom (Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 2:4), and of an Arab being sexually aggressive (Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 26b) or of Arab polytheists who “worship the dust of their feet” (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metziʿa 86b). The Jews represented by the Talmud lived among many peoples in many lands, and they interacted in a variety of contexts that are reflected in the stories, anecdotes, and discussions that are found there.

Jews and Jāhilī Arabs in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Outside the two great Jewish centers mentioned above, Jewish communities sprang up throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, including Arabia, before the emergence of Islam. Evidence of Jewish communities in both northern and southern Arabia derive from Greek, Roman, and early Christian chroniclers writing from the 1st through 6th centuries, and from Hebrew and Arabic inscriptions from roughly the same period. A Jewish kingdom was even established in Ḥimyar in South Arabia in the 5th–6th centuries, which controlled a number of other regions as well. Evidence of Jews is also clear in the northern areas that straddled Jewish settlement in Palestine and Mesopotamia on the one hand, and the Hijaz in which Mecca and Medina are located on the other. Jewish inscriptions in Hebrew/Aramaic script but in either Aramaic or Arabic language have been found in Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ, Taymāʾ, al-ʿUlā, Umm Judhayidh (near Tabūk), and a few other locales in Wādi al-Qura and elsewhere.

Humans are by definition purveyors of culture, and when they move fromlocale to locale they bring their cultures with them. Jews who entered Arabia for trade unsurprisingly brought their stories and practices and freely shared them. Those who remained as permanent inhabitants naturally communicated their perspectives and notions and their stories and beliefs with those among whom they lived. Biblical traditions thus became part of the cultural landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia as told through particular Jewish perspectives, just as they were conveyed by Christian traders and immigrants according to Christian perspectives. Biblical lore from the narrative to the theological thus became integrated into the cultures of Arabia and became nativized. The process of integrating
foreign culture into a native culture inevitably results in adaptations and adjustments as it penetrates and amalgamates into local civilization. Jewish Bible and rabbinic lore and religious tradition thus entered and became a part of a shared Arabian civilization. No direct evidence exists attesting that Jews brought with them written copies of their Bible and other religious literatures. However, they inevitably brought with them “oral copies” that were not only eminently portable, they were amendable. Thus it should not be surprising that stories and figures known from the Bible and post-biblical Jewish literature such as Midrash and Talmud would recur in one form or another in Qur’an and Hadith through the medium of Arabian culture, though not necessarily in the forms that they appear in Jewish tradition.3

Exactly how “Jewish” were the Jews living in these areas continues to be debated. As Hoyland asks, “Should we think in terms of . . . ‘a genuine Hebrew stock’ linked ‘with the learned centers in the greater world outside Arabia’ . . . or rather of a community mostly made up of Arab converts (with probably a number of Jews who migrated there for various reasons—trade, refuge, etc.—and stayed on) substantially integrated within Arabian society and barely in touch with non-Arabian Jewish communities, and possessing a relatively low level of Jewish education?”4 Evidence from Qur’an and Hadith provide in some cases quite accurate depictions of Jewish practice and behavior; while in others they seem to ascribe practices and behavior to Jews that are otherwise completely unknown (Cf. Q. 9:30).

It is clear that Jews lived, traded, and interacted not only in regions in the northernmost reaches of the Arabian Peninsula close to Palestine (Idumea, Nabatea, etc.), but also in southern Arabia and the Hijaz. What is not clear is the origin of these communities, their linguistic identities, religious and cultural practices, sense of identity as Jews and simultaneously as Arabs, and how they fit into the complex and volatile matrix of Jewish expressions during the six- or seven-century period of transition from Biblical Religion to the Rabbinic and Kara’ite Judaisms which emerged in its wake.

7th-Century Arabia: Muhammad and the Jews

By the emergence of Islam in the 7th century, Jewish communities were well established in Northern Arabia, the Hijaz, and Southern Arabia. Arabian Jews were traders, craftsmen, farmers, and Bedouin herders, and they practiced some kind(s) of “rabbinic” Judaism. The Qur’an (Q. 3:79; 5:44, 63) appears to refer to Jews as “rabbanites” or followers of rabbis (rabbāniyūn) and “companions” (aḥbār), the latter term probably reflecting a Talmudic expression to identify a learned Jew (Mishnah Avot 1:6, 4:14; Eruvin 2:6; Yevamot 16:7). Arabian Jews were probably ethnically mixed between immigrants from Palestine and converts from local tribes and communities. They spoke Arabic, and at least some also spoke a language referred to in Muslim sources as al-yahūdiyya, perhaps a Jewish dialect of Syriac/Aramaic and Arabic, and they knew some Hebrew as well. They lived in houses in towns and in tents in the desert, and they also had castles as protective formations for extended clans in some places such as Medina. Evidence from inscriptions,
the Qur’an and historical references such as the pact known as the Medina Agreement (ṣaḥīfat al-madīna or mithāq al-madīna) found in early Muslim historical writings suggest that the Jews were a significant, well-established, and accepted component of the Arabian population. They lived not only in discreet Jewish tribal communities but also as family units attached to non-Jewish tribes and were related by both blood and marriage to non-Jewish individuals and groups. There appears to be no single paradigm for the manner in which Jews functioned religiously, economically, politically, and culturally within greater Arabian society. They lived from north to south, though there seems to have been no Jewish community living in Mecca, the trading and cultic center of Muhammad’s birth. It is presumed that Mecca’s status as religious shrine and center for regional Arabian polytheism was a deterrent to permanent Jewish settlement, though Jews regularly visited for trade and commerce.

Muhammad’s emergence as leader and prophet in the 7th century occurred in a complex religious and political environment. There were others who claimed prophecy in his generation, and there is evidence that some Arabian Jews may have been expecting the arrival of a prophetic or messianic figure. When Muhammad was in life-threatening danger from his own community of polytheists in Mecca who rejected him, he seems to have expected that the Jews living in nearby Yathrib/Medina would recognize his prophetic status. Unlike the local majority polytheistic religious culture, Jews were familiar with prophets and divine revelation and had their own scripture. It was logical to assume that they would recognize his prophethood as well, perhaps because of the hints that some Jews in the peninsula were expecting a charismatic religious figure.

