

A forgotten exodus



“*Juifs en pays arabes. Le grand déracinement 1850-1975*” by the Frenchman Bensoussan

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There were between 850,000 and 1 million Jews who lived in Arab countries in 1948. By 1976, there was only 25,000. In one generation, that is, almost all Jews had left the countries where they had lived for ages. A huge exodus - barely regarded by historiography - of which Georges Bensoussan is now tracking in world history. Bensoussan, a French historian, author of many important studies, and editor for the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris. *Juifs en pays arabes. Le grand déracinement 1850-1975* (Paris, Tallandier, 2012, 966 pages, 34.90 €) surveys the history of the Hebrew people in Arabic countries, beginning around 1850 until 1975, focusing in particular on Iraq, Yemen, Morocco, Libya and Egypt, significant countries for the story of Jewish presence. A story that – even in its different nuances – the author understands to be about one civilization.

The book was meticulously researched, which was carried out primarily in the archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (the international Israeli organization, founded in France in 1860 to promote the rights of the Jews) and in the diplomatic sources. With his consistent recourse to the sources, the author overcomes the two opposing legends of the cohabitation of Jews and Muslims in Arab States. On the one hand there is the dark story of the Jews concerning destruction and a tearful history; on the other hand it is the rosy fable – corresponding more to today's good, multi-cultural intentions – of a peaceful coexistence between worlds, shattered only by Colonialism and then by Zionism. The picture which Bensoussan outlines is, actually, one of a very harsh domination of the Jews under the juridic status of the dhimma, the norm which regulated life in Islam concerning unbelieving Jews and Christians, far from the widespread, sugar-coated images of symbiosis. This roused controversy when the book first appeared in France in May of this year and more seem destined to follow.

The birth of the State of Israel then transformed the Jews of Arab countries into scapegoats. The exile started once the illusion faded that one could be an Arab citizen of Jewish belief, as with the intentions of Alliance in the 1800s. In the span of one generation 600,000 Jews made it to Israel, while the others found a place in the European metropolises and in the Americas.

A forgotten exodus that Bensoussan, a Jew of Moroccan origin, retraces in its particulars in order to restore the memory for the forgotten and dignity for the humiliated – mortified in Arabic countries but

also in their relations with European Judaism, which crushed them under the memory of the Shoah by omitting, as if marginal, their tragedy – even in their homeland, Israel, on arrival. There the preponderance of a European political and cultural elite will long place their story between parentheses. Bensoussan's work is the first of the set together, attentively and seriously documented, regarding the Jews of the east and their exile. It is also the first which, beyond political incidents, attempts to give back this history – not just that of the outside – also from the inside, “in its beliefs, in its collective practices, in its social subconscious”.

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