





# On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements

Selected Writings

Ella Shohat



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# Introduction

While “the question of Palestine” has been passionately debated over the past century, what could be called “the question of the Arab-Jew” has only recently come into the glare of the journalistic, artistic, and academic spotlight. Yet in many ways, the two questions are intimately entangled, even if that entanglement has been mobilized for very divergent, even conflicting, political ends. One debate involves the question of when the entanglement began. Was it with the 1948 war, or with the arrival of Zionism in Palestine, or with colonial incursions into Arab spaces, or even earlier with the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and its subsequent domination across various regions? To what extent can Muslim/Jewish relations in the past be read out allegorically in order to make analogies with Israeli/Arab tensions in the present?

A number of narrative grids have been deployed to account for this shared Muslim-Jewish history. One narrative takes for granted a *longue durée* history of quotidian Jewish-Muslim cohabitation and shared cultural practices from the Easternmost part of the Arab world (the *Mashriq*) to the Westernmost part (the *Maghrib*). This narrative portrays the Arab/Muslim world as plural both in ethnicity and religion, even when questioning the unequal place assigned to “*ahl al-kitab*,” the followers of the other “religions of the book,” i.e. the Torah and the Christian Bible. Another, diametrically opposed narrative assumes a situation of millennial persecution of Jews within the Arab/Muslim world, and the *dhimmi* status as one of endless humiliation and subjugation. The creation of Israel, within this narrative, forms the telos-point of the redemptive “ingathering” of oppressed Jews. Within this view, the history of Sephardis/Middle Eastern Jews is largely subsumed into the story of a uniquely “Jewish experience” modeled on the paradigmatic example of European anti-Semitism, now projected onto a very different Muslim world. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is assimilated into the narrative of perennial Arab hostility to Jews and a trace-the-dot history of pogrom-like episodes. There is very little room in this “pogromatic” discourse for examining the entangled implications of Zionism, Palestine, and Israel for “the question of the Arab-Jew.”

It is against this backdrop that I opted instead for a relational network approach that took into account imperial history, partition remappings, and post/colonial dislocations. My work attempted to demystify the ethnocentric self-idealizations typical of the dominant narrative, without a)

prettifying the Jewish experience in Muslim/Arab spaces, or b) glorifying Arab nationalism, or c) idealizing Arab Jews/Mizrahim themselves, some of whom played a very ambiguous role in this convoluted story. Taken together, the texts included in this book tried to make a case for re-membling a world at once culturally Arab and religiously Jewish. Today, thankfully, a more critical strain of thought advanced by researchers from various disciplines and backgrounds does address these issues in relation to one another. And although the scars of partition inevitably still haunt the debate, cross-border rethinking now offers a more complex account of the cultural production of Jews within Muslim spaces.

Narrating the multifaceted cultural imbrication between Jews and Muslims in the *longue durée* is especially germane given the historical shift in the meaning of the very terms “Arab,” “Jew,” and “Arab-Jew.” The shift transpired, even prior to the emergence of Zionism, in the wake of colonial modernity, with its discursive correlatives in the form of racialized tropes, Orientalist fantasies, and Eurocentric epistemologies. Against this backdrop, the conceptual schism between “the Arab” and “the Jew,” or alternatively between “the Muslim” and “the Jew,” can be traced back to the imperialized Middle East and North Africa. With the Enlightenment and its corollary, the Euro-Jewish *Haskala*, and later with Zionism, the Orientalist schema “whitened” the (Western) Jew, as the old schema began to be projected exclusively toward “the other” Semitic figure—“the Arab.” The Arab-Jew, I have suggested, came to occupy an ambivalent position within the Orientalist splitting of the Semitic figure. Divide-and-rule imperial policies, furthermore, enunciated a new racialized grammar for the Muslim/Jewish religious cultural matrix that had existed for over a millennium.