Muhammad fled Mecca for Medina, where a large and powerful Jewish community had been long established. Most Medinan Jews and the Arabian Jewish communities as a whole did not recognize him as a prophet, though a few notable exceptions are mentioned in the Muslim sources. Nevertheless, Muhammad’s most threatening opponents were not Jews but rather, the pagan Arab individuals and communities that had most to lose from his success. His having been invited to Medina was based on his skills as a respected arbitrator appointed to resolve a dangerous and bloody dispute between the major non-Jewish clans to which were allied Jewish clans. In the early period of Muhammad’s tenure in Medina, the Jewish groups were completely integrated into the larger community he established, with equal rights and responsibilities. However, as he gained strength against his opponents and many Arab individuals and groups joined him, the major Jewish groups resisted and eventually opposed him vigorously. According to the Muslim sources, the Jews of Medina violated the protections offered them in the Medina Agreement by insulting and eventually threatening the life of the Prophet. Muhammad ultimately outwitted them, dividing them and eventually disarming them, exiling some and killing others to neutralize the hostile Jewish community of Medina and become the absolute leader of the town and its environs.

Some modern observers view Muhammad’s behavior as inherently anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic, but this seems not to be an accurate way of making sense of the context of the struggle. The situation can be explained more accurately by examining it from a history of
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religions perspective. Once a scriptural religion is formed and its institutional structure established, it canonizes its scripture and affirms that while God continues to reveal truth to his followers, there can henceforth be no more official revelation that is recognized as divine scripture. New claims for divine revelation destabilize established religion because they threaten to upend conventional dogma and practice through divine authority, which inevitably challenges the legitimacy of religious establishment. So while Jews could accept a religious charismatic and redemptive figure, it was impossible for them as a community to accept such a figure who claimed status as a new prophet dispensing divine revelation. From the perspective of the prophet who hears the voice of God, however (it is always impossible from an absolutely objective perspective to determine whether the prophetic voice is truly God’s voice or not), rejection, especially by an ancient and deeply respected religious community, threatens the redemptive possibility of divine intervention. The result is inevitable clash. This phenomenology of religious relationship can be observed at the emergence of every new scriptural religion after the canonization of established scripture, which canonization, by definition, declares an end to further prophecy.

The Jews of Medina had no choice but to oppose Muhammad as a false prophet who, from their perspective, was distorting the truth of God’s revelation that had already been fully disclosed and codified in the Torah. But from the perspective of Muhammad and his followers, the Medinan Jews were unequivocally trying to oppose God by resisting and delegitimizing his prophecy and the authentic redemptive message that he brought. Parallel scenarios are easily found with the emergence of Christianity and its revelation in relation to Judaism, the emergence of Islam and its revelation in relation to Christianity, and the emergence of post-Qur’anic religion and its revelation such as Bahaism in relation to Islam. The aggrieved parties observe the conflict from radically different perspectives and each constructs a narrative to explain the conflict that favors its own particular point of view.

Despite the conflict and the violence that it spawned, Medinan Jews and early Muslims, like their descendants, shared many of the most fundamental notions of religion in prophecy, revelation, ethics, law, ritual and ritual purity, and theology. They disagreed over details, and even more so in competition over recognizing the community that best represents the divine will. That issue, also in relation to a third community of Christians that claimed its own exclusive representation of the divine will, would henceforth define interreligious relations more than any other criterion.

The Qur’an itself, however, while attesting its authenticity as God’s word, places its revelation into the context of previous revelations known in 7th-century Arabia through Jewish and Christian scripture (6:154–157; 7:157; 10:37; 35:31, etc.). It does not invalidate prior scripture, but rather critiques the accuracy of its unnamed Jewish and Christian opponents who claim to cite it. The Torah holds an honored place in the Qur’an’s portrayal of the sacred history of divine revelation. This is reminiscent of the intent of the Hebrew Bible with which we began this exploration. Both place themselves into a historical context by declaring relationship with neighboring peoples. While the
Hebrew Bible contextualizes its historical message according to a schema of human genealogy, the Qurʾan contextualizes its message according to a schema of divine revelation.

8th-9th Century: Establishing Legal and Social Status of Jews in Law and Society

The conquests that would result in the establishment of a great and powerful Muslim empire began shortly after the death of the Prophet. These conquests are sometimes referred to as Muslim, and sometimes as Arab. Historians who are expert on the period note that the boundary between Muslims and other monotheists was not clear during the early years of the movement. The Qurʾan had not yet been committed to writing nor the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad collected. No theology had been systematized, nor had a legal system been established. Contemporary Christian witnesses identify different kinds of Christians among the warriors, and while there is no witness that specifically identified Jews among them, it is likely that some Jews engaged in the campaign as well.

Within a relatively short period of time, however, a hierarchy was established by the conquerors to differentiate between three categories: Muslim believers, non-Muslim monotheists, and polytheists. The distinction is authorized by the ninth chapter of the Qurʾan. The early verses establish that polytheists are to be fought to the death or until they accept Islam. Non-Muslim monotheists, identified in the Qurʾan as “People of the Book” (sometimes referred to in scholarly literature as “Scriptuaries”) however, are granted freedom to remain in their religion as long as they pay tribute and assume a deferential position vis-à-vis the Muslim community. The policy regarding Scriptuaries is codified in Qurʾan 9:29: “Fight those who do not believe in God nor in the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His messenger have forbidden nor follow the religion of truth among those who have been given Scripture—until they pay the jizya (understood as tribute) `an yad (literally, “by [their] hand), wahum ṣāghirūn (literally, “being small”)."

