Ni Francaise, Ni Juive, Ni Arabe: The Influence of Nineteenth Century French Judaism on the Emergence of Franco-Jewish-Arab Literature

Deborah Rosalind Gruber

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, Jewish Studies Commons, Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons, and the Other International and Area Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/570

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Works by Year: Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
Ni Française, ni juive ni arabe: The Influence of Nineteenth Century French Judaism on the Emergence of Franco Jewish Arab Literature

by

Deborah Gruber

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr Ammiel Alcalay

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Dr Julia Przybos

Date

Executive Officer

Dr Ammiel Alcalay

Dr Antoinette Blum

Dr Francesca Sautman

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Ni française, ni juive, ni arabe : The Influence of Nineteenth Century French Judaism on the Emergence of Franco-Jewish-Arab Literature

by

Deborah Gruber

Advisor Dr. Ammiel Alcalay

This study proposes that the influence of nineteenth century French Judaism on the Jewish communities of the Middle East from approximately 1910-1956 has had an indelible influence on the evolution of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature today. From the late nineteenth century, the education of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire was provided by the Paris based Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization established by French Jews with the purpose of emancipating disadvantaged Jewish communities outside of France. The result was the establishment of Franco-Jewish Arab communities that regarded French education as a means of both social and economic advancement. Although the curriculum of the Alliance stressed both secular and religious elements it promoted a priori, the superiority of nineteenth century French Judaism based on the ideology of universalism that emanated from the French Revolution.

Franco – Jewish- Arab literature both of the period and written as a memoir after the period, depicts and records the effects of French Judaism on these communities. It manifests the degree to which French Judaism actively suppressed both the communities’ involvement with Arab nationalist movements and the
development of the nascent Zionist movement, rendering Franco-Jewish - Arab communities hopelessly mal-positioned to negotiate the changes that ensued in the aftermath of the rise of Arab nationalism during the 1920’s and 1930’s and the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. Ultimately, these factors contributed to the dismantling of these Jewish communities. The first part of this work primarily examines the combined effects of the nineteenth century French Judaism model on the Franco-Jewish Arab communities of the Middle East. The second part of this thesis examines the provenance and classification of Franco-Jewish - Arab literature. It proposes that Franco-Jewish - Arab literature distinguishes itself as a distinct genre, and that regardless of whether it is written in French or Hebrew, it retains credible remnants of universalism based on French Judaism that resist conventional classification and in particular, the notoriously nationalist discourse of Middle Eastern literature. This offers the hypothesis that a new genre of French literature has evolved that does not necessarily have to be written in French, but retains its Francité by cleavage to French cultural ideas and political influence.
Acknowledgments

This project has been a long time in the making and consequently there are rather a lot of people to thank for making it possible. First and foremost, thank you to my husband Steve and my family who have ceaselessly supported me even in the darkest hours when I deeply doubted my abilities. In particular I want to thank my eldest daughter Jessica who babysat my youngest child Noa on innumerable occasions and without whom I would never have been able to finish the first part of the program. A big thank you to Dr Alcalay for his inspiration and support, Drs Blum and Sautman for their patience and kind support and Carole Kulowkowski for her kindness and efficiency that has made the whole process so seamless.

Finally, as much of my work was done at the Alliance Israélite in Paris, I want to thank both Rose Levine and Gila Cooper (who has since become a dear friend) for their help in negotiating my way through the archives of the A.I.U..
Contents

Title page --------------------------------------------------------------------------------- i
Abstract------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- iii-iv
Acknowledgments------------------------------------------------------------------------ v
Contents------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- vi-xi

Introduction------------------------------------------------------------------------------- 1-11

Chapter 1

French Jewish Emancipation: The Dreyfus Affair and its Effects on the Jewish Communities of the Machreq

1. The French emancipatory model: A Model for Jewish Emancipation-------------------12-14
2. The Consistory: A for runner of the Alliance Israélite Universelle-------------------14-16
3. Les Français -Israélites: Integration versus Assimilation--------------------------17-20
4. The “Jewish Other” as an extension of self ------------------------------------------21-23
5. The Re-emergence of Anti-Semitism---------------------------------------------------24
6. The Arts as a Barometer of the Success of Jewish Emancipation and
   and the Presence of Anti-Semitism------------------------------------------------------24
7. Halévy: Finding the Words-------------------------------------------------------------24-29
8. The Français Israélites of the late Nineteenth Century: Success in the Arts
   Despite Anti-Semitism-----------------------------------------------------------------31
9. Drumont and his Crusade Against the Jews-------------------------------------------33-35.
10. Jewish and Gentile Response to Anti-Semitism----------------------------------------36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Jewish Renaissance and its Effects on France and Franco-Jewish-Arab</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communities</strong>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Response to the Dreyfus Affair---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. The First Wave of the Jewish Renaissance-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Andre Spire-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Edmond Fleg-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. The Second Wave of the Jewish Renaissance-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Jewish Literature as Folkloric Literature------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Jewish Literature as Instructional Literature-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. The Quest to Reinvent Jewish Identity----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Jewish Arab Literature of the Jewish Renaissance--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Zionist and Prophetic Literature---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Non Jewish Support of Zionism----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Jewish Renaissance and its Effects on France and Franco-Jewish-Arab</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communities</strong>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The Dreyfus Affair: A Litmus test of French Justice------------------------------------------37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Reaction of French Jews to The Dreyfus Affair-----------------------------------------38-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Theatre and the Dreyfus Affair----------------------------------------------------------24-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The Aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair----------------------------------------------------------31-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The Influence of Zionism in the Post- Dreyfus Era-----------------------------------------33-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The Reaction of the Jews of the Arab World to the Dreyfus Affair----------------------------34-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Press Reaction in the Arab World to the Dreyfus Affair-------------------------------------36-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Conclusion-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------39-40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Jewish Renaissance and its Effects on France and Franco-Jewish-Arab</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communities</strong>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Response to the Dreyfus Affair---------------------------------------------------------------42-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. The First Wave of the Jewish Renaissance-----------------------------------------------------43-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Andre Spire-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Edmond Fleg-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------49-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. The Second Wave of the Jewish Renaissance-----------------------------------------------------51-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Jewish Literature as Folkloric Literature------------------------------------------------------52-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Jewish Literature as Instructional Literature-------------------------------------------------53-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. The Quest to Reinvent Jewish Identity----------------------------------------------------------55-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Jewish Arab Literature of the Jewish Renaissance--------------------------------------------58-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Zionist and Prophetic Literature---------------------------------------------------------------59-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Non Jewish Support of Zionism----------------------------------------------------------------67-68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

viii
Chapter 3

The Jews of the Machreq and their Relationship with France

41. The Jews and their Relationship with the Hexagon-------------------------85-87
42. Jews as Denizens of the Muslim Countries-----------------------------------87-91
43. European Presence in the Middle East--------------------------------------91-93
44. The March towards Emancipation------------------------------------------93-97
45. Relations between Muslims and Jews--------------------------------------97-100
46. Anti-Semitism in Muslim Countries----------------------------------------100-104
47. Damascus Affair and the Foundation of the Alliance Israël Universelle----104-112
Chapter 4

The Clash of Arab Nationalism and Zionism and its Effects on Eastern Jewish Communities

89. The Rise of Zionism in France---------------------------------------------146-148
90. Zionism à la Française---------------------------------------------------148-149
91. The Ascendency of French Zionism----------------------------------------149-153
92. Zionism in French Literature and the Jewish press------------------------153-164
93. Zionist Support in France------------------------------------------------164-165
94. The Ottoman Jews: the Jews that Zionism Forgot--------------------------165-173
95. Zionism and the Jewish Communities of the Middle East------------------------174-183
96. The Changing Attitude of Zionism towards the Jews of Arab Lands--------183-190
97. The Influence of Jewish Emissaries during the 1940s------------------------190-192
98. Relations between the Zionist movement and Community Leaders--------193-196
99. Communism: The Other Choice------------------------------------------196-200
100. The Rise of Arab Nationalism------------------------------------------200-202
101. Who is an Arab?--------------------------------------------------------202
102 Sati’ Al Husri’s theory of Inclusive Nationalism------------------------202-208
103. The Collapse of Inclusive Arab Nationalism----------------------------208-214
104. The Ramifications of Changes in Arab Nationalism for the Jews---------214-222
105- Conclusion-------------------------------------------------------------222-225

Chapter 5

New Horizons: Forging an Identity

106. New Horizons------------------------------------------------------------226-228
107. Situating the Franco-Jewish Arab Writer as a Jewish writer---------228-230
109. Relocating Franco-Jewish-Arab Literature within its Arabic Roots—242-246
110. The Universal Arab Writer---------------------------------------------246-251
111. El Iltizam: A vital Characteristic of Arab Literature------------------251
112. The Decentrist writers------------------------------------------------251-253
113. Myriam Antaki and Identification with the "Other"---------------------253-261
114. Etel Adnan and the discourse of Colonialism----------------------------261-269
115. Nadia Tuéni and the Politics of Feminism and Exile---------------------269-273
116. The Specificity of Franco-Jewish-Writing--------------------------273
117. THE Tension between nostalgia and the Disappointment of Arrival—273-276
118. Jabès: a writer in permanent exile--------------------------------276-280
120. Franco-Jewish-Arab writers in Israel-----------------------------285-286
121. The language of exile and the (im)possibility of return-----------286-297
122. The language of Alienation in the writing of Paula Jacques-------297-299
123. Albert Oudiz-----------------------------------------------------299-301
125. Identity renegotiated---------------------------------------------310-316
126. Conclusion-------------------------------------------------------316-331

Conclusion-------------------------------------------------------------332-340

Bibliography-----------------------------------------------------------341-349
Introduction

I first came upon the concept of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature when I took a translation class at the beginning of my PhD program. I was given a sample of the Iraqi author Naim Kattan's memoir *Adieu Babylone*, to translate into English. The text recalled the author's childhood memories of the Jewish community of Baghdad during the 1930s and 1940's, on the eve of the establishment of the state of Israel. Besides being intoxicated by the beautiful detail of Kattan’s work, I was fascinated by the fact that Kattan had written the original work in French and not Arabic.

Neither had he written it in English, which would have seemed more natural given that it was Great Britain who had received the Iraqi mandate following the Sykes Picot agreement of 1917. It prompted me to further explore the work of other Arab Jewish writers of Muslim countries of the Machreq (or Middle East) for example Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Palestine, who had also been educated in French by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization established by French Jewry in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the goal of educating the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. I was particularly interested in comparing the content and style of their texts for the existence of common markers that would neatly tie these writers under one tidy umbrella to represent what I was beginning to suspect was a distinct body of Francophone literature.

As I began to delve further I stumbled upon Ammiel Alcalay’s seminal work, *After Jews and Arabs Remaking Levantine Cultures* (1992). His extensive study was of Mizrachi or eastern Jews who immigrated to Israel after the dismantling of their primarily francophone communities and had subsequently been treated with
disdain by the Ashkenazi Zionist discourse which governed politics at the time. Although, like Kattan, these writers had been educated in French, they now wrote in Hebrew and were therefore technically Israeli writers rather than French writers. To my surprise though, I found that their work showed remarkable similarities with that of Francophone writers of Mizrachi/Machreqi origin, principally in that they both tended to reject conventional ethnocentric discourse in favour of nineteenth century French universalism and multiculturalism. This prompted me to hypothesize that perhaps Jewish-Arab writers of francophone communities continued to reflect the influence of their earlier French instruction even when they no longer wrote in French and were demonstrating a new type of world literature that had more in common with the nineteenth century French literature produced by Jewish writers of the Hexagon, than with the standard discourse of the Israeli canon influenced by nineteenth century Ashkenazi Zionist thought.

This dissertation essentially examines the influence of nineteenth-century French Judaism on the oeuvre of Jewish writers of the Middle East who came of age during or just after the establishment of the state of Israel, from approximately 1930 through 1950. My first intention is to demonstrate the role of French Judaism in the ultimate failure of Arab Jewish communities to anticipate, adapt and to mobilize in response to the changes which ensued after the clash between Jewish and Arab nationalism during the 1920s. According to my research, this subject has not been covered previously through a solely Francophone lens. Franco-Jewish-Arab literature has traditionally been confined to the general study of Francophone
literature, which does not distinguish between the Arab or Jewish writer. I have chosen to concentrate my study on the countries of the Machreq, the Middle East, rather than the francophone Maghreb (North Africa). My decision to do so, in no way negates the importance of the lively, productive communities of the Maghreb. It is arbitrarily based on the fact that while there has been extensive study of the Maghreb, far less has been written about the francophone communities of the Middle East, and lesser still regarding the authenticity of their francité.

Research has shown that during the colonial period, French education was positively regarded by the Jewish communities of the Machreq. It offered a coveted means of liberation from their minority status and the promise of an as yet unequalled opportunity to advance and to obtain employment within the British and French colonial apparatus. Although this study comprises the work of many authors who all represent different countries of the Middle East, they do share the commonality of their French education. Usually (although not exclusively) children attended schools sponsored by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the shadow of whose influence spanned through and beyond the years of European colonization.

The primary aim of the Alliance Israélite was to bring “enlightenment” to the “uneducated” Jews of the Levant.¹ The Hexagon-based curriculum of the Alliance was intended to reshape the Jewish communities of the Arab world in the image of the newly emancipated Jewish community of post-revolutionary France.

Although it did so by simultaneously transmuting the language and culture of these

¹ The Jews of the Middle East were considered as Mizrachi Jews. Directly translated from the Hebrew word Mizrach which denotes the East they were inherently regarded as primitive and inferior by the Jews of France who during the nineteenth century were of Ashkenazi or Middle European descent.
communities, it was so successful that despite witnessing the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the rise of Arab nationalism which rendered the loyalty of Arab Jewish communities suspect, the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 and the subsequent state of war that existed between their countries and the nascent Jewish state, Jewish communities chose to remain in situ until the eventual dismantling of their communities in the late 1950s.

In the aftermath of the dispersion of their communities, some Jewish-Arab writers initially wrote in Arabic or French. Later, as they settled in France, Canada, Israel and the United States, they began to write in their newly adopted languages of English, Hebrew and French. Yet their writing seemed to escape national discourses often limited to all-encompassing ideas of identity, culture and nationalism. Franco-Jewish Arab writers seemed to cling obstinately to the lost, nebulous spaces of their childhood homelands, with the result that their writing is indelibly flecked with traces of the French language and the nineteenth century French Judaism that formed the backbone of their education. I propose that these writers still carry the imprint of these universal values regardless of whether they write in French or not, therefore, this work seeks to explore the role and influence of nineteenth century French Judaism on the oeuvre of the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer, and encompasses a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the problematic of my thesis.

**Chapter one** is a historical and sociological examination of the Jewish community of France from the moment of Jewish emancipation during the mid nineteenth century
until just after the Dreyfus affair at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the goal of the Alliance Israélite was to modernize the communities of the Ottoman Empire. Because the Alliance instructors followed a curriculum based on the primacy of the French Judaic model, the organization eventually became an organ for the transmission of French Judaism. This chapter is an examination of the French Jewish emancipation model and the ways it served as a pioneer model for the improvement of Jewish communities of the Machreq.

Using a selection of writers who wrote during this period. I have examined the reaction of the French Jewish community to the rise of anti-Semitism that ensued in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair. In addition, given that the curriculum of the Alliance schools was shaped by post revolutionary universalist values and that the teachers of the organization were trained in the Hexagon, it is logical that changes affecting the Jews of France would indirectly impact the Jews of the Arab world. This first chapter reveals the ways it did so and illustrates the degree to which the destiny of the Jewish community of France was indelibly linked with those of the Arab world.

Chapter two examines the emergence of the French Jewish renaissance of the 1920s. In particular, I have analyzed the promotion of Jewish particularism and the influence of Zionism on the post Dreyfus era generation. Using the work of authors such as Edmond Fleg, Armand Lunel, Albert Cohen whose proto-Zionist texts such as Fleg’s Pourquoi je suis juif (1927) chronicled the rise of Zionism in France in the
post First World War period, I have supplemented my research with Jewish Press articles of the period such as *La presse juive* and *Menorah*. I have shown that while both particularism and Zionism were seen as possible solutions to “la Question juive” by the Jewish community whose belief in *Appartenance française* had been shattered by the Affair, in the schools of the Alliance, the nineteenth-century Français Israélite model of Judaism was continuing to be actively promoted.

**Chapter three** examines the origin and rise of French influence in the Middle East and its effects on the Jewish communities. Although Napoléon’s incursions into Egypt were short, their effects were long standing, prior to the period of colonization of the nineteenth century and the post First War period, the Middle East and France enjoyed close ties. The Alliance Israélite, although not a legal organ of the French government, exerted enormous influence over the Jewish communities. The organization was welcomed by Jewish communities who viewed it as a catalyst for the improvement of their lot. Unfortunately, this was not without exacting a high price. As I have shown, the all powerful teachers of the Alliance were able to freely institute French universalist values which led to the betterment of their communities. Yet, they also imbued their students with a disgust for the Orient and the renewed perception of themselves as a community that was vastly superior to their Muslim compatriots.

It is significant that the Jewish communities of Iraq and Egypt lived for the most part peacefully under the tolerance of the Arab caliphate and subsequently, the Ottoman empire. French influence in the Middle East as a result of both
colonialism and the infiltration of the Alliance’s education program immeasurably disturbed the delicate equilibrium of the relationship between Arab and Jew. Jews were perceived by Muslims to have been unfairly favored by the colonial powers. In their turn, by considering themselves to be honorary Frenchmen, Jewish communities rejected early Arab nationalism and were consequently perceived as untrustworthy and disloyal. This chapter examines the deterioration of relations between Jews and Muslims during the age of nationalism and the role played by French influence in the ability of the Jewish community to prepare for the rise of both Jewish and Arab nationalism.

Chapter four investigates the clash of Jewish and Arab nationalism that preceded the final dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Machreq. I have illustrated that Arab nationalism, in its earliest stages, exhibited impressive universalist roots, which bore striking commonality with original Hertzlian cultural Zionism. By the 1920’s, both nationalist movements underwent dramatic changes in their founding ideology. Under the influence of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, cultural Zionism was replaced by political Zionism, a movement that promoted Jewish settlement in Palestine even if it meant the expulsion of indigenous Arabs from their ancestral villages. This resulted in the anger of Arab nationalist leaders, even among those who had formerly been sympathetic to Jewish nationalism.

By the 1920’s, Arab nationalism had changed its focus. A re-questioning of the concept of “Arabness” led to a reworking of the concept of al Umma al Islamiya and now meant that authentic Arabness was determined by religion rather than by
common language and history. As a result, Jewish belongingness to the nascent nation state was now in question. While the change in focus of Arab nationalism to Pan Arabism undoubtedly bears a heavy portion of the blame for the clash between Muslim and Arab communities, it is only one part of the story. Believing themselves to be a de facto extension of the Hexagon, Jewish communities not only profited socially and economically but they also believed themselves to be intellectually and socially superior to their Muslim compatriots. As a result, they were hopelessly unprepared to adapt to the changes caused by the development of Arab nationalism.

Like the Français–Israélites before them, Arab Jews superficially supported Zionism. In reality, they had little interest in leaving their countries to settle in Palestine. Despite anti-Semitic events such as the infamous Farhoud of 1941, when the Jewish community of Baghdad was viciously attacked by Iraqi masses under the encouragement of a pro-Nazi Iraqi government who believed the defeat of the Allies to be imminent, Jews were reticent about leaving their homeland. They preferred to accept the Farhoud as an aberration, in a country that had historically been tolerant to Jews. There was therefore no mass immigration but as in the post-Dreyfus era, there was some questioning of the belongingness of the Jewish community in Iraq.

In the aftermath of the Farhoud, Zionist organizations made serious attempts to encourage Mizrachi Jews to immigrate to Palestine, citing the Farhoud as a reason to do so. They were largely distrusted by community leaders who abhorred the particularistic elements represented by Zionism and as a result
Zionist emissaries were largely unsuccessful. Despite the pressure exerted on them by Zionist organizations, there was to be no mass immigration. The Jews of the Arab world did not leave and would not do leave their native homelands until after the state of Israel was established and the dismantlement of their communities became all but certainty. Arab Jews continued to maintain their belief that the new nation states would allow Jews to co-exist as viable Jewish communities and were perilously slow to react to obvious changes in Muslim attitude.

**Chapter five** attempts to identify and define the specificity of Franco – Jewish - Arab literature within the corpus of Jewish, Arab and Israeli literature. A complex picture emerges of a body of literature that bears similarity with, yet still remains distinct from the above groups. Conscious that the Franco- Jewish- Arab writer is by definition an Arab writer, I have endeavored to situate and distinguish the Franco-Jewish- Arab writer within the corpus of modern Arabic literature. For this, I identified several ubiquitous themes common to Arab literature written after the *Nada* (Arab renaissance). Using the work of Arab writers such as Myriam Antaki, Andree Chédid, Venus Khourry Ghatta and Etel Adnan, as a basis of comparison, it becomes clear that the two genres are distinctly different. While Franco- Jewish- Arab literature, like modern Arab literature centers itself around the traces of memory and nostalgia, it is almost devoid of the distinctly politically engaged messages (el Iltizam) often at the core of modern Arab literature.

While political engagement in the form of feminism, anti colonialism, anti-establishmentarianism and anti-Zionism, often overshadows the plots of the
Franco-Arab authors and Franco-Jewish-Arab authors tend to focus on universalist based plots that often empathize with the disadvantaged collective “Other”. Variations on this theme are not limited to the nostalgic background of memory and exile, but often include unlikely protagonists whose lives weave a complex tapestry depicting the colorful life of the author’s childhood and the world they left behind. In his work *Iya*, the Iraqi writer Shimon Ballas, for example, presents the unlikely story of the unassuming maid Iya, whose life is turned on its head when the Jewish family she has worked for more years than she can remember leaves Baghdad and emigrates to Israel. Ballas’s story represents a tableau of Iraq at the moment of the dismantling of the two thousand year old Jewish community. It also recalls the story of Iya, the “other” traditionally confined to the perimeters of the complex tapestry of Iraqi Jewish life. Her story illustrates the ways that the lives of Jews and Muslims were interconnected and remained so even after the two communities are no longer in physical contact.

By comparing the work of Jewish Arab writers such as Naim Kattan, Edmond Jabès and Paula Jacques with that of Français Israélite writers such as Edmond Fleg, Albert Cohen and André Spire, glaring commonalities surface. Like their Français Israélite predecessors, modern-day Franco-Jewish Arab writers tend to be suspicious of hierarchized religion. Yet, their texts are emphatically Jewish ones, imbued with biblical references and prophetic images of the Jewish protagonist sent to instruct a beleaguered world. These are familiar images, resonant with the perspective of nineteenth-century French Judaism and suggest
the degree to which the ideology of this period continues to influence Franco-
Jewish-Arab writers today.

The final chapter ultimately endeavors to link all the previous chapters of this work, to provide a comprehensive picture of the singularity of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature. By showing its cultural and thematic links with the work of Français Israélite writers and its digression from the Franco-Arab canon usually associated with Francophone literature, Franco-Jewish-Arab literature emerges as a separate, distinct branch of Francophone literature. Thanks to Franco-Jewish-Arab writers who now live in Israel and now write in Hebrew, it is a genre that has vastly widened its span of influence and has deeply affected the Israeli, traditionally Zionist focused discourse of the Israeli canon. It prompts the question as to how one now defines the parameters of the term Francophone literature and offers up the tempting thought that the genre represents a new type of French literature unlimited by any need for a common language yet indelibly bound to its corpus by its adherence to French Jewry’s nineteenth century universalist influence.
Chapter 1: French Jewish emancipation, the Dreyfus Affair and its effects on the Jewish communities of the Machreq

The French Jewish emancipatory model reached its influential zenith in France during the late nineteenth century. It wielded an enormous influence not only over the Jewish communities of France, but also over those of the Maghreb and the Machreq. It was so successful in these countries that it eventually outlived the validity of the model in France. Like Zionism, the emancipation model of the Français Israélites was based on the ideology of the Haskalah or Jewish enlightenment movement that swept across Europe during the mid-nineteenth century and promoted the economic and educational advancement of disadvantaged Jewish communities. Yet, in a striking digression from Zionism, the French model, based on the universalist values of the French Revolution, rejected the absolutist, particularistic notion that the establishment of a Jewish national hegemony was the sole answer to the Jewish Question. Its primary goal was to effect the institution of an exemplary, prosperous diaspora community where Jews could be fully fledged citizens, and could prosper with all of the same rights as their non-Jewish compatriots.

As we shall see, the French Jewish model was highly successful and although anti-Semitism did not totally disappear, it remained subdued enough to allow “les Français Israélites” to enter French society on multiple levels and, to feel an unprecedented level of belongingness in the society they lived in. Their new found
confidence eventually led to an extended sense of responsibility towards their coreligionists abroad who were not lucky enough to live in France and were therefore unable to enjoy the many benefits of French Jewish emancipation. As a direct extension of their sympathy and responsibility, schools were set up by the Paris based Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded during the early 1860s. The intention was to educate and emancipate Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire, in accordance with a centralized curriculum based on universalist ideology. Yet, by promoting Franco-Judaism as an exemplary diaspora model, the organization also propagated the superiority of French language and culture at the expense of Levantine languages and culture.

This first goal of this chapter is to trace the evolution of Franco-Judaism in the Hexagon and the genesis of its impressive influence on the Jewish communities of the Arab World. Using archival evidence from the Alliance Israélite Universelle, press articles of the period and memoirs and literature written during and after the period, I will examine the French Jewish emancipatory model and analyze its effects on the first Citizen Jews of France, as well as on the Jews of the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the success of French Jewish emancipation, significantly, anti-Semitism was never entirely eradicated. While Jews achieved emancipation, anti-Semitic sentiment retained a stubborn, perceptible presence in France, periodically rearing its ugly head when least expected to do so. Its virulence waxed and waned with the prevailing mood of the moment. Yet, French Jews were not overly concerned by this inconvenient fact. As fully-fledged French citizens, they believed they had gained irreversible acceptance in French society and were an integral part
of the fabric that defined what it meant to be French. Ultimately though, they were unable to ignore the conflagration of orchestrated anti-Semitism that exploded in the public arena as a consequence of the Dreyfus affair of 1894. In the aftermath of the Affair, French Jews began to inevitably both doubt the sustainability of the French Jewish emancipatory model and to re-question their own belongingness in the Hexagon. Although this conflict was eventually resolved and in fact, led to the Jewish Renaissance of the interwar years (1920-1930) that I will discuss in detail in chapter two, there is little doubt that as a consequence of the Affair, the Jews of France had been irreversibly shaken out of their somnolent complacency.

The second goal of this chapter is to examine the reaction to the Dreyfus affair in both the Jewish communities of France and of the Middle East. Using a combination of Jewish press articles and archives of the Alliance Israélite, I will show that, within the communities of the Middle East, irrespective of the unrest caused by the Dreyfus affair, and the reality that the tenability of the emancipatory model was now being debated in France, the primacy of the French Judaism model still remained strong and unwavering. The encounter of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire with the Alliance Israélite Universelle relentlessly reinforced communal belief in French superiority to such a degree that these communities blindly ignored evolving political events in both France and the Arab world. As we shall see in further chapters, this would eventually have dire effects upon the sustainability of their ancient communities.
The emancipation of French Jewry: A model for world wide Jewish emancipation

Although there has been a Jewish presence in France dating from the Middle ages, the road to modern Jewish emancipation as we understand it today, can be effectively traced back to the French Revolution of 1789 when the Enlightenment fathers' concern for their fellow men led to the Declaration of the Rights of Man. French Jews received formal civil rights in 1791, and as full-fledged citizens, were the first European Jews to be emancipated. Their integration and secularization paved the way for their full entry into French society and the eventual self rebranding of the community as Francais-Israélites, that began during the Napoléonic era.

Although eventually sympathetic to the Jewish condition, According to Benbassa, Napoléon initiated his reign by succumbing to the pressure of his

---

2 Esther Benbassa points out in her illuminating text L'Histoire des Juifs de France de l'Antiquité à nos jours (2000) that while it was true that the Enlightenment fathers harbored concerns for their fellow men, they did not express any particular concern for the status of Jews. She notes that Montesquieu expresses the need for tolerance towards Jews in Lettres persannes (1721), yet he frequently criticized Jewish texts. Similarly, Voltaire who was notably anti-religious, dismissed Judaism along with Christianity as antiquated vestiges of superstition, and both D'Alembert and Diderot's texts contained numerous references to Jewish usury. Finally, even among those Lumières who supported Jewish rights such as the Abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoure, whose defense of Jewish rights was to inspire the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, complained about the Jewish tendency for moral degradation in his famous Essai sur la regeneration physique, morale et politique des Juifs (1788)
Council of State who insisted on the need for him to address the numerous circulating accusations of Jewish usury.\(^3\)

Le gouvernement français ne peut voir avec indifférence une nation avilie, dégradée capable de toutes les bassesses posséder exclusivement les deux beaux départements d'Alsace; il faut considérer les juifs comme une nation dans la nation.

-Napoléon

Accusing the Jews of being a “nation within a nation” and therefore “unfrench” and disloyal, the council recommended the taking of restrictive measures against the entire Jewish community. Napoléon agreed to do, even though such action would have inevitably led to the inherent weakening of the Jewish community’s ability to sustain its livelihood. However, in 1806, in a stunning reversal of his decision, he recanted by announcing “Il y aurait de la faiblesse à chasser les juifs; il y aura de la force à les corriger.”\(^4\) In a display of surprising magnanimity, Napoléon called for an assembly of a “synagogue générale des juifs” to represent the most enlightened secular and religious members of the Jewish community. Instructed to convene in Paris on the 15\(^{th}\) June 1806, the committee was charged with the task of answering a wide range of questions on a whole range of subjects such as divorce, polygamy and the relationship between the Jewish and gentile community. The principal function of the inquiry was to determine to what extent Jews were capable of maintaining loyalty to France. After having successfully convinced himself of the goodwill of the Jews, Napoléon further recommended the formation of a formal Grand Sanhedrin, or


\(^4\) Benbassa, 140
tribunal. By doing so, he restored the archaic biblical institution of ancient Israel that had ceased to exist for fourteen centuries.

The Sanhedrin met for the first time in February 1807, and was presided over by the Alsatian rabbi, Joseph David Sinzheim. It formed an approximate emulation of its ancient predecessor, but its powers were very limited and the committee had little ability to challenge let alone effect government decisions. Although the committee was dissolved just a month after it first met, it was eventually replaced by an “Assemblée des Notables” which in time, was replaced by the establishment of a centralized Consistory in Paris. This in turn was supported by a system of local Consistories in all départements containing at least 2000 Jews and resulted in the historic reunification of the Jewish communities of France under one umbrella.5

The Consistory: a forerunner of the Alliance Israélite Universelle

The Consistory slowly evolved into a hierarchal, centralized organization to became an integral part of French Jewish community life. By combining religious and secular affairs, its duties included the maintaining of social order, the rehabilitation of the community through the promotion of education and the encouragement of employment in specialized trades that would discourage a reversion to usury. Based in Paris, the Central Consistory stood at the top of the hierarchy and was composed of three rabbis and two lay members. Local Consistories operated in much the same manner. Quite often, the same lay members

5 At the same time as representing the Jewish community’s needs, the Consistory also assured the maintenance of order.
were cyclically elected and re-elected. They were usually non-observant, but non-assimilated Jews who had made their fortunes in the aftermath of the Revolution. Among them were descendants of the famous Rothschild and Ratisbonne families.

In its steady march towards modernization, the Consistory sought to update and modernize the Jewish religion. In 1856, it was responsible for the abridgement of synagogue services, the introduction of sermons in French and the recommendation of the enlargement of the women’s section of the synagogue as well as the standardization of Jewish wedding and burial services. By effecting these changes, the Consistory hoped to encourage a “return to the fold” of the many secularized Jews who had left their place of worship during the early days of emancipation but had not yet abandoned their Jewish identity. The Consistory, as a natural heir to Napoléon’s Sanhedrin, emerged as the representative body of French Jewry. As I shall show in future chapters, the organization was also a keen proponent of French colonialism. Yet, although it was respected, it did not operate without criticism. By 1848, there were glaring divisions between the representatives of the Consistory and its constituents, as orthodox Jews from eastern France began to dominate the poorer classes. Arguing for a return to traditional Jewish values, their voices often clashed loudly with those of the founding members of the Consistory who continued to favor the type of modernization they believed could only be brought about through secularization.

The establishment of the Consistories marked an important watershed in French Jewry’s journey towards full emancipation. Although they were criticized for their somewhat despotic nature, that at times rendered large numbers of
constituents voiceless and unrepresented, the ideology of modernization through secularization effectively supported the organization’s ability to organize Jews as a group. This successfully ensured the continued betterment of the lives of French Jews. Soon, a full range of political activities provided structures by which French Jews could not only exercise their religion, they could also give or receive charity, become educated, receive job training and work and be cared for when they were ill - all without ever having to leave their Jewish milieu.

As a precursor to the eventual Province to Métropole relationship which would later emerge as a dominating consequence of colonization, French emancipation did not confine itself to the borders of the Hexagon. No sooner had French Jews received political emancipation, they begin seeking ways to extend the benefits of emancipation to their brethren living under less liberal régimes. Their new found awareness and empathy doubtlessly fueled by self assured superiority, ultimately led to the founding of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1860 and with it, the establishment of a network of Jewish schools throughout the Ottoman Empire. This would irreversibly change the landscape of these communities.

Les Français Israélites: integration versus assimilation

By the era of the Second Empire (1852-1870), French Jews were known as Français Israélites. The term, initially coined during the Second Empire, represented a positive transformation of the earlier term Israélite Français. It at once clarified French Jewish loyalty to France and freed Jews from the classic, pejorative, anti-Semitic connotations of the word “juif”. French Jews now had an a priori right to
participate in every sphere of citizenship. Religion, at least theoretically, was no longer a measure of one’s patriotism. While popular, contemporary Zionist discourse continues to accuse the French Jewish model of promoting acculturation and assimilation and therefore, from its inception was doomed to failure as a permanent answer to the Jewish Question, closer examination reveals that this was simply not the case.

While it was true that French Jews were free to retain their social and cultural specificity (as were the many other regional and linguistic groups within the country), they were under no pressure to shed their identity. Their process of adaptation took the form of an additive rather than a substitutional acculturation. Jews did adopt the French language, norms and values merging them with their own traditions, but contrary to Zionist accusation, they did not disappear into general French society nor did they divest themselves of their own associations. Judaism was a religion, one among many, whose practice fell within the private sphere of the citizen. Adherence or non adherence to Jewish tradition was simply a matter of personal choice.

Admittedly, during the middle to late nineteenth century, there was a digressionary movement that moved away from religious practice (which again, was entirely congruent with the religious tendency of the general population), but by that time, the Jews of France were free to experience secularized Judaism, which in no way meant that they abandoned en masse their historical responsibility. As a

---

case in point, there were very few documented cases of conversion to Christianity during the nineteenth century. For example, both immigrant Jews escaping the pogroms of East Europe and native French Jews still tended to have two names, a French name, used in dealings with society, and another Jewish name used in the private sphere such as certificates of marriage and burials.

According to Michel Abitbol, by the end of the Second Empire (1870), the Jewish community felt so completely integrated that, in 1889, on the anniversary of the revolution the French Chief Rabbi, Zadoc Kahn delivered a sermon at the Temple de la Victoire, extolling the immense progress that the Jewish community had made in France since they had attained citizenship.7

By the end of the nineteenth century, when religious observance did start to decline, it was through a slow, rather uneven but nevertheless organic process rather than a quantitative monolithic one. Assimilation was naturally heavily

7 For a more in depth examination of Zadoc Kahn’s speech see the following seminal work written by the author “Sermons et allocutions”, 1894, 111. p138-144.
criticised by the rabbis who were among the first to accuse French Jews of putting the French aspect above the Jewish aspect of their identity. According to Nadia Malinovich, much of the discourse on the declining Jewish aspect of French-Jewish identity was overstated and perhaps even invented by both the clergy, who feared the decline of Judaism as a religion and by the Zionist movement which feared the success of French Judaism.\textsuperscript{8} In truth, the French Jewish assimilation process was a slow, insidious one. Only during the closing years of the nineteenth century, did the Jewish component of the Français Israélite dichotomy come to have a secular meaning, with social, cultural and nationalistic facets of what would later be transformed by selective critics into a controversial “double loyalty” of French and Jewish identification. Evidence shows that the model had clearly started out as a “double love” for France and Judaism. Significantly, it was the French aspect of Jewish loyalty that eventually led to the Jewish community’s function as a disseminator of French culture and by extension, a keen enabler of the French colonial apparatus.

\textbf{The “Jewish Other” as an extension of self}

By the end of the nineteenth century, as French Jews were becoming increasingly assimilated, the Jewish presence in France was simultaneously bolstered by the pogroms which marked the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and had led to massive waves of Jewish emigration. Of the 3.5 million Jews

who left central and eastern Europe between 1880-1925, some 100,000 settled in France of whom 30-40,000 settled in Paris. The influx constituted a massive change in the composition of the French Jewish community. *Autochtone* Jews or indigenous Jews now that they had achieved integration for themselves, initially feared that the arrival of the immigrants, whose dowdy appearance uncomfortably reminded them of what they once had been, would set back their hard won integration into French society. Nevertheless, in the spirit of the Revolution, despite their initial reticence, French Jewry quickly took a paternalistic view of the situation and set about the task of educating, integrating and above all introducing the newcomers to a love of France. The immigrants were soon bedazzled by the bright promise of emancipation and the tantalizing possibilities of economic opportunity in their new country. Brandishing the popular saying of the era “*Lebn vi Got in Frankraycht*” translated as “Live like God in France’ they were only too happy to comply to the guidelines set by their autochtone co-religionists. In record time, they were successfully integrated into French Jewish society and within the first generation of their arrival they were amply represented in the liberal professions, public administration and even the academy.

Concern for their co-religionists was to remain a concurrent theme among French Jewish leaders who saw disadvantaged Jewish communities abroad as an extension (albeit an inferior one) of themselves rather than as the “Other”. During the infamous Damascus affair of 1840, when several Jews were accused of the ritual murder of a Cappucine monk, the Jewish community of France was quick to mobilize. Horrified by what they saw as a revival of the ancient blood libel that first
surfaced in England during the Middle Ages, they reacted in solidarity with a British delegation led by Sir Moses Montefiore, with the result that the accused Jews were eventually freed. This, along with other outbreaks of anti-Semitism such as the Mortara affair in Italy, involving the forced conversion of a Jewish child to Catholicism, encouraged the type of solidarity that led to the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1862.

**The re-emergence of Anti-Semitism.**

Despite the success of the French emancipation model, anti-Semitism did not entirely disappear. In France, its presence was still perceptible as a stubborn undercurrent that is readily detectable in the Décadence literature of the waning years of the nineteenth century and reached its apex during the Panama and later, the Dreyfus Affair. The ascendance of the Français Israélite in French society and the subsequent steady rise of anti-Semitism can be detected in the theater and the opera, both media in which Jews achieved prolific representation during the late nineteenth century, and therefore serve as a useful barometer by which to measure the progress and success of Jewish emancipation.

---

9 It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in depth study of the Panama Affair of 1892, during which close to a million Francs were lost when the French government took bribes to keep quiet about the Panama Canal Company’s financial woes. The Affair had an important effect on the development of anti-Semitism due to the involvement of two Jews of German origin, Jacques Reinach and Cornelius Hertz who were charged with distributing the bribe money among the bribed government members. For a more in depth study of this subject see Benbassa’s chapters on the subject.
The Arts as a barometer of the success of Jewish Emancipation and the presence of anti-Semitism

Halevy: Finding the words

At the dawn of the age of Jewish emancipation, there was no shortage of Jewish artistic talent. Musicians and composers such as Jacques Halevy (1799-1862) Charles- Valentin Valcan (1813-88) and Eduard Colonne(1838-1919) all prospered on stage. While in the theater, actresses such as Rachel (1821-58) and Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) played to full houses, “even though these artists did not specifically focus on Jewish themes, they remained attached to the Jewish community and its traditions.” (Benbassa 116). Later, the “Belles-lettres” were conquered by writers such as Marcel Schwob (1867-1905) Bernard Lazare (1865-1903) and the politician Léon Blum (1872-1950).

The road to artistic emancipation was not always easy for the first Jewish artists. In their desire to free themselves from the Jewish obscurantism of the past they ran the risk of being accused of anti-Semitism or of self hatred. On the other hand, failure to promote the universalist ideals of the Orléanist government made the Jewish artist an easy target for those who doubted the wisdom of awarding citizenship and full rights to the Jews of France. One of the most celebrated Jewish composers of the mid nineteenth century Jacques Fromental Halévy, quickly discovered the difficulties that laid in wait for the Jewish artist who sought to negotiate the artistic minefields of the mid nineteenth century.
Halévy was born in Paris in 1799 to a German Jewish father and a French Jewish mother. With his opera *La Juive* (1835) he attained major international fame, but Halévy’s lavish production, set in Constanza, Switzerland in 1414 during the reign of Emperor Sigismund was also deeply controversial. Although the opera was written after the codification of the “loi de culte d’Israélite,” in 1830, which gave the Jews of France civil rights, critics accused the work of being tainted by its scenes of religious fanaticism that uncomfortably recalled the old anti-Semitic tropes that had now hopefully been laid aside by the actions of the government of the July Monarchy. Interestingly, the opera continues to be lambasted today by critics such as Isabelle Moindrot who declared in her 1987 article, “Le Geste et l’idéologie dans le grand opera, *La Juive* de Fromental Halévy”, “cet opéra, qui met en scène pour la dénoncer, une situation de persécution, renouvelait l’antisémitisme séculaire en le nourrissant d’images somptueuses, en lui fourissant des slogans rimés et bien cadencés.10

*La juive* centres around a celebration called in honour of the emperor Sigismund, to celebrate his victory over the religious reformer Jan Hus. In his honour, the townsfolk sing a *Te Deum*, but are quick to anger when the Jew Eléazar refuses to join in the celebration and instead chooses to work. Eléazar, a Jewish goldsmith and a refugee, deliberately defies the Christian laws that once sent his sons to the stake. His refusal incurs the wrath of the townsfolk who threaten to throw both Eléazar and his beautiful daughter Rachel into Lake Constance. The audience later discovers that Rachel is the daughter of the Catholic priest Brogni

and has no Jewish blood at all. Yet, when faced with the choice of recanting her claim to Judaism, or death, Rachel refuses conversion and the opera ends with her being ominously lowered into a cauldron of boiling water.

According to critics, the opera's disturbing scenes of anti-Semitism and Jewish hatred of the gentile were entirely dissonant with the era of emancipation. At a time when Jews had finally received codified emancipation, why the need to recall such horror? In his article “La Juive de Scribe et Halévy (1835). Un opera juif?” (2004) Olivier Bara notes the similarity of La Juive with the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera Les Huguenots (1836) that takes place after the St Barthélemy massacre of 1572. Like in Halévy's La Juive, Meyerbeer's protagonists too, choose martyrdom over religious submission. In a striking parallel, both operas reflect the agony of religious minorities suppressed by the religion of the majority and in both productions, the religion of the minority surfaces as the more noble one. As Bara correctly points out, superficially at least, Halévy seems to revert to stereotypic religious tropes, yet, by controversially highlighting the horror and primitiveness of the religious intolerance of the fifteenth century. Halévy, like Meyerbeer, celebrates the victory of the nineteenth century universalism that gave civil rights to France's religious minorities over the religious obscurantism of the past. Bara explains,

Selon cette perspective, La Juive naitrait d'une volonté délibérée transformant l’opéra en vitrine du pouvoir orléaniste. S'il faut toujours se garder des simplifications idéologiques face à la création complexe et collective d'un opéra dont le sens échappe en dernier ressort à toute velléité

de contrôle absolu, il est évident que l’ouvrage de Scribe entretient avec l’actualité immédiate un lien puissant.
Olivier Bara, « La Juive de scribe et Halévy, p.145.

Halévy’s opera contains other scenes that are more difficult to explain. In his depiction of a world that is all the worse for its dependence on reductive, religious tropes, the composer highlights the cerebral nature and arguably superiority of the Jewish Passover Seder ceremony. In doing so, he unfavorably compares it to the garishly, lavish and presumably simplistic Catholic mass. This scene is all the more significant because it is the opera’s only positive portrayal of religion. Bara elaborates,

La représentation sur le plateau de l’opéra du seder vaut aussi symboliquement, reconnaissace et affirmation de la présence juive en France. Le dépouillement de cette scène intime, sa simplicité contrastant avec le faste écrasant de l’acte “chrétien” qui précède, donne aussi dans l’opéra le seule image positive de la religion: non plus la collusion avec le pouvoir et la puissance d’écrasement, mais le recueillement la ferveur et la foi. (Bara,150)

According to Bara, the inspiration for this scene was Halévy’s earlier visit to the Jewish ghetto of Venice during Passover when he was twenty years old. Although by his own admission, he was an assimilated Jew, Halévy’s correspondence dating from this period illustrates with remarkable clarity his observations of the contrast between Judaism and Christianity and are virtually identical to those found of the Concil de Constance in La Juive. According to Bara, Halévy was so impressed by his Venetian host Issakhar that he later modelled La Juive’s protagonist Eléazar after him.
Halévy’s lingering nostalgia towards Judaism despite his support of secular universalism suggests a type of emotional dystonia on the part of the composer. Despite his voracious embrace of universalism, Halévy was unready or unwilling to relegate the Jewish religion to the status of a primitive relic of the past. Indeed, it would appear that he still believed in its latent superiority. All of this indicates that at the time of his composition of *La Juive*, Halévy, as an emerging Français Israélite, still occupied a position of unstable, uncomfortable alterity. Straddling two worlds, that of the assimilationist, and that of the Jew who stubbornly guards what Michel Espagne describes as “Un attachement plus affectif que rationnel au Judaïsme”,¹² *La Juive* is interesting because it illustrates the poignant dilemma of the Français Israélite artist at the beginning of emancipation, who even after the enactment of the “loi du culte israélite still struggled to balance his new found French citizenship with ancient, atavistic ties of Judaism. It would only be decades later, when comfortable with their status as Français Israélites, that Jewish artists would be confident enough to effortlessly negotiate their Jewishness with their belongingness in France.

**The Français Israélites of the late nineteenth century: success in the arts despite anti-Semitism**

Two of the best examples of Jewish contribution to French theater and whose success illuminates the stubborn presence of anti-Semitism in French society despite emancipation, were Georges Porto-Riche (1849-1930) and Henri Philippe

---

de Rothschild (1872-1947). Comparing his play *L’Amour* favorably to the work of Racine, Jacques Copeau wrote of Porto- Riche (who was elected to the Académie française in 1923): “Porto- Riche, reprend après Racine l’étude des rapports passionnés entre l’homme et la femme en réalisant l’anatomie sentimentale”. Porto-Riche was lauded by critics for his subtlety in portraying love and truth. Although he did not formally treat “La question juive” in his work, he was unable to escape accusations of having contributed to ”un théâtre trop enjuivé” (otherwise construed as an inferior theater). For example, while the critic Pierre Brisson conceded in an article written for Comoedia 1925 that “Porto-Riche est le moins juif des auteurs” he still maintained his dismissive view that,

> Les grands soufflés héroïques et certains cris profonds de l’âme restent inconnus des dramaturges israélites. Prenez de grands créateurs et vous sentirez mieux la différence. Vous n’imaginez pas qu’un Hugo ou qu’un Musset aient pu naître juifs.¹³

In further criticism of Porto- Riche, the infamously anti-Semitic writer/journalist Leon Daudet (1867-1942) attacked the writer for his “excessively Jewish characters” in Eduard Drumont’s anti-Semitic periodical *La Libre parole*,

> Porto- Riche a deux traits du juif: il est prétentieux et il est tourmenté. C’est l’homme auquel les admirateurs, ces “Oh, ah” ont fini par persuader qu’il avait du génie, qu’il était une orchidée de la plus rare espèce. Un melon bleu, une petite chose touchante, complexe et de rarissime. Je l’ai entraperçu en cours des rencontres de la vie parisienne, une demi douzaine de fois. Je croyais d’abord qu’il avait mal aux dents.  


¹³ For forther understanding of this complex subject see Pierre Brisson,”Le theatre juif” *Comoedia*, Jeudi 16 octobre 1924.
While Jewish emancipation had become so successful that it allowed the proliferation of Jewish dramatists, its success paradoxically propagated the waves of anti-Semitism that led to the proliferation of a substantial body of anti-Semitic literature during the nineteenth century.

**Drumont and his crusade against the Jews.**

In an era during which witnessed the masses becoming increasingly literate, the press consequently became proportionately more powerful. This was to have enormous consequences on the Jewish artist who by the latter half of the nineteenth century now enjoyed considerable success in the arts. Eduard Drumont (1844-1917), was initially a rather obscure journalist. By the end of the century, he emerged as one of the most infamous anti-Semites of his generation by uniting all the classic elements of Judeophobia and bringing them to the attention of the widest possible audience in his notorious two volume work *La France Juive* (1886). The work totaled an astonishing 1200 pages and skillfully integrated both new and old elements of anti-Semitism. By reducing Jews to a collection of recognizable traits such as “ce nez fameux courbé, les yeux clignants, les dents serrées, les oreilles saillantes, les ongles carrés le torse trop long, le pied plat...la main trop moelleuse et fondant de l’hypocrite et du trai tre,” Drumont managed with great success, to denounce an entire segment of the population as hapless victims of a biological malediction as well disloyal French subjects. Although the work was initially published at the expense of the author, it rapidly gained a wide readership by rallying the disunited Catholic working classes of the nation against a Judaized,
unpopular Republic. Drumont cleverly used anti-Semitism as a tool, and with his novel use of negative anti-Semitic tropes he found the perfect vehicle with which to juxtapose French national identity with classical rejection of the Jew.

Jewish and Gentile response to Anti-semitism

Dumont’s and his compatriot Léon Daudet’s anti-Semitic tirades in *La France juive*, and Mauras’s *L’Action française* warned the French public of the menace and dangers of the dark forces of “le théâtre enjuivé”, and revealed the undercurrent of anti-Semitism that stubbornly persisted in French society despite the gains made by emancipation. It should be noted that anti-Semitism did not go obliviously unchecked. There was an impressive number of emerging intellectuals, both Jewish and non Jewish, who did not hesitate to defend Jewish interests. Émile Zola for example, wrote an article for *Le Figaro* in 1896 in which he criticized the ridiculousness of French hostility to the Jews.14 Initially berating his readers for their apathetic silence, he later implored,

Eh quoi! Vous êtes de plus de deux cents millions catholiques, on compte à peine cinq millions de juifs, et vous tremblez, vous appelez des gendarmes vous menez un effroyable vacarme de terreur, comme si des nuées de pillards s’étaient abattues sur le pays. ... Faire cesser la guerre des races en mêlant les races.

Émile Zola, *La Nouvelle Campagne.*

---

14 Quoted in *Nouvelle Campagne*. Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier.1897.
Zola later encouraged his readership to re-embrace and re-adopt the ideology and spirit of the Revolution. The intellectual elite’s persistent quest to re-equilibrate the balance between acceptance and rejection, bolstered Jewish belief in the over-riding fairness of the French judicial system. They believed that although anti-Semitism was akin to a dormant but virulent virus that cyclically reared its ugly head, ultimately, it would never triumph because unlike other countries, the French Republic, founded on the ideology of the Revolution inherently abhorred injustice. This was the central over-riding belief of the Français-Israélites, and it was exactly this perspective of France that was disseminated to the communities of the Ottoman Empire by the teachers of the Alliance Israélite, irrespective of any challenges to this reality in the Hexagon.

**The Dreyfus Affair: a litmus test of French justice**

Despite the anti-Semitic rumblings of the late nineteenth century, it was only after the Dreyfus affair of 1894 and the subsequent anti-Semitic manifestations that rumbled in its wake, that French Jews really began to seriously question the success of French Jewish integration. Ironically, at its outset, the Dreyfus affair did not attract much attention in the French Jewish community, because quite simply, the majority of French Jews initially believed Dreyfus was guilty. By the time the captain was sentenced and deported in 1895, anti-Semitic sentiment in France had
reached fever pitch. Jewish belongingness or Francité could no longer be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{15}

**The reaction of French Jews to the Dreyfus affair**

Initially blinded by their trust in the French government, French Jews remained quiet with the hope of avoiding too much unwanted attention. Because sycophantically grateful to France for bringing them emancipation, they breathlessly rushed to identify themselves as faithful republicans. In their anxiety to identify with the Republic, they shied away from any publicity which might question their loyalty. Eric Cahm argues persuasively in his extensive study, *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and French Politics* (1994) that, although the Middle Class Dreyfus family and Bernard Lazare had been at the very root of the Dreyfusard campaign, Dreyfusism was most marked among poorer Jews. Cahm tellingly reveals that the only public meeting held to protest against anti-Semitism at the time of the Dreyfus affair was organized by immigrant Jewish workers in Montmartre in 1899, who had just set up the *Prolétariat juif de France* to remind the French people that “not all Jews were wealthy financiers”. (92) The official bodies of Judaism kept conspicuously quiet. This included both the consistories and the

\textsuperscript{15} It is illuminating that the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, who witnessed the events of the Affair as a correspondent for the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*, concluded that as a result of the Affair, the French government could no longer be counted on to provide a reliable source of support for the Zionist movement. He subsequently chose to pin his hopes on Great Britain where members of the aristocracy such as Lord Balfour had already expressed a paternalistic interest in the establishment of a Jewish homeland. Still, one cannot help but conclude that the Affair provided a convenient opportunity for the Zionist leader to openly flaunt the failure of French Jewish emancipation. It thus presented a useful opportunity to promote the superiority of the Zionist model.
Jewish press. Notably absent was the support of the Alliance Israélite, which had ironically been established to defend Jewish interests. The organization played almost no part in the pro-Dreyfus campaign. In his *Souvenirs sur l'affaire* (1935), written some thirty years after he witnessed the Affair, Léon Blum critically describes the lamentable response of the French Jewish community.

Michel Bréal était juif. Bernard Lazare était juif, le Colonel Roget dénonçait d'avance un complot juif. Il ne faudrait pas du tout croire, cependant que dans les milieux juifs que je fréquentais alors mieux des bourgeois moyens de jeunes litterateurs de fonctionnaires-il existait le moindre prédisposition au dreyfusisme, on n'eut rien constaté de pareil. En thèse générale, les juifs avaient accepté la condamnation de Dreyfus comme définitive et comme juste. Ils ne parlaient pas de l'affaire entre eux; ils fuyaient le sujet bien loin de soulever. Un grand Malheur était tombé sur Israël. On le subissait sans mot dire en attendant que le temps et le silence en effaçant les effets.


According to Blum, the Jewish community were fearful that any overt defense of Dreyfus would further fan the flames of anti-Semitism that had already been ignited by Drumont’s anti-Semitic outbursts in *Libre Parole*. Jewish support for Dreyfus was additionally perceived as dangerous because the Affair’s connotations of Jewish treachery carried prickling, uncomfortable associations with the biblical Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, and threatened to conjure up the old anti-Semitic ghosts of the past. Tellingly, caricatures of Judas regularly featured in *La Libre Parole* (1892-1924) in which Jews were portrayed as dangerous, perfidious internationalists, responsible for the decadence of the late nineteenth century. Blum summed up the general mood of the times,

Il fallait donc se souvenir que Dreyfus était juif, qu’un juif
As far as Drumont was concerned, irrespective of their desire to ignore the Dreyfus Affair, the Jewish community was guilty and still bore the stigmata of their race.

**The theater and the Dreyfus Affair**

The rise of anti-Semitism as a consequence of the Dreyfus Affair was visible in both literature and theater. A common theme of the period was the portrayal of Jews as sly infiltrators whose aim was to erode and destabilize French society. In that spirit, Jewish males were typically cast as a Shylock-like characters with hyperbolically exaggerated Jewish physical features such as dark, swarthy coloring, a big nose and gesturing hand movements. Typically, the Jewish character engaged in usury. The Jewess, stereotypically named Judith, was usually very exotic and beautiful. She was portrayed to be even more dangerous than her male counterpart, because her purpose was to propagate the Jewish race by sinuously charming and then bewitching, the unsuspecting French gentile protagonist and then finally introducing her Jewish friends into her Christian husband’s household.

In a scene from the Goncourts’ *Manette Salomon* (1902), the Christian protagonist Coriolos marries the Jewess Manette. He later laments his estrangement from his son, which he attributes to the child’s “Jewishness”.

---

16 In 1925, Gémier in his *Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell*, wrote “Shylock n’est seulement un juif, c’est *le juif*.”
Because he associates “Jewishness” with pejorative images of Eastern European Jews, Coriolos is quickly repulsed by his son’s overtly Jewish features and cannot bear to be in his presence. Reverting to Drumontian anti-Semitism, which posited Jewishness as a sign of biologic malediction, Coriolos blames his wife for transmitting the “Jewish genes” that have smothered his child’s “Frenchness” to such a degree that his gentile father, no longer feels consanguinity with his own flesh and blood. What is worse is that by believing that his wife and the son have formed a united Jewish force against him, Coriolos feels emasculated. Complaining to his friend that his house has become “Une vraie juiverie, la maison maintenant… Non tu n’as pas idée… C’est le sabbat chez moi, le sabbat”, Coriolis stresses that he feels like an impotent stranger in his own house.

The accusation of Jewish failure to integrate in French society is also explored in Albert Guinon’s play Décadence (1901). The protagonist is an impoverished aristocrat who decides to receive the rich foreign born bourgeois Jew Strohman, in his home along with his French born, French educated son. In a heated conversation with his friend Chérance before the Srohman’s arrival, it soon becomes clear that le Duc sees all Jews as a revoltingly dangerous, contiguous body who, irrespective of how long they have lived in France, are totally incapable of

either assimilation or genuine loyalty. Speculating on which Strohman is more odious than the other, le Duc concludes, “Allez! Allez! Ne faisons pas de choix! Nous pouvons détester tous les deux, et avec eux toute la tribu!” Thus, Jews are ultimately rejected as an indiscriminate, amorphous body of hopelessly disloyal subjects.

