The Legacy of Anti-Jewish Measures in Islamic Societies

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Origins of Anti-Jewish Measures in Islamic Societies - The dhimmi status

The status of the People of the Book — Jews and Christians — is based on the Qur'anic verse: *Fight them until they pay the poll tax directly and in all humility* (Surah 29). The term *humility* has often been interpreted as humiliation.

Jews and Christians held the status of *dhimmis*, a term translated as protected or tolerated peoples. They were subject to a special tax, the *jizya*. Their status is said to have been established through the Pact of Umar in the 7th century, but it was Al-Mawardi who codified it in detail in the 11th century. The purpose of this status was to ensure that dhimmis possessed fewer rights than Muslims. In his work *The Saga of the Jews of North Africa*, André Chouraqui summarized the twelve conditions which, according to Al-Mawardi, guaranteed the person and property of the dhimmi:

- not to tamper with the Qur'an by mockery or falsification of its text; not to speak of the Prophet in false or contemptuous terms; not to speak irreverently of Islam;
- not to approach Muslim women, even through marriage, which remained forbidden between dhimmis and Muslim women (though not between Muslim men and Jewish or Christian women);
- not to attempt to turn Muslims away from their faith and, naturally, to respect their lives and property;
- not to do anything to assist the enemies of Islam or act as their spies. Dhimmis would be required to wear distinctive clothing, including a belt and a yellow piece of cloth for Jews and blue for Christians;
- never to build synagogues or houses higher than those of Muslims;

- never to practice their religion publicly, nor make their bells or trumpets, prayers or songs heard;
- never to drink wine in public nor display, in the case of Christians, their crosses or pigs;
- to bury their dead discreetly and without audible prayers or lamentations;
- finally, they were forbidden to own horses, considered a noble animal: they were to content themselves with donkeys or, at most, mules.

Such a status was enforced with varying degrees of severity depending on the regime: at times interpreted literally, at others applied with leniency, and occasionally used as a religious slogan to justify persecution. By way of illustration, the orientalist Bernard Lewis reports in *The Jews of Islam* the opinion of a medieval jurist regarding the jizya: *"When the dhimmi pays, he must remain standing while the collector is seated. The collector must seize him by the neck, shake him and say: 'Pay the jizya!' and when he pays, he must be slapped."*

This ritual is documented. André Chouraqui reports that it continued in Morocco until the twentieth century: *"Most often, the Jew was regarded not as a hostile foreigner, but as a despised protected person who had to redeem his contempt through indispensable functions he fulfilled within the Muslim city. Thus, the humiliations attached to dhimmi status, the annual slap accompanying the payment of the jizya to the caïd, the routine insults, the blows received in passing, the jostling, every humiliation silently endured — all these were accepted as ordinary realities scarcely felt anymore."*

Spatial segregation

Jews were confined to special quarters: the *Mellahs*. Population density there was particularly high. In principle, they could not own land outside the Mellah. Some Mellahs were walled, or even built adjacent to the royal palace and could benefit from royal protection in times of crisis.

Yet despite overcrowding, authorization to expand the Mellah was far from guaranteed. Even permission to build a public bath in the Mellah of Fez was

denied in 1837 and again in 1898 in order to maintain Jews in a certain state of inferiority.

Insecurity

Generally speaking, periods of political disorder were often accompanied by persecution, notably upon the death of a ruler, during wars or in times of famine. Aside from episodic massacres, entire communities were exterminated under Almohad rule in the twelfth century. The imposed choice was conversion to Islam or death. Since that period, the Christian presence has virtually disappeared from North Africa.

Jews generally enjoyed good relations with rulers, with exceptions such as during the reign of Moulay Yazid in 1790 (although he later did not limit his abuses to Jews alone). It should also be noted that Morocco and the Ottoman Empire were among the countries that granted asylum to Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.