It is not clear exactly what the last three parts of this verse, noted here by the original Arabic, were intended to mean, and traditional Muslim scholars of the Qurʾan have differed significantly over their interpretation. The verse has nevertheless served as a key authority for official policy established in Islamic legal literature toward non-Muslim monotheists who accept the unity of God but do not accept the prophethood of Muhammad or particulars of Islamic practice and theology. They are to be accepted in Muslim society as citizens with legal protection and legal rights, though at a reduced level than Muslims. Scriptuaries, for their part, must pay a special tax and accept subservient social and political status imposed through a list of sumptuary laws, rules designed to restrict outward displays of wealth and status and intended to enforce social hierarchy based on a document known as the “Pact of Umar.” Christians as well as Jews were bound by these controls, so it is clear that there was no particularly anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic intent in these laws. They developed as a means to privilege Muslims in a
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world in which governments always privileged ruling elites and those communities with which they identified.

The term used to define the status of tolerated religions was *dhimma*, which meant protection. The people belonging to tolerated religions were called *ahl al-dhimma*—“protected people,” or in shortened form, *dhimmis*. *Dhimmīs* were obligated to pay an annual tax and to abide by the sumptuary laws. Their “protection” meant that they were legal citizens of the state and protected by the same basic laws that protected Muslim citizens, though at a subordinate level. For example, they could bring grievances to a Muslim court of law, but their witnessing was not as powerful as that of Muslims so they were required to bring twice the number to court. They could pray undisturbed in their houses of worship, but unlike Muslims they were forbidden from public displays of religion. *Dhimmīs* were forbidden from building new houses of worship or repairing those already established, except with permission of the ruler. Their status, though certainly not equal and therefore unacceptable by today’s democratic standards, was nevertheless a significant improvement over their position in the Christian world where the “Jewry laws” identified Jews as an aberrant community and where Jews eventually lost their protected status altogether. By the High Middle Ages, Jews were able to survive in Christendom only through the largess of noble families who personally protected them but only for as long as the nobility wished, a far more unstable and dangerous situation than they experienced generally under Muslim rule.

Most Jews living in the Muslim world during this early period lived in the Land of Israel/Palestine, Bavel/Mesopotamia, and Egypt, though communities were spread from Morocco to Khurasan (today’s northeastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and southern Turkmenistan). We know much less about social relations between Muslims and Jews during these early Islamic centuries than in later periods. It was a period in which Muslims were busy forming their most basic institutions of scripture (through the establishment of an official canonized text), tradition (through the collection and organization of the prophetic *sunna* or teachings and practices of Muhammad), and law (through the formation of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, and the major schools of Islamic law). The Jews who lived in the early Muslim world were also busy consolidating Rabbinic Judaism and its core texts of Talmud and the legal literature that was just beginning to emerge from it. For example, two primitive attempts to codify Jewish law from Rabbinic literature that emerged in the Muslim world in the 8th century are the *Sh’iltot* (“Questions”) and the *Halakhot Pesuqot* (“Law as Decided”). While Jews and Muslims were interfacing at all levels, we have little concrete information about it. Certainly, given the Jewish historical penchant for recording disasters that affected them, if relations were very bad we would know about it, so it must be presumed that Jews and Muslims lived together reasonably well under the conditions established in the Muslim world during the early period.

As for the relations between the religions themselves, one must keep in mind that Rabbinic Judaism was newly formed by the 7th century and still somewhat of a work in progress, while Islam was at the beginning of its formation. No religion is born “ex
nihilo.” Islam, like Christianity, Judaism, and Biblical Religion before it, represents a combination of influence and inspiration. During the early period of its formation, Islam was profoundly influenced by Jewish models that had developed under the rabbinic sages. The Islamic term for scripture, qurʾān, corresponds rather perfectly with the rabbinic meaning of the biblical word miqraʾ, for example, and the Islamic madrasa (school), alternatively spelled in Arabic as midras or midrās, corresponds with the rabbinic beit midrash, the “house of study” or academy in which scripture and its meanings are studied and deliberated. These core institutions reveal the common central role of scripture and its interpretation, and they are but two of many examples that prove the close conceptual and institutional parallels between the two religions. Many more example could be added, such as the roles of religious leadership in rabbi and imam (as opposed to the biblical or Christian priest), the paucity of religious hierarchy, the parallel notions of ritual purity, the emphasis on law carefully derived from scripture and tradition (halakhah/sharīʿa), etc.

Early expressions of Rabbinic Judaism had emerged in Jewish Palestine subsequent to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, and spread within a century or two to Mesopotamia where it became the dominant form of Jewish life a few centuries later. It was not until the unification of the Conquest, however, that Rabbinic Judaism was enabled to spread to the far reaches of Jewish settlement and become the unifying form of Judaism that remains to this day. The three greatest Jewish communities, in Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, had previously been divided between Byzantine and Sasanian rule. With the Conquest they existed under one rule for the first time in history.

One could easily imagine how the influence of Rabbinic Judaism on emergent Islam could easily have been reversed if Islam had come into being only a few centuries earlier during the early period of Rabbinic formation. As it turns out, despite the firm grounding of Rabbinic Judaism by the time of the advent of Islam, the vectors are reversed only a few centuries later, when Judaism absorbed much from its experience in the world of Islam, which it then spread into virtually all the faraway corners of the Jewish diaspora.

