

## Book Review

---

Franck Salameh

**Lebanon's Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 212 pp.

---

Jews have resided on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, in the lands that are Syria and Lebanon today since ancient times, going back at least two thousand years – that is, long before the advent of Islam and the emergence of the Arabs as the hegemonic power in the Middle East region.

Following the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, Jewish communities knew periods of stability and prosperity, but also periods of persecution and distress. During the good times, Jewish communal life was rich and diverse. Members of the Jewish communities held important positions in public life and the economy. Jews worked as craftsmen, farmers, merchants, physicians, and bankers. Also, major religious centers developed in some of these communities.

The fact is, the attitude of the Muslim rulers toward the Jews was in general one of tolerance, and so the conditions under which the Jews lived were quite good. This was certainly the case in comparison with the Jews' situation in Christian Europe. However, at the same time, the Muslim rulers viewed the Jews as “protected persons” (*dhimmi*) – members of non-Muslim groups whose existence was tolerated and whose lives and property were protected, but who did not enjoy equal rights and status with the Muslims.

The Jewish presence in the Arab World came to an end in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jews became subjected to persecution and even physical attacks, so that they felt forced, and often were indeed forced, to abandon their places of birth, leaving their property

behind. Various reasons have been cited to explain these historical developments. There are, of course, those who will rush to attribute the destruction of the Jewish communities in the Arab and Islamic world to the emergence of Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the outbreak of the Israeli-Arab conflict. However, the truth is that other historical processes related to the changing face of the region were at work, quite apart from the issue of the establishment of the Jewish state. First among these were the rise of Arab nationalism and, later on, radical Islam, which were sweeping over the region. In addition, one should mention social and economic developments that affected the whole region, including the Jewish communities, and encouraged emigration to the West. The Jews were not the only ones disappearing from the region. Members of other communities, such as the Christians, were also leaving. As a result, the Middle East, where a rich Jewish life had existed, became mostly empty of Jews (apart from Israel).

Today, over half a century later, a nostalgia for the past has blossomed within certain intellectual circles in the Arab world, including that past in which the Jews were an integral part of the regional mosaic. In this nostalgia, one can discern a new way of looking at former times – sober, realistic, and even empathetic toward the Jewish life and presence that formerly existed in the Arab lands. Many in the Arab world today recognize that the disappearance of the Jews was a bad omen, for it was followed or accompanied by the disappearance of the atmosphere of tolerance and openness that had existed to one degree or another, as well as the cultural and religious diversity and richness that had previously characterized the eastern Mediterranean coast, extending from Egypt to Syria and Lebanon and on to Iraq. It would even seem that the intellectuals in Iraq, Egypt, and North Africa who have become nostalgic are lamenting not merely the disappearance of the Jews, but also what they themselves lost as a result of what developed in and happened to their own societies and countries.

Lebanon, in many ways, has been no exception when it comes to the processes undergone by the Arab world during the past half century. There too we can perceive the same tendencies toward introversion and radicalization, as well as the loss of wealth and religious and cultural diversity. True, for a very long period, up until the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in the mid-1970s, that country seemed to be swimming against the turbulent currents engulfing the nearby Arab states. Despite the stormy waters surrounding

it, Lebanon seemed as if it would maintain its status as a prosperous island, characterized by tolerance and openness in its social, cultural, economic, and political life. This unique situation, of course, had implications as well for the Jews living in Lebanon, making their situation much different from that of their brethren in the neighboring Arab countries.

There were cases of Lebanese Jews being attacked physically. However, in general, the various ethno-religious communities in Lebanon viewed the Jews living among them with an attitude of much greater tolerance than that shown to Jewish communities in neighboring Arab countries. Indeed, following the establishment of the State of Israel, the number of Jews living in Lebanon increased rather than decreased. This was because most Lebanese Jews chose to remain where they were, and they were joined by Jews who came from Iraq or Syria and chose to settle in Lebanon.

Then, during the 1970s, Lebanon sank into a bloody civil war that changed the character of the country. In the shadow of the decline into internecine fighting, the Jewish community in Lebanon was destroyed. We can now say that this was a bad omen for the country as a whole, for the factors that cast a shadow over the Jewish presence – for example, the collaboration of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) with the radical Arab nationalists in Lebanon – were the same ones that led to the destruction of the whole country and, indeed, stood at the core of the collapse that provoked the civil war.

Franck Salameh's book, *Lebanon's Jewish Community, Fragments of Lives Arrested*, sets out to tell the story of Lebanon's Jews as well as the story of the country in which they flourished and prospered. The aim of the book is to restore the Jews to the memory and consciousness of the Lebanese people. This is a book written by a careful and precise craftsman, who at the same time demonstrates love and empathy for his subject. This is the work of an author seeking to return to earlier days in Lebanon, to those days when the Jews, as a community and as individuals, were an integral part of the society and the territory, and when optimism prevailed among both the Jewish and the Lebanese people.