In Maurice Donnay's *Retour de Jérusalem* (1908), Michel is horrified when the beautiful Jewess Judith Fucciani for whom he has abandoned his Christian wife, undergoes a metamorphosis after returning from Jerusalem. Presumably as a consequence of re-discovering her Jewish roots, Judith abandons all sense of Frenchness in her preference for the dubious company of a motley crew of Jews, all of whom exhibit hyperbolically exaggerated east European Jewish features. The text assumes an even darker tone when it implies that all French Jews are covert Zionists and are therefore inherently unfaithful to France. In an interesting paradox, at a time when the French Zionist movement was in its early infancy and drew little attention from neither Jewish nor non-Jewish intellectuals, Donnay's portrayal of Judith as a Zionist in *Retour de Jérusalem* highlights the supposed connections between Jews and Jerusalem. His endorsement also perhaps supports a repositioning of the play as a proto-Zionist text, because, despite the play’s undeniably anti-Semitic undertones, it indirectly supports the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a permanent answer to “la question juive”.

It is difficult to ignore however, that that the play provides sinister reinforcement of Maurice Barrès's redefinition of the criteria which constitute “nationhood”. Barrès’s theory (later supported by Drumont) drew its roots from semi-scientific, racial contemporary theories and questionable biblical exegesis. He
(along with Charles Maurras,) believed that the roots of nationhood were to be found in the earth, history, institutions and inheritance of the land rather than universalism. Barrès's anti-Universalist ideology contrasted sharply with the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and was aired frequently during the Dreyfus Affair by the anti Dreyfusards. His reasoning was popular because it offered simplistic proof that Jews were either rootless internationalists or Zionists who in either case, had no allegiance to France, and therefore had no legitimate basis for being considered French. It is significant that in Retour de Jérusalem, Judith is initially portrayed as an internationalist who is incapable of respect nor fidelity to the basic tenets of French nationhood.

Ah ! penser en Français, on sait ce que ça veut dire: c’est limiter l’humanité à un fleuve et à une chaîne de montagnes: c’est ignorer complaisamment ce qui se passé au dehors; c’est être fier en regardant une colonne… c’est prendre un trou et mettre de la tradition autour.

Maurice Donnay, Retour de Jérusalem.

Judith’s crude mockery of French tradition serves to illustrate her lack of French belongingness. In contrast, her aristocratic gentile lover Michel is portrayed as admirably honorable and “authentically” French when he replies,

Évidemment, ces gens –là ne se proclament pas citoyens du monde; c’est d’ailleurs, une expression mal venue, car la cité et le monde sont deux choses opposées ...et la plupart des hommes tiennent à la terre où ils sont nés par des racines profondes.

Maurice Donnay, Retour de Jérusalem.
Judith is finally portrayed as a fervent supporter of the Zionist movement who bears no respect for French nationhood, while Michel is portrayed as the embodiment of authentic French nationhood.

By establishing such a glaring contrast between Judith and Michel's view of *Francité*, the scene foreshadows the eventual end of their union, suggesting that because of their *essential* differences, any union between a Jew and a Gentile is futile and doomed to inevitable failure. On a more sinister note, the author's portrayal of Judith as a Zionist, even before Zionism became a credible movement in France skillfully reinforced Barrès's theory that Jews had no authentic roots in France and therefore did not belong there.

*Retour de Jérusalem* was heavily criticized by Léon Blum, who contested the reasonability of the plot on several levels. Firstly, reminding the reader of the divisions and snobbery that still existed in Jewish circles during the era of the Dreyfus Affair, Blum questions the plausibility of the seemingly worldly, beautiful Judith even speaking to, let alone cavorting with vulgar immigrant Jews, suggesting that she would have dismissed them as below her class. He then takes Donnay to task for his portrayal of Judith as a rootless internationalist. First, he examines Donnay's initial portrayal of the character as a proud Zionist when in the first two acts, Judith implores Michel to understand her Zionist position.

Comme tu as raison! Certes il faut aimer sa patrie c'est une passion plus intense encore dans mon cœur que dans le tien. Toi tu possèdes ta patrie et tu la chéris librement ; moi, j'ai perdu la mienne et je la déplore. Qui donc peut chérir son pays aussi passionnément que l'exilé?
She argues that as a proud French nationalist Michel should be able to understand her lack of “patrie”. He then compares the above passage with Judith’s crude mockery of nationalism in the third act of the play.

On voit donc si Michel tombe à faux quand il reproche à Judith d’être internationaliste. Il est vrai qu’à sa place, et si ‘il était vraiment, je n’en serais pas plus embarrassé de répondre à la tirade de Michel Aubier. La patrie dit Michel Aubier, c’est un coin de la terre, c’est une rose qui porte son nom, c’est une assiette peinte… Dans la pièce de M. Donnay, ni Judith ni personne ne réplique rien et pourtant la riposte est facile. Si la patrie n’était vraiment que le coin de la terre où l’on naquit, que des souvenirs, que des habitudes, le patriotisme serait un instinct grossier, une sorte de fétichisme. Heureusement c’est autre chose. C’est l’orgueil de ce que nos aieux ont fait de prolonger leur tâche, c’est la résolution de consacrer, comme eux, notre effort à introduire dans l’humanité toujours plus de raison, toujours plus de bonté, toujours plus de justice ; c’est la foi dans quelques idées que depuis deux cent ans, la France a représentées dans le monde, et qui nous rendent en effet le patriotisme plus facile qu’à d’autres: la liberté, l’égalité des individus, la fraternité des hommes, l’universalité du droit. Ce que vous appelez notre internationalisme, c’est l’espoir, c’est la certitude que le monde entier sera conquis un jour pacifiquement, par les idées que la France figure dans l’histoire.

Léon Blum, Sur le Rétour de Jérusalem.

Blum rejects the *vraisemblance* of Donnay’s plot, and further castigates the author for disseminating Barrès’s nationalist values, insisting that by doing so, he has rejected the post revolutionary universal values that made France an extemporary nation. Finally, he gives agency to the silenced voice of Judith who represents fellow *Francais Israélites*, whose loyalty has been put in question. By reaffirming the historical relationship between Jews and the values of the French republic, he shows that Jewish loyalty to France is a natural, authentic, and enduring
consequence of Jewish emancipation. In doing so, he dismisses Donnay’s (and Barrès’s) suggestion that Jews are disloyal. 18

**Jewish reaction in the theater to the Dreyfus affair**

Jewish writers did not remain silent. Confident of the prevalence of French reason and justice, they responded to anti-Semitism by producing plays that challenged charges of disloyalty and criticized the unfairness of prejudice. In a scene from Savoir and Nozières *Le Baptême* (1907), the protagonist Lucien Bloch bitterly complains to his father that, “La laideur juive c’est une malédiction” (200). Though he tries to console his son, his father is unable to convince him that the reflection he sees of himself in French society is false. When Lucien complains about his lack of belongingness in France “Vois tu papa, si nous sommes si malheureux , je sais bien pourquoi. C’est parce que nous ne sommes pas chez nous.”, Lucien postulates that that the family must return to his father’s childhood home in Frankfurt. The older Bloch merely responds with sad silence. He has no answer. In 1907, Paul Léotaud wrote in *Mercure de France* that Bloch’s gesture was a sad reflection on “le juif errant” that, without a homeland, is destined to restlessly roam the Earth. Although the text principally challenges the injustice of the treatment of French Jews and the degree to which France failed to live up to its post-Revolutionary values of *Liberté, Égalité et Fraternité*, like Donnay’s *Retour de Jerusalem*, Nozière’s play too, can also be viewed as a proto-Zionist text that

---

highlights the consequences of the Jew’s lack of a permanent homeland and thus indirectly supports Zionism as an answer to anti-Semitism.

**The aftermath of the Dreyfus affair**

When Dreyfus was finally acquitted in 1906, although bruised by the ordeal that had sorely tested their emancipatory gains, many Jews were satisfied with the outcome. After all, hadn’t Dreyfus’s acquittal provided the irrefutable proof of the efficiency of French justice? For others, their previously unquestioned sense of belongingness had been irreversibly challenged. They began to re-analyze both the French identity that they had taken for granted, identity, and the future of the French Jewish community itself. With a renewed interest in their Jewish roots, some assimilated Jewish writers began to explore themes such as prejudice and the dangers of assimilation. For example, in his short story *Lévy* (1912), Jean Richard Bloch highlights the concerns of the Jewish Lévy family, who though initially unnerved by the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus period, now fears the effects of assimilation. 19 The plot is told through the lens of a gentile salesman Valentin Laboutié, who first witnesses the anti-Semitism suffered by the Lévy family at the height of the Dreyfus Affair. He is horrified when the town folk who had previously welcomed him emerge as an unruly mob, that cries out “A mort les youpins, les cochons, les traîtres, les prussiens,” whenever they catch sight of members of the Lévy family. Yet, in a startling contrast, when he returns ten years later, the

---

atmosphere of anti-Semitism has all but been forgotten and the Lévy family are now prospering. Yet, Lévy is still restlessly unhappy and explains to Laboutié,

Moi je ne pratique plus, mais je reste solidaire.
Il y en a parmi nos jeunes gens, qui nous quittent et savez vous pour ranimer le sentiment de notre race chez les jeunes il... nous faudrait peut être une nouvelle Affaire.
Jean Richard Bloch, Lévy.

Lévy now worries that the price of emancipation has been the loss of Jewish tradition and identity. His sentiment echoes the growing concern of many assimilated Jewish intellectuals during the post Dreyfus era such as Edmond Fleg, André Spire and Armand Lunel, who began to reconnect with their latent Jewish roots in the hope of redefining the place of the Jew in French society.

In fact, the Dreyfus affair, so effectively awakened a sense of indignation in the young Fleg that he wrote to his parents in Geneva in 1894 of his reticence in becoming a French citizen because it seemed to play into the hands of Anti-Dreyfusards who accused Jews of being opportunistic internationalists.

According to André Elbaz’s work Correspondance d’Edmond Fleg pendant l’Affaire Dreyfus, after the publication of Emile Zola’s “J’Accuse” in 1898, Fleg became even more disillusioned by the flagrant anti-Semitism of the French press and in now what can be considered to be a prophetic response, wrote to his mother that,

L’issue du procès Zola m’a navré. Cette affaire s’est emparée de mon imagination au point de m’empêcher de dormir; et tout cela m’a peiné comme un malheur personnel, un grand malheur que l’antisémitisme ait fait des progrès pareils, et qu’à la première occasion nous ayons ; à perspective de massacres qui vaudront les massacres d’Arménie (Elbaz,39)
The malaise of the Jewish community became Fleg’s own personal unhappiness. His indignation was to eventually galvanize a renewal of his Jewish consciousness, which would in turn lead to his enormous contribution to the Jewish Renaissance of the interwar years.

**The influence of Zionism in the post-Dreyfus era.**

By the end of the Dreyfus period, French Jewry was just beginning to feel the effects of the influence of the Zionist movement. Previously ignored by French Jews, the movement had profited handsomely both from the community’s disillusionment with France after the Affair and the subsequent influx of more religious, traditional Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The *Français Israélites* initially reflexively rejected the establishment of a Jewish national homeland, because Zionism, with its particularistic stance, seemed diametrically opposed to the tenets of the universalism that defined French Judaism. The movement was also highly unpopular because it seemed to compliment the beliefs of open anti-Semites such as Drumont who called for the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a convenient way of permanently disposing France of its Jews. Nevertheless, by the post-Dreyfus era, French Jews had become gradually more receptive to the idea of Jewish immigration to Palestine. According to the *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the inauguration ceremony of the opening of the Alliance school, Mikve Israel in Palestine in 1925, Edmond Rothschild’s speech summed up the degree to which the atavistic memory of Israel still resonated with French Jews.
Jérusalem c'est l'éternité, c'est Dieu seul, le Dieu unique c'est la religion (...) Oui les arrière petits fils n'oublient pas le souvenir de leurs aîeux; dans tous les pays nous nous souvenons de Jérusalem, et c'est par cette mémoire du passé que la religion juive est immortelle.\textsuperscript{20}

However, despite the softening of their stance towards Zionism and despite the acknowledgment of resonant, atavistic ties to the land of Israel, even among its supporters, Zionism was still believed to be a solution for disadvantaged east European Jews rather than for those who lived in France or significantly for those who were educated outside of France by the schools of the Alliance Israélite.

**The reaction of the Jews of the Arab world to the Dreyfus Affair**

It is illuminating to examine the reaction to the Dreyfus Affair in the Middle East and the Maghreb where both many Christian and Jewish communities were both educated in French schools. In theory at least, the teachers of the Alliance schools (the majority of whom had studied in Paris) should have been fully cognizant of the events taking place in the Hexagon. Instructors were obliged to send detailed reports monthly and so the reaction of both students and teachers to the Affair and the anti-Semitism associated with its aftermath should be easily traceable in the archives of the Alliance. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the anti-Dreyfusard position (of social conformity), taken by the Alliance Israélite during the Affair, traceable details of reactions to the Affair are scant. Those that do exist, provide little evidence of much support for Dreyfus in communities schooled by the Alliance. In Salonika, for example, a city renowned for its impressive Jewish

\textsuperscript{20} For more information see *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 5 April 1870.
presence where Gentiles often ceded to Jewish influence, (not unlike the situation in Baghdad), Mme. L. Benveniste a teacher at the Alliance, wrote of the support of the Jewish community for Dreyfus in 1898. Interestingly, the letter showcases the righteous indignation felt by Salonican Jews towards what they viewed as an assault on France and French post Revolutionary values rather than their indignation at the blatant French anti-Semitism that the Affair had revealed.

Après ce que je viens de dire de l'influence juive à Salonique, vous pourrez facilement comprendre l'effervescence que l'affaire Dreyfus a dû produire surtout dans les esprits de la jeunesse israélite. J'ai connu bien des personnes qui plaçaient au dessus de leurs soucis de famille cette affaire, dont nous attendrons tous avec angoisse de dénouement heureux. C'est quelque chose assez rare en Turquie de voir des hommes oublier leurs propres intérêts pour s'attacher davantage aux idées d'humanité, de vérité et de justice… “L'affaire” était le seul sujet de conversation des saloniciens … J'ai dit que c'est la jeunesse juive qui est plus passionnée pour cette affaire. C'est qu'en effet il existe à Salonique une jeunesse israélite assez distinguée. Curieuse de savoir et de connaître, elle s'intéresse à tout: politique, littérature, rien ne lui est indifférent. Imprégnés pour la plus grande partie d'idées françaises, c'est-à-dire d'idées de liberté et de justice, qu'ils s ont puisées dans l'histoire et la littérature de la France. Les jeunes Israélites ont éprouvé un mouvement d'indignation contre ce pays, qui attentait lui-même, dans cette affaire, à ce qu'il avait enseigné aux autres nations, à ce qu'il rendait si grand et si beau, aux idées de liberté et de justice. Cette France qui leur était si sympathique, qu'ils aimaient au fond de leur cœur, ils en ont été terriblement déçus. Cependant il y a bien des Salonniciens qui ne cessent encore de l'admirer, qui voient toujours en elle un noble et grand pays. N'y a-t-il pas eu en effet tant de personnes qui ont pu librement crier aux gens aveuglés par la passion, l'innocence du martyr, ce qui n'aurait pu se faire nul part ...

---

21 Archives de l'A.I.U. Turquie, I.C.I
Benveniste’s letter is so blatantly sycophantic towards France that it is arguably more memorable as a performative endorsement of French colonialism than as a testimony of Salonican Jewry’s response to the Dreyfus affair.

**Press reaction to the Dreyfus affair**

Not surprisingly, given the non-monolithic nature of the communities of the Arab world, their reaction to the Affair varied greatly. The Egyptian press, still in its infancy, deeply nationalistic and already dubious about the loyalty of the Jewish community, did occasionally denounce Dreyfus as a traitor. Naturally, this fomented anger against the Jewish community who, as we shall see in later chapters, maintained deep connections to France. They were therefore perceived as already opposed to Arab nationalism. Surprisingly though, for the most part, the Muslim press, (perhaps as a further means of criticizing France, with whom they were contesting home rule) often protested the unfairness of the treatment of Dreyfus.

Close examination of Jewish press articles reveals a very different story. During the Affair, the archives of the Alliance reveal that there were considerable anti-Semitic demonstrations that acidulously eroded at the standing of the Jewish communities of the region. In Lebanon, in an effort to display their loyalty to France, the Maronite community participated in demonstrations every bit as vitriolic as those which were described by Bloch in “Lévy”. In Algiers, Jews had French citizenship, thanks to the Crémieux laws of 1870. This had benefited the Jewish
community, but like the Tanzimaat\textsuperscript{22}, it also highlighted the disparity of the
treatment of Muslims and Jews, this time by the French colonial apparatus. Anti-
Semitic demonstrations decrying the treachery of the Jews of France reached fever
pitch in Algeria as both Muslims and Christians were encouraged by the French
anti-Dreyfusard Max Regis who had recently been appointed president of the Anti-
Jewish league. The situation worsened further in 1898, when Drumont was elected
with the support of Regis to serve as deputy in the second district of Algiers.

It should be noted at this point that while these occasional outbreaks of
anti-Semitism were disturbing, they were neither new to the Jewish communities of
the Maghreb nor to those of the Machreq. Examination of Jewish press articles
readily shows that there was a fairly continuous cyclical history of sporadic
Christian incited anti-Semitism. Described in detail by the teachers of the Alliance
in their monthly reports to the directors in Paris, these incidents were usually
initiated within Christian communities or sometimes aided by colonial personnel.

\textit{They were rarely incited by Muslims}. Lacking any formal orchestration, they were
usually spontaneous in nature and were related to classical blood libel accusations
in the style of the Damascus Affair (but usually less vitriolic and of shorter
duration). For example on the 14 October 1890, F.N. Benty, an Alliance teacher
based in Beirut wrote in his monthly dispatch about an incident involving the
harassment of a group of Jewish children by a group of Christian youths and their
driver on the Jewish holiday of Succot.

\begin{quote}
\textit{En route, un cocher –chrétien-n ?ayant pas arrêté la voiture}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Reforms enacted in the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth century. See later chapters for further expansive explanation.
qu’il conduisait, quelques israélites le prirent poliment de ne pas troubler le cortège. Toute prière fut inutile, le cocher contraire insulta les israélites, blasphéma leur religion. Quelques jeunes israélites se voyaient inexpliquées maltraités, frayèrent de retenir la voiture. Voilà que 20 Chrétiens se jettent sur les juifs, les injuriaient, blasphêmé leur religion.23

Although deeply unsettling, incidents such as these were regarded by Jewish communities as temporary aberrations that did not interfere with their relationship with their Muslim compatriots or with the halcyon images of France treasured by Franco Jewish Arab communities. In both the Maghreb and the Machreq, Jews continued to jealously guard their special relationship with France, believing themselves to be privileged and under the protection of the Hexagon. In 1925, fearful that the publication of an Arabic translation of the anti-Semitic pamphlet *The Protocols of the Sages of Zion*24 would incite anti-Semitism in Egypt the directors of the Alliance wrote to the French ambassador in Cairo seriously believing that intervention would come from the Hexagon,

Ce n’est pas sans regret, Excellence, que nous autres pacifistes de toujours, et avec nous tous ceux qui aspirant à la pacification des esprits nous l’avons vu circuler à Beyrouth. En effet ce livre traduit d’un but évident de diffamation ne peut avoir d’autre résultat que de chauffer les esprits pas assez affranchis et à créer au milieu d’une certaine classe de la population, une atmosphère peu sympathique à la communauté juive.25

---

23 *Les Archives de l’Alliance Israélite: Liban 1873.*

24 *The Protocols of the Sages of Zion* was first published in 1906 in Russia. The work describing a global plan by Jews for global domination was subsequently published in a plethora of languages.

25 Archives of the Alliance Israélite.
In 1925, during a period marked by the rise of Arab nationalism, succor from France would fail to arrive, and *The Protocols of the Sages of Zion* was eventually translated into Arabic. What is clear, though, is that the Jews of the Arab world looked towards France (with varying success) not only for moral guidance but also for physical protection. Despite the events occurring in the Hexagon, the strong, idealistic, enduring images they carried of France were left relatively unscathed by the events of the Dreyfus Affair. For that matter, they would also be unchallenged by the period of re-questioning which followed in its aftermath. Upon its resolution, the unhappy period was barely mentioned in monthly dispatches by Alliance instructors. Schooled exclusively by the ideals of the Alliance Israélite, Jewish communities were uninfluenced by contemporary events in the Hexagon and were able to retain their veneration of the French Jewish emancipatory model despite the fact that the success of the *Français Israélite* model was already being debated by the very people who conceived it.

In conclusion, French Jewish emancipation was an exemplary model. Unlike the German model where emancipation was conditional to assimilation, French Jewish emancipation awakened slowly under the Ancien Régime, matured under the changing values of the Revolution, and reached its zenith during the Third Republic. As Nadia Malinovich attests, ”It allowed Jews to participate in all levels of French life as equal citizens while remaining identifiably Jewish”(49). In essence, the French model promoted universalism and tolerance. It provided a model by which Jews could live successfully in the diaspora and eventually was emulated in other parts of the world where under the auspices of the Alliance Israélite scores of
Jewish children were educated according to a centralized French curriculum which gave primacy to the French Jewish emancipatory model.

While historians have tended to understand Franco-Judaism as a relatively stable set of ideological values framing French Jewish identity from the revolution to the collapse of the Third Republic in 1940, in fact this ideology underwent appreciable transformations in the early decades of the twentieth century. While the Dreyfus Affair initially shook the Jewish community of the Hexagon to its core, for many, its outcome provided irrefutable proof of the efficacy of the French Republic that had vindicated Dreyfus. For them, Jewish belongingness was no longer in question. For others though, it was the prophecy of the inevitable failure of the diaspora model. For them, the only permanent answer to the Jewish question was Zionism and the eventual establishment of a Jewish homeland.

The Jewish communities of the Middle East remained remarkably unscathed by both the events of the Dreyfus affair and the period of re-questioning which followed in its wake. Schooled by instructors of the Alliance, who despite periodic outbreaks of anti-Semitism, propagated idealized images of French Judaism, Franco-Jewish-Arab communities remained in a state of blissful somnolence. As a consequence, unaware of the post-Dreyfus turmoil that riveted the Hexagon, they remained faithful to their veneration of French Judaism and France.
Chapter two: The Jewish Renaissance and its effects on France and Franco-Jewish - Arab Communities

The aftermath of the Dreyfus affair ushered in a re-thinking of the paradigmatic relationship between “Frenchness” and “Jewishness” established during the late nineteenth century, with the result that previously accepted emancipation ideology underwent significant transformation. While for the most part nineteenth century French Jews operated on the assumption that they could only legitimately assert their place in the French nation as a religious minority, by the mid twentieth century, the idea that the Jews formed a distinct ethnic or cultural group had become widely accepted both among Jews and within French society as a whole.

During the 1920’s, French Jews began to seriously challenge the previously assumed dichotomy between universalism and particularism. Rather than trying to legitimize Jewish particularism by demonstrating its universal value as they had done during the previous century, they now argued that French “universalism” and Jewish “particularism” were complementary and that ideally, French Jewish identity should be based on a synthesis of the two. This had important literary ramifications and the mid twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of Jewish literature by authors who had otherwise shown little or no interest in their Jewish roots. The result was the publication of numerous plays, novels, collections of poetry and reviews, whose primary goals were to reintroduce the French public to

26 For a more detailed discussion of the evolution of French Judaism during the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Nadia Malinovich’s excellent work French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth Century.
particularistic Judaism. By exposing the banality of old Jewish stereotypes, authors hoped to prevent a reoccurrence of the type of orchestrated anti-Semitism seen during the Dreyfus affair. In this chapter, I will first examine the impact of the Jewish Renaissance on both the Jewish community of France and the Jewish communities outside of France who were overtly influenced by French culture. I will additionally treat the Jewish renaissance within the context of French Zionism and the resulting effects this had on the Jewish communities of the Arab world.27

**Jewish response to the Dreyfus affair**

The Jewish renaissance of the early twentieth century can effectively be split into two distinct periods. The first wave occurred immediately after the Dreyfus Affair, and propelled the Jewish question into the public discourse both in France and abroad28. Although Paula Hyman convincingly concludes in her classic study of the period that “The felicitous, if long delayed conclusion of the Affair confirmed to French Jewry its love of and confidence its native land”,29 there were still large numbers of Jews who could not ignore the fact that the Affair had represented an

27 As I will illustrate in this chapter, French Zionism only began to emerge as a serious political movement after the First World War. In contrast, Zionism was already a dynamic movement in both Germany and the U.K during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

3 A vast literature exists on the subject of the Dreyfus affair. Among many are Bredin *The Affair* and Burns, *Dreyfus* and Robert Hoffman’s *More Than a Trial*. which provide accounts of the trial as well as in depth analysis of the issues the trial raised.

uneasy shift in previously accepted understanding of French Jewish emancipation.

In her excellent study *La France et le sionisme 1897-1948* (2002), Catherine Nicault alludes that the significance of the Dreyfus Affair for French Jews should be understood “Beyond a mere response to anti-Semitism but rather as one within the broader context of the new networks and social spaces that it created” (p7).  

While the drama of the Dreyfus Affair sparked an interest in the greater problematic regarding anti-Semitism, it also introduced complex issues of Jewish identity and culture into the broader public sphere, giving Jews a new type of visibility in French public culture, which extended far beyond the original acculturation model of the *Français Israélites*.

**The first wave of the Jewish Renaissance**

As a response to the Dreyfus Affair, a handful of Jewish writers such as André Spire, Henri Franck, Jean Richard Bloch and Edmond Fleg, began to re-question particularistic issues such as anti-Semitism, assimilation and intermarriage. Malinovich highlights that in stark comparison to the later wave of the Jewish Renaissance, the work of these early Français Israélite authors “in no way represented a total retreat into particularism” and was in effect, a natural extension of their obsession with dualism, that stemmed from their immersion in a generalized cultural climate which was beginning to value cultural difference”. (p7)

In fact, these writers were well aware of the need to balance their interest in

30 For a balanced discussion of the affair as both an upheaval for French Jews and an era during which the classic French Jewish synthesis was strengthened see Nicault. *La France et le sionisme 1897-1948*. Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1992.
Judaism with the danger of exoticizing their Jewishness or even worse, of representing themselves as fundamentally different from their non-Jewish compatriots.

As a consequence of this sensibility, the work of the first wave of Jewish Renaissance writers was immersed in a fundamentally French (albeit French and Jewish) landscape rather than a uniquely Jewish one. For them, reconnecting with their Jewish identity was as alienating as it was exilerating, because having so long ago abandoned their faith, they now knew very little about it. Malinovich astutely concludes that “while being Jewish gave these writers a sense of historical connection and rootedness, it also simultaneously forced them to recognize the limitations of the universalist values that formed the core of their identity”. (9)

In many cases, these first wave writers initially became active Dreyfusards for humanitarian rather than Jewish reasons. In his essay “Re-articulation of French Jewish Identities after the Dreyfus affair” (1996), Aron Rodrigue alludes that Spire, influenced by Israel Zangwill, saw the social question and the Jewish question as one contiguous problem merged against the background of the murky landscape of the slums and back alleys of London’s Whitechapel. According to Spire, these poor Jewish immigrants who had escaped the pogroms of east Europe to find refuge in Britain, were the real Jews, the centerpiece of a new discourse of authenticity that he, like many other nationalists, would eventually develop in the process of identity

---

formation. 32. Using the British Jewish writer’s seminal work *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) as a reference point, Spire focused his writing and social activity almost entirely on fighting both anti-Semitism and assimilation and the need to bring the authentic culture of East European Jewry to French middle class acculturated Jews.

**André Spire**

Spire’s controversial preface to his *Poèmes juifs* (1908) marked the beginning of the first wave of the Jewish renaissance.33 The poet unabashedly categorized his collection as a response to and a criticism of apologist contemporary Jewish, intellectual figures who wished to excuse their origins. He believed that they stifled the essence of the most profound and best part of themselves, leaving only “the French patina that is the legacy of a few years of classical education and sophisticated Parisian prattle”34. The Jewish press such as *L’Univers Israélite* and *Archives Israélites* who all practiced the classical doctrine of the Français israélites, conspicuously ignored Spire’s collection.35 Yet, this did not deter him from continuing to state in clear, undiluted terms that his *Poèmes juifs* represented a much needed, clean break with the traditional French Jewish emancipation model. It

---


33 The poems were originally published by the Société du mercure de France under the title *Versets et vous riez: Poèmes juifs.*

34 For a full discussion of Spire see Malinovich, p.38.

35 Spire’s friend Daniel Halévy, who’s own father had converted to Christianity before Daniel’s birth, though initially supportive of his friends decision to take on the Jewish establishment, remained wary of Spire’s work because of its assignation of physiological and essentialist aspects of Jewish belongingness.
is illuminating that despite the collection’s negative reception by Jewish intellectuals, it received an impressively positive response in left wing literary circles such as *L’Art moderne* (1831-1905) and *le Mouvement socialiste* (1899-1914), both of which profusely praised the writer for his refusal to succumb “like the majority of his coreligionists, to the spirit of the race they live among” and for “casting his lot with those who fight for the resurrection of Jewish dignity.”

Spire’s collection painted a gloomy, rather antipathetic picture of the French Jewish bourgeoisie who in the hope of eradicating anti-Semitism, attempted to suppress their differences. According to Spire, the need to “fit in” was nothing short of a pathetic charade doomed to failure because it paradoxically accentuated Jewish difference and rendered Jews objects of ridicule. His disdain is particularly visible in the poem “Tu es content” (You are happy). Viciously mocking the Jewish need to conform to an idealized view of Christian physical features, Spire writes,

\[
\begin{align*}
Tu \text{ es content, tu es content!} \\
\text{Ton nez est presque droit, ma foi!} \\
\text{Et puis tant de chrétiens ont le nez un peu courbé!}
\end{align*}
\]

*André Spire, Poèmes juifs, p.109.*

Spire’s scathing rebuke of the *Français Israélite* who tried to fit in to French society to the detriment of his heritage and identity is matched only by his admonishment of those members of French Christian society who alienate the Jew. “Tu as raison” mocks Christians who fear admitting Jews into the intimate spaces of their lives.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tu as raison, entre nous,} \\
\text{d’avoir un peu peur, camarade.} \\
\text{car il ne vient que de fièvre}
\end{align*}
\]

\[36 \text{ See Malinovich, p40.}\]
mes deux antiques protecteurs:
mon inquiétude, ma tristesse.

André Spire, *Poèmes juifs*, p.194

According to Spire, French and Western culture as a whole, represented a frustrating chimera for Jews who although tantalized by the glittering promise of all that it had to offer, still remained marginalized at its periphery. In the immediate aftermath of the Affair, it became clear to Spire that assimilation, the choice of the past, had failed hopelessly as an answer to the Jewish Question. No matter how much the Jew tried to adapt himself to the rules of society, he was doomed to remain the alienated “Other”. Only by proud affirmation of Jewish identity could the citizen Jew hope to attain acceptance as a fully fledged member of French society. Sycophantic attempts to please French society would inevitably lead to failure and the loss of self respect.

Insisting on the need to reclaim a space for Jewish particularism, Spire emphasized the atavistic connections between French Jews and their fellow co-religionists outside of France. The penultimate poem of his collection “Pogroms” is inspired by his reaction to the horror of the pogroms suffered by the Jews of East Europe during the late nineteenth century.

> Alors les vieillards se lamentèrent:
> veux –tu que nos fils meurent?
> oublies-tu leurs bras maigres, leurs dos voûtés, leurs souffles courts?


Chastising French Jews for their ignorance and ambivalence towards the plight of their co-religionists abroad, Spire simultaneously represented Russian Jews as both victims of anti-Semitism and the embodiment of Jewish authenticity.
In “Exode”, the last poem of Poèmes juifs, Spire addressed the Jewish people in the archaic collective form as “Israël”. With its tribal, collective inferences, the term illustrates his philosophical support for a return to the ancestral Jewish homeland. Invoking the promise of the new land he writes,

Israël, Israël, peuple entêté de vivre,
Il faut fuir, Israël, toutes ces fausses patries.

André Spire, Poèmes juifs, p.211.

The placement of these two poems in the collection does not seem to be arbitrary. According to Spire, who supported Theodor Hertzl’s early model of cultural Zionism, a Jewish nationalist movement based on the tenets of universalism was a feasible and even laudable solution to the Jewish Question. Notably though, his proviso was that it was primarily a viable option for East European Jews who lacked the opportunities of those Jews who lived in France. Nadia Malinovich significantly points out that in his poem describing the preparation for exodus to Palestine, Spire calls out to his fellow Jews to “march towards the ports of Odessa, Hamburg or Bremen”, rather than to the ports of Marseille or of le Havre”(p13).37 Although he was theoretically supportive of the Zionist movement, Spire’s Poèmes juifs did not represent any organized support of Zionism. It is far more likely that the collection was written as a challenge to his compatriots to recreate a new culture based on Jewish identity. Spire’s work can therefore be best interpreted as a spiritual call to French Jews for a re-questioning

of the old model of French Jewry, rather than as an endorsement of mass Jewish immigration to Palestine.

**Edmond Fleg**

Edmond Fleg’s work, which is now regarded as quintessential *Ecriture juive* included the translation of biblical scriptures and Midrashic literature into French. It is indelibly imbued with its colorful images of Jewish sensibility. Yet, astonishingly, in his memoir “Pourquoi je suis Juif (1928), Fleg reveals that, although his family practiced traditional Judaism, by the time he arrived in Paris in 1892 to study at the École Normale, he had all but rejected Jewish religious practice. His opinion changed during the Dreyfus Affair when he became disillusioned by the increasingly anti-Semitic stance of his friend Lucien Moreau. Propelled by his growing identification with Dreyfus’s plight, Fleg was drawn to a need to re-connect with the Jewish people. After the birth of his son in 1908, he abandoned all secular pursuits to immerse himself in Jewish learning for three years. The product of this period of reflection was *Écoute Israël* (1913), a series of Biblical and Midrashic stories rewritten in contemporary French language and rendered accessible to contemporary French Jewish audiences who could no longer read or understand Hebrew.

---

38 Reflecting on his disappointment with Moreau, Fleg recalls in *Pourquoi je suis juif* “Et tandis que je mesurais ces tristesses, l’Affaire devenait pour moi une épreuve personnelle”. Upon Dreyfus’s condemnation for the second time at Rennes in 1899, he concludes, “Je me sentais banni de l’universelle fraternité. Et je me demandais : ‘Juif, quelle est ta place dans le monde?’”
The collection reflects Fleg’s struggle to re-negotiate the significance of his Jewish origins with their relevance to modern French life. Central and reoccurring themes are the fidelity and persistence of the Jewish people in the face of enormous trials. Fleg saw the Jewish people as uniquely charged with a prophetic mission. Reminding readers of the ancient premise that Israel’s trials were proof of her “choseness”, the theme of “the chosen people, doomed to suffer” is apparent throughout his collection. For example, in “Moïse et Bithia”, when Moses is told by God that it is his fate to lead his people to freedom, but not to enter the promised land, he accepts his fate unquestioningly, saying,

> Je serai ta victime, Elohim, ton prophète
> et sans chercher pour moi la terre de ton choix
> j’y conduirai tes fils au flambeau de ta voix.

Edmond Fleg, *Pourquoi je suis Juif*, p.66

According to Fleg, Moses’s acceptance of Jewish suffering was a non-negotiable condition of Jewish identity. Unsurprisingly, *Écoute Israël* was very well received by both the rabbinate and the Zionist movement. It was published in the Zionist newspaper *L’Écho sioniste* as well as *L’Univers Israélite*. Unlike in the case of Spire, whose work had been initially interpreted as an attack against the Jewish establishment, Fleg’s work was immediately appreciated as an invocation of religious sensibility by those *Français Israélites* who had long ago abandoned their religion and were now searching to connect its relevance to modern life. At the same time, from a Zionist point of view, his work satisfactorily reflected the necessary call for solidarity which would be needed to establish a Jewish homeland.
It is important to recognize that both Spire and Fleg were essentially Français Israélites who were defined by their ongoing struggle with their duel commitment to Jewish and French heritage. They both felt a growing connection to their ethnic roots which encouraged them to reach out to their co-religionists outside of France. Yet, they also continued to feel a deep and enduring connection to the universal, humanist values of Republican France to which they were still prodigiously thankful for their emancipation. Ultimately, the struggle of the first wave writers of the Jewish Renaissance can be summed up as a combination of the search for the reconciliation between hard won "appartenance française," and the new importance had come to be ascribed to Jewish heritage. By initiating a dialogue which addressed these concerns, these writers paved the way for the much larger Jewish renaissance that occurred during the post First World War years and the 1920s.

**The second wave of the Jewish renaissance.**

The gruesome effects of unbridled nationalism were all too obvious to those who had witnessed the carnage of the First World War. One of the earliest backlashes against the old order was a renewed fascination with the individual, specific differences that constituted French nationhood. This led to a flourishing of regional and folkloric literature as well as an interest in the Exotic. Jewish writers were quick to seize this opportunity and produced a series of novels, and plays that depicted the drama of everyday life in the ancient Jewish communities of France. This served to reinforce the “authenticity” of Jewish communities whose roots
predated the concept of a united nation. While fiction treating ancient Jewish communities was welcomed by the Jewish and non-Jewish public, as we shall see, writers who ventured into contemporary realms of Jewish history were far more controversial, because critics still worried that this new “mode littéraire” would negatively reinforce Jewish stereotyping and therefore contribute to anti-Semitism.

**Jewish Literature as Folkloric literature**

Jewish folkloric literature tended to treat traditional Jewish life in a non-monolithic way, as it was envisaged by varying regions and time periods. One of the most prominent authors of the folkloric genre was Armand Lunel, a professor of philosophy originally from Monte Carlo who depicted the history and legends of his native Judeo-Comptadin community of Avignon. Describing in depth the community’s particularity and traditions that dated from the Middle Ages, his most well-known work *Nicolo Peccavi ou L’affaire Dreyfus à Carpentras* (1926) (which won the Renaudot prize in 1926) was set on the eve of Dreyfus’s pardon. It depicts the complicated history of the sworn Anti-Dreyfusard, Catholic Peccavi, who inadvertently discovers that he is descended from the family of a converted Jew. Lunel’s novel painstakingly traces the history of the ancient Jewish community of Avignon. By doing so, he reinforces the legitimacy and authenticity of the Jewish community’s belongingness to both the region and to France. Referring to memories which are doubtlessly autobiographical ones, Lunel describes the virulence of the anti-Semitism endemic during and just after the Affair. Of particular poignancy, are
descriptions of riots fuelled by cries of “A bas les Juifs”, as previously cordial
Gentiles turned against their Jewish neighbors.

Malinovich testifies in her work *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth Century France* (2008) that the spontaneous
flourishing of Jewish folkloric literature during the 1920’s was “in fact entirely
congruent with the French public’s general thirst for the “texte pittoresque” and
the exoticism of regional literature” (p.87) (in particular that of Provence and
Brittany). Jewish folkloric literature conveniently fell neatly within the parameters
of a much more widespread phenomenon which respected particularism. By
repositioning Jewish communities as ones imbued with regional particularities,
long standing roots and a rich tradition, Jewish writers were able to deconstruct
old, long standing, pejorative images of the Jew as an opportunistic cosmopolitan.

**Jewish literature as instructional literature**

While Folkloric writers concentrated on the subjective aspects of modern Jewish life
in France, other writers such as Jacob Lévy in his trilogy *Les Juifs d’aujourd’hui*
(1923-1927), depicted the intricate variations of French Jewish life. According to
Lévy, the principal cause of anti-Semitism lay in the Gentile’s ignorance of the *Jewish
Condition*. Set in the contemporary era, each volume of his work traces the
perspective of three different examples of French Jewry. *Les Pollacks* (1927), the
first volume, treats the rivalry between the French born “autochtone” Jews widely
regarded as “authentic French Jews” and the Polish newcomers. The second
volume, *Les Demi-juifs*, illustrates the relationship between a Jewish protagonist
and his Catholic wife and treats the conflict of the Jew trapped between two worlds. *Les Doubles juifs*, (1927) the final volume, depicts an orthodox Jewish family struggling to balance its faith within the social context of the modern world.

In *Les Pollacks*, the reader learns that the patriarch of the Pollack family Samuel is a practicing Jew. Although his sons continue to attend synagogue services, they no longer believe in God. The sons’ lack of faith can easily be interpreted from a particularistic viewpoint, as a revolt against Jewish tradition but it can also be viewed as a universal problem that falls within the framework of the eternal conflict that exists between generations. It is illuminating to note the element of Jewish superiority that Lévy slyly inserts into his text as he explains that the Springer sons’ decision to attend synagogue services “in order to please their father”, is proof of the strength and moral superiority of Jewish familial ties.

Edmond Cahen’s *Juif, non! Israélite* (1930) recalls the saga of Simon Lévy, a cavalry officer of the First World War–turned farmer and his Christian wife. Suzanne, whose initial reticence about marrying a Jew is put aside when Simon boasts,

> Vous ne pouvez douter du nombre d'Israélites en France, dont personne ne sait même qu’ils le sont, parce que, comme moi, rien ne les distingue des autres Français.

Edmond Cahen, « Juif, non Israélite », p 80.

---

39 Lévy writes that this is a common problem among the first generation of East European immigrants and is one regularly decried by the community rabbis who fear the loss of the religious ties will lead to abandonment of the faith.

40 Note the use of the word “Juif”. In contrast to the term Israélite, “Juif was historically used in a pejorative sense.
By highlighting the indistinguishability of Simon’s physical traits from gentile ones, Cahen frees his protagonist from the negative stereotypical maledictions of the past that Suzanne associates with Jews. Ironically, later, it is Suzanne who complains that Simon would do better by emulating the intellectual superiority of his race. In further reinforcement of the redundancy of pejorative stereotypes, Suzanne expresses her delight that Simon is more generous than her first (Christian) husband. Again, Cahen not only dispels stereotypic anti-Semitic association between Jews and usury, but like Lévy, he emphasizes Simon’s generosity because it alludes to Jewish moral superiority.

**The quest to reinvent Jewish identity**

If one of the goals of the Jewish writers of the 1920s was to denounce the Jewish stereotype, the other was to remodel the concept of French Jewish identity. The new sense of security felt by Jewish writers and their conviction that anti-Semitism was on the decline meant that Jewish writers were now less fearful of criticizing problems within the Jewish community. One such topic treated was the prejudice shown by Français Israélites towards more traditional Jews who had immigrated from Eastern Europe. In Cahen's *Les Pollacks* (1923-1927), Springer opposes the marriage of his son Pierre to Olga, a Polish Jewish immigrant, despite the fact that the couple are both Sorbonne educated lawyers. In a conversation with Dussinger, (an east European Jew who hides his Polish origins because of the prejudice shown towards him by other Jews), a community rabbi criticizes the disdain of French Jews towards their East European co-religionists. Insisting on
the importance of the biblical commandment "Tu aimeras ton prochain comme toi-même", the rabbi emphasizes the need for cohesiveness and moral accountability.

While some writers downplayed the differences between Jewish and non Jewish characterization and others hinted at their moral superiority, there were still those who were unafraid to portray Jewish characters fearlessly, as vulgar, material arrivistes. Malinovich points to the example of Irène Nemirovsky who in her work David Goldar (1929) depicted sobering images of a Russian Jewish immigrant who is ruined by his obsession with material gain, and is eventually led to his downfall. When asked in 1930 during an interview with L'Univers Israélite (1849-1940), journalist Nina Gourfinkel, to explain why she had conceived of Jewish characters who were so clearly devoid of sympathetic traits, Némorovsky, who has since been criticized as an anti-Semite, replied ,"Moi, Je les ai vus comme cela". Clearly, she felt so comfortable in her status as an assimilated Jew, that she felt no need whatsoever to be apologetic for her anti-Semitic stance!

In their quest to remodel Jewish identity, Jewish writers often surprisingly evoked the controversial but contemporarily topical concept of the existence of a biological bond between all Jews. The result was a corpus of literature that emphasized the intangible links of commonality present between French Jews and their coreligionists abroad. In Lily Javal’s Noémi (1925), Noémi integrates with the upmost difficulty within the non Jewish hierarchy of the hospital where she works. Laval attributes this to the inherent inability of the stiff necked Jew to submit to authority. In a conversation with her catholic friend Thérèse, Noemi explains that she belongs to “le peuple à la nuque dure”, therefore she cannot serve and has no
choice but to resign from her post at the hospital. Upon Noémi's return to Bayonne, she marries a fellow Jew and establishes a home for disadvantaged Parisian children, thus fulfilling her “atavistic need” to reconnect with the “binding, biological communal ties” of her fellow Jews.

By extension, Judaism was often represented as a primordial, atavistic force over which Jews had little or no control. Albert Cohen's *Solal* (1930) is perhaps one of the most poignant examples of this tendency. Solal, a recent immigrant to Paris, initially appears to be a perfect example of successful Jewish integration. After marrying an aristocratic Christian woman, he succeeds in gaining a ministerial post. Yet, conflicted between his attachment to the life he has created in France and his enduring love for his Greek Jewish family, he finds that neither universe respects nor understands the other. Ultimately, he is unable to choose between them, and eventually loses both. Because Solal is a stranger, without authentic claim to *appartenance française*, the failure of his marriage can be attributed to the unavoidable expression of certain traits uniquely common to the Jewish personality such as irrational passion, emotion and sensitivity. According to Cohen, it is precisely these atavistic traits which render Solal's exogenous marriage untenable. Apparently, Judaism is an irrational force that inherently resists integration.

Similarly, in Léo Poldes's *L'Éternel Ghetto* (1928), Max's hope for an exogenous marriage ultimately fails because he is unable to renounce his historical obligation to propagate within the Jewish faith. Again Judaism is represented as an irresistible, irrepressible force. No matter how often Max proclaims “Je suis
chrétien!” he is unable to deafen his ears to the overwhelming influence of his father David's words,

Regarde tes traits. Voice ton masque où sont dessinés les stigmates millénaires de notre race... Quoique tu fasses c’est encore le sang ardent des juifs qui se révèle..

( Léon Poldes, L’Eternel Ghetto, p 44-45.

Max eventually decides to break off his engagement. In a fit of Zionist fervor, he emigrates to Palestine, but not before his gentile fiancée Jeanne endorses the inevitability of his decision to leave her.

Je ne suis pas seule. Tu n’es pas seul. Il y a autour de nous la présence invisible de nos pères, de nos grands pères, de nos aïeux...
Elle est dans notre chair et dans notre sang.

Léon Poldes, L’Eternel Ghetto, p12

Thus the importance of the biological link between Jewish co-religionists is endorsed by both Jew and non Jew.

**Jewish Arab literature of the Jewish renaissance**

While the majority of Jewish Renaissance literature depicted the Askenazi world, several Sephardi authors also achieved prominence during the period of the Jewish renaissance. The Algerian born writer Elissa Rhaiss wrote several novels and short stories about Jewish life in her native land. Narrating the stories in the

41 Albert Cohen as a Salonican Jew was a Sephardi writer but because the greater body of his work centers around life in France and his experiences as an immigrant to France, I have not included him in my discussion of Francophone Sephardic writers. I have instead chosen to include writers whose work focuses on life in the Francophone - Arab world.
style of the traditional Arab “Rawaya” or oral storyteller, her work was congruent with the prevailing public thirst for the exotic. The stories received a positive reception by both the Jewish and non Jewish press. Upon reviewing her novel Saada la marocaine (1919) the Mercure de France wrote “We are terribly fond of exoticism in France. Mme Elissa Rhaiss who has barely arrived from Algeria, has had such success in literary society that one wants to give her all the prizes.” The reviewer concluded that Rahiss’s unique ability to describe the North African Jewish community in exquisitely minute detail was the reason for her success.

Another Sephardic writer A. H. Navon, a Turkish Jew, punctuated his novel Joseph Perez : juif du ghetto (1925), with colourful descriptions of Sephardi culture and tradition, including a lengthy description of a Sephardi Bar Mitzvah ceremony that contrasted sharply with the somber Askenazi ceremonies traditionally held by the Jews of the Hexagon.

Zionist and Prophetic Literature

For both the Jews of France and the French readership in general, the larger appeal of Sephardic literature was that it provided a window into the world of the mysterious but authentic Orient. It was a theme that commonly pervaded French

42 Before the Arab Renaissance (Nada) of the early twentieth century, the Rawaya was the traditional, usually feminine conveyor of oral tradition in the Arab world.

43 In fact Rhaiss had been born Rosine Bourmédine. Upon her arrival in Paris in 1919, her publisher, in order to create an exotic aura around her, changed her name and spread the rumor that she had been brought up in a harem. This led to multiple speculations. Malinovich points out that in 1929, André Spire who greatly admired Rhaiss, described the latter as the daughter of a Muslim mother and a Jewish father who came to Paris because she was ‘ruined by war’.
literature after the Great War, as writers sought the utopic innocence of a more “authentic culture”. For example, in Jean Richard Bloch’s *Prélude à la journée kurde* (1923), the acculturated writer, without ever directly referring to Zionism, explores his primordial attraction to the Orient. Describing his boat journey to the East, he wrote.

À ce moment J’ai tourné vers l’horizon, là où la grande épaule du plateau arrête la vue. Une nuée semble naitre de la même terre elle même: elle s’élève verticalement et envahie le ciel; ca couleur est bleu noir où s’amassent les violets déchirants de la foudre... Le vent de l’Ouest, le vent qui vient de l’Océan , la pousse sur nous... Mon esprit, brusquement délivré de ses liens, m’entraîne vers d’autres pays et climats, là où trempent les origines de ma race, où mon cœur réside en secret, où m’appelle ma nostalgie.44

Jean Richard Bloch, Preface to *La Nuit Kourde.*

Although Bloch emphasizes his love for France, he admits that he is inexplicably drawn towards the Orient. His undefined attraction to the Orient gradually assumes a more specifically Zionist tone in *Le Robinson Juif* (1925), when he describes his emotional reaction at the inauguration of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Yet, while Bloch admittedly showed initial interest in Zionism, his attraction to the East should be understood within the context of its time. With its veneration of the Orient, Bloch’s *Nuit Kurde* is best considered as an example of the type of Orientalist literature that proliferated as a reaction to the First World War.

While the main goal of the nineteenth century Jewish intellectual had been to create a modern Jewish identity rooted in western rather than eastern

44 Bloch,
Civilization and culture, the goal of Jewish writers during the 1920s, was to show that although Jews had outwardly acculturated to the western world, they still retained an oriental soul. Pierre Paraf’s 1928 lecture to the Union des femmes juives françaises pour Palestine crystalized this belief when he explained,

> No matter how far away he may be, from the Americas to cold Lithuania, he carries it with him in his Torah, in his tallit, in the warmth of his regard... May the ungracious customs of the West never let him forget this invincible attraction. Poets, novelists When your interest turns towards us, we may recognize our true face, the face of a great, ancient people...in which the warmth of the Orient will forever nurture lofty dreams and invincible faith. Pierre Paraf, “Le Reveil du Judaïsme français”.45

Malinovich points out that for both Jews and Gentiles, the Orient symbolized a more pure and more perfect civilization. Not only did it represent a utopic answer to war torn Europe, but it also influenced belief in the messianic prediction that the Jews would return to the Holy Land to herald a new age of peace, and gave support to the popular belief that the Jew’s oriental essence held the key to the redemption of Western civilization.46 This inevitably led to a proliferation of Zionist literature such as Myriam Harry’s Les Amants de Zion (1923). Having emigrated to France from Palestine as a young woman, Harry had become a prominent literary figure by the turn of the century. Her idealized images of Jewish Palestine were

---

45 This lecture was published as “Le Réveil du Judaïsme français”, in the Revue littéraire juive (July 1928) 577-94 and is quoted by Malinovich. For a further discussion of this see Malinovich. p188.

46 This belief was associated with the prophetic assumption that Jews were a chosen people charged with a specific mission, people believed that it was the Jew’s innate sense of social justice and equality which could at last bring these redemptive values to contemporary French society.
almost certainly drawn from her return to the region in the 1920s, when the country was undergoing impressive development and doubtlessly presented a startling comparison to her own gloomy childhood reflections of Jerusalem. Her novel is a testament to the awakening of her Jewish roots.47

Zionism was a practical solution to the Jewish problem but it also conveniently inferred the fulfillment of Jewish “prophetic destiny”. Jean Richard Bloch’s *Le Robinson Juif*; (1925) describes his reaction to the inauguration ceremony of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It is marked by the writer’s use of romantic language and exotic themes as he admires the swelling numbers of Jews who immigrated to Palestine since the Great War.

\[
\text{L’ordre est assuré par de jeunes volontaires sionistes, vêtus de blanc et de bleu pale, les couleurs de David sont aussi celles de Jeanne d’Arc.}
\]


Bloch compared Joan of Arc, the ultimate symbol of French heroism with the pro-activism of the young Zionist settlers, He initially believed in cultural Zionism probably because of its association with universalism. Later, he became disillusioned by the movement’s insistence on particularistic values. However, his early writing suggests that he initially admired the minority of Jews who left the

47 During the 1920’s, Palestine was ruled by the British mandate. it experienced a massive growth in its economy. The Yishuv or Jewish community organized themselves under the umbrella of the labor union (the Histadrut) and were quick to profit from the better living conditions. Therefore, the Palestine that Harry would have seen on her return during the 1920’s would have contrasted strikingly with her memories of the poverty of her childhood years during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire.
comfort of the Diaspora and believed that they were the prophetic hope of the Jewish people. In the same way that Joan of Arc had done for France in the fifteenth century, these Jews would presumably safeguard the Jewish future. His additional references to the biblical Davidic dynasty, (traditionally the most glorious era of the short lived Hebrew monarchy), insinuate the legitimacy of the Zionists as natural heirs to the new Jewish civilization, which would eventually arise as an example to all other nations.

The text concludes with Bloch’s admiration of the Hebrew University itself and hints that Bloch, although a consummate Français Israélite, believed that the establishment of the University encapsulated the Jews’ chameleon-like ability to simultaneously be denizens of both the Orient and the Occident. As such, they represented a bridge between both the past and modernity.48 He wrote,

C’est qu’il est un peuple sans ressemblance avec aucun autre, je ne dis pas inférieur ni supérieur à tout autre, mais qui a réalisé ce prodige de traverser vingt siècles d’histoire sans se mêler ni se perdre parti d’Orient, il a par un long cheminent séculaire, atteint l’Occident et parvenu là, à là, surprise général, à sa propre surprise, il s’est montré aussi apte à connaître, à comprendre, à pratiquer les plus délicates disciplines de l’esprit scientifique qu’il s’est montré dans le même moment parfaitement oriental, en bonnet de fourrure et en lévite noire, au pied du mur des pleurs.

Jean Richard Bloch, Le Robinson Juif

---

48 Originally published in Le Quotidien in 1925, this article was reproduced in the Revue Europe in July 1970.
Finally, in a nod to his uncle Sylvain Lévi, who was also the anti-Zionist director of the Alliance Israélite, Bloch concluded with an affirmation of his belief in Jewish universalism.49

Ainsi, tout, climat, décor, pays, population, exprimait l’Orient et quelle Orient? Celui où l’origine du people juif se confond avec celle de tous les pasteurs nomades du désert, où nous trouvons Abraham sous sa tente, Booz dans son champ, celui où les premières légendes de l’Evangile sourdent comme les fontaines naturelles d’un sol tout imbibé de divin. L’Orient enfin d’Islam, dont Jérusalem est une des trois villes saintes. Point unique du monde, où convergent d’où divergent, les trois grandes religions du Proche Orient.


While Bloch’s speech emphasizes the primacy of the links between ancient Jewish history and modern Jewish destiny, closer examination reveals that his words were ultimately an elegant affirmation of the French post revolutionary universalist values that shaped him.

Edmond Fleg was also impressed by Zionism but like Bloch, he too struggled with the demands of Zionist particularism which imposed the need for him to choose between his love for France and his belief in Zionism. In *Ma Palestine,* (1932), he wrote that the resettlement of Palestine was prophetic proof of the endurance of the Jewish people and of the existence of God, “Cette terre et ce peuple renaissant l’un par l’autre, cette chose –après deux mille ans je la voyais”. (Fleg, 273). Yet, believing himself to be morally and philosophically unworthy, he doubted his own place within the Zionist order.

Oui, je viens de loin comme un étranger, les regarder,

49 Sylvain Lévy’s anti-Zionist stance to Zionism was congruent with early opposition to the movement by the Français Israélites and will be fully explored in the next chapter.
m’informer de ce qu’ils font; mais qu’ai-je fait pour eux? Et si c’est précisément qu’Israël est le plus grand? J’aurai donc vécu sans voir sa grandeur? Si c’est là que bat son cœur le plus vivant? Le mien aura battu sans son battement? Ah, qu’ils sont polis, généreux de me fêter! Leur hospitalité veut me cacher de ce qui nous sépare. Je me sens seul parmi eux, tout seul. Et je suis seul responsable de ma solitude.

Edmond Fleg, *Ma Palestine*, (p.201)

*Ma Palestine* is an elegant illustration of the guilt Fleg experienced as a result of being a Jew with “two hearts.” He finally resolved his dilemma by returning to France but not before promising himself that he would continue to promote the Zionist cause.

Alors, je compris; je compris cette voix si chère, qui m’avait dit sans cesse: - Retourner au lieu qui tu fus prêt à donner ton sang, au lieu t’attendent les fils, où naîtront tes petits enfants.

Edmond Fleg, *Ma Palestine*, (p.205)

Despite his admiration of Zionism, Fleg was unable to envision the movement as a cogent answer for all French Jews. While he continued to pray for and support the repatriation of the Jewish homeland, he chose to live in the diaspora. As in the case of so many of the early French Zionists, for Fleg, Zionism remained a philosophical rather than a practical solution to the Jewish question. Similarly, in *Les Chémins de mon Judaïsme et divers inédits* (compiled in 1993 by his son in law Georges Jessula), Armand Lunel states his position on the State of Israel.

---

51 For more on Lunel’s view on Zionism see *Les Chémins de mon Judaïsme et divers inédits* compiled by Georges Jessula.
Si je me suis engagé inconditionnellement pour la survie et la sécurité de l’État d’Israël, j’ai refusé tout conformisme aveugle et passionnel à l’égard de tel ou tel cas de sa politique, comme je le fais d’ailleurs aussi librement comme il m’est advenu et comme il m’adviendra encore, en tant que citoyen français, pour telle ou telle gouvernent.

Arman Lunel, Les Chemins de mon Judaïsme, (p.117)

Lunel’s text emphatically endorses his admiration of the accomplishments of the state of Israel. Ultimately though, he is guided by the principles of French post Revolutionary ideology which rendered even the slightest whisper of particularism slavish. Although he admired the work of the Zionist movement which he qualified as a resurrection “qui n’a été possible que par la fidélité à un message divin remontant jusqu’à l’aurore de la Création.”\textsuperscript{52}, in practice he was unable to accept the absolutism of political Zionism and its inability to legitimize the existence of Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Similarly, in 1925, Albert Cohen stated in his periodical La Revue Juive,

\begin{quote}
La Revue Juive ...estime en effet que c’est par la création d’une résidence nationale que pourra être résolu le problème juif dans le monde entière.