The 1870 Crémieux Decree, for example, granted French citizenship to indigenous Jews in colonized Algeria but not to their Muslim neighbors. Thus even before the arrival of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel, indigenous Jews in colonized Algeria had already been officially endowed with an ambiguous status that generated resentment on the part of Muslim-Algerians and disorientation on the part of the Jewish-Algerians themselves. Granted French citizenship and partially incorporated into the Enlightenment-colonial project, some Algerian Jews ended up identifying with the French, while others identified with the Algerians, at times even taking up arms with the nationalist movement. Others in the *Maghrib*, such as the Jewish-Tunisian Albert Memmi, began by diagnosing the twinned pathologies of the “mind of the colonizer” and “the mind of the colonized” within an anti-colonial spirit, but ended up seeing the necessity of Jewish nationalism. In the context of the early 1970s, Qaddafi’s call for the Arab Jews to return to their countries of origin was met with Memmi’s vehement rejection of the possibility of such a return, and ultimately suggested a kind

of burial of the very ontology of the Arab-Jew. Over a century of French domination of the *Maghrib* resulted in a Jewish/Muslim divide and physical displacement into *l'Hexagone*. Put differently, the colonizing mission of Enlightenment universalism gave way to seeking refuge in France's particularist form of supposedly race-blind republicanism.

With colonialism, European Jews also advanced their own version of the *mission civilisatrice* in relation to their co-religionists in "the backwaters of the world." The modern schooling system of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, for example, attempted to displace indigenous Jewish methods of teaching, creating, and the transgenerational passing on of cultural practices. Religious/cultural artifacts also came under the usual colonial "rescue" rubric, for example, the centuries-long Arab-Jewish textual corpus—known as the *Geniza*—stretching from the Indian ocean to the Atlantic. The initiative of Dr. Solomon Schechter to remove the documents from Ben 'Ezra Cairo synagogue to Cambridge University took place under Egypt's colonial authority of Lord Cromer. The dislocation reflected an increasingly dramatic Arab/Jewish split by which modern European Jews came to speak on behalf of all Jews, powerfully shaping Eurocentric representation of "Jewish History and Culture." The physical dislocation of the corpus of documents anticipated, as it were, the demographic diasporization of the living bodies of the Arab Jews themselves in the wake of the Arab/Israeli conflict. Locating the split long before the actual partition and the establishment of Israel, with the colonial incursions into Muslim spaces, highlights the ways in which the colonial/modernity project triggered novel tensions and divisions. These antecedent fissures, prior to the emergence of Zionism, what could be regarded as the micro ruptures before the macro Rupture, foreshadowed the massive post-1948 dislocation of Arab Jews.

The initial fissures of this *ruptures-before-the-Rupture* resulted in the first serious splitting of "the Arab" and "the Jew," a splitting that became more pronounced, as we know, with the unfolding translation of the Zionist idea into a political reality. Already the fall of the Ottoman Empire triggered massive dislocations and redefinitions of identity. After World War II, with decolonization and partitions, the process intensified, and life shifted for many communities, with population transfers that resulted in numerous transmutations of identity. The facts-on-the-ground *Yishuv* settlements, the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the U.N. resolution to partition Palestine, and the establishment of the state of Israel implemented a novel nationalist lexicon of Jews and Arabs. If Palestinians paid the price of Europe's industrialized slaughter of Jews, Arab Jews woke up to a new world order that could not accommodate their simultaneous Jewishness and Arabness. The anticipatory Orientalist split was to fully materialize only with colonial partition and its corollary of dispossession and dispersal of Palestinians largely to

Arab zones, as well as its concomitant dislocation of Arab Jews largely to Israel. Some (such as post-1948 Palestinians repeatedly moved from camp to camp) have been shorn of citizenship for decades; while others (like the Arab Jews) have partaken of forms of citizenship that have not been hospitable to the complexities of their cultural identity.

These traumatic displacements have shaped new national and ethnic/racial identities where officially stamped classifications did not necessarily correspond to cultural affiliation and political identification. Emotional belonging has existed in tension with identity cards and travel documents such as passports and *laissez-passers*, or with the lack of such papers altogether. Against this backdrop, “Arab” and “Jew,” I suggested, came to form mutually exclusive categories, with “the Arab-Jew” becoming an ontological oxymoron and an epistemological subversion. The notions of “Palestine” and “the Arab-Jew,” in this sense, stand not simply for historical facts, and for their contestations, but rather for a critical prism. Just as all communities, traditions, and identities may be said to be “invented,” the idea of “the Arab-Jew” here provides a post-partition figure through which to critique segregationist narratives while also opening up imaginative potentialities.