The transition to the modern era

In the Middle Ages, Arab-Muslim civilization experienced remarkable development across multiple fields — literature, science, medicine and philosophy — at a time when Europe appeared constrained by intellectual and institutional structures considered rigid. This dynamic secured for it a form of pre-eminence across the known world.

With the discovery of America and the emergence of the Renaissance, Europe entered a phase of expansion and profound transformation. The opening of new trade routes and access to previously unknown resources gradually reduced Europe's dependence on traditional caravan networks linking Europe to the Arab world, notably for spices, perfumes and certain raw materials.

Over the following centuries, societies of the Arab world experienced a relative slowdown in innovation and expansion, while Europe entered a phase of acceleration with the Industrial Revolution. This historical shift has nourished, in certain contemporary narratives, a sense of nostalgia for an age perceived as one of former centrality and lost supremacy.

Moreover, the project of political and cultural continuity across the Arab-Muslim world has often been presented as difficult to reconcile with the emergence of national entities perceived as external to that whole. From this perspective, the independence of an ethnic minority — in this case the Jews — has been interpreted as a potentially destabilizing precedent.

Arab opposition to Israel also derives from other historical, political, religious and geopolitical dimensions.

The Church's teaching of contempt and the institutionalized humiliation embedded within Islamic societies burdened relations for centuries between Christendom and Islam on one side and Judaism on the other. Today, hegemonic tendencies — whether Arab, neo-Ottoman or Iranian — draw upon and intensify anti-Jewish sentiment in order to expand political influence.

Attitudes toward the State of Israel

In 1947, the political committee of the Arab League, bringing together seven member states, proposed legislation — already implemented in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq — under which Jews would be considered nationals of the minority state of Palestine, a designation which in that political context referred to the emerging Jewish entity that would become the State of Israel and was perceived as hostile. This framework was accompanied by measures placing assets under sequestration or confiscation.

Beginning in 1948, with the creation of the State of Israel and the geopolitical upheavals that followed, the mass exodus of Jewish communities from the Arab world began. Within a few decades, communities that had sometimes existed for millennia nearly disappeared from several Arab-Muslim countries, with a large proportion of exiles finding refuge in Israel.

In 1959, the Arab League adopted Resolution 1457, recommending that Palestinians retain refugee status and opposing their naturalization in host countries. This policy contributed to entrenching the Palestinian issue within the regional landscape. No comparable consideration was extended to the 80,000 Jewish refugees from Palestine nor to the 900,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

At the same time, several Arab countries witnessed anti-Jewish violence: the Farhud in Iraq in 1941, riots in Syria in 1944, Libya in 1945 and Morocco in 1948. These acts of violence were accompanied by restrictive measures: withdrawal of nationality and confiscation of Jewish property in Iraq in 1951, forced conversion of Jewish orphans in Yemen, withdrawal of Algerian nationality from non-Muslim populations of European status after independence in 1963...

In Egypt, after the Suez Crisis of 1956, thousands of Jews were expelled or compelled to leave. Many were allowed to take only a few personal belongings and were issued exit documents carrying restrictions on return...

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 coincided with an intensification of the exodus of Jews from Arab countries. Communities present for centuries, and in some cases millennia, gradually disappeared across much of the Arab world, with the majority of their members finding refuge in Israel.

An oversimplified — even simplistic — narrative

The tendency to portray Zionism as the sole explanation for fractures in the Middle East is viewed by some as a way of relegating the legacy of anti-Judaism in the Arab-Muslim world to the background and, in Europe, of softening the burden of colonial memory or historical responsibility linked to the Holocaust. When amplified through effective communication mechanisms, this interpretive framework seeks to establish itself in public opinion as an all-encompassing and rarely questioned explanation.

Influence campaigns relayed through social media, as well as the systematic ostracism of the State of Israel in certain international forums, tend to complicate efforts at rapprochement between Jews and Muslims by reinforcing identity divisions and mutual distrust.

Peace — which requires mutual recognition and dialogue — suffers as a result.