Albert Cohen, « Déclaration », (p.9)
\end{quote}

Despite his support for the Jewish state, Cohen never settled in Israel and in 1957 refused the offer of an ambassadorial position. It is interesting that as late as 1970, he still avidly recalled the intensity of his love for France in his auto biographical novel Le Livre de ma mère (1954),

\textsuperscript{52} Lunel, 117.
It would seem that while Cohen believed in theoretical, cultural Zionism and avidly supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland, ultimately in common with Lunel, Spire, Fleg and his other Français Israélite contemporaries, he was tortured by the duality of his love for France and Israel. In the end, although he remained a fervent supporter of the state of Israel, his love of France was the enduring factor which prevented him from emigrating there.

**Non Jewish support of Zionism**

Admiration for the Zionist movement was not limited to Jewish writers. During the years of the Jewish Renaissance, a number of non-Jewish writers published accounts of their visits to Palestine, usually prompted by idealized exoticism of the Orient. The success of the Zionist movement was seen as proof of the uniqueness of the Jewish spirit that despite over a century of acculturation still maintained its distinctness. The nationalist writer Pierre Benoit whose novel *Les Puits de Jacob* (1925) depicted the forces of attraction between the Orient and the modern Jew, had once been sympathetic to the anti-Semitic stance taken by Maurice Barrès and Eduard Drumont. Yet, after he made his first trip to Palestine during the early 1920s, he declared that his new found admiration of Zionism had...
converted him from anti-Semite to philo-Semite. As a nationalist, Benoit had come to understand and admire Jewish nationalism as an extension of the love had had for his own homeland. He was not alone. Pierre Bonardi’s travelogue *Retour à Jerusalem* (1927), described Zionism as “One of the greatest human enterprises: the return of a race to its origin”. Unsurprisingly, their enthusiasm was gleefully welcomed by the Zionist press. Léon Algazi, a well known journalist wrote in 1928 that “On commence enfin à comprendre que l’harmonie ne s’obtient pas plus parmi les hommes que dans le domaine des sons par le nivellement des individualités, mais par une utilisation intelligente et habille d’éléments hétérogènes. On commence à comprendre qu’il faut chercher à comprendre.”

**The influence of the Jewish Press**

The expansion of the Jewish press in post First World War France played a huge role in rendering Jewish literature from France and from outside of France available to French speaking readers. Most notable were the numerous reviews that were distinguished by their mixture of Jewish sensibility and progressive secularity. These appealed to the needs of Jewish intellectuals seeking to translate the Jewish Question into modern terms. One of the most long lasting reviews of the twentieth century, *Menorah* was first published in 1922. Lasting twelve years, its contents, although almost exclusively impregnated with French cultural values, bore witness to the Zionist revolution that was taking hold all over Europe. In addition to

---

54 Algazi,” L’Année musicale” *Menorah* (15 Jan.1928). For more information on Alzazi’s article see Malinovich p 216.
political issues, it presented Jewish art, theater and literature, by numerous Jewish authors who used the review as a sounding board for the countless new ideas taking root across the Jewish world in and outside of France.55

**The influence of the Non-Jewish press**

Non Jewish reviews were also instrumental in the dissemination of the ideology of the Jewish renaissance. According to Catherine Fhima, one of the most notable commentaries of the 1920s, came from Benjamin Crémieux’s article, *Judaïsme et littérature* (1925).56 Interestingly, the article was not published in one of the numerous Jewish reviews of the time, but in Jean François Kahn’s *Les nouvelles littéraires*, under the title *Judaïsme et littérature*, in which he explained,

> Le Judaïsme est à la mode en France. On formerait déjà une petite bibliothèque avec tout ce qui a paru depuis deux ou trois ans et qui d’une manière où d’une autre a traité Israël. On vient de s’aviser, non sans surprise, que l’âme juive n’était peut-être pas tout entière contenue dans la Bible et la haute banque et depuis le prophétisme hébraïque surtout depuis la dispersion, une infinité de sentiments, d’attitudes psychologiques, de formes religieuses et sociales, souvent contradictoires, étaient nées du Judaïsme.

Benjamin Cremieux, « Judaïsme et littérature ».

Crémieux’s article was essentially an examination of the elements that distinguished the singularity of Jewish literature and illustrated the similarities and differences between regional Jewish literatures. He reinforced the singularity of Judaism as a

55 Catherine Fhima notes that in synchrony with the secular values of French Judaism, it was not the intention of the editors of *Menorah* to concentrate on Judaism’s particularity, but rather to demonstrate the relationship between “la Condition juive” and the universality of the Human condition.

56 Benjamin Crémieux, “Judaïsme et littérature “, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, No 156, October 1925.
cultural and emphasized the common bonds that he believed existed between the various literatures of the Jewish communities of France and of their co-religionists abroad.

**Reaction of the Jewish press outside the Hexagon**

During the 1920s, Jewish communities throughout Europe and the Francophone Ottoman empire began to publish their own periodicals and reviews in a plethora of languages. These periodicals functioned as a platform for the discussion of everything from the theater to politics to the rising influence of domestic nationalism to Zionism. Each one represented a different point of view. For example, from 1860, *Le Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the press arm of the Alliance Israelite, was published monthly in French and was the official voice of the organization. Circulating throughout the Ottoman Empire, it provided detailed, precise information about the communities served by the schools of the Alliance. Its columns often reflected the opinions of the Paris based Consistory and the Alliance and served as a barometer of the levels of anti-Semitism in these countries as well as a critic for events occurring in the Hexagon.

Another periodical, *Israël*, was published weekly in Egypt between 1920 and 1939. Founded by Dr Albert Motseri who headed one of Egypt’s wealthiest Jewish families, it represented the ancient Egyptian Jewish community and was published in French, Arabic and Hebrew. Faithful to the French emancipation model

57 Although it was disbanded in 1913 and was replaced by the review *Paix et Droit* which continued to publish until 1940
of Judaism, the review gave primacy to the expression of Jewish identity within the concept of Jewish culture rather than religion.\textsuperscript{58} Interestingly, Motseri was originally a supporter of both Zionism and Egyptian nationalism. His views represented a brief era during which both nationalist movements still retained the roots of universalist ideology prompted by the French Revolution, and when the concept of the coexistence of Jewish nationalism with other nationalist movements was still believed to be possible.\textsuperscript{59} The rise of the usage of Modern Hebrew as a spoken language led to the publication of a large number of Hebrew periodicals in Francophone Lebanon and Syria. Newspapers such as \textit{Habezeleth} tackled the progress of Jewish settlement of Palestine, and in doing so took an undeniably Zionist and indeed anti-Arab stance.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} According to Dr Hagar Hillel, this type of nationalism could be qualified as Jewish national reform rather than Zionism.

\textsuperscript{59} Numerous other Jewish periodicals were published in the Maghreb. Examples are \textit{L’Avenir Illustré} which appeared twice weekly between 1929 and 1940. Written in French, and founded in Morocco, the newspaper was established by an Ashkenazi Jew Jonathan Thursz who was born in Poland and raised in Belgium, moved to Morocco in 1923. The periodical, supportive to Zionism, was rich in its account of community life in Morocco during the years of its publication. It bore testimony to the rising influence of Zionism during these years. \textit{La Liberté} or \textit{El Horria}, published in Morocco from 1915-1922 by Salomon Benaioun, appeared in both French and Judeo-Arabic. It is notable that there were significant differences in the two editions. While \textit{la Liberté} welcomed articles written in the Hexagon by French Jewish intellectuals, it tended to ignore the communities of Morocco such as Fez or Rabbat. On the other hand, \textit{El Horria}, printed in Judeo-Arabic with some articles in Hebrew tended to draw its information from the communities of the Maghreb.

\textsuperscript{60} Other earlier examples of the Jewish press included, \textit{Halevanon} (1863-1886), published by the early Zionist organization and \textit{Hovevei Zion} which appeared on a monthly basis in Palestine, both of which concerned themselves primarily with the development of the Hebrew language and the encouragement of Jewish immigration to Palestine.
The response of the Jewish communities of the Arab World to the Jewish Renaissance in the Hexagon

In contrast to the situation in the Maghreb, French influence in the Machreq retained a rather attenuated presence. Francophonie was jealously guarded as an essential element to the collective face of Jewish communities who were thankful for the economic and social opportunities offered by French education and were therefore convinced of the superiority of its culture. The regard for French education was so impressive, that even after the establishment of the Turkish republic by nationalist factions which led to the disbanding of the Alliance, its former teachers still stubbornly continued to teach their students in French. For example, E. Nathan, an A. I. U teacher declared in 1923,

L’Alliance a été éliminée, il est vrai, mais l’Occident continue à faire sentir quand même, par cette langue française qui ne cesse d’être la langue d’enseignement, autrement dit le véhicule de tout que l’humanité compte de plus beau: et dont il faudra que les juifs soient privés. L’Alliance ne fait plus sentir son action, mais le personnel qu’elle a formé met son zèle à appliquer les programmes d’enseignement dont elle fut formé.


The Jewish community’s enduring belief was that French was “the main conduit through which the students would come to appreciate Western
Despite the growing influence of the Arab nationalist movement, Jews felt morally and intellectually superior to surrounding Arab populations. Yet, paradoxically, because the Alliance curriculum adhered so stringently to the philosophy of the nineteenth century model of French Judaism, it ignored the fact that these very tenets were now being questioned in the Hexagon and were threatening to become obsolete. The images projected by Alliance teachers succinctly ignored the rising tide of influence that favored a synthesis of particularism and universalism rather than universalism. As a consequence, they were becoming increasingly hopelessly outdated.

**The response of the Arab Jewish press.**

Egypt was the dynamic, epicenter of the Jewish press. *Israël, L’Aurore* and *La Tribune Juive* were written in French, Hebrew and English while *El Chams* was written in Arabic. All four periodicals stand out because of the influence they had in Jewish communities. *Israël*, the longest lasting newspaper, appeared weekly, from 1920-1939, and was considered to be the most influential Jewish periodical. It was the first Jewish newspaper to be published in Arabic in the immediate period

---


62 That is not to say though that the Jewish communities of the Machreq were completely immune to the changes happening in both France and at home. The infant Jewish press served as an illuminating reflection of the changes both at home and to a lesser extent in the Hexagon.

63 Here because of the limitations of this study I am referring only to the countries of the Machreq. There was of course a large and separate Jewish press base in the countries of the Maghreb.
following the Balfour Declaration (1917). With a readership that emanated from the Jewish communities of Palestine, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad and Salonika, its contributions originated from a large network of journalists whose articles documented an eclectic range of subjects ranging from politics, literature and religion.

Other examples of Egyptian based periodicals were *L’Illustration Juive* (1929-1931), *La Voix Juive* (1931-1934), and the twice monthly *El Ettehad el Israeli* (1924-1930). Like *L’Aurore* and *El Chams*, they primarily classified themselves as Zionist newspapers. Yet, despite the perfunctory lip service paid to Zionism, the Jewish literate public largely ignored the movement and continued to openly revere French culture. Newspapers such as *l’Association Amicale* (1929-1931) published monthly in French by the Alliance actively privileged French education, while other reviews such as *Maccabi*, (1932) extolled the superiority of French literature. *L’Orient* published during the early 1930s published new material by French Hexagon based Jewish writers.

**The response of Arab Jewish communities to early Zionism**

As in the Hexagon, Jewish communities in the Machreq were initially receptive to cultural Zionism because of its resonance with French universalist ideology. Ultimately though, like the *Français Israélites*, they too were committed to the betterment of their own diaspora communities, and showed little intention of leaving for Palestine en masse. While Zionist newspapers throughout the Machreq led an energetic discourse on the positive facets of the Zionist argument, as in the
Hexagon, Zionism continued to appeal to but a minority of Arab Jews. In Egypt for example, its greatest admirers were the foreign born Ashkenazi community who were alienated by the middle class Sephardi elite and as a consequence were consistently denied entry into the upper echelons of Egyptian society. Ovadia Yerushalmi writes of the influence of Zionism in Egypt during the 1920s.

Likewise, in Iraq, Zionism found its greatest following among the poor Kurdish Jews who lived in the north of the country. Consistently marginalized from mainstream Jewish society, Zionism presumably offered a means of escapism, individual reinvention and communal social advancement. For the most part though, the affluent Jewish communities of Baghdad and Mosul who were served by the schools of the Alliance, stubbornly continued to revere and emulate their ingrained imaginaire of France.

The veneration of France by Arab Jewish writers
The extent of the veneration of France was readily seen in the work of Arab Jewish writers such as Edmond Jabès, Paula Jacques and Naim Kattan, whose early works
embodied the author’s emulation of French style and idealization of France.

**Edmond Jabès: a French Writer**

Jabès, like many of his contemporaries, grew up in the wealthy area of Haret el Yahud (roughly translated as the Jewish Quarter). As in the case of the majority of Egypt’s cosmopolitan Jewish population, French was the _lingua franca_ used in family, educational and social settings. Although Jabès was enchanted by ancient Arabic culture and its connections to ancient Egypt as Steven Jaron points out in his work *Edmond Jabès: the Hazards of Exile* (2008), “Essentially, the writer viewed Egypt with the eyes of a French schoolboy, while he thought of France as a Europeanized Egypt”.64 Clearly from an early age, his sense of cultural alienation was already obvious, and while his cultural orientation was turned firmly away from modern Egypt it already leaned towards the direction of the Hexagon.

Educated in the Lycée français of Cairo, Jabès never received a formal Jewish education. Although his siblings were active in Zionist youth groups and his future wife Arlette Cohen was a vocal supporter of the cause, he preferred to identify himself as a “connoisseur of French culture”. His first book of poems *Illusions sentimentales* (1930) consisted of a selection of verse composed on the diverse models of Lamartine, Vigny and Musset. As late as 1986, Jabès boasted that his first poems had been read at the Comédie Française where they enjoyed

---

immediate acclaim. With the exception of his speeches against Nazi anti-Semitism, he remained Jewish in name only and throughout the 35 years he composed poetry in Egypt identified himself essentially as a French speaking Egyptian writer whose cultural orientation pointed towards France. Later in his life, even when he became known for his Jewish writing, he continued to publicly acknowledge his debt to both French culture and French language.

Jabès’s mantle as a Jewish writer would not be assumed until he left Egypt after the fall of King Faroukh in 1957, certain that as an already accomplished poet he would find quick acceptance in France. To his surprise, he encountered anti-Semitism. Explaining his horrified reaction to journalist Madeleine Chapsel he admitted, “J’avais pris conscience de ma condition juive”. The psychological shock and the loss of confidence in “la patrie de l’humain” resulted in an awakening of his dormant Jewish conscience, and led him to the second half of his writing period. Brandishing his newly awakened Jewish consciousness, he wrote Le Livre de questions (1963): the work which would forever identify him as a Jewish writer.

**Naim Kattan: the Arab nationalist**

Naim Kattan grew up in Baghdad, a city in which the prosperous Jewish community traced its roots back over two millennia. Historically, the Jewish community maintained an almost consistently peaceful relationship with its Muslim

---

65 These early poems which I will be examining in greater detail in the next chapter are arguably a criticism of anti-Semitism, and are therefore possibly an example of Jabès’s early identification with the Jew as the “Other”.

66 For an extensive study of Jabès, see *The Hazards of Exile* (2002) by Steven Jaron.
compatriots. Later, as a Francophone community, thanks to the establishment of the Alliance schools throughout Iraq, Jews enjoyed advantages such as their eligibility for study in France and the possibility of work in the civil service branches of the British and French colonial machine.

Kattan’s autobiographical memoir Adieu Babylone: Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak (1975) illustrates the idealized attachment the students of the Alliance Israélite felt towards the Hexagon. While he acknowledges the Zionist youth groups he attended, and nostalgically describes “Les jeunes gens et les jeunes filles groupées en cellules et qui se réunissent clandestinement pour apprendre l’hébreu ainsi que l’histoire sioniste”, his memoir also records the angry protests of the prosperous Jews of Iraq who refused to leave their homeland. Despite both the rise of Zionism in Europe and the mounting chorus of Arab nationalism, the majority of the Jewish community was anxious to remain in Iraq.

Dans les hautes sphères de la communauté, les appels à l’union retentissaient continuellement. Nous étions juifs et points sionistes.


As in the case of Egypt, the Jewish community of Iraq was strictly divided along social economic lines. Describing the physical and psychological divisions between his own neighborhood and the tortuous streets of Abu Sifain and Hennui where he went with his mother when she wanted to replace the Kurdish Jewish maids who did her laundry, Kattan paints a sad picture of the gloomy contrast between his own Francophone community and that of the impoverished, alienated
Kurdish Jews, who would be among the first Jews to leave Iraq for resettlement in Palestine.

Nous allions d’une rouelle nauséabonde à une autre en quête du lieu où d’habitude les juifs kurdes émigrés du nord ressemblaient. Les kurdes les plus démunis des juifs fournissaient à la communauté les exécutants des travaux durs portefaix, déménageurs, blanchisseuses et domestiques. Entassés dans leur quartier sordide, ils vivaient en marge de la communauté.

Naim Kattan, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.70.

**Paula Jacques : the reception of Zionism by the Egyptian Jewish community**

The Franco-Egyptian writer Paula Jacques’s work describes the fragile atmosphere of Egypt during the years that preceded the establishment of the state of Israel and the eventual dismantling of the Egyptian Jewish community. Her admittedly orientalist memoir Lumière d’oeil (1983) is a retrospective account of the author’s childhood during the interwar years. Draw from memories of the French speaking Jews of her own middle class community, the novel is set during the period immediately after the establishment of the Jewish state, and provides kaleidoscopic images of the lives of Jews and non-Jews who lived peacefully together. The novel also provides intricate clues about the Jewish community’s alienation from the Zionist cause. For example, Mona, the child narrator describes a conversation she had with her mother Rachel that despite once falling passionately in love with a Zionist that she refused to leave Egypt,  

68 Again, this is a retrospective account of the author’s childhood, and so was not written during the period she is describing.
Avant ton père, j’ai été très langoureuse d’un homme. jusqu’à le suivre en Palestine. A Tibériade. Ce n’était pas l’Israël de maintenant, mais une vraie terre de sauvages.
Paula Jacques, *Lumière d’œil*, p.77

Although one might postulate that she later regretted her decision, her description illustrates the dismissive attitude held by Egyptian Jews towards early Zionism. Although Mona’s mother was in love and dreamed of following her lover to Palestine she could not conceive of actually leaving cosmopolitan Egypt for such a primitive existence. Jacques’s memoir also describes the connection between the Jewish community’s privileged position and their devotion to France.

*Ils étaient [les juifs] protégés, forcément parce qu’ils amenaient le commerce et la prospérité. Ni les impôts ni taxes ni service militaire ni diable vauvert. Aucun devoir et tous les droits. Même la justice devait plier devant les tribunaux mixés. Quand un juif ou un Français, c’était pareil en qualité, avait une épine sur le dos, il était jugé, courtoisément par des juges européens... C’était la loi coloniale.*

Although every Passover, Egyptian Jews continued to recite the mantra “L’an prochain à Jérusalem” their attachment to Zionism in reality, amounted to no more than a superficial homage to their ancestral roots. Fortified by romantic memories of their long association with France which traced its roots back to Napoleon’s incursions into the region, and enhanced by French education, it is clear from Jacques’s novel that despite the peaceful co-existence of the Jewish community with the Muslim population, the Jews of Egypt felt themselves to be Francophone and as such, separate from and superior to their Muslim neighbors.
In his work *Alexandre et d’autres récits* de Jacques Hassoun (2001), the author notes the occurrence of a Christian missionary led accusation of ritual murder in an Alexandrian lycée in 1925. Yet, despite several documented cases of anti-Semitism in the Machreq, Jewish communities remained committed to their intricately woven, mutually benefiting relationship with the Hexagon. Consequently, they were quick to dismiss anything that threatened to breech their beliefs. For example, Naim Kattan’s shock and disappointment at the unexpected anti-Semitic remarks leveled at him by the French embassy official who awarded him his coveted bursary to study in France, was quickly tempered by Kattan’s certainty that the official who was of Assyrian descent “was not really French”. As an unauthentic Frenchman, the man was a mere aberration of authentic Frenchness. “Je me réassurais en me disant qu’il n’était après tout qu’un français d’adoption”69. By refusing to give validity to the official’s remarks because of his lack of “authentic Frenchness”, Kattan was able to sustain his belief in the supremacy of France, as the bastion of justice.

**Conclusion**

In essence, the Jewish renaissance of the 1920s occurred as a result of the reassessment of the old nineteenth century model of French Judaism, whose ideology were based on the principles of acculturation and adherence to the universalist ideals of the French revolution. In the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair and the carnage of the Great War, these ideals were challenged, as the first generation of

---

Jews after the Dreyfus affair, influenced by the offspring of the East European immigrants of their parents' generation, began to explore their Jewish roots. The result was a new openness towards individual communities based largely on an idealized, orientalist particularism. This propelled the popularity of particularistic literature which focused on the primacy of the individual community. Consequently, there was a proliferation of particularistic work written by French Jewish writers who treated a diverse range of topics such as anti-Semitism, assimilation and Zionism, all of which had previously been of little interest to the French Jewish community.

Although the literary output of the Jewish renaissance was impressive, it did not last. Both the economic depression and the increase in anti-Semitism during the 1930's eventually dealt a severe blow to many of the organizations and activities that were at the epicenter of the Jewish cultural renaissance of the 1920s. *Palestine* and the *Revue littéraire* ceased publication in 1931. *Menorah*'s last issue appeared in 1933, and *Chema Israël* ceased to exist by 1935. Their demise was due to a variety of factors, one of the primary ones to be sure was economic. Even more importantly however, the mood of crisis during the 1930s exacerbated many of the tensions and differences within their organizations. While Zionist, religious, politically active, and spiritually orientated Jews could co-exist within an organization during the 1920s, these kinds of differences became more problematic once the need to respond to the anti-Semitic crisis of the 1930s took center stage.

While these changes in the French social and cultural landscape played an important role in the demise of many of the organizations and publications which
flourished during the 1920s, the question remains as to the ultimate viability of the Jewish culture that was created during those years. In an 1929 article for *Chalom*, Jaime Azancot predicted that the heightened interest in Judaism and the enlivened Jewish sphere of the 1920s would not be substantive enough to transmit a Jewish heritage to the next generation. 70 It is of course difficult to ascertain whether his predictions would have been borne out had the international, political and economic scene remained stable. According to Malinovich, evidence suggests that much of the Jewish activity that took place during this period was essentially a one generation phenomenon.71 This was particularly true of the involvement of intellectuals whose process of self-questioning began during or in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair. Initially pushed towards a sense of reconnection with the Jewish people by their confrontation with anti-Semitism, their quest to define a modern Jewish identity grew more out of a personal need for soul searching than a concern about Jewish continuity. Most of the intellectuals active in Zionist and Jewish literary circles during this period strongly identified with French left wing culture, The new openness in this milieu towards the idea of ethnic and cultural difference encouraged them to affirm their Jewish identity. But like their predecessors, they remained firmly attached to the ideals of French republicanism and a French-Jewish synthesis.


The question should be posed as to the extent to which the ethno-cultural definition of Jewishness penetrated French culture and consciousness. While the idea that an ethno-cultural or racial definition of Jewishness was theoretically compatible with the acceptance of Jews as fully fledged members of the French nation gained support in these years, it nevertheless remained controversial and, for many, difficult to fully understand. Catherine Fhima argues that this stemmed partly from the difficulty that intellectuals and editors had in making sense of Jewish identity outside a religious context.\(^{72}\)

Outside the Hexagon, in the francophone communities of the Machreq, where the post-Revolution ideology of the *Français Israélites* was still a potent force, a combination of snobbish loyalty to France and the real social and economic advantages gained by French education effectively suppressed any change of view in the Jewish communities. Enamored by halcyon images of a France that no longer and perhaps had never existed, the Jews of the Machreq, remained blissfully oblivious to changes in the perception of Jewish identity that were occurring in the Hexagon. As we shall see, it was an outlook that would remain essentially unchallenged until the establishment of the Jewish state became all but a certainty.

---

Chapter 3: The Jews of the Machriq and their relationship with France

Nabucadnetsar emmena captifs à Babylone
ceux qui échappèrent à l’épée ; et ils lui assujettis
à lui et à ses filles.

II Chroniques 36, 20

Recollecting his Baghdad childhood in his memoir Adieu Babylon, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, (1975) Naim Kattan wrote the above quote. His identity, like that of hundreds of thousands of other Jews who had made their home in the Middle East, had been over two thousand years in the making and as a result, his sense of belongingness to the region was incontestable. Contrasting jarringly with the narrative of the Jews of eastern Europe, the Jews of Muslim countries, known as “Ahl al Kitab”, “People of the Book”, had enjoyed what was for the most part an undisturbed and at times prosperous existence in both the Middle East and North Africa.

According to Aron Rodrigue, in his work Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jews Jewries in Transition, “The irruption of Europe into the economy, politics and culture of the Middle East during the nineteenth century was to violently disturb the carefully crafted equilibrium of a region whose balance depended on the intricacies


74 Both Christians and Jews were considered “Ahl al Kitab”. As such, they were permitted to practice their religion, own property and to trade. They were also exempted from military service. In return, they were obliged to acknowledge the superiority of Islam and were subjected to numerous, sometimes humiliating inconveniences including special taxes, dress codes, restrictions on riding animals etc, which relegate them to second class citizens. Nevertheless, while the subject of dhimmi status has been historically accorded monolithic importance, its cumulative effect on Jewish communities still remains controversial.
of difference”(p.3). One of the most important consequences of the incorporation of the Middle East and Africa within the European sphere of influence was the westernization of the East. According to Rodrigue, the profound inequality of power between the Western colonizer and the colonized Orient lay at the core of the westernization process. It was further aggravated by the attempts of those who were powerless to overcome their position of inferiority while internalizing the perception of Western superiority. 75 Rodrigue notes, “The non – West never transmuted itself into the West, but it created a new, hybrid reality that was nevertheless over determined by European superior power”(p.5). The first goal of this chapter is to examine the influence of Western, specifically French influence on the Jewish communities of the Muslim world, and the ways it irreversibly changed the infrastructure of the Jewish communities of the region.

To illuminate the problematic nature of Middle Eastern Jewry’s encounter with the West, I will first focus on the relationship of Jewish communities with their Muslim neighbours. In particular, I will examine the role of European influence on the institution of the Tanzimaat, the reforms executed by the Ottoman empire during the late nineteenth century which simultaneously offered protection to eastern Jews but were also viewed by Muslims to favor Jewish communities and thus provoked anti-Semitism.

Secondly, given that the process of westernization affected all those it touched, a crucial difference distinguished the experience of the Jewish communities

from their Muslim neighbors. For Sephardim or Eastern Jews, the most important impetus for cultural westernization came from their co-religionists in the West, in particular the Français Israélites who through its organization the Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded a vast network of schools throughout the Muslim countries of the Ottoman Empire. Although the Alliance claimed that its goals were not to create a mimesis of French Jewry but rather to facilitate the conditions that would bring about the same emancipation already obtained in the Hexagon, the organization’s Paris trained teachers, who were primarily of Middle Eastern and North African origin, returned to their countries to spread their newly adopted culture with all the heady zeal of the newly converted. The Alliance was therefore, in practice, a deeply politicizing organization. The second half of this chapter focuses on the relationship between the Français Israélites and the Jewish communities of the Muslim countries. Finally, I will examine the tension between Jewish Orientalism and Jewish universalism, both of which played a large part in the westernization of the Middle Eastern Jewish communities.

**Jews as denizens of Muslim countries**

Jewish communities historically flourished throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East as early as the Babylonian exile of 586 B.C. Under a succession of Mesopotamian, Greek, Carthaginian, Roman, Persian and Byzantine rulers and eventually the trading civilization established by Islam between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the relentless expansion of territory under the Arab caliphates led to the population shifts needed to support the continued growth of the burgeoning
civilization. This resulted was a symbiotic union between of Jewish and Arab culture. Maria Rosa Menocal sums up the atmosphere of tolerance which dominated the Levant,

By all accounts under the Arab caliphate, Jewish culture prospered, the flourishing of Jewish culture went hand in hand with the heyday of the Arabic, particularly secular Arabic, culture. In great measure, both cultural zeniths were due to the same liberalism and tolerance, and ultimately they would be destroyed by the same intolerance. Avarorroës and Maimonides both wrote in Arabic because it was so dominantly the language of prestige, and though in the non Arabic parts of Europe, that received their work they may have been distinguished as Arab and Jew respectively, they were often seen as bound together as Andalusians –as harbingers of new philosophical and intellectual currents masters of the language and cultures in a world of myriad riches-than they were seen as divided by any religious doctrine.

Rosa Menocal, Arabic Rule, p.148-149.

Ammiel Alcalay, points out in his ground breaking work *After Jews and Arabs* (1993) “that while simplistic contemporary approaches often posit Islam as an all embracing, pervasive and conquering force, such generalities completely ignore the complex phenomenon of the old meeting the new, a process which was both characteristic and pervasive”(3). As an illustration of this, native non-Muslim minorities were collectively known as *alh al-Dhimma* (People of the Pact) and as such merited a respected status. While some historians reduce the dhimmi status to a demeaning and discriminatory one, the truth was complex and far from transparent. Alcalay shows that as dhimmi, non Muslim subjects of the Sultan enjoyed a complicated status that simultaneously embodied a position of defined inferiority with certain legal and social disabilities, but also guaranteed their lives, their property, and their right to worship as they chose.
Traditional Islamic social framework historically permitted non-Muslims a considerable measure of economic opportunity, and accorded a great deal of internal economic autonomy to its various religious minorities. The intricately crafted system, developed over a period of twelve long centuries of Islamic rule was by no means monolithic. There were many local variations existing in regard to its enforcement and the strictness of its application. Despite the claims of historians such as Norman Stillman who points out that during periods of economic, political and social instability, harsher and more restrictive elements of the system prevailed,\(^76\) (and here, Stillman posits the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth century as somber examples of this phenomenon), the fact remains that the Jews of Muslim countries, unlike their co-religionists in East Europe, lived in relative comfort and peace for large tracts of their duration in the Islamic countries.

It is interesting that this fact continues to be overlooked by so many academicians who continue to highlight the generally fallacious argument that the Jews of the Arab world lived primitively, in duress and in abject poverty. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the European press almost unanimously reported the overall general debasement of the Jews who lived in Arab lands. For example, Edward William Lane, who lived in Cairo during the 1820s and 1830s described the Jews of Egypt as “victims held in the utmost condition of abhorrence by Muslims in general”\(^77\) and Michel Abitbol additionally notes the reaction of the French doctor Clot Bey who in 1869 wrote,

\(^76\) Ibid, pp.4
Leurs maisons sont rapprochées, mal divisées et de pauvre apparence ... En général, ils sont mal vêtus,...ils sont ignorants et très religieux, et d’un fanatisme qui semble aigri et exalté par les nombreuses vexations, par les persécutions de tout genre dont ils ont été victimes jusqu’à ce jour.

Michel Abitbol, Le Passé d’une discorde Juifs et Arabes du VII à nos jours, p140.

Clot Bey’s dismally description was grossly unfair. While it was true that many of the Jews of the Middle East and of the Maghreb, in common with the majority of the general population, were poor and lived in ghetto like quarters known by a succession of names such as the Mellah, Harat al Yahud and Mahallat al Yahud, not all Jews lived in abject poverty. In reality, they were better off than their Muslim contemporaries. Research reveals a continuous presence of small prosperous Jewish minorities employed in professions such goldsmithing, siver smithing and moneylending (Sarraf). These were professions historically prohibited to Muslims by the Islamic faith. In addition, in a region where most subjects remained poor and repressed by autocratic rulers, Jews, who were traditionally polyglots, retained a privileged status because of their long standing historical intra-communal connections across large swathes of geography.

Later, as a result of the “Tanzimaat” Arab Jews, became highly successful as intermediaries who facilitated the commercial interests of the Ottoman Empire. 78

As a result, they enjoyed an enhanced, privileged relationship with European interests even before the establishment of the European colonial machine. Yet, we shall see, the Tanzimaat acted as a double edged sword. While they offered

78 Changes which occurred during the late nineteenth century designed to abolish restrictions on minority communities and to bring about emancipation.
impressive advantages and protection to the Jewish community by exempting them from military service and Shariah law, (in effect allowing them to effectively govern their own communities) they also inadvertently eroded at long standing, intricate ties and provoked anti-Semitism among Muslim compatriots who felt that the reforms unfairly favored minority communities.

**European presence in the Middle East.**

When Napoléon landed in Egypt with 30,000 French troops in 1798, the European penetration of the Middle East began. While the occupation lasted no more than 3 years, it heralded the advent of European political, economic, social and cultural influence that would increase exponentially during the nineteenth century. The impact of the European hegemony was to effect great changes upon the Middle East, which according to Stillman was still in a state of general stagnation and decay at the time of the French incursion. It is significant that upon his arrival, Napoléon declared that he had no intention of subverting indigenous religions. Demanding that his soldiers show the type of respect typified by the Roman legions of antiquity he declared,

Les peuples avec lesquels nous allons vivre sont mahométans leur premier article de foi est celui-ci; il n'y a d'autre Dieu que Dieu, et Mahomet est son Prophète. Ne les contredisez pas: Agissez avec eux comme nous avons agi avec les juifs, avec les Italiens: ayez

---

79 Norman Stillman writes in his work *Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, that this event represented a path to intervention that had been two centuries in the making, as expanding European interests had extended from the Levant to India by concessions to extra territorial rights for foreign nationals and their protégés in the Ottoman Empire known as capitulations.

80 Ibid, 3
Interestingly, during his failed Palestinian campaign of 1789, in a statement which predated the Balfour declaration by more than a hundred years, Napoléon formally invited the Jews of Asia and Africa to reestablish their ancestral commonwealth in Jerusalem. While the statement was doubtlessly a propaganda exercise, "une entreprise dont les effets sur la civilisation seront incalculables" designed to promote Napoléon’s magnanimity, and ultimately had no perceptible effects on the region, it is the first recorded instance in which a European power had taken the initiative on behalf of Middle Eastern Jewry.

By 1830, Napoléon had been ousted by the British. Prompted by a combination of liberal sentiments, and evangelical messianic conviction, British aristocracy began to take a protective interest in the welfare of the Jews. As an example of this, governmental concerns relating to Jewish welfare appeared frequently in British consular dispatches from Palestine, Syria and Iraq during the 1840’s onwards.82

---

81 See Abitbol’s *Juifs et Arabes le passé d’une discorde* for more extensive detail of Napoleon’s encounter with Islam.

82 See Stillman, p8 for a full discussion on this interesting topic.
The march towards emancipation

The initial steps made towards improving the status of non Muslim subjects did not occur through European intervention. In 1839, the reformist Turkish foreign minister Mustafa Rashid Pasha, imbued with European notions, encouraged Sultan Abdul Majid to sign the *Hatt-I Sharif of Gulhane*. In an action no less historic than the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, the document formally extended civil equality to non Muslims.

Il ne sera permis à personne de porter atteinte à l’honneur de qui que ce soit. Chacun possèdera ses propriétés de toute nature et en disposera avec la plus entière liberté, sans que personne puisse y porter obstacle... Ces concessions impériales s’étendent à tous nos sujets, de quelque religion ou secte qu’ils puissent être, ils en jouiront sans exception. Une sécurité parfaite est donc accordée par nous aux habitants d’Empire, dans leur vie, leur honneur et leur fortune ainsi que l’exige le texte sacré de notre loi.

Abitbol, p.147

The document marked the beginning of the period of reform or *Tanzimaat* in the Ottoman Empire. Although the *Tanzimaat* have been often criticized as an effort to obtain European favor at a time of crisis during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, in reality they provided the basis for the important reforms that substantially changed the quality of life of the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire. Encouraged in 1856 by the continued promise of Western recognition of Ottoman territorial claims, the Sultan expanded the powers of the *Khatt-i- Shariff* in a new proclamation, the *Khatt-i-Humayun*. This decree went further than its predecessor by abolishing the traditional *Jizya* (Poll tax) thereby allowing the construction of new religious buildings and enforcing a ban on derogatory terms.
By far the most important change that resulted from the Tanzimaat came with the restructuring of the Millets or independently administered communities. In keeping with the general spirit of reform, each community reorganized its governing body (with varying success). Religious leadership was invested in a Hakham Bashi or Chief Rabbi who was responsible for the administration of religious aspects of the community. As in Paris during the nineteenth century, the Jewish community was served by a committee of notables the Majlis Jismani, that included both rabbis and lay leaders. As it was in France, the wealthy elite, who had Western connections tended to dominate the committee. Even prior to the instillation of the Alliance Israélite schools, these men spoke at least one European language and were firmly committed to the supremacy of the Western model of education.

Both Stillman and Abitbol emphasize that the Tanzimaat came about as a direct function of European influence. In return for their promise to facilitate the Ottoman Empire’s aspiration of admittance into the European Concert of Powers, Britain and France were assured an augmentation of their influence in the Arab world. The success of the reforms was mixed and in countries where Ottoman control had already become attenuated, the results were especially uneven. For example, in Yemen, any improvements achieved were short lived, because the Turkish governor did not wish to stir up the Muslim majority by ameliorating the lot of the Jews. In Tangier, Cairo, Tunis, Aleppo and Baghdad however, there was a steady, gradual improvement in the standard of living of the Jewish community.
Interestingly, Aron Rodrigue emphatically insists that, even before the institution of the *Tanzimaat*, the Ottoman Empire had already begun to adapt to changes in population dynamics. Differences between population groups were inscribed in self representations of the group and notably, nothing in the political system of the Ottomans had ever called for different groups to merge into one. In other words, *Differences were accepted as a given.* In contrast to post enlightenment European thinking, which emphasized universalism, the Ottoman model *a priori* recognized particularistic differences. This was a world that accepted that groups did not necessarily have to share similarities to maintain a legitimate place in the overall array. An application of the atmosphere of amicable mutual co-existence is readily seen in Naim Kattan’s memoir *Adieu Babylone: Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak* (1975), in which he describes his childhood memories of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur.

> Toute la ville prenait acte de notre recueillement et observait, sans le vouloir, cette solennité. A l’exception d’une salle dont le propriétaire musulman ne présentait que des productions égyptiennes, tous les cinémas fermaient leurs portes. La rue Rachid, principale artère de la ville était quasi déserte. Les passants musulmans arboraient un air de nonchalance qui faisait apparaître Bagdad comme une ville orphelinée, évacuée.

_Naim Kattan, Adieu Babylone: Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak*, p.68.

Michel Abitbol points out that the reforms instigated a change in the way minority populations were viewed by the majority. Minorities were now viewed as privileged. This eventually eroded at the intricately balanced relationship between

---

83 For a fuller discussion of the subject see Rodrigue’s *De L’Instruction à l’Émancipation*. p.5.
Jews and Muslims, replacing it with an uneasy distrust that pejoratively emphasized their differences. The Tanzimaat were welcomed however by European powers whose support of Dhimmi communities was to eventually facilitate their colonization of the region after the First World War. As for the Jewish communities, drawn by the promise of advancement and gratified by European support, they were all too willing to enter into what appeared to be a symbiotically beneficial relationship. The result was that they began to leave their villages, moving to towns where there was greater opportunity for commercial exchange. This would eventually lay the groundwork for French colonization which, while favoring non-Muslims, eventually estranged them from their Muslim neighbors. The Moroccan Israeli writer Albert Swissa confirms,

Indeed, decades before the great drama of the ingathering of the exile had begun, a different drama was unfolding for the Jews of Morocco, a result of the French rule of the land. Like prehistoric eggs hatching after hundreds of years of gestation the Jews began to flock from the villages to the great metropolises by their thousands, astir with the passion for modernity. My father the first born son of renowned jewelers, bookbinders and circulators liturgical hymns on my grandfather's side, and a whole line of dentists on my grandmother's side, left their ancestral home of Tiznit- nestled in the Draa Valley between the base of the Atlas mountains and in the southern edge of the Sahara-for Casablanca – the city of his dreams in those days- taking with him his tiny family and his seven orphaned nephews. One fine day –after years of struggle and hard work,- my father found himself strolling in a leisurely fashion down the Boulevard de France from his dental clinic to his home.84

Jews who had initially been reticent to take advantage of the advantages offered to them by the Western driven Tanzimaat, now eagerly benefited from the heady respect bestowed on them by European hegemonies. In 1878, in a

84 Translated from the Hebrew by Marsha Weinstein.
memorandum addressed to the London based Anglo-Jewish Association, John Drummond Hay wrote,\textsuperscript{85}

\begin{quote}
Je me souviens du temps où les Juifs, ceux qui faisaient fonction d’interprètes indigènes des légations étrangères étaient obligés de se déchausser en passant devant une mosquée à Tanger. J’ai été le premier à mettre une terme à cette pratique, il y a une trentaine d’années…
Aujourd’hui, les juifs circulent là où ils veulent, même devant les mosquées, et leur condition est meilleure que celle de la population musulmane.

Abitbol, 186.
\end{quote}

While Hay’s praise illustrates his high regard for the Tanzimaat, it sadly displays his failure to forecast the detrimental and entirely irreversible effects that the migration and urbanization of Jewish communities would eventually have on the delicately, balanced relationships forged between Jews and Muslims over two millennia.

\section*{Relations between Muslims and Jews}

Although the Occidental lens often posits the relationship between Jews and Muslims as one of inferior to superior, such conclusions were short sighted and frequently misread the subtleties of the carefully constructed and most often harmonious ties, built on hundreds of years of shared community. As a case in point, Abitbol notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the first Arab newspapers to be published, consecrated an abundance of pages supporting the scholastic and scientific nature of the sacred texts of Judaism. Similarly, during the

\textsuperscript{85} Cited from \textit{Al Wata’iq} V (1981), pp. 350-351. For further information see Abitbol, p186.
Dreyfus affair, the infant Arab press was quick to condemn the anti-Semitic
demonstrations taking place in France, warning its readers not to close their
eyes to the events happening in France.

Significantly, the medieval anti-Semitic motifs of Jews as ritual murderers
that had been periodically revived in Europe over hundreds of years, were for the
most part, historically absent among Muslims (with the exception of those who had
been exposed to Western contact) until the early twentieth century, the period
which coincided with infiltration of European influence in the Arab world and the
rise of Arab nationalism. During this period, anti-Semitic literature, published in
Europe was first translated into Arabic and subsequently dispersed among the
Muslim population as pamphlets. While research does show that since the 1840’s,
the Jews of Turkey, Greece, Syria and Egypt had been subjected to periodical
accusations of ritual murder (usually at Easter), such attacks were usually
instigated by Christian mobs in the form of demonstrations, and it was very rarely
indeed that Muslims took part in these attacks.

As a result of the Tanzimaat, Jews migrated to the cities, forming a
disproportionate portion of the population. Their numbers were further augmented
by the lowering of infant mortality - a happy consequence of the improvement in
living conditions. Abitbol notes that in Iraq, for example, towards the end of the
eighteenth century, the Jewish community steadily increased, partly due to
immigration from the disadvantaged communities of Kurdistan, Persia and Aden
to the cities. While once they had constituted only 3% of the total population of the
country, by the end of the First World War, Jews in the three main cities of
Baghdad, Bassora and Mossoul now reached a total of 87500, easily outclassing the number of Christians residents (78800). This was a similar story throughout the large cities of the Ottoman Empire.

In Egypt, where Muḥammad Ḥasan had sought modernization during the late nineteenth century, in order to gain European favour, with the hope of challenging the Ottoman Empire, Jews migrated to Alexandria and Cairo where they formed distinct classes based on their categorization as autochtone, Sephardi or Ashkenazi. While the majority of Jews admittedly lived poorly, research reveals the presence of an emerging middle class and the ascension of the fortunes and power of notable families such as the Suarès, the Cattaoui Mosseri and Mensashe. All of the latter were quick to translate the change in attitude towards the Jews into both financial and social gain.

Jews successfully acted as intermediaries between European commercial interests and the local population. This of course was perfectly in keeping with the long standing Islamic belief that the dhimmi as a natural polyglot was eminently suitable to dealing with foreigners. As a result of the Tanzimaat, European governments, now eager to cement their influence in the Ottoman Empire, used the dhimmi as middlemen to facilitate their desire to conduct business within the

86 The term Autochtone assumes Jews who existed as an in situ community since biblical or the early exilic era Ashkenazi Jews originated from eastern Europe and had come to Egypt via Palestine after the First World War while Sephardi Jews had immigrated from other regions of the former Arab caliphate such as Spain and later the Balkans.

87 Again it must be stressed here that poverty was not isolated to the Jewish community. It was a reality that was congruent with the poverty endured throughout the Ottoman Empire, which despite the institution of the Tanzimaat was by the late nineteenth century in its death throes, and undergoing irreversible disintegration.
Ottoman Empire. This coupled with the sudden increase of Jewish population in the cities and their perceived favor with the authorities led to tension with Muslim communities who had been angered first by the imposition of the *Tanzimaat* and second by the obvious advantages given to *Dhimmi* who were now essentially free to live beyond the reaches of Islamic law. 88.

**Anti-Semitism in Muslim countries**

In his essay, “Le Séfaradisme” (2001), Naim Kattan’s goal was to criticize the conduct of the State of Israel for its unfair discrimination against Arab Jews upon their arrival in 1952. In doing so, he evocatively depicts the atmosphere of mutual respect which prevailed during his Baghdadi childhood. Firstly, defending Islam as an essentially tolerant religion, he describes the mutually sympathetic existence of the Iraqi Jewish and Christian community with the Muslim community.

Dans le même espace, le christianisme constituait un autre style, une autre modalité. Deux réalités qui furent la terre nourricière de l'Islam qui, après son triomphe, ont vécu dans ces confins et sous son autorité... Fait essentiel, l'Islam ne nie aucune religions qui ont alimenté sa substance mais les reconnaît, les incorporé dans sa démarche. Aux cotes de Mohammed, l'ultime et dernier prophète, les grandes figures présents dans le Coran sont Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Moïse (*Moussa*) Joseph (*Youssef*), Jésus (*Issa*)...

Naim Kattan, *L’Écrivain migrant : Essais sur des cités et des hommes*, p.95

---

88 Under both *Dhimmi* and *Tanzimaat* laws, Jews were governed by the laws dictated by the Grand Rabbis (*Hakim Bashi*). This meant that disputes originating in the Jewish community were usually settled within the Jewish community as were marriages and divorces. This was a policy which was common throughout the Ottoman Empire which generally operated a tolerant attitude in its governance of the different factions of its empire.
Kattan continues his assessment by lavishing high praise on the atmosphere of mutual tolerance traditionally fostered by Islam.

Aussi pendant des siècles, les premiers monothéistes ont vécu en marge de l'Islam, reconnus, respectés, même si les communautés juives et chrétiennes vivant dans son sein furent parfois marginalisées et socialement infériorisées. Les dhimmis furent des protégés qui ne participaient pas au djihad, à l'effort de l'Islam dans son expansion et dans son implantation dans le monde. Ils devaient payer une taxe en compensation de leur dépense. Des juifs et des chrétiens, individuellement jouaient un rôle important non seulement sur le plan intellectuel mais aussi socialement et politiquement. Ce qui importe, c'est que sous l'Islam empruntant fréquemment la langue du Coran ( Maimonide écrivit le guide des égarés en arabe dans l'alphabet hébraïque), les juifs ont préservé, protégé et célébré leur religion ...

Sous l'Islam, les juifs tout autant que les chrétiens ont vécu comme communautés distinctes non exclues de la vie publique et l'empire ottoman permit aux juifs qui fuyaient l'inquisition de s'installer dans les espaces de son règne. Là, l'autonomie des communautés juives et chrétiennes qui était un fait social sous l'autorité des Arabes est devenue une réalité légale. Le millet, la communauté, était légalement responsable de la vie personnelle : mariage, divorce, héritage, étaient sous le gouvernement de tribunaux rabbiniques qui étaient reconnus par l'état.

He concludes his narrative by lambasting the Israeli Ashkenazi elite whom he accuses of marginalizing and discriminating against Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries. Although deeply political, his description highlights the favourable conditions that existed in Muslim countries, unfavorably contrasting his own experience with the long history of anti-Semitism experienced by Ashkenazi communities in Europe,

Le contraste semblerait de prime abord grand entre ces juifs et ceux qui vivaient en terre chrétienne. D'abord concurrents dans le conquête des peuples idolâtres, les juifs ont assez tôt abandonné ou furent forcés de le faire-les visées de conversion et d'expansion. Les adhérents de la nouvelle religion leur reprochaient de n'avoir pas reconnu le Messie, leur propre Messie, et de l'avoir crucifié. Coupables et culpabilisés, ils étaient
As I have already noted, the imposition of the *Tanzimaat* marked a period of important changes in the attitude of Muslims towards Jewish communities. With the simultaneous rise of Arab nationalism, images of anti-Semitism began to steadily infiltrate Arab literature, which like Hebrew literature during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, underwent its own renaissance. The new literature effected almost immediate changes in the Muslim public’s perception of Jews. In 1889, for example, Najib el Hajj, a Christian journalist from Beirut well known for his anti-Semitic texts originally written in French, translated Georges Corneilhan’s text *Juifs et opportunistes –le Judaïsme en Egypte et en Syrie* and in 1905, Najib Azouri translated and disseminated *Le Réveil de la nation arabe ou le péril juif universel*.

Although the rate of illiteracy in the Muslim population was still high and consequently, the reach of the Arab press was limited, relations between Jews and Muslims began to suffer. Jews incurred both political and religious enemies and in a mimesis of the classical Christian anti-Semitic argumentation of the Middle ages, the ancient blood libel, there was an increase in attacks on the Jewish community, this time by Muslims. In June 1900, two months after Easter, the director of an Alliance school in Syria wrote regrettably of an anti-Semitic incident that occurred in Damascus.

La semaine dernière, de pauvres colporteurs juifs revenaient à pied du village de Douma. Un jeune musulman de sept ou huit huit ans suivait le même chemin qu’eux. En route des Arabes de
Douma leur demandent si l’enfant les accompagne. Non ! répondent nos coreligionnaires et ils continuent leur chemin. Cependant, le bruit se répandit à Douma que des juifs avaient enlevé un enfant musulman et qu’ils voulaient sans doute l’égorger pour prendre son sang. On se jeta sur les israélites, on les maltraita et l’un deux, le nommé Cabouni, fut mis en prison à Douma, même. un autre israélite, le nommé Faor, fut signalé comme son accomplie. On le fit arrêter à Damas et jeter en prison.89

Although incidents like this were disturbing, it must nevertheless still be emphasized that when considering the overall picture of the relationship between Muslims and Jews in Muslim countries, attacks such as these were relatively rare. In general, squabbles between the communities, when they happened, were usually resolved rapidly and effectively. During the infamous Damascus Affair of 1840, for example, the two Jews who had been accused were released following the intervention of representatives of the A.I.U. who angrily reminded the local chief of police that “Jusqu’à présent le gouvernement de S. M. l. le Sultan nous a protégé contre une pareille accusation lancé par les chrétiens: nous ne sommes pas habitués à recevoir de la part des musulmans”.90

To shed further light on the relationship of Jews and Muslims in the countries of the Ottoman Empire, Julia Philips Cohen points out in her essay “Conceptions rivales du patriotisme ottoman: les célébrations juives de 1882” (2010), that the sense of belonging was so great among Jews living in the Ottoman Empire that in 1882, that while the Jews of Europe mournfully marked the 400th anniversary of the expulsion of Jews from Spain, the Jews of the Ottoman empire,

89 Archives de l’AIU, Syrie I C1-7, Damas le 3 juillet 1900.
90 See Abitbol, p237 for a more in depth discussion of Muslim relations with Jews under the influence of the French.
commemorated their arrival there by gleefully displaying their patriotism to the Empire that had not only shown them tolerance but had afforded them the opportunity to form their own self governed millet.91

The Damascus Affair and the foundation of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.

As I have previously shown in chapter two, the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle was originally a response to the infamous Damascus Affair of 1840. The organization, founded in 1840 with the aim of defending the rights of Jews throughout the world was one of the most important consequences of the increase in anti-Semitism in the region. The Alliance’s founders, were secular assimilated Français-Israelites. Unquestionably loyal to both France and to the ideology of the Revolution that dominated Western European Jewish discourse during the late nineteenth century, its Paris trained teachers were dispersed throughout the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire in order to preach the organization’s doctrine with a missionary-like zeal.

Within the general cultural context of the era that was committed to the dissemination of the superiority of Western thought, Alliance instructors were deeply committed to spreading the emancipation model that they believed was prophetically destined to transform all Jewish communities. Led by Français-Israélites par excellence such as Charles Netter and Jacques Bigart, its founders were committed to the belief that anti-Semitism and persecution were dinosaur

91 For more information about Jewish patriotism during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire see Esther Benbassa’s study Itinéraires sépharades : complexité et diversité des identités. Paris : Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010.
like relics of the past destined to disappear in the same way that modern civilization had destroyed superstition and prejudice.

When during the Damascus blood libel of 1840, a Syrian Jew was accused of the ritual murder of a Capuchin monk, besides being an example of the revival of the classical blood libel, the incident brought to the forefront the question of responsibility of emancipated European Jewish communities towards their persecuted co-religionists abroad. The Alliance Israélite with its Talmudic model “Kol Yisrael chaverim” roughly translated as “All Jews are responsible for each other” was the first international organization founded for the creation of a Jewish organization to specifically fight for Jewish rights within the international arena.

Rooted in classical emancipation ideology, its founders stressed the urgency for Jewish communities to “regenerate themselves” in order to become worthy of emancipation and citizenship. In short, to merit *emancipation à la française*, inferior eastern Jews needed to make an effort to modernize their “backward ways” (presumably by abandoning their own culture). In a call to their co-religionists, the directors of the Alliance made their intentions clear by proclaiming,

> Si vous croyez qu’un grand nombre de vos coreligionnaires, encore accablés par vingt siècles de misère, d’outrages, et de prescriptions, peuvent retrouver leur dignité d’hommes conquérir leur dignité de citoyens ; si vous croyez qu’il faut moraliser ceux qui sont corrompus, et non les condamner ; éclairer ceux qui sont aveuglés, et non les délaisser ; relever ceux qui sont abattus, et non se contenter de les plaindre ; défendre ceux qui sont calomniés, et non se taire ; secourir partout ceux qui sont persécutés, et ne pas crier seulement de la persécution ...

> Si vous croyez toutes ces choses, israélites du monde entier,
venez, écouter notre appel, accorder-nous votre adhésion, votre concours92...

Western Jewry in what can only be reduced to an internalized type of colonization, believed Arab Jews to be a primitive but malleable extension of itself. According to Rodrigue, the nascent Jewish press began to write extensively about the Jews of Muslim lands from the early 1840s onwards, although it was usually done so in an unfavourable way that emphasised their collective state of ignorance superstition and fanaticism.93.

Although this seems to be a prescient hallmark of the way Ashkenazi Jewry would later treat their Sephardi and Mizrachi compatriots for the next eighty years, it should be remembered that at the time of the inception of the A.I.U., their orientalist attitude was a reflection of the predominantly negative perception endemic among all Western societies. Rodrigue illustrates the conventional wisdom of the period that,

L’Orient était le dépositaire de tous qu’il faillait extirper. En accord avec son temps, l’Alliance ne doutait pas la supériorité de l’Occident dans tous les domaines de l’existence : par conséquent l’occidentalisation était la seule voie du progrès, la seule façon de transformer le juif oriental « dégénéré » en un citoyen modèle acquis à la modernité.

Aron Rodrigue, De l’Instruction à l’émancipation : les enseignants de l’Alliance israélite et les juifs d’Orient p.76.

---

93 Rodrigue, French Jews, Turkish Jews 8-17; Michel Abitbol,” The Encounter between French Jewry and the Jews of North Africa: Analysis of a Discourse (1830-1914)
By allowing the rays of western civilisation to shine upon the primitive, stagnant communities of the Orient, the founders of the Alliance hoped to end centuries of degeneration that had resulted from the communities’ relentless exposure to “oppression and ignorance”. By “opening the Oriental mind” to Western ideas, they hoped to destroy the prejudices and superstitions that in their opinion had paralyzed activity and growth. Although they insisted that their principal goal was to impart communities with the rudiments of elementary and reasoned instruction, that would lead them find ways of making a living other than peddling.

...des hommes tolérants, bons, attachés à leurs devoirs de citoyens et d’israélites, dévoués au bien public et à leurs frères, sachant concilier enfin les exigences de la vie moderne avec le respect des traditions anciennes.94

The organization’s goal was to effectively fulfil a mission civilisatrice, and this desire was efficiently cynically disseminated across the Ottoman Empire through a common curriculum formulated in Paris, (with some specific changes which took into consideration particularistic qualities such as language), via the teachers of the Alliance. Ironically many of these teachers were originally from the Muslim lands, but were now fully indoctrinated by the A.I.U. and eagerly bought in to the idea that their own Mizrachi culture was inferior to that of the Western biased A.I.U. The result was that these instructors were now effectively alienated from their own origins. The process of Westernisation was so efficient that in December 1905, A. Alchalel, a teacher based in Damascus typically, wrote letters glorifying the Western

94 AIU.94-95
mannerisms acquired by his Jewish students. Beginning his letter by unfavourably comparing the traditional dress of the Muslim students with that of the Jewish students who had adapted western clothing, he wrote,

Quand on voit l'ensemble de nos élèves, leur aspect général impressionne assez favorablement. Vous connaissez l'affreux vêtement des Syriens; une longue robe, étoffé voyante, par dessus laquelle on passe un veston court en été, un pardessus en hiver. Les pieds sont nus dans des babouches sans talons. Les robes d'enfants sont en indienne ou en cotonnade indigène. Quand elles sont sales ou déchirées, ce qui, vous pensez bien, est assez fréquent, les garçons sont repoussants et ils ressemblent à des mendians. Nous tenons à ce que nos élèves portent l'habit européen: veston et pantalons. Ils y ont meilleure mine et en éprouvent plus de respect pour eux mêmes. 

Similarly, A. Nataf, a teacher based in Chiraz, Iran, commented in 1910 on the urgency and the incumbency upon French Jewry to “to remove the scourage of the “East” from his Persian students.