\* \* \*

When discussed together in the public sphere, the dislocations of Palestinians and Arab Jews are usually deployed against each other, in the combat over the monopoly on historical suffering. Addressing both—the cross-border movements of Palestinians, on the one hand, and of Arab Jews on the other—involves more than a simple exercise of comparison. Both the linking and the de-linking of the Nakba (catastrophe) and the *tasqit* (referring to the revocation of the citizenship of Iraqi Jews) have been marshalled for radically divergent purposes. The diverse and significantly distinct grids that guide the historical reading of these dislocations have serious legal, political, and cultural implications. The more common way of linking the two questions has taken the form of the “population exchange” rhetoric, which has attempted to assuage Israeli responsibility for “the Palestinian Exodus” by pairing it with the presumably equivalent case of “the Exodus of Jews from Arab countries.” In its updated version, in a kind of “narrative envy” usually projected onto Palestinians, each argument used to criticize Palestinian dislocation is echoed with a similar argument and phrasing with regards to Arab Jews. The tragedy of “the Palestinian refugees” is answered with the tragedy of “the forgotten refugees from Arab countries;” “the expulsion of Palestinians” is cancelled out by “the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries;” “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Pales-

tinians is correlated with “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Jews from Arab countries; and even “the Palestinian Nakba” is retroactively matched with a “Nakba of Jews from Arab countries.”

Some versions of the “population exchange” rhetoric embed the assumption of Muslims as perennial persecutors of Jews, absorbing the history of Jews in Arab/Muslim countries into a “pogromized” Jewish History. In its most tendentious forms, this rhetoric incorporates the Arab-Jewish experience into the Shoah, now projected onto a Muslim space that did not produce, or even propose, a Final Solution. We see an example of this tendentiousness in the campaign to include the 1941 *farhud* attacks on Jews in Iraq in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. One can denounce the violence of the *farhud* without instrumentalizing it to forge a discourse of eternal Muslim anti-Semitism. One could provide, as some historians have indeed done, more intricate political contexts that engendered the vulnerable position of Arab Jews within Arab spaces. More critical forms of discourse and scholarship have delineated the complex positioning of ethnic and religious minority-communities throughout the region, taking on board such issues as: the colonial divide-and-conquer tactics and strategies that actively endangered various “minorities” including Arab Jews; the implementation of Zionism as an exclusivist project toward the Arabs of/in Palestine; the hostile rhetoric of some forms of Arab nationalism that deemed all Jews Zionists; the massive arrival of desperate Palestinian refugees in Arab countries; and the various “on the ground” activities, some violently provocative, to dislodge Iraqi, Egyptian, or Moroccan Jews from their homelands. Without engaging the consequences of nationalism for Arab Jews, the recent campaign for “justice for the forgotten Jewish refugees from Arab countries” silences the violent dispossession of Palestinians summed up in the word Nakba, as if one event annulled the ethical-political implications of the other.

The cross-border movements of the Palestinians and those of the Arab Jews are different in nature, manifested in the very question of naming. Departing in various waves, largely from the late 1940s to the 1960s, Arab Jews left their respective countries at different times (from Yemen, largely in 1949, from Iraq, 1950–51, from Egypt, 1956, etc.), each of which reflected divergent circumstances. Some Jews departed early on, while others remained for decades afterward. Given the anomalies of the situation of a community trapped between two nationalisms—Arab and Jewish—it is not a coincidence that many of the terms used to designate the displacement seem simplistic and problematic. Nationalist paradigms hardly capture the complexity of this historical moment of rupture for Arab Jews. Many of the terms—*aliya* (ascendancy), *yetzia* (exit), immigration, emigration, exodus, exile, expulsion, transfer, population-exchange, and refugees—seem

in one respect or another inadequate or incongruous. The very proliferation of terms (as elaborated in my “Rupture and Return” in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*) points to the ambiguities. In the case of the Palestinians, the forced mass exodus easily corresponds to the notion of “refugees,” since they never wished to evacuate Palestine and have maintained the desire to return, or at least a desire to have the “right” to return. In the case of Arab Jews the question of will, desire, and agency—as invoked for example in the memoirs of Arab Jews—remains highly ambiguous and overdetermined.