9th–14th Centuries: Jewish Intellectual Advances under Islamic Influence

This period includes times and places (in Baghdad and Fostat/Cairo and much of Spain, for example) that are sometimes referred to as “the Golden Age” of Muslim-Jewish or Muslim-Jewish-Christian symbiosis and convivencia. The truth is never so simple. Violence and the threat of violence was a central aspect of communal relationship between hierarchies in the medieval world, and Jews as subalterns clearly suffered not only social discrimination but sometimes also violence and even occasional massacre. Mark Cohen has established quite clearly, however, that while a utopian “golden age” was a myth, the situation for Jews in much of the medieval Muslim world was significantly better than in most of the medieval Christian world and was one of the better situations for premodern Jewry.\footnote{11}
The freedom of movement afforded by political unity within the Caliphate allowed Jews and others new opportunities for business and for cultural and religious diffusion and consolidation. Marina Rustow has shown how the relative unity of the empire enabled Jewish practice and beliefs to become fairly standardized. This development was ushered forward particularly with the rise of the power and influence of the heads of the great academies in Baghdad known as *geonim*, who served during the period as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish world. Two rabbinic academies, established previously under the Sasanian Persians near what would later become the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, moved into the city under Abbasid rule to take advantage of proximity in the center of the largest world empire.

These two academies controlled intellectual discourse in the Jewish world by holding onto the text of the Talmud, both figuratively and literally. They established themselves as the ultimate authorities in Jewish law and tradition, attracting the best Jewish minds to study there. Jews and their rabbis even in far-flung communities in North Africa and Spain sent inquiries over issues of law and practice to Baghdad, and along with their inquiries, remittances that supported the academies. The two academies, known from the places of their origin in the Mesopotamian towns of Sura and Pumbedita, competed for these inquiries and their accompanying donations, which stimulated excellence in learning. A great genre of Jewish law known as *teshuvot*, meaning “responses” and referred to in English as responsa literature, developed during this period, and thousands of letters, legal responsa, and even parts of the Talmud survive from this period.

A similar development occurred at the same time in Islam, as the issuance of legal opinions called *fatwas* developed under Abbasid rule. Like the *teshuvah*, the *fatwa* is a legal judgment or interpretation given by a qualified scholar learned in legal traditions. It is an individual endeavor, as opposed to the church councils that were occasionally called by the Catholic Church. Among both Muslims and Jews, the authority of the issuer of the *teshuvah* or *fatwa* derived simply from his reputation as a scholar, and his opinion had no official sanction that should be enforced by governmental institution. This situation remained in the Jewish context because lack of Jewish political power meant that there was little possibility of enforcement, but with the establishment of powerful and influential power structures in the Muslim world the office of *mufti* (interpreter of Islamic law) became considerably politicized as authorities wished to authorize their power through respected religious decisors. The role remained individual and independent, however, even in the Muslim world, so that learned scholars continued to issue independent opinions on issues even under pressure or threat from authorities in power.

Another parallel development between Muslims and Jews in the Middle Ages can be found in attempts to systematize law in the formulation of law codes, one of the most famous of which in the Jewish world was Moses Maimonides’ (*d.* 1204) *Mishneh Torah*. Concern with law is a function of concern for understanding God’s will, and the most reliable and accessible source for God’s will is the record of divine communication in scripture. While Jews had engaged in the field of scriptural hermeneutics for centuries prior to the emergence of Islam, it was under Islam and the influence of its culture and
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civilization that scriptural hermeneutics among Rabbinic Jews became systematic (Hellenistic Jews in late antiquity had other systematic hermeneutics, but that community disappeared centuries before the coming of Islam).

The Jews of Islam were profoundly and enduringly influenced by the development among their Muslim compatriots of “the sciences of the Qurʾān” (ʿulūm al-qurʾān). These include lexicography and etymology, the study of Arabic grammar (word morphology, syntax, etc.), rhetoric of the Qurʾān and ancient Arabic literatures, Arabic dialectology and use of words in various contexts in oral as well as written literatures, and more. Qurʾānic sciences developed with the early need to record the oral revelations into a written text, and they developed systematically over the following centuries to their apogee in the 14th–15th centuries with the summative works of Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān—“The Proof in the Qurʾanic Sciences”) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (al-itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān—“The Perfection in the Qurʾanic Sciences”). The intent of the Muslim scholars was to understand God better by understanding God’s language and how it was used by God in the revelation of the divine word.

Jewish scholars living in the same centers of learning in which the Islamic sciences thrived knew of their Muslim colleague’s efforts, and they applied them to the Jewish context because of their parallel interest in understanding God’s revealed word—though in a different collection and in a different language. This resulted in the development of similar “sciences” in the study of the Hebrew Bible: grammar, lexicography, and so on. Jewish religious thinkers considered Hebrew a pure language and superior to Arabic, just as Muslim religious thinkers considered Arabic superior to Hebrew, but the similarities between these two cognate languages enabled Jews to apply Arabisms and Arabic linguistic advances to their study of Hebrew.

This Jewish intellectual development began in earnest in Baghdad and found an early prodigy in Saʿd (or Saʿīd) bin Yūsuf al-Fayūmī, known in Jewish circles as Saʿadia Gaʾon (d. 942), the polymath head of the great academy of Sura who pioneered works in halakhah, exegesis, philosophy, grammar, lexicography, translation, and poetry. Scientific advances continued among Jews for generations and reached its medieval zenith in Spain. There in Cordoba, Judah b. David Hayyūj (d. c. 1010) established the triliteral structure of the Hebrew verb under influence from Arab grammarians such Al-Khalīl (d. 786 in Iraq) and his student Sībawayh (d. 796) and others. Although Saʿdia wrote a rhyming dictionary, Jonah (Abūl-Walīd Marwān) Ibn Janâḥ (d. 1050) of Spain wrote the first systematic dictionary of Hebrew grounded in a grammatical method based on roots and which included related Arabic words. Jewish works on Hebrew grammar were regularly written in Arabic, the common language for scientific discourse.