S'il est relativement aisé de réaliser les différentes parties du programme... il ne semble pas qu'il soit aussi facile de modifier la nature morale de nos élèves. Nous avons à faire à des petits êtres amoraux de nos élèves, pour qui le mensonge, la dissimulation, la délation, l'improbité sont aussi naturels que les qualités opposées chez les petits occidentaux. Ils ont reçu en héritage ces tares pour la disparition desquelles nous avons à entreprendre une action lente, méthodique persévérante, continue inlassable, une lutte de tous les instants et qui doit être menée parallèlement sous peine de complet succès avec celle à poursuivre auprès des parents... Et quelle vive satisfaction morale, quel sujet de légitime fierté ce ne serait-il pas pour vos professeurs de réussir enfin à extirper chez nos populations scolaires tous les bas sentiments qu'il nous est donné de déplorer en elles: l'envie, l'égoïsme, l'amour immodéré d'argent, l'absence de tout amour propre, et à y substituer les virtus contraires: la tolérance, la pitié, l'esprit de solidarité, le désintéressement et la dignité personnelle! Le jour où nous aurons obtenu ce résultat, où nous aurons opéré cette merveilleuse métamorphose, nous aurons sauvé le judaïsme persan de la profonde déchéance dont il offre à présent le navrant spectacle.

---

95 Archives de l’AIU, France, XIII. 23 -24
Accusing his students of endemic amorality, and listing their numerous character defects, Nataf, who was a Mizrachi Jew by origin, made it clear that his herculean task was to meld and modify the eastern Jew in the image of his western counterpart. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Eastern Jewry had become a serious part of the greater « Jewish Question », regarding Jewish emancipation that since the late nineteenth century had preoccupied the leadership of Western Jewry. Paradoxically, Nataf’s deeply pejorative report illustrates that while Western leaders were deeply concerned with the well being of their co-religionists they remained deeply ambivalent towards their eastern co-religionists believing them to be hopelessly primitive.96

In 1896 Danon, the French born director of the Alliance schools of Baghdad accused Iraqi Jews of being so morally corrupt that they were unable to distinguish good from evil and of being the repository of all that was « Le mensonge, la mauvaise foi, l’égoïsme et les défauts communs à nos coreligionnaires ». According to the directors of the Alliance, Arab Jews admittedly harbored potential but in order to become “citizen Jews” they needed to first be severed from the eastern influence responsible for their stagnation. In brief, to merit their eventual

96 It is interesting to note that the original manifesto of the Alliance Israelite included concern for “disadvantaged communities”. This presumably included the communities of Eastern Europe. Indeed, French Jewry was well acquainted with the problems suffered by these communities who during the latter part of the nineteenth century had emigrated to France as a consistent trickle of immigrants into France seeking refuge from the pogroms. There were no Alliance schools established in Eastern European Ashkenazi communities. Russia barred Western Jewish interference with its Jewish subjects. In contrast, the Muslim powers of the Ottoman Empire, relatively nonchalant about such efforts, allowed the scholarising activities of the Alliance to infiltrate the Ottoman Empire without opposition
emancipation, they were to be honed and reshaped in the image of western Jewry.

Bensoussan emphasised,

\[
\text{Eduquer plus encore que l’instruire : nous ne sommes pas de simples instructeurs notre mission est autrement grande, nous sommes les pionniers de la civilisation, et c’est à grand coups que nous devons détruire l’ignorance et la superstition.}
\]

\[\text{Georges Bensoussan, Juifs en pays arabes ; le grand déracinement, 1850-1975, p.45.}\]

And so, in what can only be deduced to be classic Orientalist, colonialist argumentation, Eastern Jewry needed to be subdued and conquered by the West in order to become emancipated. Fearing that the elders of the community were already too arabized and therefore a lost cause, Alliance teachers primarily targeted the community’s youth, reasoning that French education offered the lifeblood of the community its sole means of rescue from its Arabized, Oriental and undesirable state. In a letter written to the A.I.U directors in 1908, Ben Soussan clearly outlined the goals of the A.I.U.,

\[
\text{Arracher la jeunesse juive à sa dégradation morale, éduquer de sauvageons des rapporteurs, hypocrites, désobéissants, vaniteux, redresser ces fillettes de Libye qui depuis leur plus tendre enfance ont raciné en elles le mensonge et le vol et éteint dans leur cœur le sentiment de dignité personnelle}^{97}
\]

Yet, despite its overtly, pro-western, attitude and colonialist agenda, the Alliance was welcomed with enthusiasm by Jewish communities because of the opportunities of social and economic advancement it was perceived to offer. Unlike the nascent Zionist movement which would continue to be viewed with suspicion as

---

\[97\text{A.I.U.,Libye.III.E.Tripoli,20 janvier 1908.}\]
« une chose d’Europe »,\textsuperscript{98} French education offered a real chance of advancement. If the West regarded the East as « une masse désinvestie de tout savoir et de toute réflexion ; des figures de l’oppression se sont mis à ressembler à la caricature que l’on fait d’eux »\textsuperscript{99}, the Jews of the Ottoman Empire reacted by boasting of their community’s « soif de savoir recherche de l’instruction pour l’instruction, le respect de tout ce qui est connaissance et le penchant instinctif pour le travail de l’esprit. »\textsuperscript{100}

Despite the claims of altruistic concern for their co-religionists, the relationship between the Paris based A.I.U. with the Eastern Jewish communities seems to be an emulation of the métropole/province relationship previously instituted by the Paris based Consistory in France, which operated as a self appointed hegemony during the late nineteenth century by dictating Jewish politics in all of France’s Jewish communities. In addition, the \textit{Mission civilisatrice} of the Alliance bore a strong resemblance to the orientalist position of European missionaries who had set out to “westernize” the Orient.

Nevertheless, it would not be entirely fair to condemn the ideology and actions of the Alliance to an exclusively colonial discourse. Although the ideology of the Alliance admittedly subverted established Eastern Jewish communities, in effect rendering their way of life irrelevant and inferior, theoretically, at least, the leaders of the organization reclaimed and proclaimed Eastern Jewry as a bona fide extension of themselves.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid,322.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 322.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, .322.
In his extensive work on the teachers of the Alliance, Rodrigue argues that the Alliance Central Committee’s discourse on Eastern Jewry did not directly call for the “mimicry” embedded in its colonial counterpart, which encouraged the natives to become imitation Europeans, only to later problematize and ultimately reject the end product. 101 Unlike Western Orientalism which sprung from a strictly colonial discourse which presumed the “Other” to be separated from itself and thus inferior, according to the leaders and teachers of the Alliance, the transformation of the East and the transformation of self were fundamentally one and the same.

Theoretically at least, the Alliance demanded total identity between Western and Eastern Jew, without bringing to the project the ambivalence, doubts, and constraints of the colonial system of domination. 102 In fact, according to Alliance ideology, the Westernized self was already an a priori part of the Jewish persona. After all, one had only to look at the biblical and prophetic texts to understand that historically at least, Jews had been drawn towards morality. The mission of the Alliance teacher then was not to recreate civilisation in the oriental Jew, it was to bring about the conditions which would reveal the Westernized self which already genetically existed as a “natural” and indelible part of the Jewish Self, albeit latently but nonetheless present.

The advantages of French education: Recreating France in the Arab World: and its effects on the relationship between Jews and Muslims

The liberation of the *Westernized self* proved to be more difficult than the philosophy which guided its action. For many of the leaders and teachers of the Alliance, Western representation of the Eastern Jew remained illusive, because the hierarchal relationship with the central committee in Paris reinforced the endemic sense of superiority held by teachers towards their students. According to Rodrigue, ”Monthly dispatches sent by teachers who had themselves been educated at Alliance schools, to Paris, were often filled with an acerbic critique of all aspects of Eastern society. Regaling the European triumphalist discourse typical of an era which pitted the “Western good” against the” Eastern bad. Each thematic genre echoed the discourse of Orientalism imbibed by the Alliance teacher when he or she was a student at an Alliance school”.$^{103}$

The task of the Alliance teacher was not merely to instruct the student but to educate him. Education at its core, had a moral component with centrality accorded to the reforming of the manners and morals of the population. The first area of attack was the students’ undesirable “arabized” mannerisms and clothing, which needed to be Westernized in order to differentiate them from their Muslim compatriots. In a letter written from Damascus in 1905, A. Alchalel wrote,

Nous tenons à ce que nos élèves portent l’habit européen: veston et pantalon. Ils y ont meilleure mine et en éprouvent plus de respect pour eux mêmes. Le fait a l’air paradoxal. Il est vrai cependant, que dans leurs robes, les enfants ont plus de laisser-aller moins de tenue que dans leurs habits.

$^{103}$ Ibid, 72
On dirait qu’affublés de leurs *imbaz*104, ils se sentent plus « arabes » et portent à tous ces gamins qui n’ont fréquenté aucune école, qui ignorent la politesse, les bonnes manières, le respect des autres et d’eux mêmes. L’effet est d’ailleurs le même sur les grands que sur les petits et a peu près général. Un Syrien dans son habit européen, a l’air de se croire supérieur à ses compatriotes en robe et s’observe bien d’avantage que lorsqu’il est dans son *imbaz*.105

The letter neatly underscores the power relationship between the West and East reflected in the semiotics of the community’s dress code. Quite simply, Middle Eastern traditional dress was seen as primitive and uncivilized. In order for the Jew to merit emancipation he had to first adopt the customs and dress of his European counterpart. By diminishing the Eastern “self” endemic in his students, the Alliance teacher reinforced Western superiority and by association, Eastern inferiority.

In addition, Alchalel’s acerbic contrast between the primitive Muslim and the Westernized Jew provides disturbing evidence of how the A.I.U. played its part in eroding at the carefully crafted, millennia-old links between Jewish and Muslim populations. As Jews began to identify themselves as “westernized” they irreversibly severed the delicate threads that connected them with their Muslim neighbours. Thanks the A.I.U., the latter were now viewed as primitive. Consequently, Jews became increasingly dissociated from the “Watan”, the defining concept of nationhood that emerged after the First World War in the newly formed Arab nationalist movements.106 As I shall extensively show in the next chapter, these changes would be catastrophically irreversible and although not entirely

104 Traditional shirt worn in Middle East.
105 Archives of the A.I.U, France XIII. F.23-24
106 Literally translated from the Arabic as homeland, it is a term which personifies the concept of nation.
responsible for, without doubt contributed to the chaos which preceded the final days of the Jewish communities.

It should be remembered that in an era during which the emerging science of genetics influenced literature and prevailing philosophy, the ideology of the Alliance was perfectly in synchrony with emerging late nineteenth/early twentieth century particularistic ideology and which still exists in some areas of the world. Significantly, though, while Alliance teachers readily condemned traits they believed to be negative, they also believed that the same positive qualities they admired were already present in their students. If they were latent or obscured, it was simply because their community had been temporarily contaminated by the negative influence of the « East ». In congruence with the prevailing ideology of the nineteenth century Français Israélites, that promoted the existence of common Jewish destiny, the directors of the Alliance believed that by exposing the Eastern Jew to the civilizing influence of French Judaism, the Alliance teacher would eventually reveal the superior, human qualities genetically common to all Jews.

In fact close examination reveals that the de-arabization of the “Oriental Jew” with its agenda to reproduce a mimetic French Jewish community, modelled on the ideals of les Français Israélites never succeeded in producing more than a parody or facsimile of the West. There are countless examples of dispatches that illustrate the condemnation of the East by A.I.U. teachers who relentlessly accused the eastern communities of immorality. Despite the loud insistence of the Alliance that their mission was not a conventional “mission civilisatrice”, letters show that instructors clearly prided themselves on their success in changing the self
perception, habits and habitus of the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire, and were often filled with glowing, self congratulatory accounts of the positive changes they believed they had effected. This belief was doubtlessly reinforced by the growing Western presence in the Middle East and North Africa. For example, M. Banghiat wrote from Salonica in July 1913,

La communauté salonicienne a été profondément transformée par l’œuvre de l’Alliance. Si elle est aujourd’hui une des plus avancées de l’Orient c’est aux institutions de cette société qu’elle le doit...presque tous les employés de commerce, la majeure partie de nos commerçants, une grande partie nos bons ouvriers, presque tous les médecins, les avocats, et les ingénieurs israélites de cette ville, ont passé par les écoles entretenues ici par cette société. De plus sous l’influence de cette légion d’hui men éclairés dont l’effectif s’accroit sans cesse, d’autres écoles se sont formées, des journaux, des société multiples ont été fondées qui ont vulgarisé l’instruction et ont répandu dans la masse des idées saines, le goût de travail et la pratique de la solidarité. 107

And in 1913, N. Albala wrote to Jacques Bigart,

Le progrès des mœurs se manifeste encore davantage chez les hommes nos anciens élèves, qui sont légion se distinguent par leur tenue correcte, leurs manières et leur langage policés. Plusieurs d’entre eux ont fait leur tour d’Europe et en témoignent par leur façon d’être et de penser. Le contraste est frappant entre les anciens Bagdadiens et les nouveaux. Autant l’Israelite d’autrefois était humble, servile, habitué a courber l’échine devant le musulman autant les jeunes gens sont conscients et jaloux de leur dignité d’hommes et de citoyens. La constitution leur a fait espérer un régime de justice et de liberté dont ils attendent la réalisation. 108

Albala’s letter clearly illustrates his belief in Bigart’s vision of an eastern Jewish community recreated in the image of nineteenth century French Judaism.

The comparison between the former and latest residents of Baghdad is a striking

example of the proud French educated “new Jew” with the “old” oriental Jew who is humble, servile and accustomed to ceding towards Muslim superiority. It underscores the prejudice and often pejorative images of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire perpetuated in the interests of projecting Western superiority.

In their desire to emphasize the vital nature of their mission, A.I.U. teachers were quick to publicize images of friction between Jews and Muslims. Yet, Naim Kattan’s biographical novel Adieu Babylone, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak” reveals a very different version of Jewish and Muslim interaction. Gathering with a mixed group of his friends, during the 1920’s all of whom were Iraqi intellectuals, Kattan’s friend Nissim decides to speak in the Jewish dialect. Kattan, on the other hand, is afraid that this will insult their Muslim friends who are speaking in the Muslim dialect, but his fears are proved to be groundless.

Nous sommes là dans notre lumineuse et fragile différence; Et en pur dialecte juif, nous dressons les plans d’avenir de la culture irakienne. Nous ne nous abritons pas derrière la voile d’une factice égalité. Nos traits émergent de l’ombre, se dessinent. Ils sont uniques. Nous sommes là à visage découvert enfin reconnus; A la fin de la soirée non seulement Saïd et Jamil mais tous les autres, s’initient au dialecte juif avec autant de maladresse que de comique dans le sérieux.

Kattan, Naim, Adieu Babylone: Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.28.

While Nasrin Rahimieh argues that the above scene is an illustration of the writer’s linguistic exile and that it is Kattan’s need to belong in Iraqi society that predicates his desire to cede to Muslim dialect. Kattan’s numerous expositions of the

---

109 For more on this subject read Rahimieh, N. (1990 Winter), Naim Kattan,”Le Discours Arabe” and his Place in the Canadian Literary Discourse. Canadian Literature, 127, p.32-38.
coexistence that existed in the heterogeneous Iraq of his childhood reject the validity of this theory.

All of this contrasts keenly with Albala's accusations of the maltreatment of Jews by the Muslim community. In effect, the relationship between Jews and Muslims in Iraq as in other countries of the Ottoman Empire, was not monolithic, and while without doubt there were sporadic incidences of anti-Semitism, for the most part, it was a carefully crafted equilibrium that depended upon numerous internal and external factors. By ignoring the complexity of the historical ties between the two groups and by ceaselessly perpetuating its role as a westernizing liberator, the A.I.U. reinforced differences between the two groups, irreparably snatching away any chance of the Jewish communities weathering the tumultuous changes that the rise of Arab nationalism would bring.

As a poignant example, Alliance teachers consistently emphasized the incumbent need to "raise up" their co-religionists from stagnancy, decay and Muslim hatred. For example, in 1912, writing from Meknes, Morocco, A. Moyal wrote of the dismal atmosphere of decay in the Melah, the Jewish quarter,

L’aspect extérieur du mellah et de la foule sordide d’hommes et de femmes en haillons, d’enfants nus jusqu’à la ceinture qui grouille dans ses rouelles étroites et puantes, cause une impression de malaise aigue. L’étranger qui venant pour la première fois à Fez, entre dans ce quartier, objet de mépris pour le musulman riche, pour le bourgeois de Fez qui n’y met jamais les pieds.\textsuperscript{110}

Revealing that the sole occasion when rays of light penetrated this dark, abject misery were to be found on the Sabbath, when at least some effort was given to

\textsuperscript{110} Archives de l’A.I.U. France, XIV, F,25
cleansing, weekdays are distressingly described as times when Jews were forced by Muslims to wear black clothes as a mark of their humiliation.\textsuperscript{111} Yet, Moyal’s reports are contradicted by other dispatches that describe an entirely atmosphere pervaded by a sense of mutual tolerance. For example, A. Somekh, wrote from Egypt in 1889, of how deeply he was impressed by the atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect that he observed. For him, this defined the relationship between Muslims and Jews.

Underscoring that it was Egypt’s Jews who founded the country’s banking establishments and industrial institutions, Somekh stresses a direct association between Egypt’s prosperity and its Jewish community. In particular, he invokes the value of Jewish contribution to Egypt’s economic development.

\textsuperscript{111} Incidentally, Moyal emphasizes his belief in the inherent inferiority of the “oriental” Jew by quickly dismissing their efforts to dress up on the Sabbath as « disturbing and giving the effect of effeminacy ».

\textsuperscript{112} Archives de l’A.I.U., Syrie, I, C, 4
The reception of French education

The war of languages

Despite the A.I.U.'s devotion to the particularistic aspects of Judaism, local rabbis complained about the organization's tendency to diminish the importance of Hebrew and Jewish studies; instead favouring French and other languages such as Turkish, English and Arabic that were deemed to be pertinent to the emancipation process. The A.I.U. was also attacked by the Zionists who accused the organization of discouraging the revival of the Hebrew language for fear it would propagate Zionism.

According to Rodrigue, Hebrew was not the only language neglected by the Alliance. The organization's policy of Francization meant that other Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian were equally rejected as superfluous, by teachers in their quest to hone, polish and reproduce all the desirable elements already present in European Jewry. By relegating their students' dialects (languages that had evolved over vast tracts of time) to "corrupted jargons", that were considered a hindrance to the cultural evolution of Jewish society, they relentlessly reinforced the belief that the world of their parents was hopelessly primitive. Nothing could be permitted to impinge on the centrality enjoyed by French language in the school curriculum. As the lingua franca of civilization, French was to be the main conduit through which students would eventually come to appreciate Western culture and civilization. Dismissing

113 See Rodrigue, *De l'Instruction à l'Émancipation Sepahrdic and Eastern Jewries in Transition.* p111.
the linguistic legitimacy and relevance of the dialect of his students M. Nahon wrote from Casablanca in 1898,

Il ne faut pas perdre de vue que rien n’est plus malaise que l’étude de la langue française pour les petits enfants parlant l’arabe vulgaire; le génie de leur parler maternel est si éloigné du génie européen; C’est un ramassis d’expressions arabes, hébraïques, chaldéennes, espagnoles berbères mêmes, constituée sans logique réunies dans un très petit nombre de moules d’une étroitesse extrême où il est impossible de couler la moindre idée; aucune marge n’est laissée à l’effort libre de la pensée, rien qu’un bagage très pauvre de cliches que l’on applique tant bien que mal aux diverses circonstances de la vie.\textsuperscript{114}

Besides being openly pejorative about his students, Nahon conveniently ignores the historical fact that the Chaldeans and Arabs whose languages formed the basis of the Jewish dialects disparaged as unfit for the construction of logical thought (this despite the fact that Nahon doubtlessly grew up speaking them) were in reality fundamentally responsible for much of the Arabic, science and mathematics based curriculum promoted by the A.I.U.

Alliance instructors were doubtlessly proud of the transformation they had effected upon their students. In their justification that their goal was to elicit the hidden glory of all Jews, the highest accomplishment for a teacher was to successfully ensure that his/her students did not confine French language within the walls of the classroom. By speaking French beyond the classroom, students ensured that the rays of civilisation would “diffuse by osmosis” into the lives of the older generation. A Beneviste wrote in from Galata in 1913,

Le français reste naturellement la base de notre enseignement, c’est par la culture française éminemment propice à la diffusion des idées libérales que nous relèverons nos jeunes enfants, déprimés par plusieurs siècles d’oppression et d’abrutissement moral. C’est

\textsuperscript{114}Les Archives de l’A.I.U., France. XIV, F, 25
à un double point de vue la langue par excellence de l'instruction et
d’instruction, en même temps qu’un puissant moyen qui permet à nos
enfants de tirer un profit immédiat et très rémunérable des connaissances
acquises sur nos bancs...115

Unsurprisingly, the Jews of the Ottoman Empire, hungry for both social and
economic advancement and conscious of the increasing influence of Europe in
their region, eagerly bought into the concept of French superiority. They believed
that they now represented a new order, even if it had come at the price of the
effacement of their own subjectivity.

The embracing of French at the expense of other languages, Arabic in
particular, was to come at a high price. In time, with the rise of Arabic nationalism,
the role of the Arabic language as a marker and vital ingredient of Arab
nationalism became a central theme in the earliest definitions of Arab national
identity. Literature from the Nahda (Arab Renaissance) consistently shows the
connections between language and national identity, stressed by Arab nationalists.
As I will explore in chapter four, this factor at least initially during the rise of Arab
nationalism had the potential to override faith differences between religion and
group identity. The unfortunate decision to relegate Arabic language to a
secondary, inferior place to French, in effect alienated Jewish communities from the
current of cultural nationalism sweeping the Arab world during the late
nineteenth and twentieth century. By insisting on their “Frenchness” they further
emphasized their lack of belongingness to the countries in which they lived. It
would prove to be a fatal error.

115 Archives de l’A.I.U., France, XVII. F, 28
Changes in the status of Jewish women.

The transformation of the Eastern Jewish woman was an important contribution of French education and its influence. Yet although it has a commendable *a priori* appearance of altruistic causality, closer examination reveals the deep cynicism behind the A.I.U.’s decision to target Jewish women. The organization quickly recognized that the education of females was integral to the efficient dissemination of the Western culture deemed vital for the westernization of the Oriental Jew. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Jewish women in Muslim countries began to receive formal Western education, although as I shall show, the new Western model still tended to fix women in profoundly unequal gender roles.¹¹⁶

For the directors of the A.I.U., education was seen as a crucial factor not only for the improvement of the status of the Jewish woman, but more importantly, for its potential impact on future generations. After all it was the mother who was to be a vector for the transmission of western values to future generations. This perspective was clearly echoed in the guidelines set by the Alliance.

Les défauts de caractère et d’éducation des femmes, en Orient et en Afrique, tiennent à un état social déjà trop ancien pour pouvoir être modifiés du jour au lendemain ; mais la femme a un don d’assimilation si merveilleux, elle sent si vivement les nuances, qu’il faudra relativement peu de temps pour obtenir de bons résultats et nous ne saurions trop recommander à votre attention ce conte morale de votre tache.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ For an in depth study on the impact of social, political and economic changes, including Western influence, on the status of women, see Rachel Simon, *Change within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).
While in theory, the goal of the Alliance teacher was to elevate the status of Jewish women to a position of equality with that of her male counterpart, in practice, this was entirely ancillary to the main goal of educating the girls to become “good mothers” naturally in the image of the Français Israélite. According to Benbassa, it was to be the civilized bourgeois “mère –éducatrice” who would break the vicious cycle of habits such as precocious marriage that only served to promote the reproduction of eastern vices that had created the “degenerate societies.” Rodrigue reflects that letters sent by A.I.U. female teachers were themselves gendered texts. While male teachers wrote about a wide variety of topics such as the current political situation and the internal conditions of the Jewish communities, female teachers rarely referred to topics beyond pedagogical issues. As a result, the depiction of women by women emerges as a specialist female genre, in which women teachers wrote letter after letter depicting the “pitiful state of the Eastern woman”. Women were depicted as little more than chattels, whose birth was regarded as a malediction by their patriarchal biased Jewish society because of a combination for the need for a future dowry and the fear that there would be no one to say the Kaddish (the Jewish mourning prayer).

As transmitters of western culture however, the Eastern Jewish woman’s lot was substantially elevated. Women teachers saw themselves as endowed with the power to infuse women with the capacity to control their own destiny. If they could

---

not effect political change, then to at least they had the power to change the community’s perception of women. Referring to the prevalence of arranged precocious marriages. N Benchimol wrote from Fez in November 1900,

    Je vous avoue qu’en qualité de femme et de féministe, ces pratiques ne laissent pas de me révolter et je voudrais pouvoir reformer cette société si defectueuse sous tant de rapports. Les filles... on leur cherche un mari moyen commode pour se débarrasser d’elles ; ceci explique la déplorable habitude des mariages précoces. 119

Yet, as a result of their westernized zeal, female teachers, like their male counterparts, remained thoroughly rooted in the legitimization and the validation of the goals of the A.I.U. Thus, their depictions of women tended to be sombre, dark tableaux through which the true liberation of women could be realized only accross a French lens.

    It is significant that despite an improvement in the status of women both as future citizen Jews (in the image of the Français Israélite) as well as transmitters of western values, the westernization of Eastern women did not come without it erosion at the integrity of the community. Example after example of archival evidence reveals the imbalance and damage inflicted onto the community as newly westernized children began to ridicule and eventually reject the ways of their elders. Writing about her former student Regina’s wedding, Mme D. Douec wrote from Baghdad in 1903,

        Dans toute de la ville on n’entendait causer que du mariage de Regina. Il faut d’abord vous dire que Regina est une ancienne élève de l’école. Oui disait –on, Regina est à la franca (expression qui signifie « à l’européenne »)

elle fait elle-même tout son trousseau avec une couturière venue de l’Occident, elle fait venir des toilettes d’Europe, elle n’accepte pas les bijoux du pays, elle se frise comme un mouton.

Le jour de la cérémonie des quatre coins de la ville, le monde accourt pour voir la mariée à la franca. Comme elle est de nos élèves, j’ai tenu à aller la voir ce jour là. La foule était compacte ; avec peine on m’introduit dans une chambre au deuxième étage. La mariée venait de finir sa toilette. Elle était ravissante, mais abattue. Pourquoi avez-vous l’air si fatiguée Demande-je ?

-C’est que j’ai beaucoup travaillé, les jours et les nuits avec une seule personne pour m’aider, Et deux larmes perlèrent à ses yeux. Je vois auprès d’elle une dame de mes amies qui me dit : Voyez –vous cette pauvre jeune fille comme elles est maigrie? Eh bien c’est parce qu’elle lui fallu lutter, lutter pour chaque pièce de son trousseau, non que ses parents lui refusent quelque chose mais ce qu’on lui apporte n’est pas à son goût. C’est une étoffe trop criarde que ses parents veulent qu’elle achète. Elle n’accepte pas. Ou bien, c’est un bracelet pour les pieds qu’on lui a apporté. Elle le refuse. Ou bien on veut lui mettre du rouge henné sur le mains et du noir sur les ongles, elle proteste. Aujourd’hui continue la dame, elle me fait appler à son secours. Elle veut se coiffer comme elle en a pris l’habitude à l’école, on ne la laisse pas faire. Par force on veut lui mettre de lourdes breloques d’or au bout des nattes, la pauvre file n’est pas habituée, cela la rendra malade.

Mme Douec further elaborates on the contrast between Regina and her husband, who had never attended school and appears at his wedding in his traditional Ziboun. She unfavourably compares him with his bride who has been positively transformed by her Alliance education. Mme Douec informs the directors that later, Regina not only ensures that her husband wears European clothes, but also encourages her children to adopt the European mannerisms she has learned at her Alliance school. All of this is proof that education of Jewish women helped insure the transmission of Westernised values. Yet, the reader cannot help but be shocked at the irreversible family estrangement that inevitably occurred to the scores of

---

120 Archives de l’A.I.U., Irak, I, C2
121 Traditional dress of the eastern Jew.
Reginas who in their urgency to adopt a lifestyle based on western mimesis universally rejected their parents’ judgement and way of life.

**The Alliance teacher as a political observer and protector**

The A.I.U. teachers enjoyed a privileged position. As a consequence of their Eastern origins they were accepted as trusted, honorary, indigenous members of the Jewish community. However, they were still regarded as superiors as a result of their French education. Consequently, they often found themselves assigned to the traditional role of *shtadlan*, or intercessor whose principal role was to mediate between the Jewish community and the Ottoman and colonial authorities.\(^{122}\)

The emergence of the Alliance teacher as a *shtadlan* was a sign of the new power configuration. In an era that witnessed an increased European presence in the Middle East and North Africa, the Alliance teacher represented an invaluable link to the West because although the local Jewish notables of the community still remained powerful in their essentially oligarchic societies, the authority that the Alliance teacher could bring to bear was considered to be infinitely more effective.

The role of the Alliance teacher as a champion of Jewish interests illustrates the slow, steady erosion of the *dhimmi* status of the Jewish community. In addition, the intervention by a growing number of European consuls in favour of non-Muslims added a new dimension to Muslim and non-Muslim relations, that favoured the Jews. The result was that by the late nineteenth century, once the

\(^{122}\) Rodrigue points out that the *shtadlan* was historically a fixture of Jewish diaspora existence, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe in the pre-modern period.
The balance of power had shifted in favour of European powers, who had embarked on an increasingly activist policy of penetration into Islamic lands, the dhimma classification was no longer tenable.

The activities of the Alliance teacher, who was perceived to have intimate contact with the European consuls and more importantly, with Paris, extended the perception of the promise of Western intervention on behalf of Jewish communities in the event of conflict. The inconvenient fact that the teacher did not have the influence of the French state behind him, but depended upon the magnanimity of representatives of Western states to protect the local Jews, meant that his efforts were by no means certain to succeed, although they sometimes did and when so, were much lauded by the Jewish community who were more convinced than ever of French superiority. E. Nataf’s letter written from Shiraz to

\[123\] The protection granted by consuls to local non Muslims had its roots in the Capitulations agreements signed between the Muslim powers and European states during the sixteenth century onward. These treaties allowed Europeans working and travelling in Muslim countries to enjoy extra territorial privileges such as the right not to submit to native tribunals but to be tried by European courts. Gradually, this and other rights were extended to natives, overwhelmingly non-Muslims, who worked for the European consuls, or for European merchants. These natives, the protégés of the consuls, escaped local jurisdiction altogether and enjoyed most of the rights given to Europeans. In the course of time, many were naturalized without ever having set foot in their country of citizenship. The widespread abuse of this ancient system by both local personalities and the consuls had become a thorn in the side of the Muslim rulers by the mid-nineteenth century. The protégé system, flourished because of the material gains enjoyed by merchants. In addition, in times of anarchy it provided a guarantee of a secure existence, but it also fuelled the animosity of the population against the non Muslims, who were increasingly associated with the victorious West, and in a vicious circle this drove the non Muslims to seek further protection. Thus with the growing Western presence in the Muslim world and the consequent protection extended to non Muslims, the dhimma ceased to be operative and a new set of realities, in which the Muslim was the looser and the non Muslim was the victor emerged.

---

123 The protection granted by consuls to local non Muslims had its roots in the Capitulations agreements signed between the Muslim powers and European states during the sixteenth century onward. These treaties allowed Europeans working and travelling in Muslim countries to enjoy extra territorial privileges such as the right not to submit to native tribunals but to be tried by European courts. Gradually, this and other rights were extended to natives, overwhelmingly non-Muslims, who worked for the European consuls, or for European merchants. These natives, the protégés of the consuls, escaped local jurisdiction altogether and enjoyed most of the rights given to Europeans. In the course of time, many were naturalized without ever having set foot in their country of citizenship. The widespread abuse of this ancient system by both local personalities and the consuls had become a thorn in the side of the Muslim rulers by the mid-nineteenth century. The protégé system, flourished because of the material gains enjoyed by merchants. In addition, in times of anarchy it provided a guarantee of a secure existence, but it also fuelled the animosity of the population against the non Muslims, who were increasingly associated with the victorious West, and in a vicious circle this drove the non Muslims to seek further protection. Thus with the growing Western presence in the Muslim world and the consequent protection extended to non Muslims, the dhimma ceased to be operative and a new set of realities, in which the Muslim was the looser and the non Muslim was the victor emerged.
his superiors in Paris in 1910, illustrates the conviction and certainty he held concerning the protective role of the Alliance teacher in the region.

... Livres d’une part à la rapacité proverbiale des autorités persanes et d’autre part à l’implacable fanatisme religieux des prêtres Chiis, les Israélites ne pouvaient attendre de salut que de leurs généreux frères d’Occident qui ont entrepris la providentielle tâche de secourir, partout où cela est possible, ceux qui souffrent pour leur qualité de Juif, leur espoir n’a point été déçu. Malgré les vicissitudes diverses, malgré quelques erreurs de début, erreurs et vicissitudes diverses dont ne pouvait être exempte une entreprise aussi hardie aussi hérissée d’obstacles et de difficultés, vous avez obtenu en quelques années de résultats admirables, encourageants à tous égards.124

The letter, marked by its remarkably self-congratulatory stance, unfortunately but conveniently ignores the fact that the Jewish community had existed as an integral part of Iran for over two millennia before the intervention of the West.

**Positive reception of French culture.**

Even before the carving up of the Ottoman Empire by Britain and France at the end of the First World War which resulted in the Sykes Picot of 1916, the Jews of the Arab world had already been exposed to Europeans. As a result of their *dhimmi* status, as I have already shown, they had been had allowed access to the commerce, forbidden to their Muslim compatriots, and as polyglots, were able to take advantage of opportunities offered by interaction with the European powers. Firm in their belief that the acquisition of French language was the key to advancement within the emerging colonial apparatus, they seized the advantages of

---

124 Archives de l’A.I.U.,France, XII, F, 22
an education offered by the A.I.U. Ben Simmon illustrates the high value put on the acquisition of French language as a contribution to social advancement,

L’essential est donc de savoir parler le français, cette langue qui vous désigne comme moderne dans l’échelle sociale : les parents de nos élèves qui ne s’inquiètent guère de savoir si leurs enfants sont forts en calcul, ils n’ont qu’une ambition, c’est de les voir parler couramment la langue français.125

Nahon notes that such was the admiration of French language by Jewish communities that when parents believed that their children were not seen to be advancing sufficiently in their study of French language, they would regularly threaten to remove their children from the Alliance school!

Examination of the archives of the A.I.U. show that the frenzied thirst for the acquisition of French language and identity was not merely associated with a quest for social and economic advancement (though that played a great role). Firm in their belief that their newly acquired French identity was superior to their own, they easily allowed their own Middle Eastern identity to be transmuted. The Iraqi teacher Y. Semach wrote of his undiluted pleasure at the curious phenomenon of hearing children speaking French so far way from France. While in Cairo, the Association of Jewish Scouts proudly wrote to the Jewish agency in Jerusalem of the need to send all necessary documentation in French boasting, « Nos membres savent tous parfaitement le français et le préférence de leurs lectures va naturellement vers cette langue.126

125 AIU, France XVII. F.25, Nahon, 12 Nov 1890
126 CZA Égypte, S25/3589, Le Caire, 16 Octobre 1943.
So urgent was the quest for Jewish identification with the Hexagon, that during the First World War, students of Alliance schools throughout the Machreq and the Maghreb, anxious to voice their patriotic support for the country they loved but had never visited, volunteered to fight for on behalf of France. Y Semach, who was teaching at an Alliance school in Tangier wrote of the emotion, pride and gratitude felt by his students as they wrote a collective letter to a young Jewish soldier from the region, who volunteered to serve at the frontier of Lorraine,

Nous Israelites, nous nous battons avec la patience et le courage qu'ont mis en nous des siècles de persécution, nous nous battons pour la France qui la première a reconnu notre dignité d'hommes... C'est cet accent de vérité qui avait crée dans la classe cette atmosphère de sympathie émue.\textsuperscript{127}

Although they identified with the soldier because he was a member of their own community, Semach’s letter illustrates the tangible resonance that the war in Europe had with Middle Eastern students who had eagerly taken up France’s cause as their own. Their certainty of an assured victory by «la génie de la France et par le symbole de justice et de droit qu’elle incarne»\textsuperscript{128} illustrates their belief in the enduring image of France as the capital «des lumières», the bringer of emancipation to the French Jews - and by extension to themselves. It was the ideology that dominated the imaginaire of both the teachers and the students of the Alliance, who saw no separation between the Jews of France and themselves. As one loyal, contiguous body, and as a measure of their debt to the Hexagon for their emancipation, their obligation was to unquestioningly support France.

\textsuperscript{127} AIU, France, XV. F, Tanger, 28 septembre 1915.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
Opposition to the Alliance and the response of the Alliance.

Unsurprisingly, given the enormous power of the A.I.U. teacher, there was plenty of opposition from the governing bodies of the Jewish communities. The Alliance’s intention to endow Frenchness on the Jews of the Orient was one of the first complaints levelled at the Alliance by the Zionist movement, who as I have already shown, accused the Alliance of eclipsing the importance of Jewish history and Hebrew language. By far the greatest criticism, however, of the Alliance was of their encouragement of assimilation. The organization was attacked relentlessly by communal religious leaders who opposed emancipatory movements primarily because they represented a threat to their own power bases.

Opposition to the A.I.U. in Iraq

In communities such as Iraq, where the Jewish community was highly arabized, the complaint was that not enough primacy was given to Arabic language. The A.l U. firmly contested this accusation by insisting that the teaching of Arabic language in Arabized communities such as Iraq was one of the central goals of the Alliance. Ben Soussan explains,
Y. Semach additionally argued that the primary language of instruction in the A.I.U. schools of Iraq was Arabic, to the point that the time devoted to French and English had been curtailed. To illustrate this point, in his memoir *Adieu Babylone*, (1975) Naim Kattan reminds the reader that the annual national prize awarded by the Iraqi government to the best Arabic grammarian was habitually won by a Jewish student.

**Opposition in Egypt.**

In Egypt, the Alliance was opposed by the Ashkenazi population who because of their east European origins and marginalization by the Sephardi community tended to support the Zionist movement. The A.I.U. was also severely criticized by leading Sephardi families of the communities such as the affluent Cattauis and Mosseris. The latter criticized the Alliance for its assimilatory practices and undoubtedly feared both French influence and the Zionist movement as threats to their generations old power base that had historically profited from its skilful relationships with both Muslim and Christian communities. The Alliance responded by accusing the leading families of Egypt of supporting an opaqueely corrupt administration that was in part responsible for the disparate poverty within the community despite its considerable wealth. Y. Somekh wrote, in August 1895,

> On voudrait une administration moins renfermée, qui rendit compte régulièrement de sa gestion et qui publiât chaque année un état détaillé de ses recettes et de ses dépenses. Il paraît que les contribuables n’ont jamais pu obtenir satisfaction sur ce point et cela irrite les esprits contre les notabilités – M. Cattaui entre autres – qui détiennent entre leurs mains l’administration de la communauté.\(^{129}\)

\(^{129}\) Archives de l’A.I.U., Syrie, I, C, 4
Because as I have already stated, Alliance ideology fundamentally believed that the Judaism practised by Sephardi and Eastern Jewry had degenerated as a result of centuries of ignorance and persecution, criticism of the obscurantism of the rabbis and the stagnation endemic to the traditional rabbinic school was a regular rebuttal against accusations of the encouragement of assimilation. For example, M. Fresco who was based in Constantinople in 1906, pejoratively described his visit to a traditional school in the following manner,

Dans une petite pièce de 8 à 10 mètres carrés, sont assis par terre sur le plancher sale et gras, 30 à 40 petits enfants malpropres. Armé de son bâton, le Haham\textsuperscript{130} se tient accroupi dans son coin sur un grabat crasseux et détestable. Tous les enfants crient à qui mieux leurs versets d’un ton aigu, accompagnés par intervalles de voix grosses et nasillardes du maître... Le jour de ma visite il faisait très beau temps et le soleil brillait de tout son éclat ; une vraie journée de printemps. Néanmoins portes et fenêtres étaient hermétiquement closes. Pensez donc à quel point l’air devait entre mal empesté dans ces intérieurs où les enfants passent toute la journée depuis la matin jusqu’après le coucher du soleil. Je suis sure que les fenêtres ne s’ouvrent jamais depuis la fin de l’été jusqu’au commencement de l’été suivant. Je ne pus rester que quelques minutes dans cette atmosphère lourde rendue plus fétide par les exhalaisons venant des cabinets mal entretenus ... heureux, trois fois heureux les petits vagabonds que je vois musarder par les ruelles du quartier où courir dans les champs d’alentour et dont les parents n’ont pas eu les quelques sous nécessaires pour les placer dans ces misérables écoles.\textsuperscript{131}

In order to avoid total alienation from the community members whose support they sought, the instructors’ reductive observations were skilfully carefully tempered by their insistence that the organization had no intention of weakening

\textsuperscript{130} Haham, literally translated as"Wise One"was the name given to teachers in the Middle East. He was usually a rabbi.
\textsuperscript{131} Archives de l’A.I.U. , Turquie , LIV.E
the community’s commitment to Judaism. In fact, archival evidence shows that the organization never lost sight of the need to connect the Jewish historical narrative with French emancipation and modernization, and that there was an emphasis put upon the need to provide religious instruction. This of course was fully in keeping with the original ideology of the Français Israélites, who believed that to build fully emancipated diaspora communities it was necessary to ensure the cultivation and preservation of religious sentiment and attachment to the doctrines and practices of Judaism, as well as the promotion of emancipation.

Nous aurions à regretter notre œuvre si le résultat était d’étouffer la foi dans les âmes juives, d’éteindre ce foyer du bonheur intérieur et cette source d’énergies qui a permis aux israélites de traverser des siècles de persécution et d’une oppression sans égale dans l’histoire Les hommes qui ont créé l’Alliance, comme ceux qui la dirige à l’heure présente, ont voulu au contraire fortifier et épurer le sentiment religieux chez les populations juives de l’Orient et de l’Afrique, donner à tous les élèves, et par eux aux parents, des idées de dignité morale, les attacher à toutes les choses nobles et bonnes, au judaïsme, à son histoire et à ses traditions... 132

In answer to community criticism of assimilatory practises, the A.I.U. stressed that by combining these moral improvements with an emphasis on the Jewish historical narrative, they could combat the failings in the children whose moral future rested in their hands.

Nevertheless, the Alliance was often obstructed. In September 1903, J Valadji wrote from Fez of the resistance he had met in a community where despite his best efforts to promote the advantages of an education based on the ideology of

French Judaism, families still stubbornly preferred to send their children to the traditional Talmud Torah schools administered by the rabbis.

Blaming their obstinacy on the embedded religious fanaticism of both Jews and Arabs and their stubborn suspicion of foreigners, Valadji did not hold much hope for change in the outlook of the Jews of Fez.

Anxious to prove their commitment to the Jewish historical narrative, the Alliance counteracted accusations that they had abandoned particularistic Judaism, by increasing the number of hours per week to be devoted in their schools to Jewish Studies and the acquisition of Hebrew language. Recognizing its importance, Alliance teacher M. Franco wrote in 1898 from the Alliance school of Safed in Palestine, of the school’s efforts to reorganise the teaching of Modern Hebrew. (which until then had been confined to biblical studies and had therefore been held in much lower esteem than French or other languages such as Turkish).

Au début de cette année, je veux dire depuis la rentrée des classes, rompant avec une ancienne routine nous avons groupé dans les mêmes classes pour l’hébreu comme pour le reste d’après leur force respective les élèves ashkénazim et sefardim. C’est un des derniers actes de courage d’aucuns disent d’audace, que cette fusion. Pour pouvoir introduire cette utile réforme, il nous a fallu faire venir de loin un professeur ashkénazi connaissant bien l’hébreu et prononçant à la manière séfarade.¹³⁴

¹³³ Archives de l’A.I U. France XIV, F,25
¹³⁴ Archives de l’A.I.U., France XI, F, 20
Despite its fundamental quarrel with Zionist ideology, the Alliance recognized the growing importance of Hebrew language. By introducing Hebrew teachers who had been trained according to the newest and most modern European methods, they cleverly wrestled the teaching of Hebrew language and Jewish history from the domain of their old rivals, the Talmud Torah rabbis. This had two effects. First, by promoting the teaching of Hebrew to an elevated position of importance, it discredited the old accusation that the Alliance, with its philosophy of assimilation put no importance on the teaching of Hebrew language. Second, by eclipsing both the Zionists and the Rabbis in the restructure of a curriculum that introduced European teaching and therefore “superior” teaching methods, Alliance leaders solidified their self-appointed position as the sole authentic agent of emancipation.

The Alliance and accusations of its reinforcement of Colonialism and Jewish Orientalism.

Because of the emphasis the A.I.U. put on the superiority of Western, in particular the primacy of French culture, it is tempting to reduce the efforts of the organization to a Jewish variant of French colonialism. Closer examination however, reveals that the picture was far more complex. As I will show, while Alliance schools emphasised the emancipation values that implied the superiority of post Revolution France, as an a priori part of its curriculum, the organization also vigorously promoted values based on the Alliance’s slogan of Kol Israel Chaverim (All Jews are Brothers) that reinforced its conceptualization as a continuum of the
Jewish people rather than a mere extension of the Quai d’Orsay. As well as teaching French language, literature and history, in anticipation of citizenship in their countries of residence, the organization sought to promote Jewish communal pride. Nevertheless, as I have shown, the organization did tend to view its students through a staunchly French lens, that regardless of intention, more often than not fixed them in a position of inferiority. Therefore, an understanding of the colonial context of the period is crucial to understanding the larger dynamic of which the Alliance has become associated.

The age of colonialism and its connection with French Judaism.

As I have previously shown in the first and second chapter, using the examples of emerging French Jewish literature of the period, by the end of the nineteenth century, images of the Orient or East as of places of mystery, imaginative escape, passion but nevertheless fixed inferiority, had become very much part of Western culture. Yaron Peleg points out,

At a time when Europe was being divided along ethnic lines rearranging itself evermore into political entities according to hitherto unacknowledged criteria such as history, language, culture, and ethnicity, the Orient or East had become an important point of reference as an ultimate Elsewhere. Culturally different and technologically inferior, Eastern nations became a convenient point of comparison against which Europeans could define themselves as distinct and often superior during their national formation process. The new institutions of the modern state, with its recently established social order and its newly invented collective culture, could be more sharply distinguished against the ancient cultures of a so called decaying East.

Yaron Peleg, Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination, p3
Peleg points out that this process was initially stimulated by genuine curiosity about the Orient and later by a romantic post World War One longing for a more perfect civilization. He stresses that, “though that at the height of the imperial era prior to the First World War, much of what Europe called the Orient or Levant came under its direct or indirect political control, transforming Europe’s relationship with these far flung regions from detached interest to an ever growing tendency to coerce and exploit, despite its romantic fixation with the region” (4). By the second half of the nineteenth century, the study of orientalism as a separate academic discipline had developed in Europe. Universities and researchers immersed themselves into the study of Islam, Islamic history and the Arabic language. However, Orientalism was not confined to within the walls of the university, books such as Les Mille et une nuits that had formerly been dismissed as fairy tales were now translated for the reading public into French. The Orient became an inexhaustible source of exoticism as writers such as Flaubert, Chateaubriand, Pierre Loti, and Jean and Jerome Tharaud visited the Middle East and regaled their readers with descriptions of fabulous and exotic cities.

Naim Kattan points out that although arguably informative, the lens through which the French public viewed the Orient was skewed and actively promoted western superiority at the expense of the subjugation of the East. For example, while the Tharauds claimed the Middle East as the birthplace of Christianity they simultaneously justified French intervention in the region by stating that “La France était portee d’une civilisation universelle de sortir ces peuples de leur...
arrérage, et de les émanciper”. Though the Orient was portrayed as exotic, it was perceived as backwards and dirty. European artists such as Delecroix (1798-1843) whose tableau, “Les Femmes d’ Algiers dans leur appartement” (1834) eroticized the women of the Harem, were particularly fascinated by what they imagined went on in the harem, the private quarters of upper class households and by the institution of polygamy. To satisfy this curiosity, they produced highly suggestive paintings of nude and semi nude Muslim women, even though with rare exception, they really had little or no contact with Muslim women and almost certainly had never been inside the family quarters of a Muslim home. Writers such as Andre Gide (1869-1951) who had lived in Egypt described in his novel Si le grain ne meurt (1924), made frequent visits to male brothels with Oscar Wilde, and proclaimed Egypt as “la région où un jeune homosexuel se sent libre”.

The images perpetuated by writers and painters often drew upon older European images of Muslims as violent, lusty and sexually perverse. Muslim women too played a crucial role in European perceptions of Islam. It was common to see Muslim women portrayed as oppressed and subjugated and as little more than slaves, constantly available for the gratification of oversexed Muslim men. Just as Ottoman sultans and other Muslim rulers were said to tyrannize their wives and daughters, so ordinary Muslim men were said to do the same. Unsurprisingly, the degraded status of Muslim women would later be cited as a justification for European intervention and colonial rule.

Although French Jewry was undoubtedly influenced by the orientalist model and certainly perceived the Jews of the Orient as “lesser” and in dire need of the
civilizing influence of the West to merit emancipation, their interest in these communities originally found its roots in the original values of the French Revolution and therefore credibly went considerably beyond the standard colonial model. As I have previously shown in chapter one, Eastern Jewry was considered by the Consistory and later by the A.I.U. as an extension of “self”. It was therefore only a matter of time before they too, under the guiding eye of advancing (Western) civilisation would achieve the same process of emancipation that they themselves had achieved. In this way, the process of emergence from servitude and ‘obscurantism” from which French Jewry had so successfully emerged would become a normative route to be followed by traditional non emancipated Jewish communities.

It was to be expected that the primacy given by the A.I.U. to the teaching of French combined with its missionary zeal to westernize, (which often meant to Gallicize) often led to a convergence with the aims of French foreign policy. Yet research shows that despite the fact that the Alliance rendered invaluable service to the cause of French linguistic expression, the political relationship between the Alliance and the French Foreign Ministry was not particularly strong until the first decades of the twentieth century. The main reason for this was that the Alliance had not been founded to serve French influence. Although in its earliest phases its instructors had been French born, later, its composition became an international Jewish one rather than a French one. This was arguably because too close an association with French interests might have run the risk of alienating its non French members. Both the Quai d’Orsay and the Alliance took the international
nature of the society seriously. As a point in fact, only the Ecole Normale of the Alliance was registered as an official body in Paris. Otherwise, the Alliance functioned as an institution without legal French status and had no legal French status until 1975. As such, during the first decades of its existence the organization neither asked for nor received subsidies from Paris, neither were its schools put under French legal protection in the Middle East or North Africa, therefore benefitting only from de facto protection in the localities when it arose.\textsuperscript{136}

In essence then, the Alliance cannot simplistically be reduced to a mere organ of French colonialism. The ideology of the Alliance though deeply marked by its “mission civilisatrice” was ultimately imbued with an overwhelming sense of international Jewish solidarity. Based in the ideology of the Français Israélites, its goals were to redraw the boundaries of Jewish ethnicity and to thus recreate a new identity that would take fierce pride in being French while maintaining pride in a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. The ideology of French Judaism dictated that ethnic boundaries be shifted, to create a “different Jew”. The new Jew, a citizen Jew, would represent a break with a past full of suffering and would become the model to be universalized. It was a model that was to be exported, and it eventually became the duty of the Alliance as a representative body of French Jewry to ensure that the rest of the world Jewry followed in the footsteps of the French model.

\textsuperscript{136} In 1868 and again in 1879, the French Foreign Ministry asked its consuls to protect the Alliance institutions. This was left to the discretion of the individual consul and did not carry the weight of juridical protection.
Conclusion

The relationship between the Jews of the Muslim lands and their Muslim neighbours has been historically complex, and at times fractious. It was also characterized by long periods of congeniality and mutual cooperation. The irruption of Europe in to the economy, politics and culture of the Middle East and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries conclusively and irreversibly altered this complex relationship. The most important consequence of this was the process of westernization that transformed their economic and social status and irreversibly influenced their relationship with their Muslim compatriots.

The central aim of this chapter has been to illuminate the problematic nature of the encounter between the West and the Jewish communities of the Muslim lands. While the process of westernization promoted by the Alliance Israelite operated if not as a de jure arm of the French colonial apparatus then certainly as a de facto one. Superficial examination of the goals of the Alliance reveals the shameless promotion of French culture and French language which hammered home the primacy and superiority of France that led to the mimesis of Judaïsme à la française.

Yet, while admittedly, the work of the Alliance can never escape from the fact that it took place within an Orientalist context that keenly emphasized the superiority of the Western, “superior Jew” over the Eastern, “inferior Jew”, it does nevertheless avoid absolute orientalist, imperialistic classification. The intellectual genealogy and rationale of the Alliance maintains its roots in the European Haskallah (nineteenth century Jewish Enlightenment) movement, begun by Moses Mendelsohn and later adapted by the leaders of French Judaism. The Alliance’s
sharp critique of traditional Jewish culture and society, (especially that of rabbinic culture) and its emphasis on the need to bring about the pure essence of the religion were considered to be in harmony with the transformation of an unhealthy Jewish social structure were familiar themes of the European Haskallah that had been widely debated for over a hundred years prior to the foundation of the Alliance.

Therefore, while nineteenth century French Jewry has been tirelessly posited as assimilationist, in reality, no other branch of European Jewry produced an organization like the Alliance, that worked to improve the status of all Jews. Therefore to conclude that the emancipation ideology of the Alliance was based on cynical voyeuristic Jewish orientalism is over simplistic and ignores the missionary like zeal of the organization” to raise” their co-religionists to the citizenship and equality already obtained by French Jews. In this respect, the discourse of the Alliance and its teachers was a French expression of the wider European Haskallah rather than the confluence of European and Jewish Orientalism.

Because the encounter between Western and Eastern Jewry occurred in the age of Imperialism, during the age of European domination of the Middle East and North Africa, the agenda of reform inevitably came to be considered as one of westernization. In this context, the teachers of the Alliance were also the counterparts of Muslim reformers. The new orientation towards the West was eventually shared by many (though not all) Jews of the Muslim lands, because French influence meant education and opportunity. For the Alliance teacher, who as a result of his or her schooling was already predisposed to look up to Europe as the repository of all that was positive, commitment to the West became unconditional.
Consequently, the message of the Haskallah assimilated at the *Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale*, the Paris based training school of the Alliance teacher, was radicalized further to encompass total westernization and wholesale adoption of Western culture. Nevertheless, the Alliance remained devoted to its belief in universal Jewish consanguinity. By mediating its curriculum according to the individuality of the community it served, the organization avoiding falling into the classification of pure orientalism, with the result that it rendered its agenda irresistible to eastern Jews, hungry for opportunity.

Yet, in this process which opened new horizons for them, eastern Jews were to embark on a path which would eventually lead them to a radically cultural and political dissociation from their traditional moorings. In contrast to their co-religionists in the Hexagon, convergence with the surrounding society did not emerge as the central challenge of the period. The opposite proved to be the case. Sephardi and Eastern societies were to experience the vagaries of “acculturation” and “assimilation” but the matrix of European domination dictated that these were in the direction of a culture and civilization distanced from the locality. This rendered them singularly ill adapted to survive the eventual departure of the West from the region and the subsequent creation of nation states and would fatally contribute to the dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Islamic lands.
Chapter 4 The clash of Arab nationalism and Zionism and its effects on Eastern Jewish communities.

L’entreprise sioniste est funeste si elle échoue et plus funeste encore, si par possible, elle réussit.

Theodore Reinach, 1906.

Although Arab and Jewish nationalist movements both claim historical, geographical and religious connections to the Middle East, it cannot be ignored that at least initially, in both cases, their fundamental ideology was based on the waves of emancipation that swept eastward across large swathes of Europe during the nineteenth century. While the clash of these twin nationalist movements has historically been blamed by both sides for the dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Muslim world, closer examination reveals that the situation was complex and that this was by no means the sole factor in the final demise of these long standing communities. In this chapter, in order to understand the role played by all of the above factors, I will first examine the rise and reception of Jewish nationalism and its effects on the Francophone Jewish communities of the Middle East. I will secondly examine the effects of the simultaneous rise of Arab nationalism, its relationship with the colonial powers and its influence on francophone Jewish communities. Finally, bearing in mind its occidental bias, I will analyze the effects that French education had on Franco-Jewish-Arab communities, in particular, on their ability to adapt to the challenges presented by the age of nationalism and the fall of colonialism.
The rise of Zionism in France.

As we have seen in chapter two, during the years that preceded the First World War, Jewish intellectuals grappled with the compatibility of two opposing concepts concerning their identity, essentially that of particularistic Jewish self-conceptualization and that of universalist commitment to a national, essentially French identity. By the mid 1920, the idea that Jews constituted a separate, distinct group, possessing features and traits setting them indelibly apart from the rest of the population was much more widely acceptable than it had been during the Dreyfus era both in French and Jewish society.\(^{137}\)

As an illustration, Nadia Malinovich compares the reaction of theatre audiences to Maurice Donnay's play *Le Retour de Jerusalem* after its premier performance in 1903, with its later revival in 1928. At its initial showing, audience reaction to the play which focused on the relationship between a Jewish woman and a Christian man was mixed (126). Although Donnay insisted that the play was not anti-Semitic, but essentially an illustration of the racial differences that naturally existed between the couple, in 1903, many reviewers nevertheless concluded that the play was indeed anti-Semitic.\(^{138}\) Unsurprisingly, it inspired strong emotions including anti-Jewish outbursts at theaters and numerous articles

\(^{137}\) It should be noted here, that during the 1920s, the terms race and racial characteristics did not carry the same pejorative connotations as today. In an age where particularism was seen in a positive light, Jews, like Bretons were seen to be different but were nevertheless to be respected for their differences. They were by no means considered to be less French. On the contrary, their differences were seen to be positive.

\(^{138}\) Again, the usage of the word natural here is a controversial word whose meaning has fluctuated, at times connoting "non-negotiable" rather than a pejorative inference of inferiority as it may have done during the Dreyfus era or today.
in both the Jewish and liberal press. Esther Benbassa points out that Donnay’s play was all the more shocking to its audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century, because it created the image of the Jew as an obvious “other”, who did not belong in French society. 139 “Up until that point, Jewish characters had been traditionally portrayed as caricature figures, typically moneylenders or dishonest businessmen, whose presence persisted as familiar tropes in French fiction and functioned as literary devices unconnected with the individual writer’s feeling about Jews”(4). Donnay, on the other hand, presented his audience with images of modern Jews who appeared to be fully French, but exhibited biologically inscribed character traits that made them fundamentally incompatible with their “Aryan” compatriots.

