IS ISRAEL A PART OF THE MIDDLE EAST?

A Comparison of Minority Treatment in Morocco and Israel

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Is Israel a Part of the Middle East: A Comparison of Minority Treatments in Morocco and Israel

Stretching over decades, treatment of minorities in Middle Eastern countries have proven to be similar. Israeli treatment of 21st Century Arabs shares many similarities with how Morocco treated their Jewish minority in the 20th century. The most overt parallel is each country’s national identity, which principally defines, and consequently affects all other aspects of minority life. These characteristics include social life, religious life, government participation, economic status, and education. Jews created a life in Morocco decades ago, and fortunately rarely feared for their lives unlike in other countries, which allowed them to establish a productive and growing community in this host country.

Morocco’s official religion is Islam, which is demonstrated through the titles of rulers as amir or sultan in the state’s history. Having a national religion granted Jews the rights and legal status in society as citizens, as well as being given protection to practice their faith through the dhimmi status as expressed in the Qu’ran. Being dhimmi people meant that Jews were allowed partial autonomy and freedom of religion. However, the Jews still bound themselves to the state through the granting of Moroccan citizenship upon the state’s independence. Jewish autonomy included responsibility for budgeting money, managing religious institutions, and managing taxes in the Jewish community. The Jewish people in Morocco practiced Jewish law and were permitted to establish Jewish courts in their communities. The exception to using these Jewish courts are when Muslims were involved in the cases being disputed. In these situations, the

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Jewish people were and still are required to use the Muslim courts and allow the Muslim judges to make their decisions based upon Islamic law.\(^4\)

The Jewish people had some restrictions while living in Morocco as they were not granted full autonomy. After Moroccan independence, Jews were unable to own land even in their own communities. If the Jewish people wanted to sell the previously owned property, they needed to receive permission and approval from the Ministry of Interior.\(^5\) This ruling conveyed the unequal status in Morocco between the Jews and the Arabs. Jews in Morocco, through their consideration of having dhimmi status, have been excluded from the military since the establishment of their communities.\(^6\) Additionally, Jews in Morocco are ineligible to hold high political positions in the Muslim government. Instead, they are permitted to work in positions which relate to international trade and business or in the consulates in Morocco.\(^7\) While Jews are not treated with the same respect and legal rights as Arabs, there is a history of tolerance and living peacefully together as violence against the Jewish people is rare in Morocco.

While not all Moroccan cities required a separate living space, many of the Jewish people lived in their own communities outside of the city called “mellot.” Most of these living spaces were overcrowded and there could have been between four to twenty people living in a single room together.\(^8\) However, the Jewish communities did not block off the Arabs and the cities were not blocked off for the Jews. The mellot were essentially designated areas for the Jews in which they could practice their own customs and follow their own laws. Within the mellot, Jewish [Torah] study was a large aspect of life. Jews studied Torah mostly individually in their

\(^4\) Marglin, Jessica M.
\(^5\) Simon, Reeva, et al.
\(^7\) Marglin, Jessica M.
\(^8\) Simon, Reeva, et al.
homes or in synagogues as only a few mellot actually included yeshivot, Jewish religious schools. Communities established Jewish schools which were taught in Hebrew throughout the mellot, and many Moroccan Jews spoke Arabic as a second language. Jews who lived in the mellot celebrated and kept the Jewish holidays. Moroccan Jews were also permitted to build synagogues in their communities. Shabbat was viewed as a large event within the mellot because they locked from Friday night to Saturday night in order to observe the Jewish people’s customs.

There was much diversity among the Jewish people who lived in the mellot. Both Sephardic Jews and Jews who immigrated from other Middle Eastern countries lived together in the same communities. As a result of the different cultures amongst the Jews, there were different types of synagogues, different burial areas, different languages spoken, and even different rabbinical rulings. Jews who immigrated to Morocco from other Middle Eastern countries spoke Hebrew as their dominant language, but Jews from Spain spoke Spanish as theirs. The Spanish Jews were also not accepted as easily into Morocco and the Jewish communities settled there because their culture was vastly different. Despite the diversity among the Jews in Morocco, all Jews were very much integrated into Muslim religious and everyday Arab Moroccan society.

Although intermarriage between the Jews and Arabs did not occur, Jews were invited to Muslim affairs such as weddings and picnics at the Kasbah. Moroccan Jews also dressed fairly

10 Marglin, Jessica M.
11 Gottreich, Emily. “Jews in Morocco.”
similar to Arabs in Morocco, except for the fact many Jews wore all black as seen customary to Jewish life.\textsuperscript{13} Jewish practices in Morocco also contained Berber and Arab influence, specifically concentrating on Moroccan Jewish belief in spirits, demons, and saints. Moroccan Jewish sainthood was seen as completely separate and different from Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and could be accomplished through religion and devotion to G-d, miracle-working, or faith healing. While there are not many saint families, it has been proved that they do exist.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, Arabs would use the mellot for education and burial. Although rare, Muslim saints were buried in the Jewish cemeteries. Arabs would also use the Jewish community space for religious purposes. In addition to Muslim religious practices, sometimes Arabs would even work at the Jewish schools or would enter the mellot to sell their own merchandises.\textsuperscript{15} Not only did Jews and Arabs in Morocco live civilly among each other, but both groups were involved in each other’s societies.