Arabic and Hebrew grammar had a profound impact also on the production of Hebrew religious and secular poetry, especially in Spain where it reached its apogee. Grammatical controversies could last for decades, such as the 10th-century battle between Menahem ibn Sarūq and Dunāsh ibn Labrāṭ over the appropriateness of Arabic quantitative meter in the production of Hebrew poetry.
Jewish thinkers were profoundly influenced by other popular sciences in the Muslim world, such as philosophy, astronomy, optics, medicine, and others. In fact, although Jews were exposed to systematic thinking in philosophy and theology under the Hellenistic influence of late antique Palestine, it was rejected by Rabbinic Jews and became of interest only after it had been effectively endorsed by Muslims who engaged with it. Developments in all of these fields in the Muslim world were paralleled among Jews in the same environments. In the religious sciences, these were fully contextualized in Jewish religious settings, but in neutral areas of science and some areas of philosophy, Muslims and Jews worked in the same general arenas. Virtually all Jewish compositions in the sciences were written in Arabic, which attests to the high level of comfort and knowledge Jews experienced in Muslim culture and society.

One of the reasons for the high level of Jewish intellectual and artistic production during this period was the structure of patronage that Jews borrowed from the larger culture. Wealthy and powerful Muslims attained status and prestige from the intellectuals and literati that they could gather and support. The most successful talent could move up the hierarchical ladder, with the pinnacle position in the court of the caliph. In the Jewish world, likewise, wealthy merchants patronized the arts and sciences through Jewish talent, which encouraged the production of science, literature, and especially poetry and the linguistic arts.

One form of this support was realized through the institution known in the Muslim world as the *majlis*, a setting in which intellectuals, scientists, and artists sponsored by patrons would discuss and debate their areas of expertise. Patrons were typically high government officials, but they could also be wealthy merchants who wished to support the arts and sciences and thereby further their own status as champions of high civilization, and influential scholars themselves might assemble their own *majlis*. The quintessential *majlis* was that of the caliph, who surrounded himself with the best literati and scientists of the day in his court, which functioned in a manner similar to the classic French salon of the 18th-19th centuries. The style of discourse was often one of rivalry and competition, and the caliph would typically put poets, scientists, legal scholar and story-tellers in situations in which they would attempt to overcome their competitors in order to exult in victory and rejoice at the discomfiture of the defeated. Accounts or references to religious discussions or, more accurately, debates or arguments in such sessions, can be found in a variety of Muslim and Jewish sources. Such debates usually took place over theological and legal differences between contending Muslims, but they also occurred between Muslims and Jews or Christians or between all three. The purpose of medieval dialogue was not the free exchange of ideas, but rather proving the truth of one’s opinion with the belief that this would bring divine reward. Sarah Stroumsa notes how these were more like debating societies than study groups. Despite the sometimes intense competition and the formal rhetorical and hierarchical expectations of the day, however, the participants and contenders within the dialogue of the *majlis* were generally protected and allowed to speak rather freely. As a result, scholars and intellectuals had the opportunity to learn across religious boundaries and come to a better understanding of the ideals and practices of their religious neighbors even if in a contentious framework,
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and this undoubtedly had a stimulating trickle-down effect among a larger body of citizens.

Other parallels with Islamic religious culture and history can be found among the Jews of Islam. One striking parallel is the rift between Sunni and Shi’a expressions of Islam on the one hand, and Rabbanite and Kara’ite expressions of Judaism on the other. Both have at their core a contestation over authority, but that tension is expressed also in slight variations in practice and beliefs that cement the divide between two communities. While the Shi’a community has remained a powerful minority community in the Muslim world, the Kara’ites of the Jewish world have declined to such an extent that their survival as a discreet expression of Judaism may soon be in doubt.

Cairo was a particularly interesting center for Muslim-Jewish engagement during these centuries. With the exception of Moses Maimonides, who was educated not in Cairo but in Cordova, Cairene Jews did not produce ground-breaking or influential works. But they were a successful bourgeois community that maintained close communication and trading relations from Spain to India. We know an enormous amount of information about this community from a massive cache of documents dating from the 9th to the 19th century that were found in a storage room of a Cairo synagogue. The documents include public and private records, personal letters, and much other information not only about Cairo but about many other Mediterranean lands, and they also contain much information about Muslims and the relations between the two communities. These include information about business partnerships between Jews and Muslims such as silversmiths and glassworkers, who shared partnership in their shops with each taking off on his own weekly holiday, the Muslims on Friday and Jews on Saturday. We even know from these sources about loans advanced by Muslims to Jewish craftsmen and vice versa. This does not suggest that Jews and Muslims were necessarily intimate friends on the whole, though such relationships certainly must have occurred. Social life in the medieval world was organized by class status determined by family and wealth and by ethnicity and religion. Jews could never remove their lowly dhimmi status, and various Muslim preachers, politicians, and religious reformers would readily note publicly if the sumptuary laws represented by the Pact of Umar were being contravened by dhimmi communities or individuals.

The Geniza sources also document cases of persecution against Jews, thus proving the complexity of relationship and relations between Muslims and Jews in the world of Islam. Jews were easily identifiable through dress and strict observance of the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws. They occasionally suffered from violence, particularly in periods of economic and political stress. Under the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (d. 1021), for example, Jews were forced to wear black belts and a bell around their necks while in the public baths to distinguish them from Muslims, but the caliph was much harsher on Christians, many of whom were removed from office or forcibly converted to Islam and many of whose churches were destroyed or converted into mosques. Anti-Jewish persecutions arose in Yemen in 1170 that resulted in forced conversions and an appeal to Maimonides for help, and Maimonides himself was forced to flee Muslim Spain when his city of
Cordoba was taken over by a fanatical Muslim group known as “The Unifiers” (or “monotheists”), al-muwahhidūn, known in European languages as the Almohads. Jews endured other occasions of physical and emotional persecution during this period as well, but less than the other, usually much larger and more obvious religious minority of Christians. The sharing of minority status mitigated the difficulties, which differed significantly from the Jewish experience under Christian rule.