While in 1903, this ideology was synonymous with the type of anti-Semitism blatantly brandished by Drumont and Maurras 140, a quarter of a century later, this was no longer the case. The 1928 production of Le Retour de Jerusalem sparked almost no reaction in the Jewish press. It was almost universally received in the wider French press as a well structured, entertaining study of the “Jewish-Aryan drama” that French audiences, no longer inflamed by the Dreyfus affair, were now prepared to watch without uproar. In 1928, La Petite illustration, pointed out that the primary reason for this change of perception lay in the fact that

---

139 Indeed, as Esther Benbassa points out, there are many cases where writers would draw on the medieval fable of the Jews as a usurer even while supporting the liberal, universalist ideals of the French Revolution.

140 As Paula Hyman has noted, for anti-Semitic nationalists it was precisely the fact that the Jews appeared to be fully French that made them so dangerous. For Drumont, Barrès, Maurras and their followers, “The French veneer of civilization was considered to be woefully superficial. Within the depths of their being, (according to the anti-Semites) French Jews have their own distinctive and alien culture.” Hyman, From Dreyfus to Vichy, 19
whereas Donnay’s presentation was once scandalous, today’s emancipated Jews were now proud of the personality traits, that had perennially ensured the continuation of their race.

**Zionism à la française**

“Whether rejected, embraced, or critically examined, the Zionist’s reframing of Jewishness as an ethnic or national heritage provided a changed conceptual framework through which to understand the place of the Jew and Judaism in the modern world”.


While nineteenth century thinking promoted universalism, simultaneously downplaying particularism, French Jews during the 1920s, believed that they could best contribute to universalism by exploring their own particularism with the presentation of Jewish ideals, culture and values to the broader non-Jewish world. Ironically, these were the original principles that guided the early Zionist Francophile pioneers such as Chaim Weitzman and Theodor Herzl. They had in fact led to initial French support for Zionism because of their compatibility with universalism. Unlike German Jewish discourse which according to Stephen Poppel, fundamentally posited that the embrace of Jewish nationalism meant replacement of “Deutchtum” with “Judentum” and therefore predicated that Jewish integration into German society was illusory and could therefore only be fulfilled through “liberation of self affirmation” or assimilation, French Jews, rarely posited “Frenchness” and “Jewishness” in oppositional terms. The principal arguments used to promote French Zionism centered around a discourse of dualism. Rather than addressing the question of loyalty to France and to universal ideals, French
Zionists developed a variety of arguments intended to illustrate that Zionism was totally compatible with both universal ideals and an attachment to France.

The ascendency of French Zionism

French Zionism can be effectively divided into two periods. Beginning with the establishment of the Zionist movement in France just before the First World War, the movement gained relatively quick acceptance by foreign born “traditionally Jewish co-religionists”. It also managed to attract the interest of “autochtone” Jewish writers such as André Spire and Edmond Fleg, who had already had prior exposure to Zionist discourse. Additionally, some representatives of the academic elite influenced by British Zionists such as Israel Zangwill were attracted to the movement’s socialist stance. However, because Zionism’s principal dictum that the establishment of an exclusively Jewish hegemony in the ancestral Jewish homeland was the only solution to the “Jewish Question”, the movement was problematically a priori incompatible with the ideology of the Français Israélite model of Judaism. As a result, its validity was almost immediately rejected by the two main representative organizations of French Jewry, the powerful Consistory and the Alliance Israélite, the latter which by the mid nineteenth century had already heavily infiltrated the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire.

The second wave of Zionism occurred after the First World War during the Jewish renaissance, when renewed interest in Jewish particularism made Zionism gradually more acceptable to both Jews and non Jews. Yet despite unilateral admiration of Zionist achievements in Palestine, and an exponential explosion of
particularistic and Pro-Zionist literature in France, French Jewish organizations did not change their views and continued to view Zionist ideology as a dangerous threat to French Jewry’s progress and hard won emancipation. Despite hostility shown by the Consistory, the Alliance and the Jewish press of the period, the movement did gain a measure of support from sympathizers within the Jewish establishment such as Rabbi Israel Levi who although not always in agreement with Zionist politics, often expressed his solidarity with the *Federation Sioniste de France*. Similarly, while he never publically endorsed Zionism, the Chief Rabbi of France Zadoc Kahn, continued to maintain a distant but sympathetic relationship with the Zionist movement.

As I have previously shown, evidence shows that early Zionist sympathizers such as Basch, Fleg and Spire were influenced by the socialist milieu within which early Zionism took place. For Spire, Zionism provided a concrete channel for his strong commitment to social justice. This comes across very clearly in his dedication of *Poèmes juifs* to the “seul prolétariat en qui je puisse encore espérer”. The proletariat he refers to principally comprised Zionist leaders such as Israel Zangwill, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Bernard Lazarre whose politics were clearly socialist in their outlook. Despite his concern that Zionism would play to the accusations of anti-Semites who charged Jews being with disloyal and of attempting to constitute a nation within a nation, Fleg was attracted by the idea that Zionism had the potential to endow Jews parity with other national groups. In his work *Pourquoi je suis Juif* (1928) he declared,

*Les antisémites accusaient les juifs de former une nation dans les nations ; mais les juifs, du moins ceux que je rencontrais, le niaient.*
et voici que maintenant, des juifs déclaraient:- Nous sommes un peuple comme les autres ... L'idée sioniste me frappait par sa sublimité ... cette fidélité au sol ancestral qui l'avait survécu deux mille années.

Edmond Fleg, Pourquoi je suis juif, p.47-48.

Fleg contrasted two essential groups of Jews, those who believed that Jews formed the body of a distinct nation and those who were bound universally by the certainty of their “Frenchness” and refused nationhood. According to Malinovich, “Modern Zionist discourse posits the belief that early French support of Zionism came largely from the immigrant Jews of eastern Europe who had had been exposed to Jewish nationalism in eastern Europe, where the emancipation process was inherently understood to involve the concept of autonomous nationalism.”(56) This was very different from the process of French emancipation which privileged Jews as a religious group rather than as a nation. By 1919, many European Jews had begun to assume that any change in Jewish status would involve some kind of national autonomy. This was fully in keeping with the emancipation process of eastern European Jews in which Jews were considered to be a distinct national group as opposed to the French emancipatory model which privileged Judaism as a religion among many others.

The differences became even more apparent at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, when international Jewish delegations offered various plans regarding the place of Jews in the successor states. French representatives of the Alliance Israélite remained committed to the position that Jews formed a religious rather than a national group. Tempers ran understandably high and the situation exploded when Sylvain Lévi, a distinguished scholar and member of the central committee of the
Alliance Israélite Universelle, expressed his deep disapproval of establishing a national Jewish homeland.

While Lévy recognized the benign purpose of Zionism in seeking to colonize Palestine on behalf of the unfortunate Jewish masses of eastern Europe, he insisted on the difficulties facing the founders of Zionist enterprise, calling to attention the numerous potential political and economic pitfalls ahead. Restating some of the objections raised by Western Jews who had labored for emancipation, he reiterated his difficulty in believing that the same Jews who had finally attained equality could now credibly demand exceptional rights for the Jews of Palestine. Unsurprisingly, the Zionist leader Chaim Weitzman (1874-1952) reacted angrily to Lévi, calling him a traitor, and refused to shake his hand at the close of the session. Given the hostility of French Jewish institutions towards Zionism, it is not unsurprising that the Balfour declaration of 1917 aroused little enthusiasm among French Jewish institutions.

As I have previously noted in chapter two, the immediate years following World War coincided with a repositioning of the relationship between French Jewry and Zionism. Zionism with its emphasis on particularism, was theoretically at least, perfectly in tune with the zeitgeist of the rest of non-Jewish France who had comfortably renewed their own acquaintance with particularistic groups such as the Bretons. Both the Consistory and the A.I.U, remained stubbornly devoted to the ideology of the nineteenth century Français Israélites, convinced that Zionism threatened to efface the gains they had made in their march towards emancipation.

\[141\] On this clash see Levine’s. War, Jews, and the New Europe. 14 and Spire, Souvenirs à batons rompus, ch 6.
In addition, during the same period, there was a substantial augmentation of French influence in the Middle East. While both the Consistory and the A.I.U. were quick to stress that they did not officially represent French interests, they were nevertheless characteristically anxious to prove their loyalty to France. Support of Jewish settlement of Palestine or of the Balfour Declaration—which was after all a British venture, could potentially be interpreted as disloyalty to France. Fearful that this could once again re-challenge the loyalty of the Jewish community, this provided yet another reason for the lack of enthusiasm shown by French Jewish organizations to the Zionist movement.

**Zionism in French literature and the Jewish press**

Malinovich points out that, in contrast to east European and German Zionism which as an offshoot of the Haskallah (Jewish emancipation movement) was strictly a nationalist movement, the French Zionism of the 1920s was from its earliest inception, part of a greater project based on internationalism intended to reconcile the interests of all nations by its insistence on the same universal ideology promoted by French Judaism (Malinovich 7). Henry Marx, when speaking to a meeting of the “Association de la Jeunesse Juive” in 1919, invoked the greatness of ancient Jewish civilisation suggesting that if Jews were to re-launch their own civilisation in the land of their origin, it would be for their own good but more importantly for the greater good of human progress. The argument, represented Zionism as a separate, unique prophetic type of nationalism,

---

142 During which France had been granted mandate over Syria and Lebanon, while Great Britain was mandated Iraq, Trans-Jordan and Palestine,
characterized by its commitment to pacifism and internationalism. It had much in common with original Herzlian Zionism based on European emancipation principles and propagated many of the ideals of the French Revolution that by definition, were universalist rather than particularistic.

As an illustration, one of the most unifying themes found in the Zionist literature of the 1920s was the comparison of Jewish particularism with French regionalism. Noting that a French citizen could be simultaneously French and Breton, Zionist sympathizers argued that one could be equally Jewish and French. Interestingly, some of the earliest examples of the equation of Jewishness and regionalism were actually found in the works of non-Jewish writers. Justin Godart, for example expressed his support for the Zionist Revue littéraire juive by affirming “qu’elle révèlera une âme juive, une vie juive française imprégnée de traditions locales ayant pris un goût du terroir”.143 For Godart and other non Jews, the argument provided a way to express their support for Zionism while distinguishing themselves from anti-Semites such as Drumont and Mauras who cynically endorsed Zionism, with the hope that it would lead to a mass exodus of Jews from France.

By legitimizing Jewish particularism and linking it to wider French values, French Zionists argued that the Zionist was potentially a better citizen than the assimilationist. This philosophy was readily evident in the literature of the Jewish renaissance years. For example, the prominent philosopher André Siegfried made the argument that a shared cult of intelligence, sense of family, and taste for criticism were all essential commonalities that already existed between France

143 Revue littéraire juive (March 1927), 1.
According to Paraf, the blossoming of Jewish creativity in contemporary French society was in itself, evidence of the affinity between France and the Jewish people.

The idea that a Jewish presence in Palestine would form a bridge between East and West was also in synchrony with the public interest in the Orient that had swept across Europe after the First World War, and had resulted in support for French Zionists and their sympathizers. After the foundation ceremony for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925, Menorah devoted an entire issue to the founding of the university, publishing numerous articles that according to Malinovich, tended to have two themes. First, viewed in a universal sense, the university would serve as a cultural and spiritual centre not just for Jews, but for all
humanity. Secondly, by establishing the university, the Jewish people would be fulfilling their prophetic role as mediators between East and West. To illustrate this, Georges Cattaui, the Egyptian Jewish writer, reminded readers of the important role that Jews and Arabs had played during the Middle Ages as transmitters of the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome to the Western world (128).

Cattaui expanded his argument by expounding the importance of Jews who in the past had served as intellectual courtiers through whom exchanges between Islam and Christianity took place in the Middle East. According to Cattaui, this was exactly the role that validated Zionism as more than a mere movement of sole interest to the Jews but as one imbued with a greater, wider, humanitarian reach, ultimately enabling Jews to fulfill their divine mission in the region. As Malinovich notes, Cattaui’s designation of the Jew’s “mission civilisatrice” unarguably primarily legitimized “Jewish visceral and historical links to the region, but his conception of Zionism was also imbued with all the principles of universalist emancipation that retained direct linkage with the original universalist principles of the Francais Israélites” (130). This was doubtlessly an offshoot of the French education he had received in Cairo. Similarly, when Jean Richard Bloch, travelled to Jerusalem for the opening ceremony of the Hebrew University, he stated that,

The Jewish people alone was capable of realizing the dream of reunifying the Oriental landscape with the Occidental principles of universalism, because they alone had uniquely retained an Oriental soul despite millennia of separation from the land.

Jean Richard Bloch, Address at the inauguration of the Hebrew University, 1925.
Ultimately, despite some limited early support by French Jewry, the increasingly political position adopted by Zionism during the early twentieth century, provoked mixed feelings among French Jews. While some were happy to reconstitute their “Oriental” origins as a source of pride and an indicator of vitality, many more worried that such discourse veered dangerously towards the reinforcement of the accusation that Jews were eternal outsiders, and would essentially play into the hands of perennial anti-Semites such as Drumont and Mauras.

By the 1920s, literature that linked Zionism with French national interests was seen in work produced by writers such as Julien Weil whose La Foi d’Israel (1926) criticizes the faulty logic of the first generation of emancipated Jews, who were seduced by the cult of reason and universalism and had thus been forced to redefine Judaism as a “confession” in order to prove their patriotism.

Interestingly, examination shows that Zionism as a theme of Jewish renewal had been visible in the work of early French Zionists for a while. The early twentieth century work of Fleg, and Spire for example was imbibed with the type of proto-Zionist ideology that attempted to carefully balance an admiration for the first Zionist settlers of Palestine with a love of France. This remained the subject of numerous articles in the nascent Jewish press during the early twentieth century, as French Jews doubtlessly recalling the horrors of the Dreyfus affair were fearful of appearing to be disloyal. Interestingly, their confusion and fears were not confined within the borders of the Hexagon.
With the development of the Arab Jewish press during the early years of the twentieth century, articles addressing Zionism were published and read throughout the Francophone Jewish communities of the Islamic world that had ironically up until now had been largely ignored by European Zionist discourse. In February 1929, the Jewish newspaper *Israël*, published in Egypt from 1920-1939, ran an article posing the question “Peut-on être bon juif et bon Citoyen en même temps?” The article attested to the degree to which France impacted Francophone Jewish life. Interestingly, until this point, Zionism had barely made ripples on the surface of the lives of the relatively affluent Egyptian Jewish community of the 1920s, who were for the most part either Sephardi or indigenous in origin, (although admittedly, the movement enjoyed more success with the relatively small Ashkenazi population who having arrived in Egypt after the First World War, were still relative newcomers living a rather alienated existence\textsuperscript{144}).

For the most part, the movement was actively rejected by Egyptian Jewish intellectuals and community leaders who saw Zionist aspiration as a threat to the integrity of their comfortable in situ communities. In one article published by *Israël*, in 1929, Ed Sanua pejoratively wrote of the by Zionist argument raging in the Hexagon,

Si les Sionistes ont jamais donné un semblable de teinte pareille à leur mouvement, c’est uniquement pour donner un caractère « national » à leur idéal et un caractère politique à leur organisation et cela, en vue

\textsuperscript{144} Zionists for their part interest, had shown same interest in the Ashkenazi community which they recognised as an extension of themselves.
Sanua argued that the fundamental concept of statehood allowed different religions to exist in distinct communities, while having no bearing on their patriotism. Reinforcing historical links between French Jews and France and the sacrifices France’s Jews made for France, he openly expressed his horror that Jewish loyalty should be based on sympathy for those who wished to rebuild the national homeland. Interestingly, later in the article he retracts his belief in the incompatibility of particularistic Zionism and universalist based French Judaism, saying,

Seemingly paradoxically to imply that French Jewish support for Zionism in no way implied a challenge to Egyptian identity, Sanua’s carefully measured statement was entirely congruent with the philosophy of the Francais Israélites who zealously calibrated their own criticism of Jewish renewal in Palestine while guarding their precious Francité.

Il est clairement stipulé dans les principes du Sionisme que l’adhérence à cette organisation « Politique » et à cet idéal « national » n’implique à ses adhérents aucune obligation à l’égard de leur « nationalité politique » ou de leur sujétion.

Ed Sanua, Israël, Feb 22, 1929.

Seemingly paradoxically to imply that French Jewish support for Zionism in no way implied a challenge to Egyptian identity, Sanua’s carefully measured statement was entirely congruent with the philosophy of the Francais Israélites who zealously calibrated their own criticism of Jewish renewal in Palestine while guarding their precious Francité.

Ed Sanua, Israël, Feb 22, 1929.
In 1927, the French Jewish journalist Alfred Berl published an article in the Alliance bulletin *Paix et Droit* which had readership in both France and throughout the communities of the Ottoman Empire, addressing the relevance of Zionism to local French Jewish communities. Posing the question “Le Judaïsme français doit-il être sioniste?”, he posited the argument that the two notions were intractably incompatible. While Zionists argued “Qui se sent juif ne saurait n’être pas sioniste”, Berl counteracted that while the quest of Jewish renewal of “la terre des aîeux, les liens rompus par la conquête romaine, et réaliser enfin le parole sacramentelle que tout juif conscient répète depuis la dispersion ;”l’an prochain à Jérusalem”, was relevant, the idea of the abandonment of diaspora communities in favour of mass exodus to Palestine was preposterous. He concluded that French Jews, while they were sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed Jews of Eastern Europe, they would never commit to Zionism, because its particularistic ideology had no connection with the tenets of French Judaism.

Ils se refusent à voir le sionisme en corrélation directe ou indirecte avec le judaïsme. L’un et l’autre sont nettement distincts.

*Alfred Berl, Paix et Droit, February, 1927.*

Reasoning that while Zionism took its inspiration from constructed ties with the ancient concept of Hebrew monarchy, French Judaism, inspired by the prophetic age, was the performative product of 2000 years of dispersion and evolution, Berl was unable to forgive the fact that Zionists ignored what Renan termed “Le miracle juif”, the morality which coincided with the apogee of Jewish independence.
C’est après la chute de Samarie et pendant la captivité, que le fleuve de babylonien entendit et répercuta les poignantes lamentations de Jérémie. C’est sous les règnes les plus odieux d’Israël et de Juda et aux périodes de la plus sombre immoralité, que prophétisèrent les plus grands des prophètes. Par contre les deux petits royaumes n’ont jamais démontré que la plus désolante incapacité politique, cause première et ultime des pires catastrophes nationales. Il a fallu la chute de ces pseudo-états et la dispersion tribus pour conférer aux juifs un rôle universel.


Citing the great achievements of Jews throughout the centuries of dispersion, Berl showed that a return to the “Orient” would not be progress, but on the contrary, would erode at the principles of “le génie juif”, a concept congruent with the post Revolutionary ideals of France.

Alfred Berl, *Paix et Droit*, p.47.

Zionism was perceived to be dangerous not only because it threatened to end the progress already made by the emancipated Jews of Europe who wished to stay where they were, but also because it potentially endangered the very east European communities it was attempting to rescue. In essence, Palestine was unequipped to absorb large numbers of Jews in the unlikely event they did immigrate en masse. Finally and in light of the Hebron riots of 1929, he presciently
addressed the potential regional consequences of dispossessing the indigenous populations of the region.

Quelques profondes que soient les raisons morales qui militent contre la restauration du Judaïsme en Palestine, d’autres obstacles d’ordre matériel, économique ou démographique, paraissent encore insurmontables. La présence de sept cent mille Arabes dont la population ne cessera s’accroître avec le progrès du pays et qui résignent nullement à se laisser déposséder ou majoriser ; cent million chrétiens, dont les craintes et les répugnances ne sont pas moindres.

Alfred Berl, *Paix et Droit*, p. 48

This sentiment had already been voiced by Jean Richard Bloch, when in his essay *le Robison Juif* (1925) he had raised his concern about the potential problems of settling a land that was already inhabited by an indigenous Arab population. In fact, as early as 1921, *Paix et Droit* had argued that Zionism conveniently ignored the fact that Palestine was not an empty land. In an article titled “Nationalisme ou Assimilation” published in April 1921, Zionists were criticized for treating Palestine as an empty “no mans Land” despite the reality of over 700,000 Arabs and 80,000 Christians who had inhabited the region since the Crusades.

Berl ended his article with an affirmation of his belief that while French Jewry should admire the success of the Yishuv (Jewish settlers in Palestine) their admiration should remain firmly removed from political Zionism.

La réserve des Français israélites dans cette question atteste qu’ils ont un sentiment très vif de leur responsabilité. Le mandat palestinien, les difficultés théoriques et pratiques, les inconnus qu’il recèle, les laissent en défiance. Non qu’ils répudient l’esprit de solidarité qui les rattache à des
coreligionnaires malheureux et dont ils ont fourni dans le passé des preuves indiscutables ; mais ils doutent que ce soit par cette voie que cette solidarité puisse s’exercer le plus utilement. Comme juifs, ils restent sceptiques. Comme Français, ils sont assez inquiets sur l’entreprise sioniste, sur les risques et les obscurités qu’elle comporte. Aucune propagande ne prévaudra contre cet instinct de leur conscience.


There are multiple examples of dissent against Zionism published by *Paix et Droit*.

For example, while critiquing the play *Quand Israel est roi* (1921) written by Jerome and Jean Taraud, (1874-1953) and (1877-1952), Berl grudgingly admires the achievement of Zionist settlers, pointing out that Les Tharaud “ne refusent pas leur hommage à l’effort méritoire et à la très belle énergie des sionistes” and « qu’ils admirent sincèrement « ces fils et ces filles »qui sont accourus de si loin , en rupture de bain intellectuel, pour fertiliser de leurs sueurs ce triste et maigre sol ». Nevertheless he doubts their eventual success. Arguing that the land is unable to sustain large scale Jewish immigration, he decries “la nostalgie de sion » as a false illusion, instead arguing the case for emancipation based on the French model as the only legitimate solution to the Jewish problem.

Ainsi l’élément juif, dans le pays où il s’est raciné, est une province nouvelle qui s’agrège à la masse et s’harmonise avec les autres, sans pour cela « se perdre en eux ». Les patries modernes sont moins le produit du sang que de l’histoire, de l’accord volontaire, de la communauté d’aspirations, d’intérêts, de langue et de culture. Ce qui importe, ce n’est pas tant la consanguinité que l’union des esprits et des cœurs.

Alfred Berl, *Paix et Droit*, p.54
Although somewhat sympathetic to the Zionist settlers after the issue of the White Paper of 1939, which subsequently limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, the leading journalist remained critical of Zionism.

**Zionist support in France**

Despite the position eventually taken by community leaders in both the Consistoire and the A.I.U., there were factions of French Jewry who did embrace the original universalist concepts defined by Herzl’s model of cultural Zionism laid out in Der Judenstadtt. (1896). Some French Jews welcomed the idea of the establishment of a Jewish homeland which would provide opportunity and asylum for those communities whose possibility of emancipation was severely limited. In addition, as “loyal French citizens”, others welcomed the increased relevance of France in discussions concerning the Middle East. However, and this was a huge caveat, despite their support and admiration, it very clear that from the start, French Jews, despite any admiration that they may have had for cultural Zionism, did not envisage leaving France, and as I will show, neither did the Jews of the Ottoman Empire who were beginning to enjoy the advantages of the Tanzimaat, as well as the opportunity gained by French emancipation doing so either.

By the 1920s, when political Zionism had replaced Herzl’s universalist ideology. Zionism had become a highly organized, even radicalized organization, based on the socialist values of the Bundt. With its insistence on a non-negotiable Jewish hegemony it effectively severed itself from any connections with universalism and there was no longer relevancy for alternative, diaspora models of
Judaism. This was to prove totally unacceptable to the two main representative bodies of French Jewry and for many French Jews. As the organized bodies representing French Jewry, both the Consistoire and the A.I.U. were now bitterly committed in their opposition of Zionism and were to remain so until the aftermath of the Holocaust and the de facto establishment of the Jewish state.

The Ottoman Jews: the Jews that Zionism forgot

While the debate on Zionism raged in Europe, the Jews of the Ottoman empire remained virtually immune to the changes in attitude towards Zionism that were occurring in the Hexagon. Although the existence of these communities was not unknown to the leaders of the Yishuv (Jewish settlement), it would not be until after World War II that the Zionist movement in Palestine would begin to develop any significant interest in the Jews of Islamic countries.

Zionist emissaries had in fact, been in limited contact with the eastern communities since the 1920s coincidently during the era when the Zionist debate was reaching its apogee in Europe. Yet, it is woefully clear that from its very outset, political Zionism did not regard Mizrachi Jewry as a relevant component in Yishuv society. Eliyahu Dobkin, the head of the Jewish Agency Immigration department on 1943, succinctly summed up the low regard held by the majority of the agency towards the Jews of the Islamic countries in Hayyim Cohen's work "Hayehudim be Artzot ha Mizrach Hatichon (1972).

Despite the fact that they are close to us geographically, they are foreign and distant, and their foreignness is mutual. In the past twenty years, these Jews have cut themselves off from us much more than any other Jewish collective. p.180
Admittedly, the genesis of the embryonic Zionist movement had taken place in Middle and eastern Europe during the mid nineteenth century. It was where the Zionist movement had been founded and where its ideology had taken shape and perhaps most importantly, where its leaders had risen in its ranks. Nevertheless, Dobkin’s statement makes it absolutely clear that whether it was for demographic, political, ideological or cultural reasons, from the very start, the Zionist establishment did not perceive the Jews of Islamic countries as having any significant Zionist potential.

In addition to demographic, political and ideological factors, there was also a cultural aspect related to their disregard. Zionism had been founded in Europe in the late nineteenth century. It had been shaped in the shadow of the encounter between western culture and other cultures along with corresponding ideas of enlightenment and nationalism and it had absorbed the notion of a cultural hierarchy derived from colonialist values. According to the Israeli historian Yaron Tsur “The so called “natural differences between nations produced a hierarchy with European cultures at the top and the cultures of all other nations between them” (74) While Zionists sought to give up their diaspora past, by no means did they want to surrender their European culture.145 As a result, underneath all of the ethnic–national ethos of Zionism, which promised to treat all Jews throughout the Diaspora equally, there was a latent ethos that regarded the culture of Islamic

145 For further discussion on the subject see Yaron Tsur's impressive work, Habeya ha-adatt (The Ethnic Problem) in Z. Zameret and Y. Yablonka (eds), The Second Decade (Jerusalem :Yad Ben Zvi, 2001) (Hebrew);Yaron Tsur,”Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel” Journal of Israeli History 18 no ! (Spring1997), pp.74-6.
countries as “Levantine”, that is, as inferior. Characterised by what was viewed by Ashkenazi Zionists as possessing a superficial education, that amounted to mere external manners with neither cultural foundation, nor intellectual instability, the Jews of the Muslim countries were deemed to be inferior, and as such, unworthy of immigrating to Palestine during the formative years of the national homeland. The notable exception were the Jews of Yemen and the Kurdish Jews, alienated from mainstream Arabized Iraqi Jewish society and therefore judged as more malleable. Other than these examples, very few immigration certificates were initially allocated to the Jews of the Islamic countries.

Yet, it is illuminating that while European Zionists were disdainful of the Jews of the Arab world, Eastern Jewry was clearly equally antipathetic towards Zionism. By the late 1930s, Arab Jews numbered approximately 750,000 persons and constituted less than 4% of world Jewry. They were obviously in the minority as far as world Jewry was concerned. Furthermore, the 1920s, and 1930s marked a period of political progress and economic prosperity for the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa. An era of emancipation prompted by a combination of the reforms enacted during the waning years of the Ottoman period, (the Tanzimaat, and the process of modernization prompted by French and British colonialism) had heralded unprecedented opportunities of education and an improved standard of living. As a result, few Jews were interested in Zionism or emigration to Palestine. Although, like their co-religionists the Français Israélites, they were sympathetic to the plight of their pogrom besieged coreligionists in eastern Europe, they displayed no particular wish to abandon their communities en masse for resettlement in
Palestine, a land that was part of their immediate regional area, well known to them, to which that they had free access to and perhaps most poignantly, that they considered to be primitive in comparison to their own.

In 1898, shortly after the first Zionist congress held in Basle in 1897, where Chaim Weitzman had proclaimed the Zionist movement’s intention to establish a Jewish national homeland, the following letter written by I Danon, the director of the Baghdadi boys school succinctly illustrates the latter’s ambivalent and even fearful attitude towards Zionism. Fearing it would ultimately endanger the welfare of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire he wrote,

Sionisme- Tout à la tête du mouvement se rendaient compte que leurs prétentions cauons à nos coreligionnaires de la Turquie, peut être montraient-ils plus de réserve dans leurs paroles ou dans leurs écrits. Mais l’idée de nous établir en Palestine est absurde...\(^\text{146}\)

Similarly, while the issue of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, was marked by the Egyptian Jewish press’s insistence on the Jewish community’s obligation to morally and financially support the Yishuv’s development of Palestine, like the Jews of Baghdad, the Jews of Egypt showed little interest in the prospect of their own relocation to Palestine. Ovadia Yerushalmi describes the attitude towards Zionism in Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s,

Les jeunes juifs (d’Egypte) n’étaient pas attirés par une activité sioniste, n’étaient pas enclins à étudier l’hébreu, ni comme langue vivante.

\(^\text{146}\) Sur le sionisme : Lettre du directeur de l’école de Baghdad M.I. Danon 15 novembre 1898.
ni comme langue de prière.
Quoted from Haim Cohen, *Ha Yehudim be artzot Ha Mizrah ha tichon be yomeinu*, p110.

As Yerushalmi illustrates, Egyptian Jewry remained deeply invested in the French Judaism model and perhaps to their discredit and arguably to their eventual downfall they disregarded the nascent Arab nationalism movement with the same disdain. Stressing the alienation of the Egyptian Jews from their Muslim compatriots Shmuel Ettinger also writes,

*Il convient de signaler que peu de juifs possèdent l’arabe comme langue maternelle – exception faite des juifs caraites, et de ceux qui habitaient les quartiers juifs et des provinciaux presque tous l’ont étudiée comme langue étrangère. Par conséquent, leur contribution à la culture locale et à la littérature était minime.*

Shmuel Ettinger, Ed. *Toldot ha yehudim be artzot ha Islam*, p389-390

Admittedly, the relaxed attitude of Jewish communities was influenced by the easy sense of tolerance and belonging they had experienced in countries administered by the Ottoman Empire, that had provided Jews with a haven since the days of the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. However, the education imparted to them by the A.I.U, not only adeptly hammered home the French universalist ideals that Jewish communities were all too ready to buy in to, but it also gave them a sense of superiority as far as their Muslim compatriots were concerned. It also imbued them with the certainty of the opportunity for advancement, all of which ultimately rendered the thought of emigration preposterous. The result was that any notion of Zionism being remotely
advantageous to the Jews of the Eastern communities was firmly rejected. In April, 1922, *Paix et Droit* published an article which stated,

Tous les Israélites ottomans sont sionistes, en ce sens que tous Souhaitent la création d'un état juif, dans ce monde et en préférence en Palestine.- comme le suprême refuge de leurs coreligionnaires proscrits ou malheureux. Mais une différence existe : elle consiste en ceci que les Sefardim, tout en faisant les vœux pour l'établissement du « home juif » en Palestine, ne reconnaissent ni l'opportunité d'un état juif ni l'avantage que trouveraient les Israelites du monde entier à renoncer aux diverses nationalités qu'ils ont adoptées pour devenir citoyens de ce nouvel état.

*Paix et Droit, “Les Israélites Ottomans et le Sionisme, p2*

The article goes on to provide a glowing endorsement of the allegiance of Eastern communities not only to the Alliance Israélite, but also to the Hexagon itself, which via the schools of the Alliance had brought the superior culture of the Occident to the Jews of the “Levant”.

Les institutions scolaires qu'elle a créées à l'Ouest comme à l'Est en Afrique comme en Europe, auxquelles le rédacteur de la *Revue des deux Mondes* rend un si complète justice, n'ont pas seulement propage la langue, la culture et l'influence, mais encore, ce qui est mieux la civilisation et les idées françaises. C'est à dire les notions de la liberté et de dignité humaine, de droit individuel, de liberté religieuse, d'égalité civique de devoir envers la cité, tout le patrimoine de 1789, tout l'apport moral de la France dans le monde, tout ce qui constitue sa force et son honneur devant l'humanité présente et devant l'histoire.


Clearly, the Ottoman Empire emphasized mutual tolerance within its panoply of diverse groups, however, the imposition of a Western ideology that embraced universalism, paradoxically encouraged the underscoring and endorsement of difference. While Alliance education emphasised the importance of the French post Revolution ideals of *Liberté, Egalité* and *Fraternité*, the advantages
acquired by a Western education encouraged the Jewish community to advance both socially and economically ultimately at the expense of their Muslim compatriots who saw themselves as disfavoured by the West.

It was a similar story throughout the countries of the Ottoman Empire. In 1924, David Sasson, an Alliance teacher based in Iraq addressing his graduating students, stressed the enormity of the debt they owed to the A. I. U. without whom they would have never been given the chance to progress in society.

Rendez grâce au ciel de la faveur spéciale dont votre enfance a été l'objet. Je dis « spéciale » car qu'eût été votre sort si l'Alliance Israélite depuis long date n'avait pris en main de répandre l'instruction au milieu de vous. Quel eût été le sort de votre communauté en ce moment où, le pays revenu à la liberté, marche sous l'égide de ses dirigeants éclairés et dévoués vers la glorieuse destinée ? 147

His endorsement of France did not go without recognition from A.I.U. directors.

Below is an excerpt from a letter received by Sasson from the French consul in Baghdad in 1930 illustrates.

Le gouvernement de la République française a reconnu depuis le début, les qualités d'énergie, de volonté et de tact déployés par les Directeurs qui en Iraq se sont succédés à la tête de votre œuvre et c'est pourquoi il a témoigné à celle ci cette sympathie agissante sur laquelle vous pouvez compter.

Quoted from Monique Nahon's, Hussards de l'Alliance, p.157.

The letter provides clear evidence of the intricate, complex ties that existed between the A.I U and the French government. As I have previously noted, while there was never any official association between the two organizations, there was

148 Emphasis mine.
nonetheless a mutually, beneficial relationship. The A.I U. operated its schools under the banner of French legitimacy (and superiority) while thanks to the A.I.U., France was able to increase its influence and presence in the Ottoman empire. In return, by representing the Hexagon or giving the appearance of doing so, the A.I.U. gained unequalled credibility within the Jewish communities of the Ottoman empire, and was therefore able to endorse its ideology of French Judaism and stress its condemnation of Zionism in a seemingly official capacity.

This had deep ramifications for the emerging Zionist movement which during the 1930s was by now trying to establish an albeit limited presence in the Ottoman Empire. To support Zionism was to appear to show ingratitude to France and the opportunities she had provided for Jewish emancipation. The anti-Zionist attitude of the A.I.U was eagerly transmitted by the teachers of the Alliance many of whom despite their disparaging attitude, originated from the eastern communities themselves. In 1920, David Sasson wrote a letter from Tantah which severely criticized the Zionist press in Egypt and Iraq.

Elle semble croire qu'il a besoin, pour sa propagande d'attaquer notre société et nos écoles. Je n'ai aucune qualité ni compétence de discuter les thèmes de l'un ou de l'autre groupement, mais je ne puis m'empêcher de voir que le sionisme qui fonde son espoir en notre disparition, doit peut être malgré lui, en partie, son développement en Orient à l’œuvre de l'Alliance.

Quoted from Monique Nahon's, *Hussards de l'Alliance*, p.170.

Sasson who taught in A.I.U. schools throughout the Ottoman empire, later accused the Zionists of failing to live up to their promise to repatriate distressed Jewish communities, recalling the example of a group of Jews who having escaped a
pogrom in Tehran in 1922, abandoned their houses and belongings only to arrive in Palestine to an unreceptive and unwelcoming Yishuv. In 1923, he sent a letter of complaint to the A.I.U. in Paris, addressing the lamentable situation of the group of immigrants. His reply from the directors of the Alliance condemned the Zionists for their unacceptable instigation of the “exodus”, effectively discouraging any other families from leaving for Palestine and finally advises that the families return to Iran.

Nous avons lu ce que vous nous dites de l'exode en Palestine d'un certain nombre de familles de Téhéran et de la lamentable situation dans laquelle se trouvent ces pauvres gens qui se sont laissés prendre au mirage sioniste… la meilleure propagande contre l’émigration seront les nouvelles qui parviendront à Téhéran sur la situation misérable de ceux qui sont partis avec tant de légèreté pour la Palestine. Il est plus probable qu’à l'heure actuelle on y est déjà au courant de ces faits. Ce qui est certain, c'est qu'un exode irréfléchi vers la Palestine dans ces circonstances actuelles ne saurait conduire qu’au désastre.

Quoted from Monique Nahon’s, *Hussards de l'Alliance*, p.170.

It should be stressed here that it remains uncertain whether the Zionists were actually guilty of instigating the emigration of the group of Teherani Jews under false pretences or whether they genuinely intended them to be successfully absorbed by the Yishuv. What is clear though, is that the A.I.U certainly profited from the unfortunate episode, using it as an example with which to dissuade other communities from emigrating to Palestine.
The influence of Zionism in the Jewish Communities of the Middle East.

Despite what was an overwhelmingly negative reception by community leaders and the A.I.U, during the 1920s and 1930s, Zionists did manage to make some progress in their promotion of theoretical Zionism by pushing the view that the movement’s ideology was universal in its basis and was therefore beneficial to their poorer co-religionists. In 1920, Sasson describes the rejoicing of the Egyptian community upon the issue of the Balfour declaration.

A cette occasion une souscription a été ouverte pour les Fonds National qui a rapporté dit -on jusqu’ici 3000 pounds rien qu’au Caire ; nos élèves prêteront leur concours pour la représentation d’une pièce théâtrale « le Réveil de Sion « composée pour la circonstance ; la semaine de la Pentecôte a été dénommée par les juifs égyptiens, semaine de la gueula, libération.

Quoted from Monique Nahon’s, Hussards de l’Alliance, p.180.

As in France, the issue of the Balfour Declaration gave a new vibrancy to the initially apathetic reception to Zionist activity in Egypt. In January 1918, the first edition of the Zionist newspaper La Revue Sioniste appeared bimonthly. With slogans in Hebrew such as “Si Je t’oublie Jérusalem, que main droite soit oubliée”, “Ni par les armes, ni par la force mais avec l’esprit” and “Le sionisme aspire à acquérir légalement un abri pour le people juif en Eretz Israël”, the newspaper served as the official organ of the Zionist Federation. Other newspapers such as Israël (1920) published in French, Hebrew and Arabic quickly followed suit, El Chams (1934) published in Arabic and two weekly newspapers La Tribune Juive (and L’Aurore (1921) were published in French. It is interesting that although these were the first official Zionist newspapers representing the voice of the movement,
there had already been an active Jewish press in Egypt since the beginning of the twentieth century. Newspapers such as *La Renaissance juive* for example, published in 1912 in Cairo, regularly commented on Jewish issues both in Egypt and Europe. The journal was mentioned in dispatches by Shmuel Ha Shimshoni, an executive member of the Zionist Organization of Berlin in June 1913 and was lauded as an important propagator of the Zionist message, even though it must be stressed here that the journal in no way, suggested Zionism to be a solution for the Egyptian Jewish community.

Despite the promotion of Zionism by the press, the greater majority of Egyptian Jews still considered themselves as *bona fide* residents of their native country and were consistently alarmed at what they saw as a threat to the integrity of their community, with the result that there was still intense opposition from multiple sources to any gains made by Zionism. The opposition came in several forms. Firstly, there were those (albeit few) who sympathetic to Arab nationalism movements, openly supported the concept of a strong cohesive Egypt that would theoretically be inclusive of the in situ Jewish community. For example, the Lawyer David Hazan, the son of the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, distinguished himself by his involvement with the Arab nationalist movement. As a member of the Egyptian nationalist movement *Wadf*, he took an active part in the struggle for the independence of Egypt, and was eventually condemned to death by the British authorities, only to escape thanks to his numerous relatives in the Egyptian government. Other Jewish activists included Felix Benzaken and Vita Sonsino.
Opposition to Zionist propaganda also came from community leaders, such as the wealthy Cattaui and Mosseri families. During the 1920s, the Egyptian community leader Moshe Cattaui had been a supporter of Zionism, but by the 1940s, his descendants Rene and Aslan Cattaui, who were both members of parliament, keenly supported the strengthening of the ties of identification between Egypt and its Jewish communities.

Religious leaders such as Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum Effendi (1917-1961) also urged the Jewish community not to “clash” with the Egyptian authorities. When later, during the riots of the late 1930s, the Egyptian Jewish press attentively followed the position of Egypt vis-à-vis Palestine while newspapers such as El Chams, condemned the anti-Jewish motivated demonstrations that ensued in Egypt after the riots of 1936, they were also torn by their dual loyalties, and tended to tread a careful line which stopped short of actually criticizing Egypt itself.

As an illustration of the conflict caused by the dual loyalties of the Jewish community, the editor of the Zionist journal El Chams Saad Malki, chose to play down Egyptian Jewish Zionist aspirations during the 1940s, instead underlining the general lack of interest in politics shown by Egyptian Jews. Ovadia Yerushalmi wrote,

Saad Malki souligna le manqué d’intérêt des juifs d’Egypte à la politique et l’attribua à la tendance des juifs orientaux à rester en dehors de la vie politique des pays où ils vivaient. D’après lui, ces derniers appuyaient systématiquement les gouvernements en place et il était rare de voir un juif oriental s’opposer à la politique de son gouvernement. Les juifs en Egypte étaient apparemment occupés par la vie quotidienne et cherchait surtout à subvenir aux besoins de leurs familles. Ils s’efforçaient de développer entre eux une vie sociale, religieuse et des rapports harmonieux avec les autorités égyptiennes, ce qui leur valut une attitude libérale de la part de ces mêmes autorités.
While the community’s fears of being accused of disloyalty did perhaps have some resonance with reality, community leaders, (like those of eastern Europe before them, who were threatened by the Jewish enlightenment movement) were concerned that the emerging influence of Zionism would wield an irresistible hold on the community’s youth. Fearing that this would eventually erode at the integrity of the community (as well as their own power bases), they played on the fears of middle class Egyptian Jewish parents, who were alarmed at the thought of their children disappearing in the night, only to resurface in Palestine.

It was a similar situation in the even more arabized community of Iraq where little interest in Zionism had been displayed by community leaders. Despite the initial support of King Feisal, who in 1921 had initially eyed Zionism as a model for the Iraqi nationalism movement, Iraqi Jews felt a strong sense of belongingness with the country that they had lived in for over two millennia. Although unlike the majority of their eastern co-religionists they supported Arab nationalist movements, they carefully crafted their sense of belongingness with whoever ruled their land at the moment, whether it be the Caliphs, the Ottomans or the British,

Naim Kattan points out that when the A.I.U. established their schools with the intention of bringing Western enlightenment to their co-religionists in “backward countries”, Iraqi Jews were among the first Jews to take advantage of the opportunity for western education. Later, with the installation of the British
colonial apparatus, Iraqi Jews were among the first candidates to accept coveted government posts as interpreters. Similarly, when Iraq became independent a few years later, and began the process of establishing its government service, the new government called upon its loyal Jewish citizens, because of their association with Britain and the economic ties of the British empire with India and China. As Kattan notes, during the 1920s and 1930s, the post office, the railways, the customs, and finance were all overflowing with Jews.

In truth, in the case of Iraq, Jewish belongingness had been carefully honed and negotiated by centuries of mutual cohabitation. The institution of the Tanzimaat by the Ottomans and the promotion of Occidental culture by institutions such as the A.I.U. increased the opportunity for Jewish economic development. In many cases it actively favoured Jews, who were now no longer subjected to either Islamic law and the obligation of military service. As such, they were free to move between the spaces of their already relatively fluid society. Unsurprisingly, the combination of perceived inequality coupled with the rise of an Arab nationalist movement that emphasized Muslim disdain for the colonial powers led to an increasingly fractious relationship between Muslims and Jews. Disgusted by the imposition of the Tanzimaat and the advent of Western interference, Muslims began to impose the fact they were the ruling class. In his work *Adieu Babylone: Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak* (1975), Kattan describes examples of the tenuous and at times fractious relationship the Jewish community had with their Muslim neighbours, with whom they came in contact with daily but with whom they felt increasingly uneasy.

Naim Kattan, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.61

Later, the author describes the harrowing scenes of the Farhoud when in 1941, Muslims under the influence of their pro Nazi government, and believing the British had retreated, vented the full force of their resentment on the Jewish community.


Naim Kattan, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.35.

With the rise of Arab nationalism, the same sentiment of distrust became increasingly evident in Egypt. In her most recent work Rachel Rose et l’officier arabe (2006), set in Egypt during 1957, when the Jews of Egypt were in the process of leaving en masse, Paula Jacques describes the repressed anger of the Arab officer Fouad Barouk, the son of the deceased Um Fouad, a maid who once
worked for Rachel Rose Cohen’s family. Fouad blames the Cohen family for his mother’s premature death and decides to exact his revenge on her family, by conducting an affair with the teenage Rachel Rose whose family have disregarded the government decree to surrender their property to the state and now live in fear of being discovered by the authorities. Fouad uses Rachel Rose as an intermediary through which he plays a cruel game of cat and mouse with her family, who are now desperate to sell their business and emigrate to Israel. Jacques's telling description of Fouad’s simmering hatred provides undeniable testimony of the intense resentment felt towards the Jewish community by their Muslim neighbours. Defending his decision to avenge the Cohen family, Fouad explains that his hatred was not always apparent. On the contrary, as a child, he actively sought out the company of the Jewish students of his French school because unlike the rich Muslim students, they did not ostracize him despite the fact that he was the son of a servant.

Jamais il n’avait ressentit d’hostilité envers les Cohen, les Levy, les Mory, les Douek, les Harrai, les Sapriel, les Sasson, les Behar, les Abadi. Auprès lesquels il grandissait au lycée français du Caire. A chaque nouvelle rentrée, il choisissait de partager le pupitre d’un élève juif, de préférence aux autres :les musulmans issus de la noblesse ou de la grande bourgeoisie locales qui lui parlaient avec mépris et condescendance.


Noting that unlike the rich Muslim students, the Jews carried no pretensions of Pharoanic ascendancy and did not dismiss him as an inferior, nevertheless, from an early age, he could not fail to notice that Jewish students considered themselves to
be Western rather than Egyptian. Despite his initial admiration, he mocked them for their pretentiousness and their “un Egyptianess”.

Eventually, his observations become the breeding ground for resentment and hostility. When he becomes active in the Arab nationalism movement, his hatred fosters a thirst for revenge against those he considers to be foreign interlopers who do not really belong or even want to belong in Egypt.

Fouad’s anger embodies the latent, simmering resentment felt by Egyptian Muslims towards the Westernized Jewish community. Irrespective of the gathering influence of Zionism in Europe, the Egyptian Jewish community, in its steady march towards occidentalization, continued to haplessly estrange itself from any realistic chance of inclusion within the evolving corpus of Arab nationalism. By

Ils se prenaient pour des Occidentaux, n’eussent-ils jamais dépassé les frontières de leur pays natal, et s’efforçaient de les limiter en tout. Ils confortaient leur absurde qualitatif d’Européens du Nil » par une ignorance crasse de la langue, des mœurs, de la religion, de la misère du peuple égyptien.

virtue of its blind embracement of French culture, the community fatally neglected the Arabic language and rejected Arab identity, choosing instead to place a premium on French language and a facsimile French identity. Unsurprisingly, the community was seen by Muslims to have “chosen sides”. Like so many of his compatriots, Jacques’s Fouad saw the Jews as privileged outsiders who unlike the Egyptian bourgeoisie, who he despised because of the injustice of the poverty which they helped perpetuate) were still authentic Egyptians. Jews, on the other hand were seen as having no such loyalty to Egypt.

It was the same story throughout the Middle East as Muslims became increasingly more intolerant to Jewish communities whom they considered to be in the back pocket of the colonial powers they detested. In Iraq, as a consequence of their western education that had allowed Jews to see life through a western gaze, the community had been severed from the nationalist trajectory of their Muslim compatriots who wanted nothing to do with the colonial machine. The highly arabized Jewish community could no longer take for granted their place in emerging Iraqi society.

Yet, interestingly, while archives from the Alliance and press articles of the period, show evidence of sporadic anti-Jewish attacks during the 1920s, as Naim Kattan vouches, for the most part, these incidents were relatively rare. In a world that frissoned with the uncertainty that came with the end of the age of empire, Jews like Muslims were concerned for the future of the newly emerging Iraq.

Nous étions irakiens, soucieux de l’avenir de notre pays, par conséquent de notre avenir à chacun de nous. Sauf que les Musulmans se sentaient plus irakiens que les autres.
In any case, as *Ahl al Kiteb*, (People of the Book) Jews had always merited a place in Muslim society. This was embedded to such an extent that the Koran contains a distinct section (the Isra’eli’y-et) exclusively devoted to the treatment of the Jews by Muslims. While the situation of Jewish communities was admittedly precarious and at times subject to the whim of the rulers, it still remained true that Eastern Jews fared better under Muslim rule than did their European co-religionists under Christian rule.

**The infiltration of Zionism within the Jewish communities of the Arab lands**

Chaque fois qu’il (Nissim) évoquait ses discussions avec Sireni, Nissim prenait l’air inspiré de celui qui écoute un murmure venant de l’lointain. Il n’osait pas à croire à la réalité des contrées étrangères dont il recevait l’appel. Il vivait dans la fascination de ces pays fabuleux que la voix de Sireni faisait surgir de l’ombre.


The above description written by Naim Kattan recalls his memory of the Zionist emissary Sireni’s impact on his friend Nissim who befriended the envoy in the 1940s while working at the British censor’s office during the school vacation. During the late 1930s extending through the 1940s, the Jewish agency begin to take an avid interest in the Jews of the Arab lands. This was no magnanimous gesture

---

149 The Jewish Agency (Sochnut) was and still is the government agency originally set up by the Yishuv and now administered by the Israeli government that
that hinted at a sudden epiphany regarding the worthiness of the eastern Jewish communities. It was more likely due to the practical realization that in light of the mass murder of the European Jewish community, (despite the unpalatable prospect) Jewish Palestine would need to absorb the Jews of the Muslim lands in order to retain the relevance of the establishment of a Jewish hegemony.

Despite the common belief to the contrary, the Jews of the Middle East were already quite familiar with emissaries from Palestine. For generations, rabbinical emissaries from Palestine had been visiting the Jews of Babylonia, Egypt, and beyond. They usually came for short periods of time and were generally shown great respect. Usually, they would demand assistance for Palestine, and in return, using their extensive knowledge of the Torah, they would resolve disputes and issue Halakhic rulings on controversial subjects.

In contrast, to these early rabbinic emissaries, the secular Yishuv emissaries did not originally come to collect funds, neither did they intend to stay for a short amount of time. On average they remained among the Jewish communities for no more than a year. However, by the 1940s, their sole purpose had become to encourage young Jews to move to Palestine. In contrast to the rabbinical emissaries of the past who wore traditional garb and turban, the Yishuv representatives wore European suits and were clean shaven. Neither were they religious. In fact, many lacked even the most rudimentary knowledge of religious laws and Jewish tradition. Imbued with western influence, Yishuv emissaries were admired by Jewish youth for their courage, zeal, devotion and modest ascetic way of life. Even encourages and regulate Jewish immigration to Israel. See further descriptions of this agency this chapter.
more significantly, they were admired for their fact they had been courageous enough to leave their families, homes and their comfortable lives, to live in a far away land in a harsh climate.

Once their Zionist objective became obvious to the elders of the community, the activities of the Yishuv were discouraged. Unperturbed, emissaries continued with their proselyting mission, turning their attention towards other groups that they felt would be receptive to the Zionist message. In particular, they targeted the poorer Kurdish Jews of northern Iraq whose concept of the rabbinical emissaries from the Holy land was to become embodied in the Yishuv emissary. As I have already shown earlier, Naim Kattan’s dismal descriptions of Abu Siffein portray the poverty of the poorest Jewish neighbourhood of Baghdad inhabited by the Kurdish Jews. Yet, because this community was more religious and conservative than the affluent Jews of Baghdad and unlike their co-religionists, had had been not been exposed to the influences of the Alliance they therefore had little reference point with the West. As alienated outsiders, their yearning for redemption and reinvention was particularly strong. Consequently, the Yishuv emissaries were treated with an almost messianic adulation, and the Kurdish Jews were among the earliest Iraqi Jews to emigrate to Palestine.

For Jewish teenagers from both the Middle and lower classes in Iraq and all over the Muslim world, the emissaries had a dual symbolism steeped in Jewish orientalism. Coming from Palestine the emissaries waved the banner of Jewish nationalism, yet, they also represented the western (superior) culture students had been taught to admire in the schools of the A.I.U. The emissaries also seemed to
share commonality with Jewish youth. As Esther Meir Glitsenstein notes, not all of the Yishuv emissaries were of European origin. Ezra Kadoori and Shlomo Hillel, for example, had emigrated to Palestine from Iraq as children. Although they were entirely indoctrinated by both Zionist doctrine and their belief in Western superiority, their Iraqi origins resonated easily with Iraqi Jewish youth. In many ways, they seemed to represent their duel cultural view of a world that endeavoured to straddle the difficult margins of the old and the new, religion and secularity and East and West. Moreover, in the murky atmosphere of distrust left by the Farhoud, they seemed to present a tangible answer to the forces of anti-Semitic nationalism,

In their every day behaviour, Zionist emissaries therefore served as worthy role models. Their ideological steadfastness, their national pride and their western culture combined to invoke blind adulation and absolute obedience from the members of the newly inducted Zionist circles. The emmisaries were young, mostly in their twenties with a minority in their early thirties. They saw themselves as fighters on behalf of lofty ideological and cultural values, who had arrived to shake a complacent community from its slumber and rescue it before it was too late. Yet, for most of them, including those of eastern origin, who had long been indoctrinated by Zionist ideology or were from communities other than those they were targeting, their encounter with Jewish society and culture in Muslim countries was an encounter with a strange and bizarre world.

When Enzo Sereni wrote to the Jewish agency from Iraq, he complained that “the Jewish community resembled the Arab Effendi (middle class
businessmen) in all respects”, and that “Neither charitable institutions nor religion in the truest sense of the word existed”. He observed that “The young people, stunned by the Farhoud, were gripped by “emotional disintegration”. 150 Ironically, Sireni, as one of the founding members of Givat Brenner was a secular Jew, and was therefore in no legitimate position to criticise the lack of religious authenticity in the Iraqi Jew. In addition, by labelling the Iraqi community as no different from the “effendi Arabs” he was both dangerously dismissive of the Muslim population and ignorant of the fact that the large swathes of the Iraqi Jewish community were already highly westernized. Stating later to the Mossad, Sereni complained,

These are Jews who still live according to tradition, although they are not meticulous about obeying the commandments and know neither the reasons for the commandments nor a chapter of the Torah; people whose Jewish “feeling” is still pristine but it is frequently mixed with all sorts of superstitions and all sorts of “preconceived notions”… This world is being destroyed from within. It is rotten inside, and is liable to crumble quickly if one merely touches it... Here as in other Exile lands, we are witnessing the final days of the old Jewish world. Their homes are disintegrating from the pressure of outside conditions and with the disintegration of family life, this world is coming to an end.

Quoted from a letter from Sereni in a lecture to the Mossad 22 September 1942.

Although harsh in its exactitude, Sireni’s description reflects the real problem that plagued Zionist emissaries. In a sense, they were all foreigners to Arab society and culture. While those who were Ashkenazi drew upon unfavourable comparisons with the European societies that were familiar to them,151 those who

150 Sireni reiterated his position in a lecture to the Aliya Bet committee on the 2nd of July 1942 (Hagana archives)
were native to the region were equally estranged. Having long since left their
original communities, and now deeply intoxicated by the heady fumes of Zionism,
they had blocked out the culture of their childhood with an alarming efficiency.
For example, in 1942, Zionist emissary, Ezra Kadoorie, wrote in a virulent attack, on
the leisure habits of his former community,

Gossip and pettiness as a result of empty lives with no content. Conversations... about one's life and one's clothing
about fashions, old and new, about this wedding and what the bride looked like... and all sorts of earth-shaking questions and
matters.

Quoted from Ezra Kadoorie’s letter, 28 September 1943, from Hagana Archives.

Despite having never visited Europe and knowing relatively little about its culture,
Kadoorie himself an Iraqi, compared his own community, (from which he was now
entirely alienated) to European Jewry. Dismissing the eastern Jews’ communal
desire for upward social mobility as superficial and materialistic, he became
convinced that because unlike their eastern co-religionists, European Jews had
witnessed the turbulence of revolution and national liberation, they were alone in
their thirst for social change. This according to Kadoorie, and other emissaries,

151 In truth, Siren’s conclusions were completely unfounded. Jewish religious
developments in Iraq were not the same as in Europe. Modernization and
westernization had not led to assimilation and apostasy as they had all to often
done in Europe. While there were Jews (in particular the intellectuals) who
identified with the Iraqi culture and nationalist movement generally, they did not
opt out of the Jewish people. Moreover, so long as the changes occurred at the
initiative of the community leaders and under their supervision, they did not
threaten the foundations of the Jewish society. Analysis shows that this was the
case throughout the Muslim world. Jewish communities remained intact without
cutting themselves off from their Muslim neighbours and often without insulating
themselves from the affairs of their emerging nations.
was the single, important factor that had “naturally” led the European Jews to Zionism. Thus based on their deeply pejorative and faulty analyses, the first Zionist emissaries concluded that a different type of Jew altogether had evolved in the Islamic countries, one who was lacking in national pride, over emotional and irrational, hypocritical, two-faced and most importantly, absolutely incapable of self advancement without Western leadership. Referring to the inferiority and unsuitability of Eastern Jews for the building of the Jewish hegemony, Sereni’s wrote,

The material is not the material of Europe; rather it is material that is quick to become impassioned but also quick to despair… The opportunity to inform, nod blab is too much (even) for the best people. Inability to keep a secret, inability to keep one’s word… There is deep water and the water isn’t bad … but there is foam on the surface of the water and it is bad; t is the Levantine – Arab kind… Levantine – style assimilation into a culture that either does not exist or is on a low level. This has a very bad influence on the people’s character. They can be made human beings”, but they won’t be able to do it without help from the people in Palestine…

Sereni’s summation of eastern Jews implied that while the eastern Jew possessed the potential to be “molded” into Zionist material he would not be able to do so not without the help of the superior emancipated European Jew. Besides being deeply pejorative, it displayed a remarkable lack of understanding that ignores the glaring facts that eastern communities had long been exposed to western culture via the A.I.U. and were completely conversant with the customs and values of the West.