The historically related yet distinct instances of Arab-Jewish and Palestinian dislocations form one of the main concerns of this book. The two displacements are not equivalent or symmetrical or identical, yet they are closely related. First, they are connected metonymically, i.e. causally and spatially, in that a) there were Arab Jews in Palestine—Palestinian Jews—prior to partition who were impacted by Zionism and its shaping of Jewishness as a national identity; b) the '48 dislocation of Palestinians and that of the post-'48 Arab Jews, however different, took place in roughly the same historical period; c) both events were ultimately the consequences of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel; d) to some extent, both in concrete and in symbolic terms, the displaced Arab Jews to Israel ended up in the place and the space (and were sometimes literally placed in the actual homes) of Palestinians displaced by Israel; and e) in some instances, Palestinian refugees in Arab countries were placed in Arab-Jewish buildings, although most ended up in refugee camps.

The induced diasporization of the Palestinians was linked to the project of the diasporization/ingathering of Arab Jews, at times even performed in collaboration with opportunistic Arab regimes who also benefited in different ways from the departure of Jews. Culturally Arab and religiously Jewish, Arab Jews were caught up in the contradictory currents of British and French colonialism, Zionism, and Arab nationalism. Even Jews who participated in various Arab anti-colonial and nationalist movements, who saw themselves primarily as Iraqis, Egyptians, or Moroccans, had to confront a dramatically changed landscape with the unfolding events in Palestine. The reconceptualization of Jewishness as a national identity had profound implications for Arab Jews. The Orientalist splitting of the Semite was now compounded by a nationalist splitting. The meaning of the phrase “Arab-Jew” was transformed from being a taken-for-granted marker of religious (Jewish) and cultural (Arab) affiliation into a vexed question mark within competing nationalisms, each perceiving the “Arab-Jew” as “in excess.” In a different fashion, the two nationalisms came to view one side of the hyphen suspiciously. In the Arab world “the Jew” became out of bounds, while in the Jewish state, “the Arab;” hence, the “Arab-Jew,” or “the Jewish-Arab,” inevitably came to seem an ontological impossibility.



From the outset, the utopian *altneuland* vision rendered the Palestinians superfluous and irrelevant to the project of the Jewish “Return into History.” In fact, the Herzelian idea of dislodgment and resettlement was first applied to Eastern European Jews, the *Ostjuden*. As a modern cure for an enduring pathology (anti-Semitism), the movement away from Europe to another site (be it Uganda, or Palestine) was meant to remedy the Jewish predicament. An approach that links the dislocations engendered by the restoration-of-the-Jews project in the lives of all those impacted by it was deemed therefore necessary. To re-inscribe the Palestinian and the Arab-Jew as the subjects of their own histories mandates the replacing of a single national History with a constellation of inter-connected histories, in the plural. This approach requires articulating together the various exiles produced by the modern transplanting of populations in accord with newly drawn maps. Against this backdrop, claiming a false equivalence between the mass exoduses of Palestinians and Arab Jews reproduces the same nationalist Arab-versus-Jew splitting, which had been stirring regional turmoil from the very outset.

Such quarantining maps have perpetuated rigid, sometimes literally concrete, borders and the persistence of the Arab/Jewish emotional divide; whence “the rejection of the Arab-Jew” within many Jewish institutions and publications. Pronouncing an incorrigible Arab or Muslim anti-Semitism, furthermore, all too conveniently places the burden of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict on the Palestinians themselves. In the era of post-9/11, of the War on Terror, spreading Islamophobia, as well as of ISIS-led destruction, the campaign on behalf of “Jewish refugees from Arab lands” has gained some momentum in the public sphere. Yet, against the backdrop of the Arab-Spring turned Arab-Winter, of bloody repressions, and of sheer decimation of Iraq and Syria that has led to the current refugee crisis, “the forgotten refugees” project turns a blind-eye to other dislocations. Current violence in the Middle East often turns the departure of Arab Jews into proof of the essentialist argument that one “can’t trust the Muslims” (an updated version of “can’t trust the Arabs.”) The many legitimate claims of Arab Jews become problematic when ignoring the complex circumstances that ejected the Arab Jews; when such claims are utilized to nullify Palestinian claims; and when oblivious to current devastations causing the exodus from the Middle East to Europe.