Moses Maimonides’ (d. 1204) philosophical perspective is often compared to the Aristotelianism of his contemporary, Muhammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198), who like Maimonides was born in Cordova and was exiled from there by extreme orthodox Muslim rulers. Maimonides became the head (raʾīs al-yahūd) of the substantial Jewish community of Cairo and produced many writings in Arabic as well as Hebrew, many of which were influenced in structure and content by the intellectual and cultural developments in the Muslim world. His son Abraham Maimuni (d. 1237) became his successor as head of the Jews and received the title of nagīd in the following generation, when Sufism was becoming widespread in the larger Muslim world. One finds in Abraham’s writings a great deal of Sufi influence, though it did not detract from his strict rationalism and devotion to Jewish law and practice. He nevertheless deeply admired the Sufis and wrote his major work in a style that was highly influenced by contemporary Sufi intellectual and spiritual practice, “calling them the real lineal descendants of the prophets, and regretting that the Jews do not imitate their example.”

The Decline of Two Worlds

The Muslim world began a long decline beginning in some places already in the 13th century, and the decline negatively impacted the position of its minorities, including its Jews. The decline occurred at different speeds in different places, and was even reversed for various periods in some areas such as those under Mongol Ilkhanid, Ottoman Turkish, Safavid Persian, and Mughal Indian rule. But the general direction was one of decline, and when this occurred it caused difficulties and frictions between the majority Muslim population and the Jews and other minorities. Under the stresses brought about by weakening economic and political institutions, society became increasingly stratified, religious orthodoxy with a rigid perspective toward religious minorities became increasingly dominant, and social, political, and religious frictions emerged between various factions and communities.

Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire was a particularly bright spot for Jews, especially during its height in the 15th through much of the 17th centuries when it welcomed Jews who had been expelled from the Spanish peninsula under Christian rule in the late 15th and early 16th centuries or who subsequently fled from the horrors of the Inquisition which followed. Those Spanish (Sefardi) Jews who moved to Ottoman lands were able to reestablish themselves among their own indigenous communities in the empire and among their new Muslim and Christian neighbors.
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As a rule, when the economic and political situation in the Muslim world was stable, so was the position of its Jews. Relations between Jews and Muslims improved through business and commerce, and that positively impacted social relations as well. During periods of destabilization, however, the general relations between Muslims and Jews deteriorated, though always with exceptions. Generally speaking, the more precipitous the decline, the worse for positive and productive Muslim-Jewish relations. The long decline of the Muslim world reached its nadir in the 19th century, when virtually all the Muslim world came under the control of one or another European colonial power.

Under Colonial Powers and Transition to Independent Nation-States

The decline of the Muslim world occurred simultaneously with the growth and increased power in the Western Christian world. As the Ottoman Empire weakened, growing Western powers increasingly asserted themselves in the internal economic and political, and then social and legal, spheres within the empire. Commerce between Ottoman lands and European trading companies had been carried out for centuries through the intermediary relationship of Jewish and Christian dhimmīs who were familiar with both Ottoman and Western languages and cultural and mercantile expectations. In North Africa, where Jews represented the only non-Muslim minority, Jews were especially prominent in this role. As the European powers asserted their influence through consular agents in the 19th century, Christian dhimmīs sought European protection and influence to improve their own status. Because people tend naturally to relate better or more personally with people of similar background, Europeans tended to privilege the Christians with whom they interacted. They openly promoted Christian dhimmīs, and it was common for dhimmī merchants traveling to British India or French North Africa or even Europe itself to return as naturalized foreign subjects. Their new status as French or British or Italian citizens then released them from minority status in their native land. This elicited a negative response among Muslims, who resented both the outside interference and the reversal of the traditional hierarchy.

Western influence on the traditional dhimmī status of Christians also impacted Jews, since Islam does not distinguish between the religious identity of its dhimmi citizens. Moreover, some British colonialists were motivated by a kind of romantic philo-semitism toward native Jews that motivated them to work toward improving their status in areas under their influence. European pressures eventually resulted in the promulgation of an 1839 decree by Sultan ʿAbd al-Majīd I that echoed many of the libertarian ideals articulated in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. It included the accord of “complete security to the inhabitants of the Empire with regard to their lives, their honor, and their fortunes even as it is required by the sacred text of our law.” Because of the problem of political devolution within the empire, this decree was essentially ignored in many quarters, especially in outlying areas. This, along with other pressures and interests, prompted the same sultan to issue a new decree in 1856 that, among other reforms (tanzimāt), created...
a system whereby each religious community became an autonomous body that could regulate its own affairs and be represented to the state through official deputies. These reforms created what is known as the *millet* system, which resulted eventually in the official abolition of the *jizya* with its resultant denigration of monotheist religious minorities.

Under the pressure of European consuls in adjacent North African lands free from direct Ottoman control, places such as Tunisia and Egypt likewise liberalized the status of their non-Muslim subjects. The changes were not uniform, and some areas such as Morocco did not liberalize until much later or not until they came under the rule of European colonial powers, but the trend greatly improved the legal standing of Jews as well as Christians.

Jews and Christians took advantage of the opportunity by increasing their role as intermediaries between European and local businesses, markets, and political bodies. Not only international merchants, but entire communities learned European languages and culture, thanks in part to European efforts to establish Christian schools. Some European Jewish organizations then established Jewish schools in Muslim countries, especially the French Alliance Israélite Universelle. Jews and Christians increasingly took on the trappings of westernization and, especially with foreign passports, served a critical intermediary role. These changes improved the social-economic and political situation of Jews in these areas, but it caused tension and bitterness among traditional Muslim circles who resented the new and equal status of their Jewish neighbors, particularly since the abolition of the *jizya* and *dhimmī* status was considered by many to contradict the precept evidently articulated in the Qur’an that religious minorities enjoy protection only as long as they agree to an inferior social status. Particularly in areas lacking a strong central government, Jews became vulnerable to pillage and rape by marauding tribesmen or extortion by local officials. Vulnerability to these scourges applied to everybody in areas of weak or bad government, but more so to non-Muslims because of their traditional, vulnerable *dhimmī* status.