---

The influence of the Zionist emissaries on Jewish youth during the 1940s.

As I have previously indicated, despite their doubts concerning the suitability of the eastern Jew for inclusion in the building of the infrastructure of the Jewish state, by the 1940s, Zionists had become fearful that there would no longer be enough Jews to even justify the establishment of a Jewish state. Thus, entirely by default, they pinned their hopes on the youth of the Jewish communities of Muslim countries who they still believed would be malleable enough to meld into “the new Jew” required to build the Jewish hegemony. They set about the task of transferring the population, with tactical alacrity.

*Mossad le Alya Bet* was an immigration organization founded in the late 1930s to circumvent official immigration ceilings set up by the British and to bring young pioneers illegally to Palestine. Until World War II, emissaries had worked for the most part in central and eastern Europe, but by 1942, the organization had resumed activity, assisting in the launch of *Shabab el Inkaz* (Youth Rescue) an organization originally founded by the Jewish youth of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. Although the illegality of the Zionist movement made routine activity difficult because Zionist ideological literature could not easily be distributed in schools or in newspapers, meetings were held privately in people’s homes. This was not without considerable risk. Young people knew if they were caught by the authorities, they would be subject to heavy fines and even imprisonment.

Nevertheless, membership numbers grew, reaching close to two thousand by 1948 from a few hundred in 1942. Naim Kattan recalls the popularity of the Zionist youth
groups his friends attended, and their efficiency in convincing large numbers of Jewish youth to leave their parents for resettlement in Palestine.

Depuis plusieurs années, une puissante organisation sioniste était à l’œuvre et préparait ses adhérents à leur nouveau pays. Les jeunes gens et les jeunes filles étaient groupés en cellules et se réunissaient clandestinement pour apprendre l’hébreu parlé, ainsi que l’histoire et l’idéologie sionistes. Et puis discrètement ils disparaissaient. Des camarades de l’école, des collègues de bureau franchisaient illégalement la frontière pour participer à la nouvelle aventure. Souvent nous étions surprises. De jeunes employés de banque, des fonctionnaires subalternes des chemins de fer ou des postes timides, peu débrouillards, qui semblaient vivre en marge des remous qui agitaient le monde et que personne ne pouvait soupçonner d’avoir une conviction personnelle ni même une opinion politique, pliaient bagages un beau matin et allaient se joindre à l’armée juive qui se formait clandestinement en Palestine. Ces voyageurs de la nuit ne passaient pas par la Syrie ou la Jordanie. Ils se rendaient d’abord en Iran ou ils prenaient l’avion pour le futur Israël.

Naim Kattam, Adieu Babylone : Mémoires d’un juif de Bagdad, p 257.

As was the case in Egypt, community leaders and parents were alarmed at the influence that the Zionist movement had come to wield over their children, and believed that the movement threatened to erode at the very lifeblood of their ancient communities.

The ideology of the Zionist movement and its use of language stressing secular enlightenment was in fact deeply resonant with the modern values Jewish students had learned at the schools of the A.I.U. It must be remembered that despite their thirst for change, young Iraqi Jews came from traditional backgrounds, and despite their admiration of the West and here that implies France, they were not ready to reject Jewish life entirely. They did not want to give up their Jewish
national identity. Whereas Zionism’s main competition, the advocates of Iraqi nationalism and the nascent Communist party obliged them to do so. Zionism at least superficially so, had the advantage of allowing its followers the opportunity to express their social and national feelings.

Consequently, the Zionist movement by promoting itself as the social *avant garde*, strove to be a leading element in Jewish society while cynically voicing criticism of community leadership and its methods of operation. Unsurprisingly, these views went down well with the sentiments and aspirations of the educated youth of the middle class, who bound by tradition and were powerless to exert any influence within the community. In reality, the Zionist movement could not actually give them any real opportunity to become involved in the affairs of the community, but, it at least offered them an alternative route that trained them for public leadership roles.

Although as Kattan’s testimony illustrates, the movement remained underground and its members therefore remained anonymous, it bestowed on its members real feelings of power. On a more prosaic note, the Zionist movement was also a youth movement that offered the attraction of a vibrant social life with dances, field trips and games and thus represented a solution to the quandary and distress of Jewish youth during the uncertain years that followed the *Farhoud*.

**Relations between the Zionist movement and the community leadership**

As Zionist emissaries tackled their task of targeting the Eastern Jewish communities, they also sought to develop connections with prominent members
of these communities, in particular with leaders whose support they anticipated needing in the future. This was no easy matter. The Zionist movement often established its presence in communities without the permission of community leadership and regularly depicted the latter as dangerous enemies of the movement. Meir- Glitzenstein recalls how in Iraq, Rabbi Sasson Kadoorie, was described by Zionist emissaries as being a” dangerous enemy of the movement who wished to liquidate it in behalf of the authorities”. In truth, evidence shows this to be false. While community leaders were aware of the clandestine immigration taking place under their noses, it did not overtly worry them. Meir Shilon recounts a conversation he had with the Iraqi Senator Ezra Daniel in 1945,

> The senator knew about the emissaries from Palestine and about their illegal aliyah activity. At the end of his remarks he said ”Each of us works in his own way. You are taking Jews to Palestine, but how many can you take? Hundreds, maybe thousands. But that doesn’t solve the problem of the natural increase of the Jewish population, and especially the problem of the poor and the impoverished. I am keeping up with my activity on behalf of the community and will keep it up until the end of my life.


Rabbi Kadoorie was well aware of Zionist activity, although it is unlikely that he knew the full extent of the movement’s infiltration within the Jewish community. In any case, it is probable that he preferred not to know, because such knowledge would have endangered both his own status and that of the community. It is entirely plausible that during the 1940’s, the main concern of Jewish community leaders was not the threat of the small, relatively weak Zionist party,

\[154\] For further discussion see Meir – Glitzenstein, p.134.
but how to keep their communities viable in the face of disturbing political vicissitudes such as the rise of Arab and Jewish nationalism and the escalation of the Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine.

As we shall see, by the 1940’s, Jewish leaders had lost their pro-Iraqi orientation as a result of the now undeniable increase in anti-Semitic nationalism. Yet, still influenced by the doctrine of the Français Israélites, they still refused to believe that Zionism provided a viable answer to the Jewish Question. Viewing life through a universalist/French lens, and longing to remain in their own communities, they clung to the last comforting vestiges of their education and tangeable links with the waning colonial powers, Deeply invested in the social and economic, if no longer the political life of the country they lived in, they wanted neither to leave their homes nor to give up their cultural heritage. Given these circumstances, they might have been expected to fight against Zionism. However, they did not, loftily stating that they did not do so because of their traditional love of Zion and Jerusalem.

In reality, this decision was more likely a self serving one rather than a magnanimous one. Community leaders were well aware that a show of hostility towards Zionism would have probably cast doubt on their own legitimacy as compassionate and loyal Jewish leaders. Instead, they preferred to maintain an image of a loyal, apolitical, religious community that dealt discretely with problems as they occurred. Evidence shows that they were at least partially successful in blinding themselves to the incumbent reality. For example in 1946, Abraham el Kabir, director general of the finance ministry and one of the most prominent
members of the Iraqi community stressed to the Anglo-American committee of Inquiry, 155

The Jews in Iraq do not feel they have a problem which must be solved through outside assistance. Their domestic problems, if such exist must be solved through mutual understanding and co-operation. They do not feel any need to emigrate to Palestine, to America or to any other country, and if there are exceptions, they are the results of commercial, religious, or other reasons ... The Jews in this country are living prosperous and happy lives.

Quoted from Moche Gat. The Jewish Exodus from Iraq 1948-1951, p29.

With what was by this point undeniable evidence of a significant rise in anti-Semitic sentiment, it is almost impossible to believe that El Kabir actually believed his own words. Interestingly though, his statement mirrors Jacques Bigart’s own rejection of Zionism in 1919, which echoed French Judaism’s 19th century goal of establishing loyal, emancipated Jewish communities in the image of Judaism à la francais Israélite. As further evidence of the Jewish community’s wish to stay in situ, Naim Kattan recalls the urgency of which community leaders reiterated their loyalty to all who would listen to them,

Notre appartenance à la terre de nos ancêtres était mise en cause. Les notables et les dirigeants de communauté donnaient chaque jour des nouveaux gages de leur orthodoxie arabe et assuraient ceux qui voulaient encore prêter

155 The Anglo – American Committee of Inquiry was important because it brought the leadership of the Jewish community of Iraq together with Zionist leadership in March 1946. It marked the first attempt by the Zionist movement to intervene in the affairs of the Iraqi Jewish community and to dictate Zionist positions to Jewish leadership. The Zionist leadership arrived in Iraq to review the situation of the local Jewish community and to look into claims that the community was being persecuted and wished to emigrate to Palestine. In order to bolster these claims, He’halutz activists sent memoranda to the committee members about the condition of the community. They then pressured the community president to appear before a committee. (Meir- Glitzenstein, p.150)
Communism: an alternative choice for the Jewish community

Zionism’s main competition, came from the communist Party headed by Yusef Salman (1901-1949). The latter also appealed to Jewish youth desperately searching for political inclusion. Like the Zionist movement it was an underground movement that eventually grew into a countrywide movement. Both movements had a shared socialist ideology. Both had a modern organizational structure that was well aware of current political, social and economic changes and finally, both movements were competing for the same target population within the Jewish community: the youth of the middle classes preferably with a high school or higher education and political awareness.

Despite these differences, there was a fundamental difference between the Communist movement and the Zionist movement. The communist movement drew its strength from social, economic and political conflicts, the unjust distribution of wealth and the increasing polarization between the rich and the poor. It sought to replace the political and social regime with a socialist regime that would correct economic distortions. Zionism on the other hand focused solely on the Jewish Question and settlement of Palestine. Its socialist ideals applied to Palestine only.

Many people went back and forth between the two movements and sometimes as Meir- Glitzenstein notes, their affiliation was influenced by either coincidence or family-related factors. As a generality though, Jewish communists tended to be more affluent and better educated, from the middle class and in favour
of integration within the society of newly emerging Arab states. Zionism on the other hand, tended to attract less well integrated Jews, as well as those from the lower classes. Most importantly, while the Communists continued to regard countries such as Iraq and Egypt as their homeland, believing that socialism would solve the Jewish problem in their countries, Zionists viewed emigration from these countries to Israel as their sole solution.

Vigorous activity by both parties began between 1941 and 1942 and indeed continued throughout the 1940s. Evidence shows that Zionist emissaries were deeply concerned that the Communist Party would capture the imagination of Jewish youth. Sereni wrote,

There are already some who say that there is no need for Palestine, that everything will work out locally at the end of the war with the victory of Communist. Enlightening informational activity will be needed in this regard to show the rightness of our path and the social value of our Zionist solution.

Meir Shilon notes that Jews played an important role in the Communist party in Baghdad. In his memoir, Kattan notes the growing influence the communist party had on his own friends at his A.I.U. school in Baghdad during the 1930s,

Les communistes, suivant les directives édictées par les grands chefs mondiaux renchérissaient sur les slogans des nationalistes les plus intransigeants. Ce furent les Juifs communistes qui menèrent la cohorte, eux qui dénoncèrent avec le plus de violence le caractère réactionnaire et impérialiste du sionisme anti-arabe. Et malgré ces cris du cœur, ces

156 For amore detailed discussion on the clash between communism and Zionism see Meir- Glitzenstein's work Zionism in an Arab country p.146
protestations de loyauté, ces mises au pilori des traîtres et de tièdes, les juifs les plus farouchement nationalistes portaient autant que les autres le même estampille.

Ils n’étaient juifs qu’à religion. Les communistes montraient plus de véhémence dans leur attaques contre les sales laquais de l’impérialisme occidentale qui exploitaient les sentiments religieux des naïfs pour tramer leur sale complot. Ils n’attaquaient pas de front la religion juive puisque leurs frères musulmans auraient été alors soupçonnés d’athéisme et d’anti-islamisme, accusation dont ils voulaient toute prix se décharger.


Kattan’s memoir illustrates the antipathy between the Zionists and the Communists who were both competing for the loyalty of Jewish youth, Communism held an obvious advantage because it was felt that the instillation of a communist regime would still allow Jews to retain relevance in emerging independent Arab states, whereas Zionism predicated the unavoidable dismantling of the Jewish community.

Yet, the popularity of communism eventually declined with the persecution of the communists that began in late 1946, in Iraq, and coincided with the failure of Prime Minister Tawfik al Swaydi’s political reforms.158 The eventual rise of a far-right government led to the persecution of the communists and the jailing of their leaders. These purges made Jewish youngsters less eager to join their ranks, and ultimately eliminated Zionist concerns that they would take over the Jewish street. In any case, by now, the Zionist movement was already sufficiently well established and no longer worried about the strength of the communists.

---

158 See later exploration of the role of Arab nationalism in this chapter.
The persecution of suspected communists did however indirectly affect the Zionist movement, in that families, aware that the authorities made no distinction between Zionism and communism, now refused to allow any Zionist activity in their homes, because they were afraid that the persecution of the communists would lead the secret police to Zionist activists. Hehalutz members too, were fearful of retribution and many voluntarily deterred from further involvement. With the persecution of party members, hundreds of suspected communists were arrested and the underground press was gradually silenced, with the result that the Zionists movement’s main rival, was severely weakened.

Amazingly, despite the obvious political unrest, traditional community leadership still continued with its quest to preserve the moorings of their communities. Adding further add fuel to their problems, was the fact that Jewish settlement of Palestine was collectively seen by the increasingly pan-Arab orientated populations of the Arab world, as a land grab. As Kattan’s testimony shows, by the 1940’s, it had become dangerous to even be suspected of being a Zionist. Fearful for the safety of their communities, community notables who had previously remained silent on the subject of Zionism, now fervently declared themselves to be anti-Zionist.

D’ailleurs, les sionistes ne pouvaient jamais exprimer publiquement leurs argument. Les notables qui affichaient un antisionisme de circonstance découvraient des alliés inattendus parmi les nationalistes de l’Istiqlal, parti mené des anciens nazis. Dans la honte et l’humiliation, Ils s’évertuaient à faire ressortir les différences entre sionisme et Judaïsme.

Nevertheless, it was all to be in vain. Although western education had prepared Jewish communities for the age of emancipation, it had left them fatally mal-positioned to face the changes which would come with the fall of colonialism. Neither occidental nor Oriental, Jewish communities of the Islamic world were unwilling to embrace the particularism of Zionism, and were unable to perceive nor withstand the changes which would come with Arab nationalism. The inevitable result was that they no longer belonged to either world.

The rise of Arab Nationalism and its effects on the Jewish communities.

Although the rise of Arab nationalism and its clash with the Zionist movement has traditionally been blamed for the dismantling of the eastern Jewish communities, careful examination of the facts shows that the facts were far more complicated. From both a temporal and regional viewpoint, Arab nationalism was non monolithic. Depending on the individual country, its emphasis, goals and even definition of “Arabness” were fluid ones, constantly changing and evolving from the moment of the movement’s early stirrings during the late nineteenth century through to the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. As we shall see, the response to these changes by Jewish communities was to have an enormous influence on their eventual compatibility with the politics of the newly emerging Arab nation states,

As was the case for Zionism, the seeds of intellectual twentieth century Arab nationalism can trace their roots back to the emancipation ideology of nineteenth century thinkers and activists. According to Abdeed Dawisha, among the earliest of
these political agitators, whose writing and activities were held in great reverence by the Arab nationalists of the twentieth century, were Jamal al Din Afghani (1839-1897) and his pupil Muhammad 'Abdu (1849-1905). Interestingly, neither of these men ever spoke directly about the concept of Arabism. Afghani and ‘Abdu were essentially Islamic reformers who recognised and feared the cultural threat of the Christian West, and sought to confront this threat through the avocation of Islamic reform, resurgence and unity. “Their hope was to regenerate a stagnant Muslim society and to educate it into adapting to the ideas and institutions of the modern world”. (Dawisha, p.19)

Afghani argued that the arsenal of the West’s undoubted contemporary superiority found in its philosophy, reason, and science – were not only compatible with Islam, but were actually embedded within the very essence of the Muslim faith. Afghani therefore concluded that “Thus, it is not Islam per se, but the Muslim’s intellectual backwardness, brought on by centuries of subjugation and neglect, as well as the disunity of the Islamic Umma (Islamic community), that is responsible for the inferior status of the Islamic world”. The two reformers encouraged Muslims not to blindly imitate the West, but to delve into the real meaning of their religion, study it well, and model their lives on its teachings. If that could happen, the world of Islam would be strong again. (Dawisha, p.113. It was this level of determined independence, even superiority, that would later lead to the naissance of the contemporary Arab nationalist cause.
Who is an Arab?- changing definitions of Belongingness

Unlike Zionism which quickly moved from its early definition as an emancipatory movement to one exclusively devoted to the establishment of an Askenazi led hegemony based on belongingness to the Jewish religion, Arab nationalism, grappling with the twin concepts of *Umma* and *Wattaniya*, moved at a much slower pace. The concept of *Umma*, in its most literal form is traditionally defined by religion. According to Afghani, belongingness based on this definition of *Umma* infers that irrespective of regional belongingness. One is an Arab if one is Muslim. Conversely, if one is not a Muslim, one is not an Arab irrespective of history, linguistic or regional belongingness. In contrast, *Wattaniya*, loosely translated as region, is a more flexible (and thus more inclusive) definition that stipulates that *Arabness* is defined by common linguistic and historical ties, irrespective of religion and theoretically includes Jews and Christians as well as Muslims as part of an inclusive national plan. As we shall see, when Arab nationalism emerged from its nascent form during the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the fluctuating definitions of *Wattaniya* and *Umma* were to have enormous implications. To understand the evolution of Arab nationalism in the Middle East and its effects on the Jewish communities of the region it is necessary to examine the differing theories of the leading two major contributors of Arab nationalism theory.

Sati’ Al Husri’s Theory of inclusive Arab Nationalism.

Sati’ al Husri was born in Yemen in 1882 into a Syrian Muslim family but spent his formative years in Constantinople, eventually achieving promotion as the director
general of education in Syria, after World War 1, during King Faysal’s reign over Syria and Iraq. Husri made his ideas about nationalism the central thrust of the country’s educational and cultural policies. In common with the early Zionists, he believed that a nation could be only be reborn through education. Consequently, he sought to inculcate Iraqi youth with a clear and durable sense of Arab national identity that would supersede other prevalent identities such as tribalism, regionalism and sectarianism that threatened the concept of a tenable Arab nation.

Like other twentieth century nationalisms, Husri’s view of nationalism was based on the intellectual tenets of European emancipation ideology. He subscribed in particular, to the German model of nationalism that stipulated that language was at the very heart of national formation. Husri also cited common historical ties as the other crucial factor in nationhood. Much of his work as director of education concerned the teaching of Iraqi history in Iraqi schools, believing that the combination of a common language and a shared history were two inexorably linked factors which would engender the students with a sense of “primordial” attachment to Arab nationhood. He wrote.

The union of these two spheres lead to fusion of emotions and aspirations, of sufferings and hope, and of culture. And in this, people see themselves as members of a unitary nation distinct from other nations… If we want to specify the roles of language and history in the formation of a nation, we can say: language is the soul and the life of the nation; history is its memory and its cognizance.

According to Husri, the originality of the Arabic language, stemmed from the early inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula who had been protected from external cultural influences by the inhospitable Arabian desert, and the long, continuous stretch of Arab history, that predated the advent of Islam and the times of the Prophet. These were the two essential constitutive elements of the Arab’s national identity.

Essentially, as far as the Jewish communities were concerned, Husri’s brand of nationalism was an emphatically secular one that was intellectually extricated from Islamic political thought (even though Islam remained the overwhelming majority of the Arab people). In his nationalism based formulation, he contended that, unlike language and history, religion did not constitute a fundamental element of national formation. According to Dawisha he was convinced that human solidarity built around mere religious affiliation would not withstand the force of secular cultural nationalism.

Husri’s theories posited the absolute primacy of nationalist ties based on the twin influences of language and history, over sentimental, religious attachment. Interestingly, in doing so, he committed the almost sacrilegious intellectual infraction of employing the term al Umma in a secular nationalist mode. Until then, the term had been exclusively used in a religious context, as al Umma al Islamiya to describe a community of the faithful who shared the Islamic faith and were bound together regardless of the cultural and linguistic distance which separated them.\(^{159}\)

In a novel departure, Husri introduced the concept of al Umma al Arabiya,\(^{160}\) a

\(^{159}\) Defined as the Islamic nation.
\(^{160}\) Defined as the Arab nation and therefore intentionally separated from its ties to religion.
people united by language and history, regardless of their religion that he refers to as,

Every Arabic-speaking people is an Arab people. Every individual belonging to one of these Arabic speaking people is an Arab. And if he does not recognize this, and is not proud of his Arabism then we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand.


This had enormous ramifications for the Eastern Jewish communities, who shared linguistic if not historical ties with their Muslim compatriots and therefore theoretically at least, complied to Husri’s definition of Arab. While Husri’s determination and single minded pursuit of nationalist education was often criticised and accused of being too overbearing, too authoritative and too politically driven, its inclusiveness did allow Jewish as well as Christian communities to hope that they could maintain their place in the emerging Arab states.

Husri was so emphatic in his belief in the redefinition of *al Umma al Arrabya*, that when during the 1920s, Sheik Muhamed Mustafa al Muraghi, the rector of *al Azhar*, the most respected Islamic newspaper in the Arab world, declared to an Egyptian newspaper “that he had no views on Arab nationalism and that the concept did not interest him one bit, because after all, Islam did not differentiate between the Arab and the non Arab and that indeed the Muslim *Umma* was a unity in which ethnicity played no part”,¹⁶¹ Husri angrily retorted, “How could someone say that

¹⁶¹ This statement engendered a spirited debate between Muraghi and Sati al Hisri.
Muslim clerics should endeavour to establish unity among the Arab, Iranian, and Turk but should not work to unify the Syrian, Egyptian and Hejazi? How can someone hope to effect the unity of Muslim lands speaking different languages, but not the unity of the land speaking one language, especially the language of the Qu’ran? The swiftness and vigour of Husri’s response to the sheikh attested to his belief in the potency of the concept of a united Arab Umma, as a competing alternative to the ideas of a Muslim Arab nation.

In countries where Jewish communities were highly arabized such as Iraq, Nationalism defined as a function of language had major implications for both Muslims and Jews. From a Jewish point of view, geographic and linguistic belongingness as opposed to historical belongingness, was an exciting endorsement of parity with Muslims and potentially negated old notions of Muslim superiority. Naim Kattan writes of his friends’ and family’s eagerness to take their place in the new Iraq.

La majorité des Juifs qui ne puisaient avec une soif insatiable et avec un empreinte continu aux sources de cette nouvelle culture. Mon oncle s’abonna à la revue égyptienne Al Hilal. Et chaque semaine, mon frère exhibait avec joie le dernier numéro de Al Hassid, hebdomadaire littéraire fondé et dirigé par un group of jeunes Juifs nourris de culture hébraïque et occidentale mais décidés à être les premiers bâtisseurs de la nouvelle culture irakienne.


Kattan and his friends hoped and believed that their ties to the Arabic language, combined with Jewish cultural contribution, and the usefulness of the Occidental and Jewish values learned at their Alliance schools would ensure their

---

162 Ibid., p.106
relevance in the newly independent nation. They were eager to make it very clear to their Muslim compatriots that their loyalties lay firmly with the future of their country of origin and not with the Zionists. So eager were they to prove their loyalty, that during the 1930s, when communist insurgents were put on trial, Iraqi Jews openly condemned the disloyalty of the insurgents in order to stress their own loyalty, Kattan writes,


Naim Kattan. *Adieu Babylone Mémoires d'un juif d' Irak.* p.81.

The desire to prove their loyalty was not isolated to the Iraqi arena. In Egypt, where as I have shown, Jews considered themselves to be a proxy French community, they did not generally speak Arabic and therefore did not conform with Husri's definition of *al Umma al Arabiya*. They did however, share common links with Egyptian history and therefore could claim belongingness with the nascent nation state. Jews defended the right for Egyptian independence. Yet controversially, and to their eventual detriment they saw no incongruence in the duality of their support for both the establishment of a Jewish homeland (naturally, for the dispossessed Jewish communities of Europe) and the establishment of an independent Egypt in which they themselves would continue to live. For example, while the prominent lawyer Leon Castro both founded the Zionist periodical *La Liberté* in 1915, he allied himself with the Egyptian nationalist Saad Gaghoul. Similarly, David Hazhan, another prominent Jewish lawyer took an active part in
the political life of Egypt and was also an active member of the nationalist movement Wafd. In their eagerness to show their loyalty, Egyptian Jews were also quick to condemn the British government despite the fact that the Jewish community had profited economically from its links with the British Empire and had albeit superficially, initially supported the Balfour declaration.

According to Ovadia Yerushalmi, Egyptian Jewish support for Zionism was fleeting and within a short time, with the exception of the Ashkenazi minority, the community quickly lost their sympathy for the Zionist movement.

Ironically, after the Balfour Declaration, many Muslims throughout the region, were sympathetic to the Jewish quest for nationhood. Their own thirst for independence fuelled by Husri’s theories had led to a greater understanding of the Jewish desire for national independence. Yerushalmi notes Muslim admiration of the Jewish led “Semaine de la Guela” deliverance, a week long celebration after to the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

Dans le quartier juif du Caire inondé de lumières, les orateurs défilèrent devant une foule ivre d’enthousiasme.
Des groupes de musulmans criaient : « Vive la nation juive ».

Yet, within ten years of the Balfour Declaration, alarmed by what was now viewed as Jewish colonization of Palestine at the expense of indigenous Palestinian Arab communities, in 1927 the Egyptian nationalist periodical _El Etihad_ would lament that,.

La déclaration Balfour resterait un tigre en papier tant que le mouvement sioniste n’agirait pas pour l’immigration des juifs en Eretz Israël et pour la colonisation à grande échelle de cette terre.

"El Etihad", 21 June 1927, 20 September 1927 and 1st November 1927; Abd El Rahman, _El Sahafa_.

Not surprisingly, this pivotally marked the end of the period of Arab tolerance towards Jewish aspirations of national independence.

**The collapse of inclusive Arab nationalism and its effect on Jewish communities.**

Setting out to make Iraq the beacon from which Arab nationalist ideas would spread out towards the rest of the Arab world, Husri and his disciples focused on the schools which they hoped would become the breeding ground for future Arab nationalist generations. The organizing framework of the history curriculum had two parametric elements: the idea of the unity of the nation and the Arabism of Iraq. Like early Zionist literature which aimed to project the image of a new

---

breed of Jew who would be, strong, suntanned and above all fearless, the focus would be on positive Arab achievements, stories of heroism and valour, examples of nobility and generosity, the spirit of sacrifice, fortitude in the face of adversity, all of which would hopefully endow the student the with essence of the Arab character.

A seminal text written in 1931, intended for the preparatory and secondary schools was titled, Tarikh a-l Umma al Arabiya (The History of the Arab Nation). As the title implied, the concept of the “Arab nation” was by this stage taken for granted by its readers, there would henceforth be little effort to question, analyse, or even defend it.

Dawisha reminds us that it is important to consider that from its onset, Arab nationalism, was by definition a form of supra nationalism. “Its appeal as well as its political agenda, extended beyond the geographical borders of the Arab states and had to compete with Islam, (another form of supra nationalism). The problem was that during the colonial period almost every part of the Arabic speaking Middle East was under some sort of colonialist or imperialist domination” (Dawisha46). While temporarily united by their desire to unshackle themselves from the ties of Colonialism, Islamists and Arabists tolerated each other. But, because the compression of the twin nationalist ideologies was tactical, and therefore ultimately untenable, after the collapse of colonialism, the rigidity and exclusivity of their doctrines eventually became exposed. In 1928, Hassan al Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood Organization, depicted Islam not as a mere religion or form of worship, but also and just as crucially, as “a creed... a homeland, a nationality and a state. (Dawisha, P.56) This unequivocal depiction of
what essentially was an "Islamic nation state " was diametrically opposed to the concept of a secular, and an ethnically based Arab nation and so automatically seemed to exclude Jewish communities despite the belongingness they had previously enjoyed based on linguistic commonality.

During the 1930s, other obstacles such as sectarianism and tribalism became factors throughout the Arabic speaking Middle East. In 1933, even King Faysal of Iraq lamented\textsuperscript{164},

\begin{quote}
In Iraq there is still... unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic appeal, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever. Out of these masses we want to fashion a people that would train, educate and refine... The circumstances being what they are, the immenseness of the efforts needed for this can only be imagined.
\end{quote}

Quoted in Batatu, \textit{The Old social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq}, p.28.

As I previously noted, the development of the Arab nationalist movement was by no means monolithic. For example, in Syria, although 85 \% of the population was Arabic speaking, the country was divided by sectarian and religious affiliations. The French, ever cognizant of these divisions and intent on following the imperial dictum of “divide and rule”, endeavoured to extend their sphere of influence by attempting to endow the particularistic impulses of the various communities with political legitimacy, creating independent states in Aleppo, Damascus and in the Alawite regions.

\textsuperscript{164} Faysal’s letter in its entirety is rich in detail of the enormous obstacles faced by the King and his government in their efforts to integrate the people of Iraq.
Egypt which Husri, had initially dismissed as lacking "Arab sentiment, presented its own challenge to the concept of Wataniya. There, Arab identification was endemically weak. After all, Taha Husayn, the dean of Arab letters, had written in his most influential book Mustakbal al Thakafa fi Misr ( The Future of Culture in Egypt) (1938) of the need for Egyptians to distance themselves from their immediate Arab past. He argued that Egyptian civilization was older than any other civilization and therefore retained its distinct identity through links with its pharaonic past rather than notions of a pan-arabist future. Husayn, minimized the importance of Arabic or of Islam as a factor in nation building and instead maintained that Egypt had in fact always been part of Europe.

Husayn's influence is particularly visible in one of the most seminal novels of modern Arab literature, Awdat al Ru'h (1933) (The return of the Spirit) written by Tawfek El Hakim in which the author contrasts the innate decency of the Egyptian with the militant bellicosity of the Arab bedouin. For example, when a traditional Muslim implies that there is only one choice-Islam or nothing- a fellow traveller gently corrects him and says that the question is having a heart or not having one. According to Hussein, Egypt was akin to a modern gentleman, traditional enough to have a heart, whereas Europe was so modern that it lacked one. Al Hakim regarded Egyptian Christians, Muslims and Jews as brothers with the same heart. While it was important to be religious, it could not be so in a one dimensional way. Al Hakim did not see Islam as having a single and pure era that needed to be revived. The issue was to awaken the Egyptian spirit. Because it was not based on conventional religion, Husayn's ideology promoted a type of nationalism that was inclusive to the
Jews of the Egyptian community. It is illuminating to note that Jewish Egyptian writers similarly emphasized their links with Egypt’s pharaonic past, for example as seen in the work of Georges Cattaui and (though an admittedly French influence) the poetry of Edmond Jabès’s Cairene period that extended through the 1920s and 1930s.

The final death knell to the Egyptian nationalism that had once seemed so promising to the Jewish communities came during the 1920s when a growing number of Islamic organizations gained popularity first among the poorer classes and later spread to the middle classes. Their leaders, driven by their own brand of religious nationalism rejected exclusivist Egyptian “Wataniya” in favour of the reinstatement of the idea of al Umma al Islamiya as a badge of Pan-Arab belongingness. Hasan al Banna, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood outlined the differences between Islamist and the Egyptian nationalists.

The point of contention between us and them is that we define the limit of patriotism in terms of creed, while they define it according to territorial borders and geographical boundaries. For every region there is a Muslim who says “there is no God but God, and Muhamed is his prophet“ there is a homeland for us… All Muslims in these geographical regions are one people and ones’ brothers … the advocates of patriotism alone (al Wataniyafaqat) are not like this, since nothing matters to them except the affairs of that specific, narrowly, delimited region of the earth.

Gershon and Jankowski. *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, P.82.

While Islamists accepted that the Muslim Egyptian citizen had certain duties “to the place that he lived in”, they also emphasized that the individual had an even greater duty to the “fatherland”- the Islamic world, which according to their belief “extended from the farthest east to the farthest west”. (Haim, *Arab Nationalism an
not only challenged the notion of what it meant to be Egyptian but also of what comprised an Arab identity. It was an ideology that throughout the 1920s and 1930s took root throughout the Arabic speaking countries of the Middle East. At its core, it threatened the legitimacy of Jewish communities whose legitimacy had been dependant on the legitimacy of al Husri’s definition of \textit{al Umma al Arrabiya} based on \textit{Wataniya}.

Other factors also threatened Jewish belongingness. Resentment of the imperialistic/colonial powers that ruled the Arab world began to play a larger role in the manifesto of the nationalist movement and even threatened the concept of Jewish loyalty to \textit{al Umma al Arrabiya}. Jews who were by now suspected of supporting the French and of being disloyal to the Arab nationalist cause, found themselves even more excluded from the pan–Arab quest for statehood. In Syria, for example, where nationalist energy was fixated on attaining independence from France, a relatively young, radical generation of nationalists led the country’s fight for independence as a regional struggle against colonialism and imperialism. In one of the first notable pan–Arab reactions to the Syrian revolt of 1925-1927, Egyptian newspapers, called on Egyptians to give their support to the Syrian independence movement. In answer to their co-religionists’ plight, Egyptian poets began to compose poems praising the Syrian uprising, lambasting the French for their acts of repression. The rising number of citizens in the Arabic speaking Middle East who supported nationalism beyond their immediate locale, illustrates the increased support for a pan Arabism based nationalism based on
the concept of an all encompassing Arab nation imbued with commonality of language, religion, goals and “blood ties”.

This was all to prove disastrous for the eastern Jewish communities. Whereas at least theoretically, supporters of nationalism based on Wataniya could imagine Zionism as an extension of their own yearning for national aspiration, Islamists dismissed the movement’s intentions as an imperialistic grab of Muslim land by colonialist sympathizers. And whereas Jewish communities had once been accepted as a relevant minority, they were now under grave suspicion as traitors, sympathetic to Western Colonialism.

As I shall show, the burden of blame for the distrust that ensued between Jewish and Muslim communities is not entirely one sided. The re-emphasis of Al Umma al Islamiya with its connections to religion, potentially, and even inevitably, excluded Jewish contributions to Arab nationalism doubtlessly played its role in the dismantlement of Jewish communities. However, the inadvertent decisions made by Jewish communities to reject defined “Arab” bonds based on history and language effectively sealed their fate, permanently excluding them from the possibility of future participation in the fate of the emerging Arab states.

**The ramifications of changes in Arab nationalism for the Jewish communities**

The Farhoud of 1941 stands out as one of the most infamous attacks on the eastern Jewish communities in an area where anti-Semitism had been relatively rare during the Jewish community’s long tenure in the region. It was an orchestrated attack on
the Jewish neighbourhoods of Baghdad that resulted in the murder and injury of hundreds of Jews. Naim Kattan recalls the community’s reaction as their neighbours attacked them without warning.


Kattan describes the horror of the unprovoked attack that occurred when the British army temporarily left pro Nazi governed Iraq in 1941. His account, described in the present tense, to preserve its full horror and impact, substantiates that the that attack was shocking not only because of its ferocity against the unarmed Jewish community, but because until that moment, Muslims had been so tolerant towards the community. The Jews were now forced to see their compatriots in a new light. Kattan remembers

Although the attack is shocking because of its ferocity and suddenness, Kattan’s account suggests that the Muslim anger that had catastrophically exploded that day had been fomenting insidiously. Given hindsight understanding of the rise and inevitable clash of the twin nationalism movements, it is credible that the attack was likely to have been due to a multifactorial combination of the resentment held by Muslims towards the infiltration of the Zionist movement, and changes in the definition of Arab nationalism which now viewed the Jews as outsiders. All of the latter deeply and indelibly eroded at the long standing bonds of trust that had existed between Jews and Muslims for over two millennia.

Kattan reports that when the British returned, order was quickly restored to Baghdad. Within the Jewish community however, there was a loss of confidence comparable to the aftermath of the Dreyfus trial in France during the early twentieth century causing Jews to re question their place in Iraq. Yet while some Jews chose to leave Iraq, many more of them stayed. Reluctant to leave, or with nowhere to go, they preferred to believe that like the Affaire, so too had the Farhoud been an aberration and that Jewish belongingness in the emerging nation state was still possible.\(^{165}\)

---

\(^{165}\) During the 1940’s, the doors to America were closed to immigration, Europe was in the midst of war and because of immigration restriction, Palestine was additionally severely restricted to Jewish immigration. This severely limited the choices for Iraqi Jews who wished to leave Iraq. Some went to Iran, others found a home in South America. But the greater part of the Iraqi Jewish community remained in Iraq until the early 1950s, whereupon most went to Israel.
Although Kattan’s heart was now immutably turned towards furthering his studies in the Hexagon, he and his friends returned to school to renew their fervent study of Arabic language and literature. Yet, the atmosphere of mutual distrust was pervasive. Jews fearful of being labelled as Zionists, were desperate to dissociate themselves from any suspicion of disloyalty. Kattan describes the accusations of Zionism that were disseminated in the Iraqi newspapers of the period.

Les journaux se déchaînaient contre les « sionistes » qui complotaient dans l’obscurité et le mystère de vol d’une terre arabe. Nous étions juifs points sionistes. Les protestations de patriotisme, les professions de foi nationalistes ne calmaient pas ceux qui, chaque jour plus nombreux, mettaient en doute notre loyauté envers la nation arabe.


A review of the archives of the A.I.U. reveal that after the Farhoud, a large pattern of anti-Semitism began to brew throughout the Middle East. While the schools of the Alliance had reached an uneasy concordance with Zionism. Its curricula now promoted the teaching of Modern Hebrew (although the organization still fundamentally rejected the movement’s particularistic goals), but resentment towards the Jewish community promoted by Muslim nationalism was less easy to ignore. Part of the general dilemma lay in the unfortunate fact that the teachers of the A.I.U. itself had a fundamentally ambivalent attitude towards Muslims.
This echoed the accepted Western opinion of the era, that Muslims were inferior and that Islam was imbued with a fanaticism that was a perennial obstacle to progress. In his work, Sephardic and Eastern Jewries in Transition, Aron Rodrigue illustrates that although this attitude was less prevalent among teachers working in the Turkish region of the Ottoman Empire, it was endemic within the schools of Iran, Iraq and North Africa. For example, A. Franco contemptuously wrote of Muslim reaction to the new government formed in 1908 in Iraq,

On voit que les Musulmans sont la pierre d’achoppement à tout progrès ; c’est un poids mort qui pèse aussi sur le reste de la population. Ennemis de toute innovation, ils regardent d’un mauvais œil les efforts tentés par les autres pour se créer une vie meilleure.166

Furthermore, in a description of the reaction of the Jews of Basra when British troops entered the city in August 1914, A. Zilberstein described the collective relief of the Jewish community.

A jamais débarrassé du joug turc qui depuis des siècles opprime cette terre privilégiée. Ce pays verra revenir à lui sa prospérité d’il y a 2000 ans. Les ruines accumulées pendant des siècles par la barbarie turque seront relevées ; des voies de communication seront construites… et la Mésopotamie connaîtra une prospérité qu’elle n’a jamais pu avoir chez les Turcs et dont elle jouira sous le nouveau régime.167

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the divisions between Jews and Muslims seemed irreconcilable. Palestine now weighed heavily on relations between Muslim and Jewish communities and mutual suspicion clouded any chance of reconciliation, as Muslims blamed the Yishuv for massacring Arabs, while Jews

blamed Muslims for attacking the Jewish settlements. M Laredo wrote from Baghdad,

Les incidents de la Palestine n’ont pas été sans avoir leur répercussions. Les journaux arabes consacrent journellement de longs articles sur la violence des agissements juifs en Palestine et les soi distant massacres de la population arabes par les Israélites de la Palestine. Nos coreligionnaires ont demandé au ministère de donner ordre à la presse de ne pas se déparir du calme nécessaire en la circonstance et de ne pas susciter en vain la haine contre l’élément Juif du pays. 168

Nevertheless, despite Jewish sympathy for their co-religionists in Palestine, the Jews of Iraq still remained anxious to distance themselves from the Zionist movement.

Nous ne pouvons pas dissimuler que la situation devient difficile. Tout est suspect à la part de nos coreligionnaires. Leur moindre geste est taxé de sionisme ou d’antipatriotisme. et cependant, Dieu sait si les Israélites de Bagdad sont loin de toute idée sioniste. 169

It was all to prove to be in vain. The further the Jewish community distanced itself from its Muslim compatriots, the more it invited a torrent of antipatriotic criticism.

The alternative response was to ignore nationalism all together. Referring instead to their ancient roots in the region, Iraqi Jews stressed the authenticity of their eternal ties with the nascent nation state.

Other communities took a different stance. In the case of Egyptian Jews such as Edmond Jabès and Georges Cattaui, whose cultural views had been orientated in

168 Archives de l’A.I.U. , Irak, I, C, 3
169 Ibid.
the direction of the Hexagon by their schooling and childhood visits to France, they chose to ignore (to their eventual peril) the rise of Arab nationalism preferring instead to stress their ties with ancient Egypt. As Steven Jaron illustrates, an ardent admiration of ancient Arabic culture is readily visible Jabès’s early Cairene period.

Though born and raised in Egypt, Jabès imagined himself to be a foreign child, who did not identify with contemporary Egypt but who was a savant who heard the desert poetry of ancient Arabian poets. Although his work shares shades of commonality with the themes of Al Hakim, a comparison of this quotation written during Jabès’s youth with another written by the author in France some thirty years later, demonstrates the hold ancient Egypt still continued to exert over Jabès long after he moved to France.

Je me souviendrai toujours d’un bas-relief du temple d’Abydos où l’on voyait le dieu Horus et le dieu soleil Ré, réunis dans un même corps sous le nom de Reharakh, Horus de l’Horizon, donnant à respirer à Ramsès II, pharaon considéré comme une incarnation du dieu Horus, le « Ankh », symbole de vie. Ce signe qui représente l’ancienne Égypte, la vie éternelle, je rêvais de l’introduire par la plume dans vocable et la
manière à ce que le sang de chaque lettre en soit chargé enrichi.\textsuperscript{170}


Jaron notes that while in Paris, Jabès wrote about the ancient archaeological remains that formed the backbone of ancient Egypt’s history. The verb he used (souvenir) remains in the future tense, “Je me souviendrai “ followed by “toujours”. Through the medium of memory, his own past is thereby suspended in an eternal present. The writing process thus performs as a means of recreation of lost territory. Jaron also notes the parallel between Jabès’s early and his later Jewish themed poetry. Similarly, expressions such as “Je rêvais à des poèmes sur papyrus”(1932) and “la vie éternelle, je rêvais de l’introduire par la plume”(1967) and “les anciens poètes d’Arabie” (1932) and “dans l’ancienne Egypte”(1967) are proof of the fascination and identification Jabès maintained with Egyptian antiquity and in a more general sense to the ancient Orient. (Steven Jaron, Edmond Jabès and the Hazards of Exile, p.45)

Jabès’s admiration of ancient Egyptian culture contrasts with Naim Kattan’s arabized views. As an Iraqi Jew, Kattan’s reference point is initially his love of Arabic language and culture. He writes that his admiration for France was based on his conviction that French literature shared many commonalities with the work of the father of modern Arab literature Gibran, whom he so admired. Expressing his love of Gibran’s work he wrote,

Sa grande découverte fut le poète Gibran… Pour nous, Romain Rolland et Gibran, si éloignés l’un de l’autre, si différents, exprimaient une même révolte assourdie par uns
spiritualité diffuse, un mysticisme vague. Leurs cris et leurs appels se transformaient en une subtile évasion qui nous permettait d’échapper à un monde qui finissait par devenir irréel, abstrait tant il entait rétréci. Nous ne refugions dans le rêve, mais hors de notre étouffante existence, nous nous transplantions dans les montagnes et les villages enchantés du Liban, dans les forêts d’Europe et parmi les femmes d’Occident.

Naim Kattan, Adieu Babylone mémoires d’un juif d’Irak, p.112.

Although Kattan was cognizant of the differences between Gibran and Rolland’s work, he found synchrony in the effects they both held over him. Ultimately, as in the case of Jabès it would be to France that he turned to for succour. Imagining himself to be a French child free to leave his own constrained, cloistered world he wrote,

Je m’identifiais sans contraint à cet adolescente français qui répondait à l’appel du départ. Je rêvais à Sabine et à toutes les femmes qu’il a connues. Je recopiais des pages a fin de relire une fois le livre rendu.

Naim Kattan, Adieu Babylone mémoires d’un juif d’Irak, p.112.

As a response to their unresolvable alienation from the newly emerging Muslim states, Jewish communities found succour in their identification with the Occident. If they could not be Iraqis or Egyptians or Syrians or Lebanese, they could still take comfort in the belief that they were French or British or at any rate Western. After all had they not been educated by the French? Unfortunately, as they would soon discover, their cleavage to the Occident would only add to their problems by emphasizing their incompatibility with the future of emerging Muslim states.
Conclusion.

The clash between Zionism and Arab nationalist movements is complex and its effects are equally difficult to assess. Both Jewish and Arab nationalism came of age during the late nineteenth century and both were initially based on the same principles of universalism and emancipation. Thus, it can be said that at least once, they were mutually compatible. The crux of the problems that ensued seems to essentially lie in the latter day redefinition and subsequent reception of the concepts that define Arab nationalism, *Umma* (nationhood based on common religion) and *Wattaniya* (nationhood based on regional ties). The early theorist, al-Husri, defied Islamists by replacing the concept of *al Umma al Islamiya* with *al Umma al Arabiya*. He stressed his conviction that the common ties of nationhood did not reside in religion but were found in the sharing of a common history and most importantly a common language. This inclusive model of nationhood should have theoretically allowed the continued presence of particularistic communities with geographical, historical roots and linguistic ties to the region, even if as in the case of the Jewish community, they did not share the commonality of religion.

During the 1920s and 1930’s, the emphasis of Arab nationalism changed and once again, the old definition of *Umma al Islamiya* gained favour, stressing the importance of the ties of Islam. Although this change was problematic to the Jewish communities of the Arab world because it had the potential to lead to an *a priori* rejection of Jewish participation by the new nation state, the reasons for the failure of Jewish acceptance within the ideology of Arab nationalism are complex, multi factorial and far from monolithic.
While Al-Husri’s brand of nationalism stressed the importance of historical and linguistic ties over those of religion, Jewish communities, were never going to be easy to integrate within this model. In Iraq for example, where the Jewish community spoke Arabic and therefore had deep linguistic commonality with Muslims, Jews lacked the common, historical ties of distrust that bordered on hatred of the Ottoman empire and later the colonial apparatus, that were so integral to early modern Arab nationalism. In Egypt, while Jews enjoyed brandishing their ties and admiration of an ancient pharoanic Egypt, they proudly refused to speak Arabic, preferring to remain a separate, francophone community. Both of these examples show the degree to which Jewish communities withdrew from the al’ Husri’s model of nationalism.

Without doubt, the rise in pan-Arab nationalism played an important part in the clash between Muslim and Jewish communities. But ultimately, it was only one factor in a complicated story. While Muslim anger at Jewish settlement of Palestine meant it was increasingly difficult for Jews to retain belongingness in emerging Muslim states, Jews were already suspected of being Western collaborators who had handsomely profited from colonial rule. As de facto if not de Jure extensions of the Hexagon, they considered themselves a priori distinct and superior to the Muslim community, and had made both economic and social gains from their association with the West. Essentially, the Jewish communities’ self imposed transmutation of their own identify and the subsequent superimposition of an occidental identity ultimately left them ill prepared and mal positioned to weather
the inevitable changes that the rise of Zionism and pan Arab nationalism would bring.

Like the Français Israélites of the nineteenth century before them, Arab Jews superficially supported Zionism but in reality, they had little interest in settlement in Palestine. The Jews of the Muslim countries whose education was imbued with the universalist ideas of French Judaism that promoted the existence of emancipated Jewish diaspora communities had little commonality with the primarily socialist Zionist movement and indeed felt even less belonging when they later immigrated to Israel during the 1950s.

Therefore, while Jewish communities rejected Zionism, it was their steadfast allegiance to the West that eventually dealt the final death knoll to the questionable possibility of their inclusion within the nascent Arab nation states. Because their orientation was pointed towards the Hexagon and by extension towards the West, Jewish communities with the exception of some Iraqi Jews, found scant resonance with either Arab, or Jewish nationalism. Their support of the Français Israélite model of Judaism left them ill prepared to negotiate the changes that were simultaneously occurring within both movements. Vulnerable to rejection from either faction and as Jabès’s and Kattan’s testimonies of anti-Semitism reveal, ultimately unwelcomed in France, the Jews of the Muslim countries were left alienated and directionless, helplessly caught between the glare of Middle East nationalism and the remnants of Western Imperialism.
Chapter 5

*New Horizons: Forging an Identity*

Bound by the common experience of exile, regardless of whether it is written in French or in Hebrew, the genre of the Francophone - Jewish - Arab writer is an orphaned literature, severed geographically and politically from its historical moorings. Its writers, no longer able to engage with the possibility of a future within their country of origin, often seem to create disembodied protagonists unwilling or unable to contain themselves within life in the present. Close examination of Franco-Jewish - Arab literature reveals common themes shared with other exilic Franco-Arab non Jewish writers of the region such as an emphasis on the loss of their former communities. As Jewish writers, inclusion of Jewish themes posits their genre as “Ecriture juive”, yet, careful reading of their texts reveals evidence of the emergence of an exciting, distinct genre of Francophone literature unique to French educated Jewish writers of the Arab world regardless of whether it is written in French or not.

While Franco-Jewish - Arab literature, like Franco-Arab literature, emphasizes the loss of homeland and uses nostalgia as a literary device with which to engage the reader, it also distinguishes itself from the latter by its rejection of political engagement and its ability to recreate a viable future through linkage with the values accrued by its essentially Français-Israélite roots. Admittedly, there are superficial shared commonalities with the work of the Jewish writer and that of his/her non Jewish exilic counterpart of the Arab world such as

Yet, *el Iltizam*, the political commitment and essentially particularistic ingredient, almost universally found in Arab literature, is practically absent in Franco-Jewish–Arab literature. Similarly, while the employment of intricate descriptions of the Jewish communities of their countries of origin, and the frequent analysis of their Jewishness (Judaité) categorizes Franco–Jewish–Arab literature as “Ecriture juive”, the dissociation of Franco–Jewish–Arab writers from Zionism and their identification with the universalist notions promoted by the Français -Israélite model of Judaism, disenfranchises them from traditional, canonical, Jewish emancipation discourse which until very recently, predicated unmitigated support of the Jewish state as the sole solution to “la Question juive “.

In this chapter, I will define and trace the evolution of Franco-Jewish literature and illustrate the ways it maintains its distinction as a hybridized but distinct body of French, Jewish and Arab literature. In particular, I will examine the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer’s loyalty/ disloyalty to Jewish themes, his/her emphasis on the ideals of universalism learned in the Francophone schools of their dismantled communities, his/her reverence for France, despite the disappointment of the anti-Semitism encountered upon arrival in the Hexagon, and his/her nostalgia for the Arab communities left behind.

Finally, In this chapter I will show how Franco-Jewish–Arab writers distinguish themselves from both Francophone Arab and Jewish writers, to emerge as a separate, distinct voice in French literature. I will also explore how the

171 Although admittedly, as I shall show, there are similarities with the universal themes found in the work of Amin Ma’alouf and Saleh Stétieh.
Franco-Jewish–Arab experience continues to influence the work of writers of Franco-Jewish–Arab origin, (who now live in Israel and choose to write in Hebrew) who continue to bear the traces of French influence thus transcending Zionist canonical discourse and altering the literary landscape of Israeli literature.

**Situating the Franco-Jewish–Arab writer as a Jewish writer.**

**The Jewish writer**

In her work *Écritures de l'identité* (1998), Clara Lévy identifies the following criteria to be essential to a genre’s classification as *Ecriture juive française*, Jewish origin, French language and the treatment of Jewish themes. Yet, all of these factors can easily be challenged. Regarding origin, according to orthodox rabbinical law, Jewishness is matrilineal, yet, reform Judaism redefines the latter as both matrilineal and patrilineal, and according to the infamous Nuremberg laws of 1938, it was merely enough to have a Jewish grandmother to be considered Jewish. The prevalence of Jewish themes as a defining criteria of *Écriture juive* is equally difficult to define. As I have previously shown in chapter two, a writer does not have to be exclusively Jewish in order to write about Jewish themes. Lévy suggests yet another criteria, connected to Jewish consciousness and to a common Jewish destiny based on shared universal values and a calling for the betterment of a fractured world. Quoting Wladimir Rabi, she writes,

> Seuls sont comptés les écrivains engagés dans leur dur destin juif, pleinement convaincu de leur responsabilité au sein d’un univers, qui est le leur, qu’ils le veuillent ou non, et pour lequel ils portent témoignage.
Wladamir Rabbi. "Lettres juives, domaine français"  

Rabi refers to the presence of a tautological perspective that posits the Jewish writer as one who treats the subject of a common Jewish destiny, adheres to the tendency of Jewish writers to treat Jewish themes and has a preoccupation with the universalist values that emphasize Judaism's instructive reparative role in a fractured world. These are basic themes (and of course do not include Zionist literature which was neither universalist nor reparative) that extended through the post-Dreyfus era and are aptly illustrated in the work of writers such as Fleg, Spire, Lunel and others.

Although French Jewish literature has evolved as a result of both the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish state, universalism remains an important and enduring element. Its themes also run through the writing of the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer influenced by the images of universalism imbibed during early exposure to French Judaism. As Edmond Jabès, explains,

> L’écrivain juif est rivé à sa langue. Un écrivain français, quelque soit son origine, ne peut se réclamer que d’une littérature, la littérature française, dont il est l’une des voix. Au sein de cette littérature, il y a incontestablement un apport des écrivains juifs ; mais cet apport, je ne crois pas qu’il faille forcement aller le chercher, comme on a trop tendance à le faire, chez ceux qui pensent nous donner à lire une œuvre dont ils sont issus, avec ses angoisses, espérances, joies et souffrances.


In addition, French Jewish writers, whether autochtone or francophone, seem to share a homo-social tendency, essentially translated as a need to produce work
independent of the language they write in that reconsiders the enigma of the Jewish question and the Jewish experience. French Jewish writers or French influenced Jewish writers characteristically bearing the original markings of their Français-Israélite acculturation, distinguish themselves by their tendency to combine “la Question juive” with deeply universalist issues such the empiric role and destiny of the Jews in the betterment of a fractured humanity. Lévy ironically points out, that “the only Jewish writers who insisted on transmuting diasporal Jewish culture were the early Zionist canonical writers” (p.12). This is certainly true in the case of seminal Zionist writers such as Haim Nachman Bialik, Avraham ben Yitzchak and even in the work of post modern left wing writers such as David Grossman. Their plots, protagonists and narrative tend to be inserted within the national framework of the Jewish hegemony, and are based on the principles of particularism. As a result, they are impossibly estranged from the ideology of the Français-Israélites and those who write under its influence.

**Cohen and Jabès and the commonality of their relationship with Judaism and universalism: an illustration of the relationship between Franco Jewish writers and Universalism**

As I have shown in chapter one, Albert Cohen was a Jewish renaissance writer whose seminal work, written during the 1920s, was heavily influenced by the post Dreyfus era that emphasised the rise of Jewish particularism that followed the First World War. Although Cohen continued to write until the 1960’s, well after the establishment of the Jewish state, his work straddled his own personal need to
connect his belongingness to both the Greek Jewish community of his birth and France, his “pays d’accueil”. His work was often centred around his protagonists’ deeply nostalgic and often fractious relationship with Judaism. Despite his traditional upbringing, in common with his Français-Israélite contemporaries, Fleg, Lunel and Spire) Cohen rejected the rigidity of rabbinic Judaism and firmly believed in the Jew's prophetic destiny to lead humanity by instruction.

If we compare Cohen’s work with that of the Egyptian writer Edmond Jabès, it is clear that like Jabès, Cohen too had unresolvable issues with hierarchized Judaism. In both cases, their protagonists Solal, and Yuke Sérafi grapple with the orthodox religion of their childhood, at times angrily arguing with a God that they are no longer sure exists. Yet, despite their uncertainty about the existence of an all powerful deity, their belongingness to Judaism is never really in question. Characteristically, it is their quintessential need to decipher the role and destiny of the Jew that forms the central quest of their texts. The overriding feature that emerges in both cases, is the certainty of the authors’ belief in the universal role of the Jew as an instrument for the betterment of mankind.

In Solal (1930), Cohen’s depiction of Solal’s family and the Greek Jewish ghetto echoes his own father’s world. It is also marked by the writer’s ambivalence to the poverty of that Jewish community that he describes as,

Une race exsudeuse expectorait, crachait, toussait, râlait, transpirait, se gratait, procédait à des échanges, assimilait rejetait, vivait. Des enfants échangeaient des biens, Des vieillards échangeaient des sciences. Tout circulait. Une race active ricanait, sanglotait débordait expression, avait peur(...) mortellement las et blessé vivait sous ces voutes et tremblait de peur.

It would be all too easy to misconstrue Cohen's words as evidence of the author's self hatred and ambivalence for the "inferior Orient" which bears poor comparison to the emancipated community of the Hexagon. This would certainly have been congruent with the orientalist lens through which the author received his education at the schools of the Alliance Israélite in his native Salonika. Yet a closer examination of his text, reveal that this is simply not the case. Surprisingly, it is towards the Occident, rather than the Orient to which Cohen bears his antipathy, by chastising the former's culture as superficial and lacking in authenticity. Cohen's plots like Jabès's ripple palpably with unresolved tension between Occident and Orient. They reflect multiple allusions of the hidden yet deeply profound value of the "Oriental" Jew. For example, in Cohen's work *Ezekiel* (1933), in order to explain the difference between the Jews of the Orient and the Jews of France to a rich emancipated Jewish (français Israélite) businessman, the protagonist Ezekiel uses the analogy of a « hidden ruby of hidden value » to portray the latent qualities of the oriental Jew.