Salameh's research does not ignore the more sinister side of Lebanese life, the manifestations of intolerance and the actions taken to persecute and restrict the Jews, which led them to leave Lebanon – as the shadow of the deep negative processes afflicting the country lengthened and ultimately brought about the bloody civil war. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the story of the Jews in Lebanon is not necessarily a tragic

story of ruin and destruction. After all, most of the Jews left Lebanon voluntarily, without having been expelled – before the outbreak of the civil war, at the height of which Shi'ite extremists went so far as to kill several Jewish dignitaries who remained in Beirut.

Salameh's book seeks to emphasize the special relationship that developed between the Jews and the Maronite community, the community that for many years kept alive the Lebanese dream and still struggles to maintain that dream. In this connection, Salameh presents a fascinating discussion of the way the Lebanese people, and especially the Maronites, viewed the Jews and Zionism. These attitudes stood at the core of the cooperation between the two communities, which began with the beginning of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel and culminated in the 1970s and 1980s. Regarding this matter, Salameh states:

As was revealed in these pages, the early twentieth century was a period of high optimism and intense, even antsy "state-building" in the Middle East. Granted it was also a period of great disappointments for some. But on the whole, in Lebanon, and among Lebanese Christian intellectuals, politicians, entrepreneurs, church leaders, and visionaries, there had been great optimism and hope for a Lebanese future edifying a distinct Lebanese entity and identity; an identity that, as some had envisioned, would find political expression in a modern republic conceived as a "federation of minorities," dominated by Maronites, discrete and dissimilar from the Arab-defined entities taking shape on a post-Ottoman political map still "under construction." And so, it was in the main "Maronite Lebanese nationalism," and its vocal rejection of an inchoate Arab identity taking shape on the debris of a defunct Ottoman Empire, that drew Lebanese Christians to other Lebanese minority groups, among them the Jews, but also the early settlers of the *Yishuv*, laboring to foster personal, commercial, intellectual, cultural, and political ties, hoping to translate what they deemed "natural" and "existential" affinities into a concrete alliance of interests and a commonality of fates (p.199).

However, we must be careful not to idealize the reality, which was more complex. There were, after all, other notions of Jews and Zionism that were being entertained by members of the Maronite community. There were those who held negative opinions of the Jews and there were those who preferred to place their hopes on the Arab world surrounding Lebanon.

In retrospect, we can now see clearly what both sides, the Lebanese people and Israel, lost because of the break in their relations (which still prevails today). One of the most prominent manifestations of what was lost was the alliance concluded in February 2006 by General Michel Aoun, President of Lebanon and one of the country's most prominent Maronite leaders, with the Shi'ite Hezbollah organization. At the same time, in contrast to this, we note that the renovation of the Magen Avraham synagogue, located in the Jewish residential neighborhood of Beirut (the Wadi Abu Jamil district), was carried out with wide support, led by Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister, Rafik al-Hariri, and even with the tacit agreement of Hezbollah. This would seem to be an expression of a widespread Lebanese consensus that seeks to return to the days of glory that once were, to the Lebanon in which a vital Jewish community prospered and flourished.

The first chapters of the book, "Prolegomenon: When Lebanon Loved the Jews" and "Lebanon of the Jews: An Introduction," are devoted to the story of Lebanon and the Jews living there on the eve of its founding as a modern political entity, and then during the French Mandate period. The following chapters, "Lebanese Jewry: Memory Fragments" and "Rootedness and Exile: Holocaust and Aftermath," discuss the unique relationship between the Jews and the Maronite community, when the latter was the mainstay of the early Lebanese state. These chapters also deal with changes that took place in Lebanon, including the establishment of a Palestinian Arab presence and the emergence of extremist Arab nationalism.

The unique and special contribution of Salameh's book, *Lebanon's Jewish Community, Fragments of Lives Arrested*, lies in its effort to bring together, as it were, the Jewish individual and the Lebanese individual who once upon a time lived alongside each other. Salameh worked to achieve this through interviews with Jews who emigrated and Lebanese who remembered with nostalgia their neighbors and life alongside them. The results of these interviews are presented in the chapters, "Lebanese Jewish Memory and Memorial: Personal Recollections" and "Through the Eyes of Others: History's Reckoning." These chapters connect and intertwine into a stirring story that is both historical testimony and oral history at its best. In addition to the interviews, Salameh draws upon his meticulous investigations into archives, private collections, and the press, including the Jewish press in Lebanon, like *Al-Aalam al-Isra'ili*.

In sum, we may say that the story of the Lebanese Jews is unique in some ways, but not entirely exceptional. It is unique insofar as the Jews, like Lebanon itself, constituted an “island” in the Arab “sea” surrounding them. It is also unique insofar as it is not a one-sided story of persecution that ended in destruction. However, it is not entirely exceptional, because the Jewish presence in Lebanon ultimately came to an end. Thus, Lebanon ended up without Jews. It remembers its Jews, however, and it also remembers an era when Jewish society was a focal point of social, cultural, educational, and intellectual life, as well as a vital political and, above all, economic center that the entire Middle East looked up to.

Prof. Eyal Zisser, Vice Rector, Tel Aviv University  
zisser@post.tau.ac.il