Jews were involved in economic activities with Arabs as well as seen through business arrangements. Since Jews were not allowed to own land after Morocco declared independence, the Jewish people rented land from Muslim citizens. In cases as such, Jews would attend Islamic courts to legitimize business between the two parties. Moroccan Jews also engaged in business which Islam forbids such as producing alcohol and taking part in money-lending. Common Jewish jobs included craftsmen, artisans, shop owners, and peddlers. Many Jews engaged in business in the markets just outside of the mellot and worked alongside Arabs. The most prosperous jobs Jewish people held in Morocco were in banking and commerce, especially international trade. Some Jewish men served the Moroccan ruler in economic roles and were

\textsuperscript{13} Marglin, Jessica M. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Gottreich, Emily. “Jews in Morocco.” \\
\textsuperscript{15} Gottreich, Emily. \textit{The Mellah of Marrakesh}
important to the ruler in specifically managing royal deals between other countries. More Jewish men seemed to have worked secular fields rather than religious ones such as rabbis or rabbinical teachers. In addition to men, women were permitted to work in society usually either water carriers or seamstresses in the markets. The Jewish people portrayed a western-style economy in Morocco. The integration of western cultural aspects shows the extent of Jewish participation in society. Jews were never viewed as being severely limited in economic life in Morocco except in positions which Islam played a role in the job such as the government as discussed earlier.

Moroccan nationalism also played a role in the treatment of Jews living in Morocco. Many readings indicated that Morocco’s specific nationalism is not necessarily an ethnic/religious nationalism (although this type of nationalism is the most prominent in Moroccan society), but rather an escape from colonialism indicating a civic nationalism. The idea of a civic nationalism helped the Moroccan Jews receive citizenship upon state independence. The notion of having a civic, and in Morocco’s case an Arab, nationalism conveys the similar regional history between the groups living in Morocco. The meaning of Arab nationalism is to show the connection between the culture and manners of the Moroccan citizens. With an Arab nationalism, the Jewish people are being included as equals based upon daily lifestyle which includes how religion affects the daily activities of the Moroccan people. By the Moroccan government identifying Islam the state’s national religion, the idea of a civic nationalism comes to be affected because of the religious law which the state must follow. With a religious party in power, it meant that individuals of other religions were given a different status in society as seen from the dhimmi title given to Moroccan Jews. However, in the

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16 Gottreich, Emily. *The Mellah of Marrakesh*
conclusion of research on Moroccan nationalism, it would seem that Morocco has a stronger ethnic or religious nationalism and still incorporates ideas of civic nationalism into its society.

Jewish involvement in daily Moroccan life changed over decades depending on which identity rulers chose to make their priority – religion versus independence and citizenship. Depending upon which identity Morocco chose to define itself, Jewish minority treatment changed within the country throughout its history. In Morocco, national identity was strong throughout society, and the theme of religion in the state and an ethnic connection to the country was important. Similarly, both of these themes are prominent in Israeli life and in the Israeli government itself. While Israel maintains a national religion and provides Jews certain rights, it also advocates for Jews around the world who do not have citizenship to apply for it. Israeli Arabs, on the other hand, are granted Israeli citizenship with their religious needs and opportunities to practice existing as second to the state supported religion. Research reveals that Arabs feel a stronger connection to each other as a people than to the State of Israel. These results among Arabs in Israel are fairly similar to the portrayal of Jews in Morocco as the Jews never gave up who they were as a people or their own traditions for the State’s purpose, despite how much they wanted to become citizens of the country.

Upon the impending establishment of the State of Israel, and consequently upon the state’s independence, many Arabs left the country and headed to neighboring Arab countries to settle in what they thought was going to be a temporary condition until Israel was destroyed and eliminated during its war of Independence. Ultimately, this annihilation never occurred, and

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these Arabs were left in limbo, having not been afforded citizenships in their new countries and having given up their rights to citizenship in Israel. The many Arabs who remained in Israel, however, and every future Arab child born in Israel, became citizens of their new country. Citizenship was granted to those who stayed in their homes at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel. Additionally, to support this significant “minority” in the new state, Arabic became the second official language of the State of Israel. Although Israel integrated parts of Arab culture into its society, Arabs were not seen as equals because there was no connection between them and Israel itself, only the land prior to Israel’s independence.