*Ezekiel*

Il pose contre l'oie le tube -loupe des bijoutiers et
Examine la pierre - Montre.
Jérémie, tournant autour d'Ezéchiel
- Véritable faux rubis.
- Aucun éclat.
Jérémie
- L'Eclat ne se voit pas parce qu'il est à l'intérieur.

Albert Cohen, *Ezekiel*, p.46
Cohen’s texts therefore demands to be viewed as more than a mere confrontation between Orient and Occident (although clearly the author almost certainly grappled with that concept). They serve as a lens through which the author, who considers himself a prophetically endowed "Oriental" Jew seems to instruct the occidental Jew and simultaneously provide enlightenment to a jaded world.

Cohen makes a clear distinction between Jewish and gentile values that portray his belief in the concept of a unique Jewish ability to prophetically view the world. It is a theme to which like Jabès, he returns to time and time again, presenting his characters as ugly, but majestic, brilliant, but simultaneously demented, until it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that the real beauty of the Jewish people is to be found not in their superficial appearance but within the greatness of their morality.

For all his belief in the latent qualities of the Jew, Cohen clearly struggled with his (dis)belief in God and orthodox religion. In his novel Solal (1930), he attributes to his protagonist Solal, (a Jew who personifies Cohen’s personnel struggle for acceptance in France), a distrust of orthodox Judaism and argues,

Une raison de vivre tout de suite! La Bible? Résumé de prophètes: "Cela va mal parce que vous n’étes pas des moutons. Mais plus tard Israël sera un gros mouton docile et tout ira bien “ S’enthousiasmer pour ce végétarisme de l’âme. Il ne pouvait pas. Et pourtant cette moutonnerie était ce qu’il aimait le plus au monde. Et si on parlait de Dieu? Dieu si gentil qu’il aimait tout le monde et même les méchants leur gaz asphyxiants et leur bébés asphyxies.

Cohen. Albert, Mangeclous, p, 319

In his later work, Le Livre de ma mère,(1954) Cohen admits that while writing Solal, he was devoured by the same insatiable hunger for God as his protagonist, after
having been ultimately left in the same state of sadness, confusion and guilt as a result of his agnostic belief.

Il me faut un petit divertissement sur le champ, N’importe quoi (...) Et si on essayait Dieu, ça me rappelle de quelque chose. J’ai eu quelques déconvenues de ce côté-là. Enfin, quand il sera libre, il n’aura qu’à me faire signe.

Albert. Cohen, Le Livre de ma mère, p.135-136

Importantly though, while he was tortured by his inability to believe in God, for Cohen, conversion was never a realistic possibility. On the contrary, it was viewed as a false solution to the Jewish Question. In Mangeclous (1938), he rejects the idea of converting in order to be accepted by the Occident, and in La Belle du seigneur (1968), like Spire before him, he mocks Français-Israélites who choose to betray their race by assimilation, indignantly asserting that his own attachment to Judaism remained strong regardless of anti-Semitism or his lack of belief in God, he wrote.

Coupable penchant de certains de nos coreligionnaires de renoncer à leurs beaux noms israélites ! Avoir honte d’appartenir au peuple élu et s’en cacher, te rends -tu compte ? Quels insensés ! Il m’est revenu qu’un Levy écrivain à Paris a fait changer son superbé nom en Ivel ! Qu’il en crève !

Albert Cohen. Les Valeureux, p.290

As in the case of later Franco-Jewish Arab writers, Cohen’s exposure to exile and anti-Semitism upon his arrival in France results in the accentuation of his identification with Judaism. Despite the ambiguity about his views about God, and whatever his beliefs are in God, he ultimately nominates himself as a Jewish writer.

O ces rouleaux de la loi en grave procession dans la synagogue
les fidèles les baissent et avec un émoi dans ma poitrine émoi devant cette majesté qui passe je les baisse aussi et c’est notre acte d’adoration dans la maison de Dieu de ce Dieu auquel je ne crois pas mais que je révère.

Albert Cohen, *Les Valereux*, p.904

Regarding the Jews as “the” elected people with a prophetically, determined destiny towards mankind, he returns to these themes repeatedly, imploring both Jews and gentiles to,

O mes juifs connaissez votre peuple, vénérez –le d’avoir voulu le schisme et la séparation, d’avoir décidé devant le mont Sinaï, d’avoir follement décidé qu’il ne voulait plus être de la nature et obéir les lois animales, d’avoir décidé qu’il obéirait la Loi morale. Loi nouvelle qu’il inventait et qu’il allait, de par sa volonté, transformer le primate en homme.


According to Cohen, the Jew was singled out at Mount Sinai, as an “élu”, an “elected individual”, but it was not with the intention of flaunting his God- given superiority. Simultaneously emphasizing the particularistic nature of Judaism combined with its universal (Français – Israélite promoted) goal to facilitate the transformation of humanity, Cohen leaves the reader in no doubt about his beliefs in the Jew’s destiny as a force for good, thus elucidating the Jew’s intrinsic value to humanity.

The Egyptian born Jabès struggled with his own tenuous connections to rabbinical Judaism, ultimately concluding that his sense of Jewishness was equated with his sense of perpetual alienation and exile. In order to fulfil his universalist mission according to Jabès, the Jew is destined to remain permanently situated on the margin. His early Cairene poetry written during the 1920s, at the zenith of the Jewish renaissance, seems to portray little interest in
either Judaism or Zionism. Declaring in 1976 that, “J’ai dit qu’être juif, c’était vivre ces instants d’appartenance et de non appartenance au judaïsme”, it was only after he was forced into exile after the nationalisation of the Suez canal in 1956, that Jabès reconciled with his Jewish identity to become one of the most seminal Franco-Jewish writers of the twentieth century. His arrival in France, and the anti-Semitism he encountered in the country he had so voraciously identified with since his childhood, amplified the impact of his exilic state and led him to re-explore the connections between Jewishness and exile. Jabès was to later disclose that his departure from Egypt and his subsequent arrival in France emphasised both his detachment from his native country and his marginalization in France.

Jabès’s sense of alienation is readily visible in his texts. Stressing that his exile from Egypt was both physical and linguistic, his protagonist Yukel explains in Le Livre de Yukel. (1963),

Et Yukel dit :
Le pays où je vis n’est pas celui à qui mes aïeux ont donne la parole.
Je me plais peu dans ces paysages.
Et pourtant, ma langue est celle que j’ai acquise et perfectionnée ici.
Mon exile est l’exil antérieur de Dieu.
Mon exil, de syllabe en syllabe, m’a conduit à Dieu, le plus exilé des vocables et en Lui, j’ai entrevue l’unité de Babel. C’est par la langue
que Dieu nous parlera.

Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre de Yukel*, p. 286

Despite his distrust of rabbinical Judaism, as a consequence of his marginalization in France, Jabès eventually reconnects with his faith. But it is to be on his own terms. In *Le livre de questions* (1963-1973) he ultimately renews his Jewish identity, but like in the case of Cohen, deeply influenced by his belief in universalism, he was convinced that the Jew could only fulfil his universal destiny to improve the world by attempting to resolve the ceaseless questions promoted by his marginalization and exilic state. He also continued to criticize hierarchized rabbinical Judaism, because of its insistence on rules and group belongingness, which he believed discouraged questioning. He elaborated.

_C'est donc en effet mon impossibilité d'être »un juif paisible », apaisé, ancré dans ses certitudes, qui a fait de moi le juif que je crois être_. Cela peut paraître paradoxal, mais c'est précisément dans cette coupure-dans mon non-appartenance en quête de son appartenance-que je suis sans doute le plus juif.


In an interview in 1975 with Marcel Cohen he further clarified his belief,

_Il faudra que je m’explique, un jour, cette appartenance du mot devenue non appartenance au mot, plutôt, sur cette non appartenance devenue appartenance : mon itinéraire juif._

_Etés-vous juif?_

_-L’aurais-je été ; mais le vide est le tourment du vide?_  

Edmond Jabès. _La réponse esquivée*, Change, p. 8

172
Jabès’s *Le Livre des Questions* (1963-1973) further echoes his personal attempt to resolve his struggle with Judaism. For example when Yukel answers on behalf of those who accuse him of not being a « real Jew » because does not follow rabbinical laws, the protagonist re-iterates.

S’adressant à moi, le plus ancien de mes frères m’a dit :
« Nos fêtes de Pourim ne sont plus les fêtes de ton carnaval et de tes douceurs. Pâque n’est plus l’anniversaire de ta halte dans le désert et de ton passage dans la mer. Yom Kippour n’est plus la journée de ton jeune.
Et quelles significations ont maintenant, pour toi, ces dates cochées dans notre calendrier ?
Reniez des tiens, volé de ton héritage, qui est-tu ?
Tu es juif pour les autres mais si peu pour nous ».

M’adressant au plus ancien de mes frères de race, j’ai répondu ;
Mais un homme ne vaut-il pas un homme ?

Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p.67-68

Jabès’s brand of Jewishness carries the trademarks of particularism that isolate the Jew, leading him into a permanent state of exile and questioning, yet, paradoxically it is also a conduit to his universal destiny as an instrument through which to create a more perfect, world, imbued with the principals of universal equality and justice for all mankind. In *Le livre de Yukel (1963-1973)* he insists,

Et Mansour rappela cette chanson que l’on attribue à Reb Bertit :

« Il m’a dit
Ma race est la race jaune.
J’ai répondu :
Je suis de ta race.

Il m’a dit :
Ma race est la race noire.
J’ai répondu :
Je suis de ta race.

Il m’a dit :
Ma race est la race blanche.
J’ai répondu :
Je suis de ta race ;

car mon soleil fut l’étoile jaune ;
car je suis enveloppe de nuit ;
car mon âme, comme la pierre de la Loi,
est blanche ».


Like Albert Cohen’s rendition of Judaism, it is an expression of the
universalism propagated by the late nineteenth century Français –Israélite model of
Judaism. In Le Livre des questions (1963-1973) the voice of Yukel embodies Jabès’s
own point of view,

Appartenir à ce qui, par essence, récuse toute appartenance
-l’universel ; voilà la vraie vocation juive :son devenir déferré.
‘Qu’est ce qu’être juif ? Je suis tenté, pour ma part, de répondre que
c’est être celui à qui cette question s’adresse et celui qui, soi même , se
pose tout bas la question « , écrivait Yukel.


Close examination of both authors’ work reveals their remarkable
similarities. Despite the fact that they wrote at different times. In both cases, their
gravitation towards universalist values found commonality in the nineteenth
century universalist values succinctly summed up in Edmond Fleg’s essay
Pourquoi je suis juif, (1928). According to Fleg, Jews had two destinies, first to follow
the laws of the Torah and show their devotion to the “one and only God”, and
second, to enter into an unbinding covenant with God to bring about the repair of an imperfect and unfinished world, which would ideally,

Ainsi la justice de l'homme augmenterait et fortifierait sur la terre la Présence de Dieu. L'homme collaborerait avec Dieu. Il parachèverait, en le créant, le monde créé par Dieu. Sa faute briserait l'unité divine ; son mérite rendrait à Dieu son unité. La, toute la mystique d'Israël.

Edmond. Fleg, Pourquoi je suis juif, p.66

In the closing pages of Fleg’s text, as he famously underlines the reasons why he has returned to Judaism, despite having initially rejecting it in favour of his preference for philosophy during his youth.

Je suis juif parce qu’en tous lieux ou pleure une souffrance le juif pleure
Je suis juif, parce qu’en tous temps ou crie une désespoirance, le Juif espère.
Je suis juif, parce que, la promesse d’Israël est la promesse Universelle.
Je suis juif, parce que pour Israël, le monde n’est pas achevé : les hommes l’achèvent.
Je suis juif, parce que, pour Israël, l’homme n’est pas crée : les hommes le créent.

Edmond. Fleg, Pourquoi je suis juif, p.66

Fleg’s insisted that the Jewish writer’s primary function was to act as a vector for the spreading of emancipation and universalism and is highly representative of the importance put on universalism by the First World War generation of French Jewish writers. While Cohen and Jabès did not necessarily share Fleg’s interest in following the laws of the Torah, they did share his belief that Jews had an
obligation to enter into an unbinding covenant with God to bring about a more perfect world.

On this basis, the Franco- Arab- Jewish text like the early texts of the Français Israélite writers, can be credibly incorporated within the corpus of Ecriture juive. Despite its unconventional attitude to rabbinical Judaism its ideological roots were deeply aligned with the universal texts of the twentieth century French Jewish writers that propagated the ideology of universalism.

A literature of difference: Franco- Jewish -Arab literature within the context of its Arabic roots.

Because Franco- Jewish -Arab writers are by necessary definition, Arab writers, it is essential to attempt to classify their work within the context of modern Arab literature. As I have previously shown, as was the case with Zionist literature, Arab literature initially developed in tandem with the emerging Arab nationalism movement of the early twentieth century when two distinct literary schools emerged. Writers (usually poets) turning to classical Arab poetry for inspiration, were inspired by time periods whose concerns paralleled their own. Later, there were writers (mostly poets) who specialized in the blending of classical Arab tradition with European modernism. The first category, known as Revivalists were based in Egypt. By remaining in a sphere dominated by an essentially classical mentality and writing fine poems that imitated the work of major poets such as Nabigha al Dhubiani (535-604) and Abu Tammam (788-845) their work swept
across different time periods inspired by ancient poetry that idealized the situations and qualities their own age seemed to lack.

During the early part of the twentieth century, the Mahjaris emerged from the Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian communities and settled in the United States and in Latin America. By taking up the challenge of the classical Abbasidi poets who demanded that poets should write about their times in every day speech, their work often mimicked the poetry of renowned Abbasidi poets such as Abu Nuwas (762-813), Ibn al Mu'tazz, Ma'arri (973-1057) and the later Andalusian muwashaha poets. Mahjari attempts to modernize Arab poetry resulted in the emergence of essentially two poetry movements, Arrabita al Qalamiya (The Pen Bond), founded in 1920 in New York and led by Gibran Kahlil Gibran, and Al-usba al–Andalusia, (The Andalusian Group) founded in Sao Paulo in 1933. These poets breathed new life into the genre, effectively creating new Arabic diction, new metaphors and new rhythms. Their eventual plan was to start a printing press that would propagate both their revolutionary ideas and the importance of translating works from other languages that would hopefully inject fresh blood into their own language.

Two poets of the Arrabita group, Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) and Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), stand out as the most inventive of the Mahjari poets. Their work has impressively influenced both the work of Muslim and Jewish writers of the region, and it can be argued that it is from these writers that modern Arabic literature traces its emergence. In a recent interview, Naim Kattan revealed that even today, Gibran remains one of the greatest influences of his writing. Gibran’s major contribution to Arab poetry was his revolutionary attitude towards
Establishment and its language. By brutally attacking the hypocrisy and corruption of the political, religious and social order of his day, Gibran injected new force and resonance into the Arabic language.

Gibran’s revolutionary style demanded the enforcement of a social contract between the poet, and the reader that ensured that neither would forget or ignore the need for change. In effect, he was one of the earliest proponents of the need for political engagement (el Iltizam), the essential ingredient to emerge as one of the archetypal trademarks of modern Arab literature. Since the late 1940s, modern Arab writers have admittedly faced problems far greater than the ones first encountered by the first Mahjari poets. While the latter wrote about their experiences as aliens in foreign countries, modern Arab poets have had to contend with being alienated in their own countries, witnessing the ravages of coups d’état and an onslaught of both external and civil wars.

The reception of the Arab poet’s work within the Arab world is complex and has not always been effusive. Following the humiliation of Israel’s sweeping victory over the Arab armies in the Six Day War in 1967, Nizar Qabbani wrote the poem “Footnotes to the Book of the setback”. It famously captured the mood of a nation shattered and humiliated by defeat, and was quickly banned from publication in the Arab world, because its controversial content lambasted Arab governments for squandering the opportunities that their oil wealth brought them. In his poem he wrote,

We are a thick skinned people
With empty souls.
We spend our days practising witchcraft,
Playing chess and sleeping.
Are we the “Nation by which God blessed mankind?"

Our desert oil could have become
Daggers of flame and fire
We’re a disgrace to our noble ancestors;
We let our oil flow through the toes of whores.

Abdullah, Ashari, *Modern Poetry of the Arab world*, p101

Imploring future generations not to follow the example of their elders because it had proved to be a recipe for disgrace and failure, he accuses his own generation of blindly following their misguided leaders. He implores,

Arab children,
Don’t read about our windowless generation,
We are a hopeless case.
We are as worthless as water-melon rind.
Don’t ape us,
Don’t accept us,
Don’t accept our ideas,
We are a nation of crooks and jugglers.

Abdullah, Ashari, *Modern Poetry of the Arab world*, p101

His work was revolutionary, because in a society that traditionally reveres its elders he had broken traditional taboos, its accusatory tone was shocking but nevertheless resounding. Although it was banned throughout the Arab world, it was quickly smuggled into every Arab country. Printed and learned by heart, it released in its wake a flood of political frustration and anger that found expression in what is now known as *Al Adab al Huzaairani* (The June Literature).

Political engagement still remains an enduring feature of Arab literature today regardless its language of expression. Despite antipathy towards the final
residues of colonial influence, there is still an impressive corpus of Lebanese writers who continue to write in the French language learned at the myriad of French schools that were established throughout the region before the establishment of the French mandate of 1917. Important writers such as Andrée Chédid, Venus Khourry Ghatta, Etel Adnan, Amin Ma’alouf, Saleh Stétiéh among others, all write in French. It is therefore useful to examine these writers work as a barometer to the degree of which they, like Jewish writers of the region, have been influenced by France. It is additionally useful for comparative purposes to examine their work for their usage of political engagement and universalism.

**The Universal Arab writer.**

In a 2112 interview in association with the newspaper *Le Monde*, Saleh Stétiéh revealed his preference for writing in French as opposed to his native Arabic. Although he emphasized that it is ultimately the writer’s personal choice to write in whichever language he feel comfortable in, he staunchly defended his own decision by declaring,

> Parce que la langue française s’est toujours adaptée aussi vite que possible aux réalités du monde contemporain, elle propose à son utilisateur un instrument nuancé et inventif pour aller plus loin dans l’exploration et la formulation d’idées neuves, de concepts inédits de sentiments, ou de sensations difficilement identifiables pour cause de subtilité extrême. Ce faisant, la langue française permet de sortir des sentiers battus, de stimuler en chacun, par l’oxygène qu’elle apporte, tous les dynamismes créateurs. Je l’ai défini comme espace de liberté. La liberté ouvre les futurs

*Saleh Stetieh, Le Huffington Post en association avec le groupe Le Monde, “, immense poete arabe. Agsous”.*
Stétié’s decision to write in French was in reality, a practical one, although it was admittedly based on a combination of sentimentality for the language that he was schooled in, and his belief in the legitimacy of French as the root of his own education and evolving philosophy. Nevertheless, during the same interview, he curiously appeared to suffer a crisis of identity. While on one hand, he reminded the reader that he was primarily an Arab writer who happens to write in French, he was also anxious to defend his decision to write in French. (the language once described by Assia Djebar as the language of the colonizer). At times he appeared to be dismissive of Arabic, pejoratively relegating it to a language bound by its dependency on Q’uranic convention, and resistant to linguistic evolution. This was not new, in an interview in Kantara magazine, in 2006, he had already criticized the hermetic nature of Arab writers stating,

Poets, in particular, strive for a liberated, profane language. The sanctity of Arabic implied the rejection of new words, since they were not legitimized by the Quran or by tradition. One had to adhere strictly to traditional Arabic grammar so as not to destroy its exalted foundation, and in particular, it could not be augmented with foreign words, least

---

173 Pen name of renowned Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Said Esber,(1930-)

Saleh Stétiéh, Le Huffington Post en association avec le groupe Le Monde, “, immense poète arabe. Agsous”.

Il est vrai, comme l’a écrit à mon propos Adonis, que je suis un poète arabe qui écrit en français , Adonis voulant dire que par là les valeurs non significatives de l’arabité et le rythme même de celle-ci qui pouvaient se lire en filigrane dans ma création poétique et dans ma réflexion sur la poésie. Le français dans laquelle j’ai écrit toute de mon œuvre est une langue aimée de mon enfance et choisie dès la montée en moi de la conscience littéraire et philosophique.
of all those from cultures outside of the Islamic world or the language of the unbelievers.

*Kantara* magazine, 2006

While Stétié’s work carries the imprint of his French education in both style and language, his poetry showcases the importance of multiple identities and the universality of the human condition. In that sense, it can be argued that his work bears the hallmark of the same French influence liberally inflected in the work of Jewish Arab writers. In an interview with Tele 5 in 2007 he asserted,

I am a writer with two conceptions of the world and sensibilities not foreign to each other; but rather and most often complementary beyond their divergences; East-West, Europe- Arab world, Islam –non Islam, Arab originally...

All that I have had to face up to and manage in my work and, also in my imagination, I have practised, whenever I could modulations and interferences, I have thrown down bridges, opened up passageways and at times have been defined as a ferry man.174

Stétiéh's emphasis on the universality of the human condition is particularly poignant in his poem “Exil”, in which he explores the exilic state and his belief that all people have the capacity to flourish even when they are geographically far from their homeland. Like Leo Senghor before him, who stated “la civilisation à venir sera métissée ou ne sera pas”, Stétié confirms his belief that a métissage of identities is the true foundation of future civilisation.

Je salue le soleil, forêt de roses rouges,
Enfant serré sur le corps des rivières
Il faut pourtant frapper les roses puis rayer
Le nom de la tendresse –ne garder
Dans l’esprit que les cils de la lumière

Using the analogy of a child, who must become bruised in order to eventually shine, Stéité infers that exile although initially alienating, intrinsically carries with it the promise of redemption. The assimilation of a new culture, and its subsequent conjunction with that of the exile’s origin gives way to novel cultural hybridity and the promise of advancement.

Yet, unlike the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer who posits himself as a quasi French rather than Arab writer, Stéitiéh’s work is indelibly interwove with the future of his country, Lebanon (of which he later became an ambassador). Although he doubtlessly reveres France, his primary goal is to promote a pathway to peace in order to improve the welfare of his own country. The case of the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer is very different. Having no hope of return to their dismantled communities, they effectively transmuted their own identity with one based on French mimesis.

The Lebanese writer Amin Ma’alouf’s work is similarly, infused with the writer’s disdain for particularism. In Les Identités meurtrières (1998), Ma’alouf charges that it is greed for the construction of a single identity that ultimately drives the hatred that eventually promotes crimes against humanity. In his first chapter, “Mon identité : mes appartenances” he asks why so many crimes against humanity are committed in the name of a single unifying ideology, whether it be ethnic, religious or national. By first defining identity as the one single factor that makes one individual distinct from another, “ Mon identité, c’est ce qui fait que je ne
suis identique à aucune personne, (p.16) he then illustrates the problematic of the friable and fragile nature of the concept of identity. Giving the example of a Bosnian who during the 1980s, might have effortlessly proclaimed himself to be a Yugoslav and then during the country's bitter war during the 1990's, would have just as spontaneously affirmed himself to be a Bosnian Muslim, Ma'alouf shows that the very concept of identity is fragile and untenable. He uses his argument to underscore his belief in universalism, stressing that within each individual there are several identities (appartenances) that the individual is at liberty to assume at any given time. Because the particularistic concept of a single identity is so fleeting, the only sustainable option is universalism.

In the final chapter of his work, « Le temps des tribus planétaires », Ma'alouf explores the significance of multiple identities in a world governed by globalization and writes,

Moi qui revendique à voix haute chacune de mes appartenances je ne puis m’empêcher de rêver au jour où la religion qui m’a vu naître suivra le même chemin, laissant derrière elle le temps des tribus, le temps des guerres saintes, le temps des identités meurtrières pour construire quelque chose en commun; je rêve du jour où je pourrai tout le Proche Orient, comme j’appelle le Liban, et la France et l’Europe, “patrie” et « compatriotes” tous ses fils, musulmans, juifs et chrétiens de toutes de toutes origines. Dans ma tête, qui constamment spéculer et anticipe, c’est déjà le cas; mais je voudrais qu’il en soit ainsi, un jour, sur le sol du réel, et pour tous.

Amin Ma’alouf, Identités Meurtrières, p.16

By reinforcing his belief that the incorporation of a society’s multiple identities is a vital step in the resolution of global conflict, Ma’alouf concludes his work with his universal hope for the eventual reconciliation of the Middle East,
El Iltizam: A vital characteristic of Arab Literature

The Decentrist writers and political commitment

The protracted war that broke out in Lebanon in April 1975 which saw over two decades of conflict also witnessed the emergence of women’s literature and the growth of feminine consciousness. (Miriam Cooke, Arab Women,” P.454. In what Cooke refers to as the Beirut Decentrists, a group of primarily Francophone writers (who with few exceptions, wrote in French) began to re-write the war on their own terms. They were concerned with personal freedom, imbued with nationalist aspiration, yet still distinguished from their male counterparts whose corpus who (with the exception of Francophone influenced writers such as the above Stétiéh and Ma’alouf, tended to justify the violence of war with a nationalist agenda. The Decentrist corpus of Etel Adnan, Andrée Chédid, Nadia Tuéni and others did not focus on enemies or revolution. Instead, these writers provided grotesque images of the war that had forced Lebanese society into a steep decline, and the harsh, brutal effects the violence had incurred on the most vulnerable members of its society (its women and children).

As observers of the new society in creation and of the generation coming of age during this war, their work resonated with incessant calls for political change and freedom. This had profound effects on women who from Yemen to the Arabian Gulf began to find both their voice and political conscience and resolved to fight

175 The mid 1970s, also marked one of the most important periods in the history of international feminist criticism. It was also a time that saw an Islamic reawakening as well as the rise of a strong women’s activist movement, that helped women become more literate and knowledgeable in Islamic principles.
against the patriarchal oppression whom they accused of promoting a culture of death. During the 1970s for example, Saudi poet Fawziyya Abu Khalid was a strong voice against alienation and for social change, while Iraqi writer Lamea Abbas Amara also participated in the women’s struggle at the time and was in Lebanon during the civil war. Nathalie Handel, *The poetry of Arab Women: A contemporary Anthology*, p.16)

Another Lebanese writer, Nadia Tuéni, intertwined the struggles of her gender with the love of her homeland (which is also portrayed as a feminine entity). While writers from other corners of the Arab world such as the Palestinian writer Myriam Antaki sought to use their identification with the “other” as a deeply political tool with which to fight individual and universal oppression and ring new changes. The goal of the Decentrists, in their struggle against the forces of oppression was essentially to bring about much needed changes in the patriarchal society to which they still felt they belonged to despite the fact that many now write in exile.

**Myriam Antaki and identification with the Palestinian Other**

In her striking novel *Les Versets de Pardon* (1999), Myriam Antaki’s protagonist awaits trial in an Israeli prison accused of having committed acts of terrorism. He inadvertently discovers that his father (who died before he was born) was a French Jew who had once been a member of the infamous *Irgun*, a terrorist/freedom fighting organization that operated during the British mandate over Palestine (1917-1948). Although Antaki’s moral equilibration of “La condition juive” with
“la condition palestinienne” emphasizes the fragility of the fine line dividing the terrorist from the freedom fighter, the novel’s empathetic conception of the “Jewish Other” superficially at least, seems to illustrate Antaki’s universalistic views of the human condition. Closer examination however reveals that her work is a highly charged, politicalised, critically motivated text that eventually compares the Israeli army with the Nazi regime in order to showcase the plight of the Palestinian people.

All this is stridently different from the work of Franco-Jewish–Arab writers such as Kattan and Jacques who often emphasize the consanguinity of Arab and Jew, by writing about their mutual childhood interaction. Antaki’s text, with its multiple inferences of Jewish injustice and charges of their non-belongingness to the region, underscores the seemingly unresolvable, irreconcilable differences between Muslims and Jews. While the Palestinian Ahmed is portrayed as an authentic denizen of the region, Antaki’s Jewish protagonist is seen a static, two dimensional representation of the European/imperialist interloper whose presence lacks legitimacy. While Ahmed’s Jewish father, a French Jew, is portrayed as a victim of the Holocaust, Antaki stresses that he joined the Irgun, a militating organization which she equilibrates with the Palestinian liberation/terrorist movement. She also stresses that it was the Jewish organization, not the Palestinians that eventually broke any chance of peace.

Un groupe clandestin de jeunes combattants fonde L’Irgun Zva’i l’eoumi, L’Irgun est purement offensive. Le groupe connu sous le nom de Stern, refuse ouvertement la trêve.

Myriam Antaki, Les Versets du Pardon, P. 95
Ahmed implores his dead Jewish father to understand the commonality and universal nature of their individual struggles,

Chaque geste de violence ou de miséricorde appartient a un cri de Yahve , de Dieu ou d'Allah.

Myriam Antaki, „Les Versets du Pardon, P. 95

While Antaki’s text, with Ahmed’s declaration of,

Père, pour qui est ce pays”... Pere, aujourd’hui, ce pays est pour toi et pour moi.

Myriam Antaki, „Les Versets du Pardon, P. 95

appear to initially imply the importance of the universal common bonds between human beings, regardless of religion, the words of Cheikh al Tahi, Ahmed’s Palestinian mentor, revered for his wisdom, make the author’s case for political engagement clear to the reader.

Cheikh al- Tahi a parfois une voix souillée, éteinte. Son regard s’épaissit et se charge de fumée. Sur sa terre de Palestine, une Guerre implacable, calcinée, se contient avant d’éclater. De terribles évidences présagent des rafales, des poussières, du sang noir . La judaïsation fait de grands pas mais, pour lui, pour les Palestiniens il n’y a pas de pays étrange. S’ils sont appelés devant le tribunal leur histoire, de leur enfance, de leur présent, la terre leur appartient, leur cause est juste. Ils ne s’organisent pas vraiment. En face, dans le camp adverse règne un esprit d’audace.

Myriam Antaki, „Les Versets du Pardon, 95

By using classically loaded anti-Semitic vocabulary, such as Judaisation, to infer the pejorative infiltration of the land by the Jews, Antaki portrays the Jew as the illegitimate interloper, one who doesn’t belong and who has used nefarious tactics to
undermine the Palestinian—rightful, legitimate inhabitant of the region.

Interestingly, Antaki’s rather ubiquitous criticism is not confined to the Jew, she also blames the colonial, divisive tactics of the British who made impossible promises to both Jews and Arabs, but who ultimately favoured the Jews. Arguing,


Myriam Antaki, *Les Versets du Pardon*, 95

She adds her criticism of the colonial interference that perhaps prevented any chance of successfully resolving the region’s problems.

Antaki’s approach to universalism is thus very different to that of Franco–Jewish–Arab writers who often explore their relationship with their Arab “Other” as an imagined alternative of themselves, with the result that absence is viewed as dislocation or an incompleteness. For example, Paula Jacques’s novel *Les Femmes avec leur amour* (1997) set on 1956, explores the intricate ties of friendship established between Mara the only daughter of a wealthy Jewish Cairo family and her Muslim maid servant Zanouba. The polyphonic novel simultaneously reveals Mara and Zanouba’s often converging narratives For example, Mara discloses,

Zenouba est plus proche de moi que ma propre mère.
une autre idée surgit du plus profond de moi même.
D’abord, ce n’est plus une idée, mais une sorte de chaleur qui me monte au cœur : Zenouba est pareille à moi.
Zenouba est moi! Moi est Zenouba sommes une seule personne dans deux corps différents.

Paula Jacques,*Les Femmes avec leur amour*. P, 38
When Mara is eventually forced to leave Egypt with her family for resettlement in Israel, she is haunted by memories of her childhood confidante. For Mara, the maid is more than a mere employee, she effectively represents the other half of herself, that still remains forever lost in Egypt. Zenouba’s absence, like the absence of Mara’s Egyptian homeland itself is portrayed as a perpetually open wound.

In contrast to Antaki’s particularistic, politically orientated text, Naim Kattan’s reimagining of the Arab “Other” in his memoir Adieu Babylone (1975), is entirely universal. It centres around memories of the lively discussions concerning the evolution of Arab literature that he once enjoyed with both his Jewish and Muslim friends. He recalls an encounter during his youth during which he and his friend Nissim (Naji) argued about the future of Arabic literature. When Nissim decides to revert to the Jewish Arabic dialect of Iraq instead of deferring to the Muslim Arabic dialect, Kattan is initially unsettled by this digression, because it challenges the tacitly agreed convention. He is pleasantly surprised when his Muslim friends show no objection to the group’s usage of the Jewish dialect, and are unexpectedly respectful and receptive to the Jewish contributions to discussions about the future of Iraqi culture. He recalls,

Kattan discovers that as Jewish intellectuals, he and Nissim enjoy an undreamed degree of parity and acceptance by their Muslim counterparts. More importantly, any worries they had concerning their belongingness in Iraq are banished. They appear to have relevance in the future of Iraq itself.

*Iya,* (1992), was originally written in Hebrew by the Iraqi Jewish writer Shimon Ballas who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s and was educated by the Alliance Israélite in Baghdad, later completing his doctorate in French literature at the Sorbonne. Although Ballas now writes in Hebrew, his writing shares many of the same universalist markings of his francophone co-religionists who write in French. *Iya* portrays the experience of a Muslim maid who has worked for a Jewish family since she was a child herself. Bruised and bereft by the post Israeli independence departure of Sarah, Saul and their children (whom she deeply loves), the reader learns that the Jewish family’s home has also provided a physical and mental haven for Iya.

After escaping from a violent, precocious marriage, which forced her to shamefully return to her family, her subsequent employment with Sarah and Saul allowed her a measure of independence that she would never had known had she stayed with her abusive husband or been reduced to taking charity from her family. After forming close bonds with Sarah (whom she now regards as a sister) we learn that that Iya has acquired the mannerisms of the Jewish community to such an effective degree that at times she questions the strength of her own Muslim
identity. (in effect re-prompting Ma’alouf’s question of whether identity is anything but a flimsy, transient phenomenon).

She was at peace with herself and could not recall ever regretting her choice to come and live with Sarah. She lives among Jews and had already adjusted to their customs and borne their imprint... Yet sometimes, in moments of confusion and introspection, musings over her identity would attack her.

Shimon Ballas, *Iya*, p.91

Besides deconstructing the rigidity of a single fixed identity, *Iya* reimagines the dismantlement of the Jewish community of Iraq from the viewpoint of the Muslims who stayed behind but whose lives were intertwined with those of the Jews they worked and lived with.

Clearly, the thought of life beyond the safety of the framework of her Jewish family is unbearable for Iya. Not only will she miss Sarah’s children, “The three who grew up in her arms, but she would not rejoice at their weddings, throw sweets over their heads, see their offspring, (91 but (and here she echoes Ballas’s own criticism of elitist Ashkenazi Zionism) she also has real fears about their future in Israel, imagining that “her family” is to be spirited away to a primitive desert far removed from the urban cosmopolitan life of Baghdad. She is also deeply fearful of returning to her own family from whom she became estranged long ago, who chide her for being “more Jewish than Muslim” and now regard her as a burden.

Ballas’s portrayal of Iya, like Jacques’s portrayal of Zenouba is a complex, multi layered attempt to imagine those who stayed behind, but still remain firmly attached to their Jewish compatriots by the invisible cords that represent over two millennia of mutual tolerance. Iya’s world explodes when the Jews begin to leave
and even until the last minute, she hopes that for a miraculous reprieve that will enable the Jews to stay. When she realises that there will be none, she is forced to silently watch their exodus while she begins to painfully grasp the enormity of the empty space left by their absence and to consider what it will mean for her and all the others who have been left behind.

She had gone with Saul to buy them in the Al - Shurja market. Mounds upon mounds of suitcases. The Jews are going, the Jews are going. It was a grand time for tinsmiths and suitcases dealers. Liquidation sale. The seasons of sales to the Jews were over. Earthenware platters for Passover, palm fronds and pomegranates for Sukkot, noisemakers and masks for Purim. There would be no more Jews and their holidays would no longer be felt in the market. The tin suitcases close the season. To each one a suitcase, to each one the space they leave behind.

Shimon Ballas, Iya, p.93

Although he never remained to see it, through the lens of the imaginary Iya, Ballas reconstitutes a tableau of a Jew-free Baghdad. He reminds us that there were thousands of Iyas and thousands of Sarah’s and Saul’s, all caught up in history’s noise, who were left to brush off the battered shards of their lives to begin again in countries they felt no commonality with.

In his imaginaire of the parallel “other”, Ballas’s work is also an anguished cry for a return to universalism. Although he makes little effort to disguise his own distrust of the Zionists whom he contemptuously describes as the “Organization” and of whom he suspects of having instigated the bombings that led to the mass exodus of Iraq’s Jews in the first place, Iya remains an essentially universal tale. By transcending religion and nationality and exposing humanity in all its glory and
fragility it overlooks the personal and the political. *Iya* is above all, a story of the renegotiation of identity beyond the experience of exile, and irreplaceable loss.

**Ethel Adnan: the discourse of colonialism.**

Because modern Arab literature derives its roots from its urgency to dissociate itself from colonialism, it is unsurprising that anticolonial discourse appears as an archetypical, omnipresent theme in both the poetry and prose of modern Arab literature. This is certainly not the case in Franco–Jewish–Arab literature, whose Alliance educated writers of course held the view that French/western culture was a superior genre was to be admired and to be imitated. Andre Chouraqui illustrates this point of view in his work *L’Alliance Israélite universelle et la renaissance juive contemporaine* (1965). The then president of the Alliance Israélite Jacques Bigart wrote to teachers of the Alliance in 1901 criticising them for failing to teaching enough French to their students!

> Vous savez que ces enfants, élevés par des parents ignorants et imbus d’innumérables préjugés, vous arrivent à l’école avec ces mêmes préjugés ; et si votre attention, votre effort, ne se portent pas à détruire ces préjugés, si vous bornez à enseigner à ces enfants les règles de la grammaire et de l’arithmétique, à leur faire la leçon comme la feriez à des petits parisiens, à des petits Français, votre action sera stérile, vos peines inutiles ; ce sera comme si vous écriviez sur une feuille déjà remplie. On n’y pourrait rien déchiffrer.


Clearly, Jewish communities in their desire to become “les petits parisiens” had no wish to reject colonial discourse. On the contrary, colonialism had afforded them
numerous undreamed of socio-economic advantages that they had no wish to lose by enjoining themselves with the nebulous cause of their Muslim compatriots. Therefore, because they fundamentally equated the admiration of French Jewish discourse with an admiration of colonialism, there were strident differences in the ways Arab-Jewish writers and Arab writers treated France, French culture and colonialism in their work.

The Lebanese Christian writer Etel Adnan’s *Apocalypses arabes* (1989) is a series of fifty-nine poems criticising colonial violence on a global scale. It is also a prophetic warning of the tragic future that awaits mankind if it continues on its present violent course. Adnan uses unusual and violent natural imagery to describe the profound effects colonial, neo-colonial and imperialistic powers exert on their subjugated peoples. Her poetry portrays a confused universe in which various natural entities such as the sun, moon and sea all engage in adversarial relationships.

Adnan provides a performative corollary of the relationship between colonized and colonizer, suggesting that language alone cannot sufficiently express the sufferings of individuals who have suffered the effects of physical violence, displacement, or emotional trauma brought on either directly or indirectly by colonization. She inserts hieroglyphic-like sketches into her text to suggest that mere words have become inadequate to express intended meaning. Expanding on the theme of wordlessness, *Apocalypses arabes*, makes use of the staccato-like language of the telegram, a once important method for communicating the results of war, to tersely describe the terrible destruction caused by war and to call for its
cessation. Adnan’s text is also highly political engaged with direct reference to the specific effects of the destructive power of colonial and neo colonial powers on the Arab world. Carolyn Seymour-Jorn notes that her poems arguably allude to displacement and genocide in a general, universal sense of populations who were colonized such as for example the indigenous people of America.

Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that Adnan also makes frequent references to the psychic damage done to the Lebanese people by those who have incessantly imposed the superiority of their languages and cultural traditions over the Arabs. At other moments, she criticises the behaviour of the Jewish state, whom she equates with the forces of colonialism, referring to the ravages of the Palestinians by the occupying Israelis with the support of the American government. Here, she employs the full strength and intensity of the Middle Eastern sun as a metaphor for the colonial power that in its determination to control the earth, has decimated much of what stands in its way. The motifs of the sea, moon, earth seem to represent various specific groups of marginalized people such as the Hopi, whose unhappy fate the poet links with the Palestinians. By doing so, she redirects the poems away from the universalism of subjugation of the “Other”, to represent the brutalized, colonial subject itself.

As an alternative interpretation, Adnan’s sun appears to be at war with itself, wounded or even dead, suggesting the author’s criticism of Arab leaders whom she charges with being hopelessly disunited and at war with themselves. Yet, Apocalypse arabe is unescapably associated with a recollection of the tumultuous period of Lebanon during the 1970s which witnessed civil war, the Israeli
invasion, clashes between the PLO and the Israelis on Lebanese soil and the suffering of the Palestinians in refugee camps located in the southern part of the country.

In poem VII, Adnan describes the spectre of the sun hovering in the sky watching dispassionately over a scene of butchery on earth.

Un soleil de guerre à Beyrouth avril éclatant un vent frais dans les navires
un soleil jaune sur un mat un œil dans le trou du fusil un mort de Palestine
un soleil mauve dans la poche de mon amie déambulation à PARIS
un oiseau sur un orteil de Palestinien mort une mouche chez le boucher
Beyrouth- acide-sulfurique STOP la quarantaine brule ses fous STOP
Beyrouth.

Ethel Adnan,. *L'Apocalypse arabe.* P.13

Adnan calls for a stop to the banality of random, incessant violence. Some of these lines evoke bitter images of war and the frightening aftermath of battle, while others seem to infer another potentially better world connected with and yet strangely disconnected from that of the chaos in Lebanon and Palestine. The violent, raging sun may be a representation of the Israeli government, which not only waged war against the Palestinians but whose forces regularly raided southern Lebanon during the 1970s. Alternatively, it may be a more general although still highly political symbol of the forces of colonialism and imperialism that continues to contribute to political conflict in both Lebanon and Palestine,

In poem XXXV, Adnan further develops her criticism of the all-consuming nature of colonial violence, referring again to the Palestinians, who have experienced a continuous assault on their national identity, land homes and lives as a result of the Israeli occupation,

Les Palestiniens encercles marchent à quatre pattes
le Grand cercle solaire a les cernés dans son anneau de fer et fatigué des mots ils se mettent à aboyer.

Ethel Adnan, *L’Apocalypse arabe*, p.48

The poem suggests that the Israelis, represented by the colonizer, the great solar circle, have committed the ultimate act of betrayal. By breaking the human spirit, and oppressing the Palestinians so completely they have convinced them of the futility of their voice with the result that they have become politically impotent. The colonizer has thus deprived the Palestinians of their dignity and finally of their humanity. Elsewhere, she suggests that the colonizer justifies its acts, in poem XL, the sun seems to represent the Israeli authorities, and is portrayed as a nefarious camera that takes anonymous black and white photos again depriving the Palestinians of their individuality. After having captured its subject the sun (camera) leaves nothing behind.

Le soleil est une camera qui ne photographe qu’en blanc et noir
Blanc blanc blanc est le couleur de la Terreur.
Des yeux il ne reste que le blanc d’œuf et des arbres ! le noir
Dans la chambre noire du souterrain toujours noir d’expérience.

Ethel Adnan, *L’Apocalypse arabe*, p.52

Adnan suggests that the colonizer is hopelessly incapable of acknowledging the value and culture of the people it seeks to dominate, seeing them as an anonymous black and white entity.

Her descriptions of the black and white photographs of victims (which presumably lack the focus and detail) and her inference to an amorphous *Terror* which though capitalized to show it enormity, is not specifically named, seems to infer the anonymity and randomness of those who are victimized by the colonizer.
Here, the colonizer’s calculating gaze, and its simplified vision of its subject, facilitates and validates the violence it later uses to subdue that subject. The last line of course alludes to the consensual relationship between the Israeli regime and the United States government (between which Adnan sees no difference).

While many of the poems of The Arab Apocalypse focus on the violence of the colonial encounter, Adnan also describes the sun as jealous, vain, romantic, sorrowful and haunted. In doing so, she grants the colonial enemy a measure of the fallibility and human emotion that has it has historically, zealously denied to its victims. For example, while the sun emits solar arrows that the creatures below dread, we learn that it is not immune to fear,

Un autre soleil jaloux du jaune amoureux du rouge épouvante de bleu et horizontal
Un soleil romanesque comme la jaune jaloux comme bleu amoureux comme un nouage
Un soleil frêle timide un soleil belliqueux vaniteux et malheureux
Une pharaonique un soleil égyptien un univers solaire et un soleil universel

Une flèche solaire parcourt le ciel Un œil a peur du soleil le soleil est
Un œil
Un soleil tubulaire hanté par les tubulures de la mer un soleil pernicieux et Vaniteux

The cosmic struggle between the sun and the sea in particular appears and disappears to resurface again throughout the collection and seems to represent a
metaphor for the endless struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. In which as Edward Said argues, the dominating force is first attracted to and then repulsed by and above all determined to control its subject. As Carolyn Seymour-Jorn notes, in the case of the European colonizer of the Middle East, “the colonizer despises but is also simultaneously attracted to its subject as the source of its own history, languages and mythologies.” (2) Adnan portrays the sense of attraction as a romantic and emotional one.

Finally, in her closing poem of the collection Adnan alludes to the temporary nature of colonial power whether it be European or Israeli. She prophetically predicts an apocalyptic event in which the all powerful sun seems to burn itself out and all creation is destroyed by fire.

Quand le soleil aura parcouru son chemin multimillénaire
le feu dévorera les bêtes les plantes et les pierres
le feu dévorera le feu et le cercle parfait
quand le cercle parfait brulera nul ange ne descendra STOP
le soleil éteindra les dieux les anges et les hommes
et il s’éteindra a son tour au milieu de ses filles
alors la matière-esprit deviendra la NUIT
dans la nuit dans la nuit nous trouverons le savoir l’amour et la paix

Ethel Adnan, L’Apocalypse arabe, p.72

It is illuminating that the final poem is reminiscent of the well known Qur’anic verse that describes judgement day, when the world will come to an end and each person will achieve true knowledge of his or her own deeds and will be held accountable for them.
When the sun is folded up, The stars turn dim and scatter, The mountains made to move
When Hell is set ablaze, and Paradise brought near, Then every soul will know what it had prepared for itself. So I call the receding stars to witness, The planets withdrawing into themselves, The closing night, The rising dawn, That this is indeed the world of an honoured Messenger.

Suratu Takwir 1-3; 12-19, p.524

The Qu’ran describes judgement day as a new dawn when the message of the Prophet is validated by the world and only those who have done good will reap their rewards. Adnan’s apocalypse is not brought about by a patriarchal god.

According to her prophecy, the sun devours the gods, along with the angels and the men, suggesting that human society and all its evils, including colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism will eventually culminate in a moment of terrible destruction. Yet, ironically, in a final, fatal assault against colonialist power, she prophesizes that this cataclysmic moment will prefigure humanity’s arrival at an enlightened state represented by a new level of rationality. This will free humanity from the desire to inflict suffering on the weak.

Nadia Tuéni and the politics of feminism and exile

Another example of political engagement is found in the poetry of the Lebanese born Nadia Tuéni. Born to a Druze father and a Lebanese Christian mother, her Collection Archives sentimentales d’une guerre au Liban (1990) addresses the banality of a war during which soldiers, stripped of their individual identity, fight as a masculine collective only to eventually fall in the name of nationalism.
While Tuéni mourns of the loss of Lebanese youth, like Adnan, she also criticizes her country’s male dominated society, terminating her poem with an assault on the country’s patriarchal need to equate sexuality with virility and violence with nationalism.

In a nod to her national commitment, Tuéni is very clear that she does not oppose the national struggle. It is the violence by which the struggle is being orchestrated that she questions. Like Jabès, her writing style is influenced by her admiration for the twentieth century French surrealist writers who influenced her French education. Tuéni however, is primarily concerned with the emergence of a strong but peaceful Lebanon, and like Etel Adnan, she too actively despises the colonial period and the results of its hold its violent hold on the region.

Tuéni’s collection *Liban: Vingt poèmes pour un amour* (1990) is marked by her need to extrapolate concerns for the Lebanon’s future beyond her opposition to the violent discourse of war. Concentrating *a priori*, on the beauty of her ancient
homeland, she angrily chastises male hegemony for having squandered the
historic and economic opportunities that independence has offered the people, by
reverting to protracted, repeated cycles of sectarian violence in the name of
nationalism. She writes,

Mon pays longiligne a des bras de prophète.
Mon pays que limitent la haine et le soleil.
Mon pays où la mer a des pièges d’orfèvre,
que l’on dit villes sous marines,
que l’on dit miracle ou jardin.
Mon pays où la vie est un pays lointain.
Mon pays est mémoire
d’hommes durs comme la faim,
et de guerres plus anciennes
que les eaux de Jourdain.

Tuéni, Nadia. Liban : Poèmes d’amour et de guerre, p.25

It is Tuéni’s exilic state and the opportunity to write as an insider who lives outside
of the country that imbibes her with the prophetic ability to see Lebanon in all its
beauty and tragedy. In contrast to her disparaging criticism of male writers who
often portray Lebanon as a wanton whore, (and in doing so denigrate all women),
she writes positively about the women of her country. She believes that they are the
only hope for the cessation of the country’s endless wars, and beseeches them
to actively participate in the healing of her country.

Femmes de mon pays,
une même lumière durcit vos corps,
une même ombre les repose;
doucement élégiaques en vos métamorphoses.
Une même souffrance gerce vos lèvres,
et vos yeux sont partis par unique orfèvre
Vous,
qui rassurez la montagne
qui fait croire à l’homme qu’il st homme,
à la cendre qu’elle est fertile,
Although Tuéni is not shy in her criticism of women who have unwittingly supported the hunger of male dominance that has led to war, she lauds what describes as the inherent rational qualities of Lebanese women whom she still believes have the sole ability to change the status quo.

In stark contrast, the oeuvre of the Jewish writer is anything but an anti-colonialist narrative. With the collapse of the colonial machine, Jews lost both their protectors and their advantages and were simultaneously dislocated from their geographical roots. Therefore, as opposed to his/her Franco-Arab counterpart, who envisages himself as part of the evolving society of his country and whose work is infused with the dreams and hopes for the future of the Arab world, the Jewish writer’s work is permeated with loss, nostalgia and regret as she/he desperately tries to conserve the last memories of a lost community which has since assumed surreal, dream-like qualities. Significantly, Naim Kattan refers to this phenomena as the dilemma of the “l’écrivain migrant”, the exile who is disappointed by his pays d’accueil yet is irretrievably severed from his roots within the country of his origin. The attachment of the Jewish writer to the past is limited to the language and landscape of nostalgia and thus he sees his world through a static lens.

Il arrive souvent que le migrant condamne le nouveau pays pour l’avoir mal accueilli et le récuse parce qu’il est moins

---

177 Ibid., 0.24.
culturallement riche que le pays d'origine.


If he is to survive intact, he has no choice but to accept his adopted country or be forever lost to his sense displacement.

Quand l'écrivain migrant refuse le déplacement de son espace, qui est une condition pour préserver son univers d'écrivain, il cherche refuge dans un exil qui rétrécit le réel et le faire glisser sur le chemin de silence. Il perd son rapport avec le lieu du passé forcement transformé par le passage du temps, mais aussi avec le lieu ambiant du fait qu’il ignore. Il se condamne ainsi à n’être nulle part.


Having maintained a static image of France that was hopelessly idealistic and deeply mired in the imagery of the nineteenth and early twentieth century images (perpetuated by the ideals of the Judaism of the Français Israélite), Jewish writers were deeply unprepared for the anti-Semitism that they encountered upon their arrival in France during the middle years of the twentieth century. This led to renewed feelings of homesickness for their old communities and a longing for relevance in the emerging states of the Arab world, even though they had previously shown little interest in Arab nationalist movements. Despite the establishment of the Jewish state and its precarious existence during this period, they felt as they had always felt. Zionism was an East European enterprise that held little relevance to them. They longed instead for the security of their old communities and could find no comfort when they realized that return was now out of the question. As a result,
their early attempts at writing was characterised by the language of the
dispossessed, filled with nostalgic images of their lost way of life.

The specificity of Franco-Jewish-Arab writing

1. The tension between nostalgia for France and the disappointment upon arrival.

In the picture I am a boy of three, swathed in a white silk kaftan and seated proudly
on my mother’s lap, a crystal fish in my arms. But even then, in the heart of the child
whom I have never abandoned and against the background of the lullaby with
which she would serenade me in French, I knew that my mother’s face was turned
towards “Paris”. The ship that sailed for the land of Israel docked for three weeks in
Marseille; but before my mother could see even the corner of the boulevard in that
city my father had yanked her away to the land of Israel. Ever since, her thoughts,
her ways, and her dreams have been turned towards Paris. My father’s face has
always been turned towards “Zion”. Yet, despite having lived for thirty years in a far-
flung neighborhood of Jerusalem, he too still longs for Paris, longs for Paris, and
wonders at the “Zionism” that had so turned his head.

Interview with Albert Swissa.p.187

The above passage is an excerpt from an interview conducted by Ammiel
Alcalay in Hebrew in 1996 with the Moroccan Jewish writer Albert Swissa, who
immigrated with his family to Israel as a small child. The French educated Swissa,
who now writes in Hebrew was one of the earliest Mizrachi writers who along
with others such as Shimon Ballas, Yitzhak Gormezano Goren all addressed the
Mizrachi encounter with Zionism. Their writing eventually formed a body of
resistance literature that contested the traditional Zionist discourse that had
condemned them at the bottom rungs of the ladder of Israeli society.

Swissa’s interview describes his family’s longing for France. But exactly what
kind of France did they long for? Certainly beyond their ill-fated sojourn in
Marseille, Swissa’s family had never visited France. Clearly then Swissa’s France
was an imaginary one, nourished by the lullabies his mother had sang to him as a
child and the glimmering chimera presented to him by his Alliance school teachers. They were so successfully executed, that long after he immigrated to Israel his family still dreamed of a better, fairer life in the Hexagon.

...rayonné dans tout le monde civilisé, parce que le monde civilisé est tributaire plus ou moins de la culture et la pensée françaises même quand le pays et les peuples ignorent la langue de Ronsard et Pascale.

Interview with Albert Swissa, p. 187

Swissa’s Francophilic sensibility was a direct consequence of the nineteenth century Français Israélite ideology that disseminated the belief that the “civilising nature” of French culture would calm the uncivilised “esprit” of the East. In reality, it was a relationship that stressed the superiority of France, and it was a position supported by Jewish Egyptian writers quickly seduced by the idea that French superiority could be equated with the Jewish community’s superiority. For example, while the Egyptian Jewish writer George Cattaui in his initial support of Arab nationalism, attempted a timid concession to “resonances locales” at the annual meeting of a nationalist organization in 1939, in an article published in la Revue de Caire, he also stressed “l’universalité du français, que sa charité, que l’ordonnance stricte de son discours, que l’incorruptibilité même de sa syntaxe n’ont rien en soi d’incompatible avec l’expression “originalités régionales”.

When Cattaui whose political position initially straddled both loyalty to Egyptian nationalism and his own Français Israélite community, defined French genius as,

Paré d’élégance, de discrétion, de finesse. Il a la vivacité qui donne son éclat à la pensée comme au sentiment. Il a la pondération ennemie de l’excès qui n’a jamais crée l’enthousiasme mais seulement le désordre. Les idées ne
George Cattaui, « Le français, langue humain” Revue du Caire,

It can be argued that Cattaui had seen the value of French thought and logic not just from an aesthetic perspective (although he was certainly conscious of the latter), but also as a potential blueprint for the enlightenment and emancipation needed to awaken Egyptian consciousness that would hopefully bring about independent statehood. This was in line with the « rôle tutrice » attitude echoed by other Egyptian nationalist writers who in the early days of the “Nahda” similarly saw the Hexagon with its French enlightenment ideals as a beacon of enlightenment by which they could illuminate their own aspirations for independence. For example, in 1940, Mohamed Hussein Heykel, wrote in the *Revue de Caire*,

Nous devons à la France une véritable renaissance de nos lettres. la littérature arabe moderne n’existe que depuis cinquante ans ; elle a puisé dans la littérature française de nouvelles idées et de nouvelles formes d’expression, ainsi, sommes nous profondément attachés à la France.

*Revue du Caire*, p.102-103.

With the rise of Arab nationalism, Egyptian Muslim writers eventually rejected France’s “role tutrice” in order to assert Egypt’s emergence as an independent literary entity. In 1942 for example, Tewfik el Hakim, the celebrated Egyptian Francophone writer (who was never seen in public without his French Beret) published an article in the Arabic daily newspaper *Mokattam* in 1942,

Je vous aurais démontré que l’ère n’est plus, pour la France (et je crois que jusqu’avant cette dernière et drôle de guerre, ce fut jamais
Although Arab nationalist writers had admittedly initially incorporated the values of French enlightenment within their nascent nationalist literature, by the end of the Second World War they had already begun the process of irreversible rupture from colonial power. In stark contrast, Francophone Jewish writers still stubbornly clung to the last vestiges of their association with the Hexagon.

**Jabès: the writer in permanent exile**

If we trace the execution of the work of Jabès, we see that from an early point in his life, he was preoccupied with his own sense of rootlessness and search for identity. His early work produced during the Cairene years identified with ancient Egypt but was followed by a desire to reinvent himself as French. It was finally superseded by his realization that the act of writing rather than physical space held the keys to a solution to his rootlessness. This eventually led to Jabès's self identification as a Jewish writer. Although he was influenced by the poet Max Jacob, it is equally evident that from his earliest writings, Jabès's work exhibited the promise of a new, original and distinct genre of poetry. Steven Jaron's work *The Hazards of Exile* (91) describes Max Jacob's response to his first reading of Jabès attempts in 1935.
“Je l’ai bien lu”, Jabès recalled him saying, “et si tu le permets je vais maintenant le déchirer pour que nous puissions parler librement.” The manuscript was duly torn up and thrown onto the wastepaper basket.”C’est excellent ”, the poet reassured the young man,”, mais ce n’est pas toi . Tu m’imites et j’ai fait mon temps”. Now they could talk freely about poetry. “Durant une heure et demie,” Jabès related “il me donna la plus extraordinaire leçon de poésie. En substance , il me poussait à avoir le courage d’être moi même, en dehors de tout le monde. Il m’incitait aussi à briser les idoles et notamment, à rencontrer Eluard –alors que les surréalistes vomissaient Max –pour mieux venir à bout d’une proximité qu’il devenait dans mes textes.