The “Jewish-refugees-from-Arab-countries” discourse enacts an identical role to that of the persecuted European Jews, whose experience of pogroms and the Shoah was somehow presumed to refute Palestinian arguments. In the contemporary arena, the Jewish-refugees-from-Arab-lands topos is redeployed both as a denial of Palestinian refugees’ claims and as a proof of Muslim anti-Semitism. The “forgotten refugees” account, in other words,

is told as a story of mutually exclusive traumas, figured as a competition for victim-status, with winners and losers, rather than as a compassionate narrative for many groups: for Jews enduring Judeo-phobia in Europe, for dispossessed Palestinians, for dislocated Arab Jews, for Muslims suffering Islamophobia, and for the victims of the ongoing devastation in the Middle East. The conversation included here, “Bodies and Borders,” discusses the historical echoes between the experiences of Jews and Muslims within Europe, between the past anti-Semitism and contemporary Islamophobia.

The two questions central to this book are also intertwined metaphorically, in terms of comparing two different forms of loss, dispossession, and departure from homes and longstanding homelands. The two forms of traumatic out-of-placeness have to be articulated in relation to each other, bypassing competing nationalist narcissisms. The challenge has been to compare the two without equating them; to relationalize and transnationalize the comparison itself. In this sense, “the Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” function as tropes not only for loss of time/place and the absence left in their wake, but also for struggles to persist and remain amidst the absurdities of disappearing, or disappeared, worlds. Both the “Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” come to form tropes of dis/placement. The respective exiling of both communities gave way to the shock of arrival. And the black and white photos of dislocated Arab Jews in tents echo images of Palestinian refugees in a kind of a haunting specularly. By simultaneously linking, de-linking, and re-linking the two events, it is possible to highlight “linked analogies” without ever suggesting that the two dislocations were identical or equivalent.

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Over the decades, Palestinians, for their part, have tended to see the Mizrahi/Arab-Jewish issue with a certain skepticism. The critique has been expressed not only outside, *fil-kharij* (in articles by Joseph Massad, for example) but also “*fil-dakhl*” (inside Israel), where Palestinians are officially defined simply as “Arab Israelis.” Observing Mizrahi ambivalence toward their own Arabness/Middle Easternness, Palestinians have witnessed Mizrahi integration into the security apparatus. Indeed, the same Arab Jew who might embrace the Arab in him or herself, or laud a common Muslim and Jewish past, may also, in the current polarized situation, fear or reject the present-day Arab (Palestinian) in Israel. In a recent satiric music-video entitled “To Be an Arab” (2015), musician Jowan Safadi gives voice to the Palestinian perspective on the Mizrahi who displays Jewish nationalist symbols and chants death to Arabs, precisely because he knows all too well how hard it is to be a poor Arab/Black in a place ruled by rich Jewish/Whites.



Performed in Mizrahi-accented Hebrew, the music video saves Arabic for the climactic finale. It stages the seductive charm of a symbolic choreography in which “the local Arab” (the Palestinian) and “the imported Arab” (the Mizrahi) joyfully dance together in a kind of un/conscious Arab/Jewish affinity. The hint of a utopian opening is instantly cut short, however, when the word “Palestine” is uttered, ending with a bodily stand-still underlined by a freeze-frame. Such a satirical representation, even if in an upside-down manner, reveals the ongoing chasm separating “the Jew” and “the Arab” in which the Arab-Jew has been molded as a Jew in the nationalist sense of the word.