The situation was similar east of the Ottoman Empire in Iraq, where Jews (and Christians) found themselves in a far less secure situation. Here also, government was weak and often corrupt. Even the large and wealthy Jewish community of Baghdad was subject to official oppression and occasional violent riots. Accusations of blasphemy, conversion, and then apostasy from Islam (both liable to the death penalty) were common, especially when there was a falling out between a Muslim and a Jew or when a Jew tried to collect a bad debt from a Muslim.

In Syria, the situation was better initially, but a watershed moment occurred with the so-called “Damascus Affair” of 1840 in which local Christians, supported by the French consul, accused the Jews of having murdered a Capuchin friar and his servant in order to use their blood for Passover. This resulted in the killing of innocent Jews in rioting and under interrogation, and it introduced the slander of the medieval European Christian
blood libel to the Muslim world. The blood libel has since become firmly embedded in the popular culture and imagination of much of the Muslim world to this day.24

Ironically, while the introduction of Western liberal ideas and expectations through political and economic pressure in the Muslim world relieved the legal inferiority of non-Muslims and even allowed significant numbers to take on Western national identities, the disruption of their traditional status also removed the protections that accompanied it. The confusing imposition of Western values and political and legal systems upon the traditional religious and cultural structure and expectations already in place destabilized the region in a variety of ways. Several negatively affected the welfare and living situation of native Jews and Christians. On the one hand, some prospered greatly, both economically and socially. On the other, they were all exposed to the reactive excesses of native jealousy and religious dogmatism. The situation resulted both in new opportunities and new dangers, especially under colonial rule and in its wake.

Long-term colonization began in Algeria as early as the French conquest in 1830 (Napoleon had conquered Egypt as early as 1798, but was forced out three years later). By 1870, the Jews of Algeria gained French citizenship en masse and needed no longer to identify as Jews of Muslim lands. While this policy was somewhat exceptional and did not occur everywhere even under French colonial rule, Jewish integration into European culture and society in colonial lands increased drastically under colonial rule, though as noted, the patterns of dhimmi emancipation had already been established in the Levant and parts of North Africa decades before the end of Ottoman rule. Christian missionary schools, which the Jewish communities initially avoided, eventually became *de rigueur* for the children of the wealthy mercantile elite and eventually most of the Jewish middle class. Some Muslim children also attended these schools, but the result for the Jewish community was the creation of a kind of European Jewish identity that privileged a new Jewish elite from a perceived non-European vulgarity or primitivity in the local Muslim communities. The Jewish communities themselves were often divided between those with European education and those with the more traditional Jewish education. In Cairo, for example, Arabic speaking Jews of the ḥāra (ghetto) and French speaking Jews of the suburbs often had little to do with one another, nor did they even necessarily speak the same language. In some areas of North Africa, European schools did not teach Arabic, so Jews could grow up in an Arabic-speaking Muslim country and barely communicate in the local language.

The Christian missionary schools were soon followed by the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, which numbered one hundred from Morocco to Persia by the turn of the 20th century.25 Western educated Jews obtained a distinct advantage of opportunity over the largely uneducated Muslims. Sometimes in as short as a single generation, Jews went from being virtually powerless to becoming powerful, very often living at a much higher status than the vast majority of their Muslim neighbors.

By the end of World War I, virtually all the Muslim world had come under the rule of European powers either directly or through one or another form of protectorate status.
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Despite the changes, the colonial system did not actually release Jews from their inferior social status. In addition to traditional Muslim antipathy, European Christian-based anti-Semitism remained part of the standard worldview of those running the colonial administrations. But legal changes released Jews from the legal inferiority imposed by traditional Islamic law. Jews and Muslims, of course, viewed this development from quite different perspectives. The Jews who were able to obtain a Western education and acquire the colonial language could utilize these to improve their and their families’ situations substantially. They were delighted about their change in fortune. Most Muslims had quite a very different reaction. While a few took on the trappings and truly believed in much of the Western worldview—and prospered accordingly—most Muslims were left out of the economic improvement and resented not only the harsh reality of foreign control, but also the imposition of standards and expectations that were incompatible with their experience and respect for tradition. By accepting and embracing the changes brought about by the colonial experience, native Jews and Christians identified themselves with foreign rulers and their exploitation and disregard for traditional Islamic (and also traditional cultural) sensibilities. That would result in disaster for the native Jews of Arab Muslim lands after freedom from colonization.

The Rise of National Movements

As noted above, Jewish-Muslim relations had been deteriorating in much of the Muslim world for centuries. The decline would only be exacerbated by the rise of modern nationalism. This was due in part to the rise of Jewish nationalism in the Zionist movement, which defined Jewish identity in national terms that hearkened back to Jewish roots in the ancient Land of Israel rather than religious terms. But it was also the result of nativist sympathies among Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, in much of the Middle East and North Africa. It was natural for modern Arab nationalists to identify Jews as a foreign nation despite their having lived for many centuries—as long as or in some cases even longer than many of the native Muslims—because of the Jews’ association with colonial powers and the Zionist rhetoric of Jewish otherness.

The rise of Zionism and Zionist Jewish immigration to Palestine in the early 20th century added to the tensions between native Jews and Muslims in the surrounding lands as well. By the 1930s, another element added to the stresses, that being the rise of German National Socialism (Nazism). Germany was not a colonial power in the Middle East and North Africa, so it was free from the taint of colonialism. Moreover, Germany was the traditional enemy of France, which was particularly aggressive in its colonial policies. So the Arab Muslim lands tended to be ripe for absorbing and assimilating Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda, which exacerbated the tensions between Jews and Muslims. By the end of the 1930s, the rise of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy offered alternative models to French and British liberalism, increasing the receptivity among Muslims to their anti-Semitic perspectives.26
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As a result, the overwhelming bulk of Jewry that had been firmly established for millennia in the Muslim world fled under duress with the realization of national independence. Many suffered from violent pogroms and state nationalizing of their property, and many fled with nothing more than what they could stuff into a suitcase. Some fled to the European states to which they had previously naturalized. Others fled to wherever they could find refuge. The mass exodus/expulsion occurred at the same time that the State of Israel was in formation, so many—and especially those with no other alternatives—ended up in the new Jewish state. Some Muslim and Western accounts have emerged that attribute the mass exodus of the Jewish populations of the Middle East and North Africa strictly to Zionism, but as noted above, the situation was far more complex. Zionism certainly was a factor, but so were the destabilization of colonialism, religious prejudice, government corruption, and other causes.