Similar to the status of Jews in Morocco, Arabs in Israel are treated as second-class citizens. While Arabs have the right to vote in governmental elections and can participate in economic activities in Israel, the majority of Arabs are not allowed to participate in the Israeli military service. Another aspect of the Arab community which is restricted in Israel are Muslim courts, yet this restriction is almost exact to the restriction of Jewish courts in Morocco. In Israel Arabs are permitted to have Sharia courts to follow Islamic law. However, Sharia courts are not allowed to try criminal cases, instead must be heard in Israeli courts. Sharia courts only hold jurisdiction over civil issues which affect personal statuses of Muslims such as marriage and divorce, custody, and inheritance cases. However, aspects of Islamic law are imbedded in the Israeli judicial system shown through the implementation of sulha committees. These committees not only help determine settlements and resolutions which honor both parties in a

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23 Rouhana, Nadim.
case, but they involve Arabs in trying cases. Other discriminations towards Arab-Israelis include having a small influence in governmental affairs and receiving less funding than Jewish Israelis in both their communities and their education. And like Jews in Morocco, Arabs are not permitted to own land in the State of Israel.

While Arab-Israelis do not have full autonomy in Israel, they tend to be segregated from the Jews in both living and institutional spaces and tend not to marry each other. This idea among Arabs in Israel parallels Jewish lifestyle in Morocco. The majority of Arabs living in Israel live in villages outside of the city-life and nevertheless, Arab-Israelis have the ability to live in communities with the Jewish people if they choose. Arab communities are not blocked off to Jewish-Israelis, and Arab-Israelis are able to enter into Jewish communities although both communities tended to remain separated from each other. Arab communities have their own markets and build their own schools. However, Arab schools are overseen by and receive funding from the Israeli department of education. As this is the case, Arab schools not only have fewer resources and are underfunded but are also limited when it comes to the content allowed to be taught to students such as geopolitical histories. Additionally, similar to Jewish lifestyle in Morocco, Arabs have their own agencies and local “government” over the Arab population. This includes leaders for aspects such as education, health, and welfare in Arab communities.

26 Rouhana, Nadim.
28 Smooha, Sammy.
29 Rouhana, Nadim.
do hold positions in the Israeli government and build national coalitions, but these agencies and institutions allow Arabs to have a larger role in shaping their own communities.  

Like in Morocco, there is much diversity among Arabs who live in Israel. The extent to which each group is valued in Israeli society is different. Bedouins, Druze, and Muslim or Christian Arabs each have different lifestyles in Israel, so much so that they live in their own communities segregated from each other. Both Druze and Bedouins have a prioritized role as Arabs in Israeli society because they are not a religious practicing group therefore creating less of a barrier between themselves and the majority group in the country. Religious practicing Arabs, more so Muslim than Christian, tend to be discriminated against in the public sphere because their beliefs are in contradiction of not only the majority’s beliefs but also the state’s beliefs. Yet, despite the difference in community culture among the Arabs in Israel themselves, Arabs were not forbidden to enter Israeli cities and the urban-life.

Arab-Israelis have shown that they are self-sufficient in the economic aspect despite having fewer resources and opportunities. Many Arabs work in sewing shops or with clothing companies, and even have a large participation in the production of construction materials in Israel. While Jews and Arabs in Morocco interacted with each other in both social and economic affairs, Jews and Arabs in Israel tended to only work together in economic matters. Rather than spending their days in the Arab communities, some Arab-Israelis chose to work in the Jewish communities. Arabs usually hold jobs such as “health professionals, teachers, and administrators.” Given that Jews and Arabs can work together in Israel, there is no distinction between certain jobs which Arabs are allowed to hold in the public sector like there was in

32 Rouhana, Nadim.
33 Landau, Jacob M.
Morocco with the Jews. Despite the certain jobs Arabs have in Jewish communities\textsuperscript{35}, Arabs have higher prestige in Arab communities as they are not the minority and instead valued within their peer and social group.

Similar to how Moroccan nationalism played a role in the treatment of Jews, the fact that Israel does not have a separation between the “church” and state, as well as the importance of an individual having an ethnic connection to the country, plays a large role in the treatment of Arabs in Israel. The inequality among different religious groups in Israeli society conveys the religious importance of Judaism in Israeli society. Similar to Moroccan nationalism, Israel’s nationalism incorporates aspects of civic nationalism by granting citizenship to non-Jews. The way religion plays a role in both the Moroccan and Israeli governments communicates how equality in all aspects – political, social, and economic – is unachievable in a multiculturalist society. By comparing an analysis of Arabs in Israel to Jews in Morocco, a Middle Eastern country, Israel would be considered part of the Middle East. While each country has its differences in the treatment of its minorities, both countries give its minority members civil-political rights.\textsuperscript{36} The overarching idea that minority treatment and value in society is based on a religious/ethnic connection to the country conveys that both Morocco and Israel govern with that specific connection as a priority in order to be a citizen of the highest value.

\textsuperscript{35} Lewin-Epstein, Noah, et al.
Works Cited


