

Lessons from the Past: How Interfaith Work Can Benefit from Historical Research

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An indigenous community of Jews has lived in Egypt for thousands of years. The Islamic Golden Age allowed greater freedom for religious and ethnic minorities, and as a result the Jewish community flourished. Many of its members rose to prominence, most notably Maimonides, who produced famous works on Jewish law and philosophy whilst simultaneously becoming the personal physician to Salah al-Din. The Jewish community of Egypt has continued to grow throughout history through waves of immigrations, particularly following expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 which attracted traders and merchants, and late 19th century pogroms in Eastern Europe. By the 20th century, Jews formed an integral part of cosmopolitan Egyptian life, boasting cultural icons like Leila Mourad and Togo Mizrahi.¹ However, this period also saw a wave of nationalist sentiment against the West, which Jews were seen to represent through their perceived links with Zionism. This intensified after the establishment of the State of Israel and Nasser's rise to power, culminating in the expulsion of Egyptian Jews over the course of the coming decades, with surges in 1948, 1956 and 1967 – key points of conflict with Israel. Most were stripped of their property and assets, and nearly all of the 80,000 Jews who made up the vibrant community in 1948 emigrated.² There are currently fewer than 15 Egyptian Jews remaining in their native country. According to the head of the Jewish community Magda Haroun, most of the dwindling number are now elderly women, the sole living reminder of a palimpsest of Jewish history in Egypt.³

With the onset of Zionism in the early 20th century, generations of inter-religious history and relationships were seemingly erased overnight. Naturally, most Egyptians share a pan-Arab affinity with Palestinians, and four wars between Egypt and Israel in less than half a century have left Egyptian society vehemently anti-Israel, consolidated by its continued presence as an enemy state on their borders.

I am a Jewish student and have just returned from a wonderful six months in Egypt as part of my Arabic studies, which led to some fascinating observations. I travelled there aware of its history of anti-Jewish sentiment, but the extent of conflation between Zionism with Judaism was beyond what I had anticipated, nearly always constituting antisemitism. Travelling around Egypt today, it is not uncommon to see swastikas spray-painted onto buildings. Bookshops often sell a copy of *Mein Kampf* or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, once-dormant anti-Jewish propaganda and slogans which have been revived and circulate freely in contemporary Egyptian society. Though professional Arab historians rarely use these materials, journalists rely on them up to the present day.⁴ School textbooks offer only basic and distorted accounts of history⁵, and the combination of government censorship of certain websites and the lack of access to varied Arabic-language information furthers misunderstanding and bias.

¹ Leila Mourad, born to Jewish parents, was proclaimed the voice of the 1953 revolution and remains one of Egypt's most famous singers to this day. Togo Mizrahi, a prominent Jewish film director, produced films with Jewish themes and characters.

² Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), introduction

³ Jared Malsin, 'Meet the Last Jews of Cairo', *Time*, 21/09/2015 < <https://time.com/4041832/cairo-jews-population-egypt/> >

⁴ Jan Goldberg, 'A Lesson from Egypt on the Origin of Modern Anti-Semitism in the Middle East', *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) p. 145.

⁵ Patrycja Sasnal, 'Myths and Legends: Modern History and Nationalistic Propaganda in Egyptian Textbooks', *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, (Warsaw, 29 May 2014) p. 10.

I had interesting discussions with Egyptian friends, who talked candidly to me about religion, minorities, and politics. The most remarkable observations pertained to the Jewish past; most Egyptians were aware that Jews *had* lived among them, and that they had now left, but there was little knowledge – or even curiosity – about the reasons behind their departure. It was simply accepted as fact. It also struck me how much misinformation there was; discussions about the oppression of Palestinians or the brutality of the Israeli occupation morphed into tropes about Jews ruling the world or being responsible for 9/11, the Holocaust a Zionist myth to legitimise the foundation of a Jewish state.⁶ Jewish religious identity has been reduced in public consciousness to a politicised object of discrimination, aided by a simplistic association between Judaism and Zionism⁷ as well as the complete absence of Jews from society to offer counter representation. When I revealed my Jewish identity, most were intrigued by it, never having met a Jew before. I was flooded with questions about my upbringing, personality, religious teaching, comparisons between Judaism and Islam. Interaction and dialogue creates bonds, and conversely, estrangement leads to prejudice.

I was lucky enough to remain in Egypt over Ramadan, where I was amazed by the generosity of my Egyptian friends who welcomed me into their homes, excited to introduce me to their families and traditions. My favourite “tradition” is the *musalsalat*, which offer the foreigner an unparalleled glimpse into the contemporary Arab world. These are special TV shows which are divided into episodes, one for each night of the month of Ramadan. Typically watched after *iftar*, *musalsalat* have become an integral part of the Ramadan spirit, a role previously held by the *hakawati*, the Arabic storyteller who passed the long Ramadan nights enthralling Muslims with tales.⁸ The expansion of Arabic satellite channels in the early 2000s led to an explosion of these series, and they have enormous reach across the Arab world. Themes reflect current social, religious, and political trends, often tackling complex issues.⁹ It is this unique combination of such contentious topics with high quality production that has enshrined Ramadan TV in the traditions of modern Muslim Arab life.¹⁰ Their enthusiastic reception has proven public readiness to engage in new ideas and debates, a popularity which ensures a growing platform for influencing culture and spreading awareness of sensitive issues.

As mentioned, antisemitism is exceptionally present in Egyptian culture, strengthened by cinematic representations. Following the Jewish exodus, Egyptian cinema rarely referred to Jews. It was only after the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1978 that Jews were re-introduced to Egyptian film and television, which became a channel for venting public disapproval, developing a stereotyped image of the “evil Israeli-Zionist-Jew”.¹¹ Modern Egyptian audiences have thus “been socialized by overwhelmingly antisemitic themes for the past six decades” in cinema¹², often under the guise of anti-Zionism.