The conflict over control of the land that Jews and their supporters call Israel and Palestinians and their supporters call Palestine is at its core a conflict of nationalisms, national identities, and national rights. More precisely, it is a product of 19th-century ideologies of secular nationalism and secular national identity. Nonetheless, among both Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians, definitional identities have proven to be elastic, and the boundaries between nation, tribe, and religion remain ambiguous. This is not surprising given the complexity of identity in general, and it cannot be denied that the complex of factors that make up Israeli and Palestinian identity (or Jewish and Arab identity) include religious indicators. Zionists have emphasized religious aspects of Jewish identity to appeal to a larger, non-Zionist religious community for support, and in the process have gradually identified the conflict in religious as well as national terms.27 Palestinians, in turn, have increasingly emphasized the Islamic connections to Jerusalem and Palestine in order to appeal to a larger religious community for support as well. As a result, the conflict has come to be identified increasingly in religious terms, which has negatively impacted Muslim-Jewish relations globally.

Muslim-Jewish relations in the State of Israel have always been tense because of the ongoing and unsettled conflict. Its intractability and its ever-present violence have resulted in a general sense of distrust, and this has become embedded within the cultures of both the Jewish and the Muslim inhabitants of the state. That lack of trust has entered into the worldview and discourse of many Jews and Muslims far removed from the conflict as well. Muslim and Jewish organizations and media outlets tend to portray the conflict in simplistic and binary terms, and they project negative views and stereotypes of the other which further embeds the problem within their respective cultural and religious assumptions and worldviews.

Nevertheless, despite the problems brought about by the decline of Muslim economic and political might, the rise of the European powers and their colonial domination, the emergence of nationalist movements and the particular problems resulting from the Israel-Palestine conflict, individual Jews and Muslims have always managed to maintain deep friendships. These friendships were not limited to the elites who shared “enlightened” views that transcended stereotypes and religious hierarchies. In fact, many
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traditional, religious Muslims and Jews maintained friendships in Muslim lands despite the massive disruptions to their traditional worlds. We read about them in the stories and novels authored by members of both communities. Those friendships have been powerful and enduring, but they could not withstand the forces that brought an end to the once vibrant Jewish life in most of the Muslim world.

Muslim-Jewish Relations Today and Tomorrow

Currently, no more than tiny remnants of once large and successful Jewish communities exist in Iran, Turkey, and Morocco, and only a few individual Jews remain in other Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The tiny Jewish communities in South Asia and Southeast Asia have little if any significance in terms of patterns or influence in Muslim-Jewish relations. Most occasions for Jews and Muslims to meet occur today on the neutral ground of westernized multicultural societies. In these environments, Muslims and Jews share a minority status as non-Christians in a world that, even when defined as secular or religiously neutral, remains at the very least, culturally Christian. This places them in a parallel status vis-à-vis the larger culture and also in a position in which their needs and issues in relation to the larger culture overlap.

In Europe, Muslim-Jewish relations are complicated by the shadow of the Holocaust on the one hand and the Israel-Palestine conflict on the other. There is neither a single coherent Jewish nor Muslim community in Europe, but various communities of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, religious histories and practices, and national origins. That makes it difficult to draw any accurate generalizations. If one would venture such an attempt, one must acknowledge that as of this writing there is little interest in coalition-building between European Muslims and Jews. The Israel-Palestine conflict has divided the two communities substantially and it would be fair to assess that both communities tend to feel that they are despised by the other. Each also tends to feel insecure with its own status in the local national culture in which it is located. There is little energy on a community or national level for improving relations between the two communities. On the individual level, as always, friendships occur, but these have little impact on the larger communities as a whole.

In North America, on the other hand, despite the abiding impact of the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict, Muslim-Jewish relations are more positive. That is due in part to the greater physical distance from the lands of the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict, but other factors have a larger impact. On the one hand, the Jewish communities of North America are better established and feel more secure in their position within the larger societies in which they live. Likewise, the Muslim communities of North America immigrated with greater resources and higher levels of education, which have enabled them to integrate better into the fabric of North American society in both Canada and the United States. Better integration for both communities is due also to the long history of multiculturalism in North America and the immigrant status of virtually all of its citizenry. Despite a long history of prejudice and racism, the overall American ethos continues to
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include an expectation that the social fabric is maintained by individuals and communities of diverse origin, custom, and practice, including religious practice. Additionally, the Muslim communities of North America include a large number of South Asians and African American converts to Islam (together making up more than half the community), neither of which are as deeply influenced by the rhetoric of the Israel-Palestine conflict as are the Muslim communities of Europe. These factors enable Muslim and Jewish communities to maintain a level of self-confidence and mutuality that enables positive relations with outsiders.

Nevertheless, official Muslim and Jewish institutions and organizations tend to discourage and inhibit the development of relations with the other community. This is due in part to funding needs that require organizations to avoid controversy in order not to offend donors, and partly to the natural tendency of institutions to be conventional and inward-looking. On the individual and small-group level, however, since the horrors of the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings of 2001 there has been an increase in efforts to improve relations between Jews and Muslims. Efforts and initiatives have originated from members of both communities, almost always initiated by individuals. As of this writing, it seems clear that the largest impediment to improved Muslim-Jewish relations is the festering struggle and violence between Muslims and Jews over the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Further Reading


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Notes:


(4.) Hoyland 2011, 111, quoting the questionable position of Charles Torrey.


(7.) Guillaume, 240–241.


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(20.) Ibid, 50.


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