Over the years, I was trying to offer a partial genealogy for the ambivalent Mizrahi positioning as occupying the actantial slot of both dominated and dominators; simultaneously disempowered as “Orientals” or “Blacks” vis-à-vis “White” Euro-Israelis and empowered as Jews in a Jewish state vis-à-vis Palestinians. In a sense, Mizrahim are both embedded in and in excess of nation-state identity formulations. Even the newly fashionable “Arab-Jew” figure reaches its limits when it confronts the national checkpoint. The recent Mizrahi renaissance, and the present-day cultural currency of “the Arab-Jew,” has led to vital personal voyages of self-discovery, to the embrace of one’s cultural roots, and to productive recovery projects involving language/dialects, cuisine, music, literature, cinema, and visual culture. Given the history of rendering certain memories taboo, the very possibility of any nostalgia for an Arab cultural past becomes publically meaningful. In some versions of these cultural practices, however, the Arab-Jew, while tolerated or even celebrated, usually exists in the past tense, “back then” and “over there” when living in Arab countries. Affectionately evoking the “good Arabs,” in Morocco for example, such discourses at times presume a distinct contrast to “the bad Arabs” “right here,” i.e. the Palestinians. Nostalgia for the Arab past in this sense becomes a denegation and displacement of the neighboring (Palestinian) Arab.

These celebratory activities at times come accompanied not simply by hegemonic institutional denial and rejection but also by appropriation and co-optation. The nationalist anxiety around “the Arab-Jew” as an in-between and border-scrambling figure has more recently led to a containment strategy, including in recovery programs for the culture of Arab Jews. In some contemporary Jewish studies projects, a very specific “Arab-Jew” is now permitted to exist—but safely enclosed in the past, in the Arab world. Even as the Arabness of Arab Jews is enthusiastically reclaimed, the institutional apparatus continues to regulate who and how that Arabness can be enunciated. (If some of the criteria for Arabness—for example participation in Arab national modernity, or mastery of proper *fusha* Arabic, or living in Arab countries—had been applied to Arabs of Muslim or

Christian backgrounds, or to their ethnically hyphenated descendants—they too would probably have failed the Arabness test; however, *their* (non-Jewish) Arabness would not come into question.) Performed in the name of historical accuracy, the academic version of the rejection of “the Arab-Jew” forecloses any possibility of a present-day “Arabness” especially for the displaced descendants of Arab Jews. Even while scholars explore the poetic productivity of the border metaphor for the literary imagination, these temporal/spatial delimitations ironically continue to legitimate rigid national borders.

This new taboo, erected around definitional prohibitions, around any present-day Arab-Jewishness, places the scholar of the history, culture, and literature of Arabic-speaking Jews within the salvage-paradigm of the authentic Arab Jew, while actively guarding against any current re/claiming of Arabness by Jews. Such a “corrective” approach that presumes to move beyond the passé Zionist/anti-Zionist/post-Zionist debate, and which passes for academic neutrality and scholarly complexity, remains itself embedded in the national Arab/Jew split. Even while studying “Diaspora Jews” of Arab countries, the tacit rejection of present-day re/claiming of Arab-Jewish identity is ultimately anti-diasporic in thrust. A project that began as a cross-border vision, in other words, now also bumps up against the impasse of the Arab-versus-Jew as a nationalist line not to be crossed, thus restricting the imaginative potentialities of the Arab-Jew outside of Arab/Muslim spaces.

The fact and the trope of “the Arab-Jew,” however, are at once past and present. The Arabness of Jews was for over a millennium the taken-for-granted designation for people whose religion was Jewish but whose culture was Arabic, without the two seen as a contradiction. (My recent work on “The Question of Judeo-Arabic,” for example, highlights the self-designation of the language deployed by Jewish liturgical texts as *Arabic*—and not as “*Judeo-Arabic*”—even when written in Arabic-in-Hebrew letters.) In the present, the term “Arab-Jew” does not necessarily refer to the fact of self-designation since some Jews of Arab backgrounds might identify with the term, while others—for various reasons, including (self)rejection of the Arab in the Arab-Jew—might not. Rather, it refers to a project that attempts to move beyond the current impasse and the myth of eternal enmity. Like the shared plural space that was Palestine, the Arab-Jew is a reminder/remainder of the plurality within the Arab world more generally. Both “Palestine” and “the Arab-Jew” in this sense are not only tropes of loss and mourning but also figures of inclusivity. Even in the face of present calamity, the concepts evoke the memory of a shared past while also pointing to a possible future of re/conciliation.