⁶ Goldberg, p.132

⁷ Reinhard Schulze, ‘Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Islamischen Weltliger’, (Leiden, 1990) p. 397. Quoted in Goldberg, p. 137.

⁸ ‘How Arab TV Dramas Became a Staple in Ramadan’, *The National News*, <<https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/how-arab-tv-dramas-became-a-staple-in-ramadan-1.69677>>

⁹ The inner workings of the Muslim Brotherhood were depicted in 2016 (*Khiyanat Watan*, Betrayal of a Homeland), 2018 brought *Abu Omar al-Masri* which led to backlash from the Sudanese government for its negative depiction of Sudanese people (see ‘Sudan Protests Against Egyptian Ramadan TV Series Abu Omar al Masri’, *Arab News*, 21/05/2018, <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1306486/middle-east>>), and this year’s *al-Tawus* (The Peacock) sparked controversy for its portrayal of rape.

¹⁰ ‘How Arab TV Dramas Became a Staple in Ramadan’, *The National News*.

¹¹ This depiction can be seen in classics such as *Alexandria, Why?* (1978), *The Girl from Israel* (1999), and *The Embassy is in the Building* (2005). See Yvonne Kozlovksy Golan, ‘Site of Amnesia: The Lost Historical Consciousness of Mizrahi Jewry’, *Brills Series in Jewish Studies*, Volume 64, 2009.

¹² Elie Chalala, ‘Ramadan Drama Revisits 40s Egyptian-Jewish Relations’, *Al-Jadid*, 2015, <<https://www.aljadid.com/content/'-jewish-quarter'>>

In 2015, *Harat al-Yahud* (The Jewish Quarter) aired across Egypt and the Arab world. Centring on Cairo's Jewish quarter, it depicts early 20th century Egypt, home to a flourishing community of culturally-integrated Jews. It tells of a love story between a Jew, Leila, and Ali, a Muslim Egyptian soldier. Set against the backdrop of Zionist developments in Palestine and its repercussions around the world, threads become entangled as Ali is sent to the Palestinian front in the 1948 war, while Leila's brother travels there to fight on behalf of Israel. As an Arab drama, *Harat al-Yahud* is an unprecedented and sensitive portrayal of Jews as Egyptians, recognising them as victims in global geopolitical change and tides. There are depictions of intimate scenes of Jewish life in the synagogue, Sabbath meals, relationships between families, woven together to humanise Jews, perhaps for the first time in recent Egyptian history. The synagogue is a shelter for all residents of the neighbourhood under Israeli bombardment, a beacon of Egyptian pluralism.¹³

It has been described as "more consistent with facts than almost anything else that has appeared in Egyptian mass media in recent decades"¹⁴, despite some historical inaccuracies. The immodesty of clothes worn by Jewish women is exaggerated, the perpetrators of antisemitism weren't solely Brotherhood members as portrayed, and it completely glosses over the Egyptian government's role in the expulsion of the Jews. It is a world in which enemies are painted in black and white, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood and Zionists, who carry the sole blame for deepening the discord between Jews and Arabs and the resulting Jewish eviction from Egypt.

Notwithstanding these issues, the series' focus on Jews, rather than on their potential ties to Zionism, is novel. By highlighting the lack of Zionist sentiment amongst the majority of Egyptian Jewry, *Harat al-Yahud* reminds its audience that Judaism and Zionism are separate entities. Of course, the story of Israel and of Egyptian Jews are undeniably intertwined. Yet few Egyptian Jews identified as Zionist in the 1940s and, once expelled, many of those holding dual citizenship with a European country emigrated elsewhere. *Harat al-Yahud* seeks nuance, presenting clearly the distinction between Jews and Israelis, and expressing nostalgia for the loss of Jews in Egyptian society.¹⁵

Online criticism of *Harat al-Yahud* reveals the continuation of antisemitism, with one commenter on the show's Facebook page denouncing it for "making the Jews look better than the Egyptians", another asking "how can this be aired in... a Muslim country, when these are considered the enemies of Islam and Muslims?"¹⁶ Yet for all the negativity, countless others have benefited and learnt from the series. It establishes a framework which challenges the absence of Jews in traditional narratives of Egyptian history, and sets them as a positive contribution to society.

By reconciling with the injustice perpetrated against the Jewish minority in Egypt rather than ignoring it, *Harat al-Yahud* engages with history and probes beyond the status quo of historical narratives. It promotes discussion about how we view members of other faiths by bringing them back to the forefront of culture. Egypt's Jews aren't going to return, but evoking their historical presence to address their current absence will challenge misunderstanding and intolerance. We should follow the series' lead and look to the past in order to create acceptance and ties between faiths today.

¹³ Golan, 'Site of Amnesia'.

¹⁴ Chalala, 'Ramadan Drama Revisits 40s Egyptian-Jewish Relations'.

¹⁵ Eyal Sagui-Bizawi, 'How the Jewish Quarter Became the Talk of Cairo', *Haaretz*, 5/7/2015, <<https://www.haaretz.com/life/television/.premium-how-the-jewish-quarter-became-the-talk-of-cairo-1.5375242>>

¹⁶ David D Kirkpatrick, 'For Egypt, TV Show's Shocking Twist is its Sympathetic Jews', *New York Times*, 23/06/2015 < <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/world/middleeast/for-egypt-tv-shows-shocking-twist-is-its-sympathetic-jews.html> >