Jaron, Steven. Edmond Jabès :The Hazards of Exile. p91

According to Jaron, although Jacobs initially criticized the mimetic nature of Jabès’s work, he recognized the singularity of the young poet’s voice, which although obviously influenced by French poets such as Jacob and Heinin, nevertheless remained distinct. In his efforts to hone Jabès talent, Jacobs initially began by steering him further into the direction of French influence.(67).Clearly Jacob’s had quickly recognized Jabès’s voice as unique and encouraged the young poet to imbibe the glory of France’s literary tradition,. However, he simultaneously implored him not to look neither exclusively towards France nor even towards the monumental pharaonic architecture of Egypt, but to retreat inwards, towards his own poetic inspiration. In essence, it was a gentle push towards his own creative independence

Jabès however continued to be stubbornly drawn towards France. Spending literary evenings with the Amitiés françaises, an organization specifically set up to strengthen artistic ties between Egypt and France, that he had joined to affirm his devotion to the Hexagon, he also embarked on several publishing projects. In 1947,
after both Un Effort and Art et Liberté were disbanded, he co-founded with Georges Heinin a new review, La Part du sable, that published the work of international writers such as the Romanian writer Gherasim Luca and the Frenchman Henri Pastoureau. In 1947, Jabès went on to publish «Le Fond de l'eau», a poem that bore all the traces of the themes which would preoccupy him in his mature poetry, namely the desperate cry in the space of silence and the search for questions and responses.

Je parle de toi
Une foule répond
Des fournis sans voix sans cris
Et pourtant
le silence tue comme la mort
le silence règne seule à naitre
Je parle de toi
et tu n’es pas n’as jamais existé
Tu réponds à mes questions.

Jaron, Steven. Edpond Jabès: The Hazards of Exile, p.91

Jaron notes here that Jabès’s text is already imbued with aesthetic concerns characterised by lyricism, repetition and above all a longing and desire for the other to whom he amorously addresses himself. In late January 1953, Jabès would pay tribute to Paul Eluard in Le Part du sable, respectfully acknowledging his indebtedness to the poet, in the form of two poems, “Paysages” and an untitled one, as well as in excerpts from a prose poem that began “La mort d’un poète est une tache d’encre sur le poème, il faut laisser aux lettres déséparées, le temps
Yet, while acknowledging the increasing importance of French influence in Jabès’s work and his high regard for the Hexagon as the ultimate bastion of culture, it is important to remember the poet’s early associations and strong identification with ancient Egypt. Indeed, Jaron poses the interesting question of whether Jabès’s identification with France would have been so strong had he never left Egypt in 1957, noting that even after his break with George Heinin in late 1952, the poet still remained a literary advisor to *Amitiés françaises*.(78)

Interestingly, Jaron concludes that “it seems likely that Jabès would have continued along a similar course even if he had not left Egypt, probably promoting French writers and writing his own poetry”(78) In early 1956, the political situation in Egypt became untenable for the Jewish community, Addressing his early Cairene poems, Jabès sadly concluded, « Les poèmes qui naissent au Caire sont des exilés, des enfants perdus : ils n’ont pour témoins que le sable, les yeux vides du Sphinx, le vent du désert et l’indifférence des humains » (Jaron, 90). The judgement was perhaps severe but evidently, he was re-iterating his feelings that his native country Egypt, had somehow always been a foreign land to him and that his destiny lay in France. Jabès was of course to later change his mind, famously quoting that he was from « nulle part » and that « Ma patrie est ma langue. Aussi, le pays de ma langue était –il devenu le mien » (Jaron 91).

---

178 Published as “La Mort d’un poète est une tache d’encre sur le poème” in Jaron (ed.), *Portrait(s)*, 10-15
Naim Kattan: France in Iraq

The Iraqi writer Naim Kattan's work also shows evidence of his early, not entirely successful attempts to mimic French style. In Adieu Babylone (1975) the reader learns that when Kattan proudly submits an essay that had previously published by an Arabic language magazine. To his disappointment, his teacher simply replies, ““Ce n’est pas beau””\(^{179}\) and advises Kattan to read the great French writers for inspiration. Kattan is offended and replies that he has already read them in translation, to which his teacher hands him a simple book by the Comtesse de Ségur, which Kattan finds puerile and simplistic. When he vigorously expresses his disappointment to his teacher, the latter responds, “Je t’ai donné pour la langue. Il faut d’abord que tu t’habitues à lire en français avant d’aborder d’autres écrivains plus sérieux.”\(^{180}\) Kattan then begins his life long thirst for and admiration of French literature,

\[
\text{Durant plusieurs mois, dictionnaire en mains, je ne lisais que des auteurs français. Les enfants français ne semblaient pas avoir, autant que nous, honte de leur âge. Pour le choix des livres, je me laissais guider aveuglement par mon professeur. À Daudet succédait Anatole France. Je n’avais même pas le plaisir de découverte. Plus tard, au terme de cette période d’initiation, je ne pourrais exprimer mes goûts et mes différences. « Dorénavant, tu choisisiras toi même les livres que tu veux lire », m’annonça-t-il au bout de quelques mois.}
\]

Naim Kattan, Adieu Babylone, Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.74

Although, Kattan would later develop his own distinct style, like in the case of Jabès, French literature was to remain the barometer by which he measured the

---

\(^{179}\) Ibid p.74.

\(^{180}\) Ibid p.112.
worthiness of his emerging voice. Later, in his book of essays *L'Ecrivain migrant* (2001), he discusses his decision to write in French,

Choisissant de vivre à Montréal, j’ai décidé de changer de langue d’écriture...Venu d’ailleurs je participe à la vie d’ici à visage découvert et, sans me délester le bagage, je porte mon nom. Je ne me sens pas comme un étrangère. Le français est plus qu’un choix. Il est nécessaire pour rendre ma parole accessible à ceux qui m’entourent. Et puisque j’adopte une culture en y participant, la langue devient un objet d’amour.

Naim Kattan, *L’Ecrivain migrant* p.112

Kattan continues by explaining that although his native language is Arabic, his final decision to write in French has been governed first and foremost by his personal choice to live in a francophone society where there is a large francophone audience. Although he does frequently admit to his admiration of French language and culture, he also stresses that his decision was a practical one because his readership would not be able to read his work if he did not write in French. Justifying his decision he wrote,

M’adressant à l’Occidental, j’entrais dans son univers, j’empruntais son savoir. Au lecteur arabe j’aurais évité certaines explications, inutiles et j’aurais, par ailleurs clarifié certaines références.

Naim Kattan, *L’Ecrivain migrant*, p.48

It is illuminating that in *Adieu Babylone* (1975, the youthful Kattan, recalls that he loved and admired both the Arabic language and its literature. Yet as an adult living in Canada and writing in French, he confesses to feeling uncomfortable writing or even thinking in his own language. Discussing the translation of his work *Le Réelle et le théâtrale* (1979) in Arabic he states,
Ce qui me surprend dans la lecture de mon texte en arabe est de prime abord, son étrangeté. Cette langue qui fut la mienne n’est pas, de toute évidence, celle de ma pensée. Elle s’y infiltre, s’y introduit souvent d’une manière imperceptible dans des vocables qui ne sont plus les miens. De surcroît, je relis, mon essai sur le surréalisme et me découvre, à nouveau, dans mon étrangeté.

Naim Kattan, *L’Ecrivain migrant* p.46

Paradoxically, after reading his own work, originally written in French and now in a sense betrayed via the words of the translator, Kattan is confused and is no longer sure whether the original French or the translated Arabic represents his true self. Seeing his work in Arabic effectively elicits an unexpected sense of rupture. Prompted by the painful nostalgia for who he once was, and how much he has changed, he no longer recognises himself. Most poignantly, seeing the Arabic language written on paper reminds him of all that he has lost and forces him to question his belongingness as a francophone writer,

Ainsi, une dimension du verbe français demeura pour moi un mimétisme que je n’ai pas intégré totalement.

Naim Kattan, *L’Ecrivain migrant* p.46

Like Jabès, he resolves his confusion by refusing to accept classification declaring that he is a writer of « hybridité et métissage ».

**Paula Jacques and the language of nostalgia**

The same sentiment of francophone nostalgia echoes throughout the work of Paula Jacques. Typically, Jacques's protagonists are privileged refugees who left Egypt.
after the fall of King Farouk’s government in 1957. Having spoken French all of their lives, they proudly brandish their *inability* to speak Arabic as a badge of their *appartenance française*, and therefore their worthiness. Although they disdain Egypt’s Arabic speaking Muslim population whom they regard as primitive and inferior, Jacques’s protagonists are poorly equipped to accept the rigours of a new life once they are deprived of the privilege and wealth that marked their existence in Egypt. They are now dependant on the magnanimity of the autochtone Ashkenazi community they once looked down upon in Egypt. Yet, despite their disappointment, they still stubbornly cling to their sentimental belief in France’s superiority.

In Jacques’s novel *L’Héritage de tante Carlotta* (1987), after receiving notification of their sister Carlotta’s death in Egypt, the Soncino sisters insist on the need to repatriate her body to France, despite the fact that Carlotta elected to stay in Egypt after the fall of King Faroukh, and made a successful life for herself as a belly dancer. The sisters eventually abandon the idea citing their lack of funds, but not before they lambast the folly of their sister’s decision to stay in Egypt.

Carlotta était folle, concédée tante Fortunée, mais pas de l’homme folle de Caire, je dirai. Il y a une différence de sens quand même !
-Pauvre chère Carlotta, s’attendrit tante Marcelle. Je veux pas calomnier la morte, mais de son vivant, elle a chéri les ténèbres. Préférer le Caire à Paris ? Folie ! Y a –i-il plus beau que la lumière de France sur la Loire ?


But despite their inexhaustible admiration of France, Jacques points out that they are not immune to criticizing the poverty of their reception. After much soul
searching, Carlotta’s sister Melba finally criticises her other sister Marcella’s blind reverence of France, remembering.

La Loire? toi, Marcella tu connais la Loire? Railla maman, tu célèbres la France? Une fête dont le maître de maison et les convives sont absents, voilà la France. Quant à Paris : Dieu lui enlève l’âme par la langue. Tu as oublié Marcella Tu as oublié qu’à Paris l’apatride est moins que rien et rien est plus que l’apatride? Moi je garde la blessure ouverte. Chaque fois que je dois renouveler la carte de séjour, je saigne. L’autre fois encore, l’employé du Bureau des Etrangères- Dieu le rende étranger à sa propre mère- l’employé m’a apostrophée, vous ne saurez jamais comment...


Similarly, in her novel Gilda Stambouli souffre et se plaint... (2002), Jacques portrays the story of the destitute widow of a rich Cairo lawyer, Gilda Stambouli who rejects the possibility of living in Israel, instead choosing France even at the price of Maternity. The reader learns that she has abandoned her daughter on a Kibbutz in Israel because she herself is unable to accept life there. Jacques goes to great lengths to illustrate Gilda’s belief in France but simultaneously mocks the fact that she and her group of friends who are all Egyptian Jewish refugees remain isolated from French Jewry and live so poorly in their “pays d’accueil”.

Bien que venant de milieux très différents, les réfugiés d’Égypte présentent des caractéristiques assez communes. A peine évadés de leur logement sombre et triste, ils interpellant d’une table à l’autre rient, pleurent, s’enfiévrant comme si un rat, échappé de leur assiette les avait mordus. Mais tout cela ne serait rien s’ils ne portaient pas leur querelle dehors, à la vue des passants français, dont l’hilarité égale alors l’étonnement. C’est que si démunis et amers soient –ils, mes compatriotes vont dans Paris comme le cygne sur le lac de Versailles. Et je vous fais grâce des bijoux de Prisunic que leurs épouses baladent tels les joyaux de la reine d’Angleterre. Triste parade! Ils ont de trous à leurs semelles et leurs poches sont vides. Le vide qu’ils éprouvent au cœur est tout aussi insupportable...

Jacques criticises her compatriots who are well aware that the French regard them as comedic figures, but still persist regardless in their desire to maintain an outward appearance of opulence and belonging.

2 The language of exile and the (im)possibility of return

In Naim Kattan’s essay, “La Tristesse” (2001), the writer reflects upon his friendship with his recently deceased childhood friend Naji (Nissim) who immigrated to Italy after the dismantling of the Iraqi community. The reader learns that Naji’s death is painful to Kattan, not only because of the physical loss of his friend, whom he rarely saw in any case, and therefore shared no part of his existence in his present, but because his friend’s death represents an erasure of the tangible proof that his past actually existed.

Au cours des vingt dernières années nous nous étions vus six ou sept fois, et chaque fois, pour deux ou trois jours. Nous croyions notre amitié aussi vivace, aussi solide qu’elle l’était au temps où nous découvrions le monde. Nous avons besoin de le croire. Peut être étions-nous l’un pour l’autre une évidence nécessaire, celle que notre enfance avait véritablement eu lieu, qu’elle avait réellement existé. Chaque fois que je mets le pied en Italie, la douleur me frappe. Naji n’est plus là ; il est parti définitivement. Et puis, au bout de quelque jours, je me rends compte que nos souvenirs communs furent si épars, si rares, et c’est alors que la douleur s’atténue, relayée par ce qui la prolonge, la tristesse. La disparition de mon ami crée un vide, une vacuité à l’intérieur du temps, car ce temps n’a pas existé, n’a pas eu lieu.

Naim Kattan, *Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak*, p.75
Because Kattan’s epistolary relationship with Naji was based on their mutual past, rather than on a present with which they shared no commonality, with Naji’s death, the last threads that links Kattan to his Baghdadi community are irretrievably broken.

Je me rends compte que tout au long des années, j’ai mis le présent entre parenthèses, suspendu entre un passé qui est un ailleurs et un avenir qui est une promesse. Et tout à coup, espace disparu, notre amitié est privée d’un futur, dépouillée d’un présent qui ne l’était pas, transformée en passé puisque nous l’avons vécue comme attente. Est-ce que cela alors la tristesse, la vie qui n’a pas eu lieu, qui n’aura pas lieu ? C’est cela la tristesse. Ni regret, ni nostalgie, mais un arrêt du temps, sa dissipation dans l’inabouti.

Naim Kattan, , Mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.75

Kattan further elaborates on the locus of his « Tristesse »,

J’ai souvent quitté des villes où j’étais passé, où j’ai élu domicile. Je les ai quittées, sachant qu’elles seront là, telles quelles à mon retour. L’espace fixe donne confiance dans le retour. Celui-ci est voulu, désiré souhaité ; les circonstances, le hasard, existent et persistent, mais j’arrive à les inféchir par une volonté dictée par le désir. Il y eut dans ma vie les lieux que je n’ai jamais quittés, que j’ai emportés comme un bien et comme garants de continuité de la vie. D’autres lieux –et c’est le cas de ma ville natale – je les ai quittés sans espoir de retour. Je les ai repris, réinventés, préservés, dans les écrits. Le récit que l’on fait d’une ville, d’une rue, d’une maison, les prolonge en nous, les constitue comme dimension d’une mémoire et dimension de l’être. Ces lieux se dissipent, s’évaporent dans une conscience intime, souvent secrète, nous accompagnent, nous guident et finissent par devenir physiquement inexistantes, redondants, inutiles. S’il nous arrivent d’y retourner, ils nous apparaissent méconnaissables et disparaissent dans une conscience qui intègre et mêle mémoire et imaginaire.

Naim Kattan, , mémoires d’un Juif d’Irak, p.76
According to Kattan, the sole place that successfully privileges the preservation of the sacred places of memory is « le récit ». As in the case of Jabès, the writing process itself is the saving remnant of a lost past because is the unique space that refuses the passage of time. It is within that space that Kattan finds solace, yet he also paradoxically finds himself trapped. While writing about his childhood memories of Baghdad, reproduces and preserves the memories of the community for future generations, ultimately writing reminds him of all he has lost and can never regain. The reproduction in intricate detail of his past therefore ultimately fails to provides a conduit by which he is able his return to his lost childhood.

Nous nous retrouvons dans les allées desséchées, des rues désertées par les visages connus et aimés. Nous nous sentons orphelins dans un espace qui nous prive de la promesse de poursuite du temps. Ni détruites, ni assassinées, ces rues ne peuvent plus être reconstruites dans le récit, réinventées par l'imaginaire. Revoir ces lieux nous plonge dans la tristesse...

Il y a aussi les lieux d'un moment de bonheur, d'un instant : nous y revenons pensons retrouver l'instant, mais nous sommes en présence d'un champ muet, d'un territoire sourd et désemparé. Nous savons que ce bonheur est passé et qu'il est sans retour ; nous nous battons avec notre tristesse qui nous livre à la léthargie, à la résignation face à face à la mort de l'instant. Nous allons le faire revivre et en inventer d'autres.

Naim Kattan, *Mémoires d'un Juif d'Irak*, p.77

Kattan's mourning for his lost community is reproduced by a meticulously linear recall of the smells, sights and sounds of the Baghdad he grew up in. This is clearly shown again at the end of his autobiographical text *Adieu Babylon, mémoires d'un juif d'Irak* (1975), when he recounts in painful detail, the finality of his parting from Iraq. Fully conscious that his parting is permanent, he recalls,

L’autobus s’engage déjà sur un chemin de terre. Pourvu
que ces visages demeurent à jamais vivants. Déjà le sable
nous enveloppe et entend un rideau, nous coupant de la ville
qui s’éloigne dans un brouillard sale, lugubre, sombre. Des pierres
jonchent le chemin et sautent sous le crissement des pneus. A
travers les larmes qui coulent doucement sur mes joues, j’entrevois
les chiens qui hurlent, qui nous poursuivent. Je n’ai plus besoin de
leur lancer des pierres pour les éloigner, pour m’en protéger.
Naim Kattan, Mémoires d’un Juif
d’Irak, p. 303-304

The dogs described by Kattan, represent the increasing number of anti-Semitic
demonstrations calling for the Jews to leave Iraq. But Kattan’s sense of loss is not
limited to place, it is also associated with the carefully nurtured relationships with
his Muslim friends, centred around the mutual exchange of intellectual ideas and a
shared love of literature. He sadly recalls his lofty promises to preserve both his
Iraqi identity and his friendships.

Nous dressions les bilans du passé. Ce n’était qu’un moyen
de rêver l’avenir. Nous bâtirions ensemble le nouvel édifice,
à la culture irakienne serait le fruit de notre engagement collectif.
Les promesses se pressaient dans nos bouches, fusaient de toute
parts, éclataient dans la joie. Elles ne naissaient pas de notre misère
d’existence. Elles étaient le prolongement de richesses réelles, qui
étaient désormais à notre portée, offertes dès demain, dès
aujourd’hui. Nous n’oublierons pas la littérature irakienne au court de
nos grandes randonnées dans le quartier Latin. Nous en parlerons
da des belles françaises et à d’éméntens Français. Ce sera la carte de
visite que fièrement, nous produirons. Nous distribuions déjà les
biens dont nous allions être les garants et les détenteurs, partagent
d’avance, le cœur léger, le surcroît de richesses qui nous serait donné
à profusion.

Bien sûr, j’alimenterai les journaux d’articles, de reportages.
J’aurai tant à dire, tant à révéler que je ne pourrai pas me taire. Saïd
songe à faire de notre revue un organe européen, voire mondial.
Elle ouvrira ses pages à tous les intellectuels arabes dispersés dans les
universités de l’Occident.

... Nous allons nous séparer et nos destins suivraient leurs
cours individuel. Nous nous retrouverions sous d’autres cieux, dans
d’autres circonstances, tel que chacun de nous aurait été transformé
Kattan’s conversation with Said is especially revealing because it demonstrates the strength of the deep ties of their friendship. Unable to comprehend that their separation will be a permanent one, the two friends plan to eventually establish a European branch of Said’s literary review in France. Paradoxically, Kattan’s statement also reveals the enormity of the gulf between the Jewish community’s conception of Arab nationalism and that of their Muslim compatriots. While Kattan dreams of using his knowledge of Iraqi literature to impress the French, and to improve the lot of Arab intellectuals « scattered throughout Western universities » Said, on the other hand, plans to stay behind in Iraq to facilitate the concrete development of the new presumably state that would effectively be Jew free. Centred around its reception and acceptability to a French audience, Kattan’s conception of the betterment and visibility of Iraqi literature is recognisably entangled with his reverence for France and is extraneous to Iraq, while Said’s visions of intellectual advancement remain firmly centred round the future of the nascent state of Iraq which will develop without the presence of a Jewish community.

Jabès and the language of nostalgia

The nostalgic landscape of both people and place is keenly reflected in the work of other Franco Jewish Arab writers who attempt to freeze frame the lost cities of their childhood within the pages of their texts. As I have previously shown,
Edmond Jabès’s early struggle for identity led him to a self-imposed exile. By delegating Judaism to the margins of his consciousness, he chose to embrace his affinity with France. By 1957, his own “sortie d’Égypte” had marked him as an exile in France, and for the first time he was forced to dust off his old connections with Judaism.

J’ai quitté l’Égypte parce que j’étais juif. J’ai donc été amené, malgré moi, à vivre une certaine condition juive, celle de l’exil. 181

While his departure from Egypt emphasised his estrangement from his native Egypt, it also underscored his marginalisation from the French culture he once believed in so strongly. Exile from Egypt had led to a continuation of the exilic state, this time in France.

Je découvrais, en fait, ma différence, alors que la distance m’avait permis jusque là de la gommer en grande partie. Comprenez-moi bien ; revendiquer ma culture française au Caire me tenait presque lieu de filiation réelle. A Paris, le soleil se dérobait sous mes pieds. Reconnaître une filiation, c’est s’amputer soi-même. Paris aggravait le problème dans la mesure où je donnais l’impression, en m’y installant, d’avoir recherché cette intégration.

Edmond Jabès, *Du Desert au livre (entretiens avec Marcel Cohen)*, 1980, p.54

Close examination of *Le Livre de Yukel* (1964) reveals that Jabès’s exile from Egypt was indeed both geographical and linguistic. His sense of alienation manifested itself in Jabès’s creation of discombobulated protagonists, who like himself, were in if not physical then psychological exile.

Et Yukel dit :

Le pays où je vis n’est pas celui à qui mes aïeux ont donné la parole.
Je me plais peu dans ces paysages.
Et pourtant, ma langue est celle que j’ai acquise et perfectionnée ici.
Mon exil est l’exil antérieur de Dieu.
Mon exil, de syllabe en syllabe, m’a conduit à Dieu, le plus exilé des vocables et, en Lui, j’ai entrevu l’unité de Babel.
C’est par la langue que nous parlons que Dieu nous parlera.

Edmond Jabès, Du Desert au livre (entretiens avec Marcel Cohen), 1980, p.54

Significantly, Jabès’s exile is often portrayed as the emblematic feature of the work he composed in France, after his exile from Egypt. However, critics such as Jean Luc Bayard and Brooke Frederikson point to evidence of the existence of the poet’s sense of dislocation and his search for a permanent dwelling even before his physical exile. In his work Edmond Jabès: The Hazards of Exile, Steven(2002) Jaron further illustrates in his work Edmond Jabès and the Hazards of exile (2002), that the title of his poem “Je bâtis ma demeure” written during the 1920s in Egypt and therefore part of his Cairene collection, is proof of Jabès’s early search a dwelling, using architectural structure in his poetry. “By elegantly demonstrating that two of the poem’s four words, two, Je and Ma are in the first person, Jaron suggests that the collection is clearly subjective and indicates a declaration of the poet’s intention, or more correctly, his affirmation “Je bâtis ma demeure” to build a dwelling of words for himself. Significantly, the words demeure and bâtis are repetitive affirmations effectively meaning the same thing”. (pp78-83)

Je bâtis ma demeure is essentially an attempt to define the struggles for physical space or dwelling by a poet who while still living in Egypt, the land of his birth still considered himself a foreigner and a “sujet ennemi ». This is even more
keenly illustrated in the second poem of the collection, “L'Absence de lieu,” which amplifies the theme of physical and existential uncertainty later developed in *Le Livre de questions*. “In the second verse of the poem, Jabès offers a definition of dwelling place, “Une demeure est une longue insomnie/sur le chemin encapuchonné des mines.” In the following line, night mingles with day, and the concept of love, the timeless vehicle of hope in the abyss of despair is introduced. “Mes jours sont jours de racines / sont joug d’amour célébré” (p. 69).” In yet further stanzas, travel is evoked through association with the damp earth, “La terre baigne dans de/vaines visions de voyage”. The poem continues by continuing the theme of the uncertainty of Jabès’s sense of dislocation in Egypt, “Tout terre doute nuit que le soleil arrache à /la méditation et aux épines du doute ». Finally, he regains his self possession as he withdraws into his own inner world, defined by words rather than physical space.

Mes secrets sont vergers.
Le mystère est sans malice.

Mon amour, une rose dans les cheveux,
Le message de l’homme et de la terre

Edmond Jabès, *Je batis ma demeure*, p.321

While the “terre” may be emblematic of impending catastrophe, it is the secret vocabulary of his poetry that ultimately provides a tranquil shelter from Jabès’s despair. As the poem draws to a close, Jabès, restates the theme of homelessness on earth. It is noteworthy that the concluding poem of the collection “*Le Pacte du printemps*”, written in January 1957, preceded his immigration in June of that year and continues Jabès’s linguistic engagement with the exilic state.
According to Jaron, “the poem’s obvious lack of punctuation has a disorientating effect on the reader who senses the semantic breaks, yet is nevertheless compelled to continue reading without pauses or stops” (63). Yet strangely, this apparent euphony, rather than distracting the reader, lends the poem a melodious, resonant quality.

Noting that the first half of 1957 was a particularly trying period for Jabès, who was forced to endure a temporary separation from his wife and family who had already taken up residence on Paris. Jaron points out “that far from being a dissonant cacophony, “Le Pacte du printemps” exhibits a perfect equilibrium. The alliteration of “plainte” and plaie is echoed by that of “de” and “désir” and are linked by the “celle” and “chanson” in each line” (p. 57). Like the other later poems of “Je bâtis ma demeure”, “Le Pacte de printemps”, absorbs the aphorisms of language so prevalent in Jabès’s earlier texts, that describe the despair and precariousness of life in Cairo and his hope for renewal in France.

Despite the enthusiasm of French critics during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s towards Jabès’s poetry, Jaron points out the poet continued to evince a troubling sense of displacement within the French literary community. While it was true that he was on friendly terms with many of its principal personalities such as René Char, Jules Supervielle, Maurice Nadeau and Michel Leiris, who had all
contributed to helping him gain admission into literary circles, from an emotional view, he was unable to comfortably integrate his Egyptian past with his present life in Paris. An agonizing sense of abrupt separation between the periods of his life, evidenced by his epistolary exchange with the renowned critic Bonoure weighed upon him. According to Jaron, “But, while Bonoure reminisced poetically about the years he had spent in Cairo, “quand tout l’orient devenait rouge et que le mystérieux vent du désert s’emparait des rues et des carrefours” (43), Jabès had no wish to relive the past. As far as he was concerned, his life in Egypt was finished, and he wished to put the past behind him.

Despite his protests, the memory of Egypt’s deserts remained the place where Jabès’s imagination was most successfully able to nourish itself. The combination of ubiquitous, nostalgic images of the Orient, of Egypt and the Mediterranean anchored his work, Although he could no longer write in Egypt and had been stripped of Egyptian citizenship, according to Jaron, there was nevertheless, a stubborn portion of his personal history that he could not frivolously part with:” Je ne garde que la mémoire d’un désert illimité où je puisais ma perte et ma mort” (p.32). Henceforth, his writing became obsessively nostalgic and marked by the writer’s frequent references to restless exile.

Jaron notes that “Jabès frequently stated that Le Livre des Questions (1963-1973) was more accurately, “le Livre de me mémoire 182, a book written by a man with his gaze turned inward, towards his past. It is significant that in Le Livre des Questions.” (47). Jabès never evoked Egypt’s political crisis. On the contrary, Jabès’s

182 Prière d’insérer to L Q (1963)
Egypt is neither lost or forsaken, it has simply been displaced onto the Parisian landscape. Recalling his meetings with Bonoure along the Nile, Jabès wrote,

> Ce matin, entre la rue Monge et la Mouffe, J’ai laissé le désert, après la rue des patriarches et la rue de l’Epée-De-Bois, où s’élève ma demeure, envahir mon quartier le Nil n’était pas distant. Cependant, ce n’est pas sur ces berges où nous nous promenions autrefois que je vous ai conduit...


Perhaps as a form of reflection on the Egyptian political upheaval of 1957, in many of the later poems of *Je bâtis ma demeure*, the Mediterranean (or at least Jabès’s nostalgic memory of it) have the capacity to heal the poet’s anguish. According to Jaron, “Significantly, while the “Middle sea” connects Egypt to Europe, it also separates Europe from Egypt and so represents exile, but more importantly, it ultimately has the capacity to rejuvenate the poet’s devastated vanquished spirit” (p.80). This is especially clear in the final section of *Le Livre des questions*, “Le Sud” as Yukel learns of his wife Sarah’s death in the psychiatric hospital in which she had been interned in for the past twelve years.

A powerful wave of regret overcomes him, and he instinctively longs to go south, in this case, towards the south of France. Yet, the reader is well aware that is not specifically the shores of the south of France that he need to see, but rather the sight of the sea rolling back and along its shorelines. It is that sight that has retained the power to connect him to his past and thus give him comfort.

> Quel impérieux désir poussa Yukel à prendre le train, quelques heures plus tard pour le sud ?

---

183 In May 1961, the Jabès family moved to the rue de L’Epée-de-Bois in the 5th arrondissement.
Revoir la méditerranée, écouter les leçons de la mer qui, par tous les temps, conserve son sel et ses couleurs.

Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p.342

At a time when all seems lost, after learning of his beloved’s death, a couplet from a long forgotten song springs spontaneously to his consciousness.

Il se souvient –mais pourquoi est-ce elle et non une autre qui a surgi tout à coup de sa mémoire? d’une phrase détachée d’un récit inconnu dont il retrouvait l’émotion, en la récitant.

« Père, quelle était cette ville dont nous étions les gardiens? »

cette ville n’est pas Paris. Et pourtant, Paris est la capitale de ses sens.

Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des questions*, p.342

The song reflects both Yukel and Jabès’s unobtainable desire to return to the city of his childhood. That city of course is Cairo and the couplet, “Père, quelle était cette ville / dont nous étions les gardiens?” echoes the final verses of a poem composed there. “Quelle était cette ville / Mon amour notre amour / sans pays” (Jabès, (42) during his youth. By reminiscing back to a time when his family had indeed been the pillars of the Egyptian Jewish community, Jabès affirms his realisation that the seductive attractions of Paris, however strong they were, would never eclipse the memories of his former life in Cairo.

184 For further reading see ’Soleil land”; Jbmd, p.112.
The language of alienation in the writing of Paula Jacques

In *Gilda Stambouli souffre et se plaint...* (2002) Jacques reveals a collection of disembodied figures, similar to Jabès’s protagonists who are all profoundly different. Although simultaneously united by the exile imposed upon them, like her protagonist Gilda, they are former members of the Cairo community, and once enjoyed both wealth and social standing. They are now reduced to living in cheap hotels, dependent on the charity of the Ashkenazi Jews they once ironically viewed with contempt.

Bien que venant de milieux très différents, les refugiés d’Égypte présentent des caractéristiques assez communs. À peine échappés de leur logement sombre et triste, ils s’enfuient comme si un rat, échappé de leur assiette, les avait mordus.


Dismissed by autochtone French Jews as comical, irrational figures, the refugees cling to each other for comfort. Their conversations frequently revert to memories of their former lives. Gilda, the widow of a wealthy Cairene lawyer, who once lived luxury in Egypt and now lives in poverty with her son Robbie in Paris. Yet, despite her inability to find a job or adequate lodgings, Gilda proudly refused a life in Israel (even though her it has meant abandoning her daughter Juliette at a youth Kibbutz).

Interestingly, the polyphonic novel, has a strong autobiographical element representing Jacques, who as a child, lived unhappily in Israel. Gilda’s daughter Juliette’s story is a foil for the author’s own criticism of both the Jewish agency and
the Kibbutz movement whom she cannot forgive for suppressing the individual in the name of collective Zionist ideology. For example, when asked by a sergeant in the Israeli army why she is incapable of behaving with the same loyalty as her roommates, Gilda’s daughter Juliette angrily replies,

- Non?
- Non je suis française, moi.

Rivka m’a dit que tu viens d’Egypte.
- Oui, et alors? Je suis française d’Egypte, voila tout. Je parle le français, je lis en français. C’est ça d’être français.\(^{185}\)


Both Gilda and Juliette vehemently reject the Kibbutz, the land, and the Hebrew language, choosing the illusion of French *appartenance* despite the reality of Gilda’s disappointing reception in France and Juliette’s inability to leave the Kibbutz because of lack of funds.

**Albert Oudiz**

The Egyptian Jewish writer Albert Oudiz, who settled in Paris in 1957, nostalgically recalls two different aspects of life in Egypt in his memoir *Une Jeunesse égyptienne* (*Je viens d’un pays qui n’existe plus*), (2007). Unlike Jacques, his autobiographical

\(^{185}\) Ibid. p.358.
novel does not criticise the poverty of his reception in France. Instead, his work reflects the tension he feels between his love of France and his nostalgia for Egypt. For example, he nostalgically recalls the “politeness” of Egyptian society while unfavourably contrasting it with the lack of manners in France.

Ce qui frappe l’Européen qui découvre l’Egypte et qui séjourne quelque temps, c’est l’extrême politesse du peuple à tous les niveaux de la société, peut-être même, de façon plus frappante dans les couches populaires. A chaque geste, à chaque situation correspond une formule de politesse qui est imposée par les usages, les mœurs et le code oriental qui régissent les rapports humains.

Oudiz, Albert. Une jeunesse égyptienne (Je viens d’un pays qui n’existe plus) p.48

Despite his keen observations, Oudiz’s commentary does at first seem to epitomize the type of orientalism typical of the post First World War French writers such as Jean Richard Bloch which idealized the “authentic” qualities of the East while referring to the superiority of the West. This would have certainly been congruent with the Franco-centric education that he received at the Alliance school he attended in Egypt. Yet, Oudiz’s subsequent carefully crafted listing of the different Arabic greetings in “Urbanite, et politesse orientales” and his meticulous account of the precise circumstances when they were used, proclaim him as an insider, rather than an aloof Western observer of Egyptian society. It alludes to unresolved feelings of nostalgia for the lost world of his childhood. More than curious voyeurism, Oudoz’s exhaustive inventory represents a declaration of his longing for belongingness to a world that no longer exists.

Oudiz’s other interesting regret is the loss of freedom to travel within the Middle East. Recalling childhood memories of his family’s annual vacation in
Lebanon with exquisite detail, he describes the anticipation of his arrival in Lebanon, the long journey with his family, (which incidentally took him through the newly developing town of Tel Aviv in British mandated Palestine) the beauty of the mountains and finally, the delight at his arrival in Beirut where his grandmother awaited his arrival. Their ability to travel unimpeded throughout the Middle East is yet another loss that is a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He recalls,

Pendant notre séjour au Liban, Papa nous avait emmenés en excursion dans des sites célèbrés. Nous étions accompagnés de ma tante Marie et ses enfants, de Elie et de Sarina, ainsi que du cousin David Zeitouni et des siens arrivaient du Caire rendre visite à la famille.

Oudiz, Albert. *Une jeunesse égyptienne (Je viens d’un pays qui n’existe plus)* p.23

Like Kattan’s insistence on the importance of his friend Naji’s letters as proof that the lost world of his childhood actually existed, Oudiz’s careful account of his family members is a validation that the Jews of Egypt once prospered and were able to freely move around the region. In his final paragraph he regrets that having visited Lebanon as such a young child, he never fully appreciated its beauty and charm both of which are now lost to him.

Quel dommage que je n’aie pu le refaire à un âge où j’aurais bien mieux apprécié le charme de ce beau pays, la gentillesse de ses habitants. Je connus en France plusieurs familles libanaises de qualité avec lesquelles je prenais plaisir à comparer leur parler avec leur langage dialectal égyptien qui leur plaisait tant. Quant à moi, je raffolais de leurs expressions libanaises pour leur charme leur rythme chantant et surtout parce quelles me rappelaient le langage de ma grande mère bien aimée.

Oudiz, Albert. *Une jeunesse égyptienne (Je viens d’un pays qui n’existe plus)* (p,25
3 New horizons: Franco-Jewish-Arab writers who write in Hebrew

Although they no longer write in French, interestingly, the themes of francophone writers who emigrated to Israel and now write in Hebrew share commonality in both style and content with their francophone counterparts. There are multiple additional examples of Franco-Jewish Arab writers who emigrated to Israel only to be alienated by Ashkenazi Zionist discourse. In their search to carve out an identity and give voice to their experience in a country that tended to ignore them, relying on the Alliance education of their youth, they chose instead to opt for French culture. Their universal themes contrast jarringly with the typically particularistic Zionist discourse and as a consequence, their work was slow to penetrate the Israeli narrative. Often heavily critical of Zionist discourse, they were to effectively change the face of Israeli literature.

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff was born in Egypt to a Jewish family of Tunisian - Iraqi origin. Her work Mizrach Shemesh (From the East)(1978) is a collection of essays which reminisce with intricate detail the Egypt of her childhood. Yet her work also reveals both her struggle to find her own identity and her alienation from both Egypt and the Jewish state. In her work Mizrach Shemesh (1978) she explains that when asked what she was she could not reply. “She knew she was not British, since she came to hate cordially the rulers of her land: however she could hardly think of herself as an Arab for the Arabs were more numerous than other people and they were poor” (43). Although she had been taught by French Christians, she was not one of them.

186 For further informations see Kahanoff, Jacqueline Shohet. Mizrach shemesh.
Yet her Jewish awareness was rather weak as well. While Kahanoff and her peers thought of themselves as patriotic Egyptians, she confesses that “they felt dissociated from the people and the country in which they were living.” (18) While some embraced Marxism, and others Zionism, this too was no solution in the search for her identity. Like many of her middle class Jewish compatriots, in her youth, Kahanoff opted for French culture. Caught between the glare of her European identity and nostalgia for an Egypt that no longer existed, her search for belonging finally leads her to uneasily select Israel as her country of residence.

Kahanoff’s unease with Israel is readily visible in her work. Contrasting the death of her grandfather on his one hundredth birthday at home among his family in Egypt with the sanitized last days of her father’s life as he died alone in a home for the aged in Israel, she writes,

My father died in what is politely referred to as a “hospital for chronic diseases”, although that type of place is more like a concentration camp with full care where we dump our old folk ... Here victims are not a religious or ethnic minority, but a more defenceless group - the aged. My father was an old fashioned man who died a modern death. (Kahanoff, “To Die a Modern Death” p.34)187

Kahanoff is angry that Israel has failed her father. More significantly, in the Jewish state’s urgency to cultivate the image of the “new, strong, fearless Jew” there seems to be no place for the weak, elderly or for anyone else who does not fit the ascribed Zionist model.

As in the case of Franco-Jewish-Arab writers who write in French, nostalgia often forms the corner stone of the work of Franco-Jewish-Arab writers who write

---

187 For more information see, Ammiel Alcalay's collection of Israeli stories. The Keys to the GardenNew Israeli Writing, 1996.
in Hebrew about their childhood memories. Yitzchak Gormazano Goren, an Egyptian writer, educated at the Alliance Israélite emigrated to Israel in 1951. In his work *Kayitz Alexandroni, (Alexandrian Summer)* (1978) the author remembers the Francophile Alexandrian community of his childhood with hyperbolic, nostalgic irony.

Alexandra, a city that let you live a carefree life of a lord without even being rich. It was enough for you to be a Jew or a European of minimal intelligence, and even that was not always a requirement. Money? Money was to be spent on pleasure and mischief. Only the old folks saved for a rainy day. Dancing, trips, sailing, races and cards. You could earn between thirty and a hundred pounds a month. You pay four and a half pounds in rent and you live in a castle, surrounded by servants who make each two pounds a month. What a wonderful gap!

Yitzchak Gormazano Goren, *Kayitz alexandroni.* (Translation my own).

Nostalgic Jewish memoirs of Egypt can also be found in Rahel Maccabi’s work, *Mitsrayim shelli* 189. The author, now a Kibbutz member, describes her life as a young girl growing up in Alexandria during the years that followed the First World War. Marked by detailed evocation of the sounds, sights and smells of every day life, Maccabi’s text provides insight into her privileged childhood. Educated by a succession of French governesses, she reveals her total lack of contact with “the Arabs” who seemed strange and even threatening to her. (p.8-9) Through her eyes, the reader is well aware of the dissociation of the majority of middle class Jews from the Egyptian Muslim majority. For example, Maccabi’s father who is a

member of the Alexandria municipality, is the only one among her family’s friends and relatives who can read Arabic. (p.16), while her mother, who “used to read a lot” was notably fond of French magazines. Indeed, the author states that if as a child she had ever encountered Egyptian Muslims, it was entirely by accident as most of the family’s servants were Europeans. Maccabi recalls that her enforced separation from her Muslim compatriots was a result of her mother’s elitist beliefs that as “proud Jews” there could be no comparison with Jews and others!” Maccabi’s family eventually emigrate to Palestine (except for her father who was assassinated during an outbreak of violence)

Maurice Shamas better known by his pseudonym Abu Farid, was born in Cairo in 1930, and emigrated to Israel in 1951. His collection of short stories published in Arabic as *al Shaykh shabtay wahikayat al yahud*, Stories from the Jewish Quarter (1979) evokes dramatic details of his childhood in Cairo during the 1940s. The collection was published after the meetings and peace talks between Sadat and Begin, to both whom the volume is dedicated. Like Kattan’s *Adieu Babylone* (1975) Shamas’s memories recall the amicable relations that once existed between Jews and Muslims. For example, in his story “al Amm Mahmud” (Uncle Mahmud, 1979)) he focuses on the relationship between a Muslim who comes to live and work in the Jewish quarter and the Jewish hosts who readily accept him.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the case of Max Sawdayee, a Jew who chose to remain in Iraq. His work entitled *All Waiting to be Hanged: Iraq Post Six Day War*
Diary (1974) focuses on the rapid deterioration of the situation of the Jewish community after the establishment of the Jewish state.

It is fair to say that in general all Jews did moderately well. However, alone they could hardly run a commercial business, and only a partnership with a Muslim or a Christian could entitle them to that privilege. By no means could they get a job in a high Government office, or in a military quarter and this had been the case since 1948... Hence, the Jewish community of Iraq was compelled to live in closed circle. Jews had been forbidden to leave the country since 1964, and could not participate in social or public activities. They were allowed no part in sports, arts, radio or television. But all those limitations did not hinder them from having a more or less satisfactory social life. They had their own schools, they ran their own sports stadium, they had their own tea, dinner and game parties. Yet their circle was almost closed. They numbered about 35,000 at the time of the Six day War, all living in one and the same quarter, but a nice one.

Max. Sawdayee, All Waiting to be Hanged: Iraq Post Six day War Diary, 1974.

Although Sawdayee's work reveals the deterioration of the Jewish community and its fall from grace, it stands as a testimony of the passionate love the author still feels for Iraq (even many years after his immigration to Israel). This has strong commonality with the work of Franco-Jewish-Arab writers such as Kattan and Jacques who write in French describing their own aching nostalgia for their homeland. Although Sawdayee's diary recall examples of dispossession, humiliation, arrests, beatings, torture, show trials and public hangings—all of which led to great anxiety about the future, like Kattan, he still marvels at the reaction of "the large number of cultured, educated, wise Iraqis who are disgusted."(26)

Sawdayee's descriptions of an emasculated, introspective Jewish community contrast jarringly with the Hebrew writer Nissim Rejwan's descriptions of Jewish
life in Iraq before the mass exodus of the Jewish community. In his work *The Last Jews in Baghdad* (2004), Rejwan recalls his coming of age.

(I recall) the Baghdad of the 1940’s and my own experience within the largely Muslim-Arab milieu in which I grew to consciousness and found the nearest thing to emotional and intellectual fulfilment.

Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad*. (p.36)

In a further elaboration of his friendship with his friend Abdel Fattah Ibrahim, who worked with him in the Al Rabita bookshop, that he helped establish in Baghdad in 1946, Rejwan remembers the reaction of his friend after Israel’s victory over the Arab armies in 1948. Ibrahim, who had never before shown any trace of anti Jewish feeling or prejudice appeared to feel uneasy as if conscious of the divided loyalties that threatens their friendship. Later, he presciently predicts to Rejwan that the Arabs would never forget the humiliation of being routed from Palestine. Yet Rejwan, reflecting on their discussion, holds no resentment towards Ibrahim, and instead highlights the fact that,

He always spoke of “them “ when referring to the Arabs, and never of “us”. I am certain that this was by no means an attempt on his part to dissociate himself from fellow Arabs and co-religionists. It was simply that detachment which one finds in the true intellectual. And he said what he said neither with anger nor with bitterness- nor even with a sense of real involvement. It was rather a kind of warning, a grim prophecy of things to come. It must have been a subtle comment on the way in which I myself had reacted to those events, making no attempt whatsoever to hide my pleasure and satisfaction at the course of events.

Alcalay, Ammiel. *Keys to the Garden,”* Nissim Rejwan”, p.55
Significantly, he contrasts his reaction the defeat of the Arab armies with that of his friend, who despite his disapproval of the Jewish settlement of Palestine was able to consider the national aspiration of the “Jewish Other”. The older Rejwan now mocks the younger version of himself who celebrated the defeat of the Arab armies, and slavishly supported Zionism. He writes,

I don’t think Abdel Fattah was an anti-Zionist, (nor of course was he a Zionist) but he had a great deal of empathy for the Jews and the Jewish problem. “You Jews,” he said to me on another occasion, “are the salt of the earth. How do you think you are going to manage to live in a state of your own – all cooped up together in one place and having solely yourselves to deal with, depend on each other, earn your livelihood one from each other?”

Then no doubt reflecting on the trouble he himself was having with his own government and his own people, he said in a gesture of mock desperation mingled with his own good humour: “All right! Have it your own way! Have a bloody state of your own! Come to Think of it, why should we be the only sufferers? You will soon discover what a burden it entails!”

Alcalay, Ammiel. Keys to the Garden,”Nissim Rejwan”, p.55

Abdel Fattah’s dismal prediction of the pitfalls of a Jewish state preaching the equality of all Jews while remaining hopelessly mired in a particularism that favoured Ashkenazi Jews, keenly reflects the latter day opinion of Rejwan. It is interesting that it Abdel Fattah, his Muslim friend, an Arab nationalist, who is able to both understand the nationalistic needs of the “other” and predicts the future problems of statehood, which the young Rejwan himself was blind to. Unlike Rejwan, who rejoices in the defeat of his fellow Iraqis and the subsequent ejection of the Palestinian Arabs, Abdel Fattah is able to concede the Jewish right to statehood.
Rejwan lauds his friend’s ability to predict the immiscibility of Ashkenazi and Mizrachi Jews in the Jewish state and the inevitability of the difficulty of their absorption into Israeli society.

“But if you for one moment imagine that you are nearer in outlook and temperament, to a Jew say from Germany, Russia or Poland than you are to me or to Iraqis in general then you are quite simply mistaken. You just don’t know what you are in for!” But I remained coolly unconvinced— and after that he quietly gave up trying.

Alcalay, Ammiel. Keys to the Garden,”Nissim Rejwan”, p.55

It should be remembered that Rejwan’s testimony is a memoir based on the memories of events which happened long before he wrote them down. As a result, they may be somewhat blurred by the passage of time and his negative experience in Israel. Regardless, it is clear that Rejwan associates his Iraqi childhood with a sense of belongingness that he never found in the Jewish state and it is to those memories of universalism and equality that he repeatedly returns to in his writing.

Perhaps most indicative of the extent of anger at the marginalization felt by the Jews of the Muslim countries is the work of Iraqi–Israeli poet Ronnie Somekh who immigrated to Israel when he was eighteen months old. His poetry, written in Hebrew, is an attempt to reclaim the lost world of his parents. In a display of unmistakeable universalism, inherited via the influence of his French educated parents, Somekh interweaves images of contemporary Arab singers such as Umm Kothoum and Fairuz with images of Israel. He effectively blurs the artificial borders erected by both Arabs and Jews to challenge what he sees as a constructed,
categorized reality that does not necessarily have to remain the accepted status quo.

Ben Gurion’s wind teased hair hung on the wall of the café near the transit camp and next to it, in a frame just like it
The doughnut face of Umm Kulthoum.
That was in ‘55 or ’56 and I figured if a man and a woman hung side by side like that they had to be bride and groom.

Somekh, Ronnie.” In Answer to the Question: When did peace begin? Alcalay, Ammiel. Keys to the Garden”, p.205

Somekh’s work underlines two important aspects, first, his poem recalls the herding of Mizrachi Jews into overcrowded, transit camps upon their arrival in Israel, where they remained for several years. Second, by alluding to the famous Egyptian singer Um Kulthoum he reminds the reader that the Mizrachi refugee straddles two worlds, the Arab world (where he clearly still feel belongingness) and Israel (where he clearly does not). His poem provides a testimony and gives voice to the interchangeable nature of the two identities, signifying that the universal nature of mankind is ultimately beyond politics.

Admittedly, there are differences between writers who reside in Israel and in Hebrew and those who live in the Diaspora and write in French. Those who live in Israel have been undoubtedly deeply affected by the prejudice experienced as a result of Zionist Ashkenazi discourse that long held Mizrahi Jews in disdain. Naturally their writing portrays this struggle a priori. Franco-Jewish-Arab-writers who write in French with the exception of those like Paula Jacques, who lived in Israel, did not endure the same struggle. Their work although distrusts of
Zionism, tends to focus on the marginalization they have experienced in the Hexagon. Nevertheless, it is the common insistence on universalist themes rather than political commitment which seem to define Franco-Jewish-Arabic literature. The roots of these themes extend back to the nineteenth century model of French Judaism and the influence of Français-Israélite writers such as Fleg, Spire, Lunel and Cohen. The influence of the Français-Israélite model, augmented by the atmosphere of mutual tolerance that was the trademark of the Ottoman Empire, were vital ingredients assimilated by Franco-Jewish-Arab writers (both those who write in French and those who write in Hebrew). It features heavily in their post-exile search to define a space for themselves within the greater arena of World literature which would extend beyond mere nostalgia and political lament.

4 Identity renegotiated.

While French education imbued Franco-Jewish-Arab literature with an attachment and admiration of the ideals of the Français-Israélite model of Judaism, there was criticism by the rabbis and Zionists that blind admiration would eventually lead to a facsimile or alien, artificial mimesis of the work of nineteenth century French Jewish writers. They worried that this would eventually obscure any remaining identity with the emerging literature of the native homeland. Jabès himself recognized this danger when in a remark to Marcel Cohen he revealed, “Revendiquer ma culture française au Caire me tenait presque lieu de filiation réelle. Reconnaitre un filiation c’était m’amputer de moi même”. (Jaron, 80.) His confusion
was further exacerbated once he settled in Paris where he was certain (mistakenly so) that he would effortlessly blend in.

Jabès recalls that his own culture confusion began while he wrote *Le Livre des questions.* (1963-1973) At the time he reflected, “J’ai eu l’impression que la culture sur laquelle je m’étais reposé jusque là se lézardait brutalement.” (Jaron,78). The culture he was referring to of course, was French. Without doubt, the dismantling of the carefully crafted schema he had constructed since his youth in Egypt, seriously contributed to his anxiety when he was forced to reconsider that the poetry of French culture did not, as he once was so certainly believed, correspond to his own existential condition. As in the case of Kattan and Jacques, solace and homeland, would be constructed through the writing process. “N’ayant plus d’appartenance, je pressentais que c’est à partir de cette non-appartenance qu’il me fallait écrire” (Jaron,200).

The realisation that from a political and emotional viewpoint, Franco-Jewish–Arab writers do not belong anywhere has produced work impregnated with shared shards of commonality. As I have shown, typical markers are nostalgia, reverence of France, universalism and a lack of political engagement. Yet, rupture from their origins and the reconstruction of homeland within the spaces and crevices of the text, has also liberated Franco-Jewish–Arab writers. In the case of Jabès, he was able to transform his artistic uncertainty into productivity. Cognizant of the multiform character of his writings, he identified the problem of assigning a specific genre to his work his “lettre à Gabriel”, in *Le Retour au livre.*

-Est-ce un poème aux puits profonds?
-Non. Peut-être.
- Est-ce un récit?
-Peut être.
- Dois – je déduire que tu aimerais qu’il fut reçu comme le récit de tes rivières, de tes récifs?
Livré étranger comme le vocable et comme le juif, inclassable parmi les livres, comment appeler?190?

Edmond Jabès, Le Livre des questions, p.332

According to Jabès, Le Livre des questions defies generic classification. Neither a narrative nor a poem, it is all of them. Like its author’s relationship with France and Egypt, it is profoundly foreign, and refused conformity to any single genre yet perhaps by fragments belongs to all of them. Jabès uses this to his advantage, to produce a hermetic text that invites questions, and dialogue. He does so in several ways, for example, by manipulating the fundamental rules of French grammar in Le Livre des questions, he uses the conditional tense to introduce an identification that is immediately negated.

Il faudra que je m’explique, un jour sur cette appartenance au mot ; ou plutôt, sur cette non- appartenance devenue appartenance : mon itinéraire juif.
-Êtes-vous juif?
-L’aurais – je été, mais comme le vide est le tourment du vide?

Edmond Jabès, Le Livre des questions, p.198-199

By proclaiming his belief that “Seule la créature sans appartenance connait l’exil divin, car elle est étrangère à son propre exil”, (Jabès, 198) Jabès’s manipulation of vocabulary and subsequent emphasis of words paradoxically becomes his gateway to liberty. Finally, by manipulating the poem syntactically,

190 LQI, 332.
the closing passage of *Le Livre des questions* (1963-1973) “As tu faire et se défaire un royaume/ As tu faire et se faire le livre? (Jabès, 199)” does not come to a full stop. It simultaneously remains hermetic and open ended, with the result that although despair and contingency permeate every page that precedes the ending of the poem, the reader is left with the belief that despair rather than being a still born notion, is the necessary condition for hope and creativity.

The refusal for *appartenance* to a particular category, whether it be French, Arab or Jewish ensures that Franco-Jewish Arab Jewish writers have distanced themselves from nominalism and the credo of the centrality of any agency’s political message (including Zionism). As Jabès reiterates, “J’ai toujours préféré les situations en marge, pour cette position de recul qu’on leur doit et qui nous permet d’imaginer, d’aimer, de vivre dans l’instant et hors de l’instant, libre mais de cette liberté de l’esclave qui en rêve. (Jabès, 333). Jaron notes that this ideology was contiguous with earlier declarations that the had made,

J’ai rêvé d’un œuvre qui n’entrerait dans aucune catégorie, qui n’appartiendrait à aucune genre, mais qui les contiendrait tous ; une œuvre que l’on aurait du mal à définir, mais qui se définirait précisément par cette absence de définition ; une œuvre qui ne répondrait à aucun nom, mais qui les aurait endossés tous ; une œuvre d’aucun bord, d’aucune rive ; une œuvre de terre dans le ciel et du ciel dans la terre. Livre, objet d’une inépuisable recherche ; n’est-ce pas que la tradition juive dans le livre ?

Steven Jaron, Edmond Jabès, Edmond *Jabès, The Hazards of Exile*, p.343

In association with his belief in the universal burden of the Jew, Jabès posits that in the universal spirit of the Français –Israéli, being Jewish carries a universal task, contiguous with nineteenth century French Judaism. While Jews as
eternal outsiders are forever exiled, their universal function is to question and encourage questions and above all to instruct and repair the fractured world they find themselves in..

To illustrate the depth of this influence of the Français-Israélites on Jabès, we return to Albert Cohen's interpretation of the destiny of the Jew in his work *Carnets 1978*. Although written in 1978, the work remains loyal to the universal principles Français-Israélite model of Judaism. According to Cohen, it is the Jew's unique capacity for questioning (in this case, injustice) that leads him to his capacity for identification with the "Other".

La première voie qui mène à la tendresse de pitié, seul possible amour du proche, est ce que je nomme l'identification avec l'autre. Lorsque je suis devant un frère humain je le regarde et soudain je le connais, et soudain, étrangement, je lui ressemble, je suis lui. Pareil à lui, son semblable. Il est en moi.


He further elaborates that "l'identification avec l'autre"(169) not only leads to the individual's personal survival but also towards the confirmation of universal destiny that ultimately endorses the Jewish obligation to contribute to the repair of a broken world. Based on the Jewish tradition of "Tikun olam" or repair of the world, the performative enactment of the obligation of Jewish commitment to fulfil God's commandments as part of the original biblical covenant was a religious concept eagerly taken up by the secular Français-Israélites. It was later incorporated into their embrace of the emancipation ideology of the French Revolution. Cohen insists that this universalism is a genetically predetermined Jewish predisposition.
La deuxième voie vers la tendresse de pitié est la connaissance de l’universelle responsabilité, tous commandés et déterminés que nous sommes par nos chromosomes et leurs gènes, entre autres.


It should be mentioned here that his view was also fully congruent with the ideology popular during the Jewish renaissance of the 1920’s when the concept of genetic belongingness in particularistic groups was heavily exploited and the meaning of concepts such as race and genetic predetermination were not at all pejorative. As I have already explored in chapter two, during this period, French Jewish writers regularly incorporated the ideology of genetic belongingness with Jewish responsibility and destiny within their work.

For Jabès, writing was a means of questioning, yet, it simultaneously imbued him with the unbearable burden of the prophet-poet who sees what others cannot. He is obliged to communicate his vision to an unseeing world, however unpalatable the message may ultimately be to them. In *Le Livre des questions* he writes,

Comment s’expliquer, ah comment ? Il ne l’a jamais su.
Le verbe est en lui, ca fait deux. C’est un silencieux. Il a tant de choses a dire qu’il n’a jamais formulées ; des choses simples comme bonjour et qui feraient plaisir a certains ; des choses auxquelles on ne pense plus, que l’on a peut être oubliées. Des choses qui feraient honte a d’autres.
Maintenant, il est trop tard, trop tard.

Edmond Jabès, *Le Livre des Questions*, p.54

Jabès’s over riding worry was that he had failed to communicate with his readers.

Echoing the thoughts of Max Jacob who had once declared, “Pour les grands poètes la poésie a été une recherché dans la souffrance » (Jaron, 90), Jabès believed that
his obligation invested him with the need to invite the questioning of his readers which in turn, would lead to universal human understanding. As Jaron points out, “If the origin of poetry was a wound, a separation or a displacement, then its composition might be a soothing balm”. (Jaron, 165) For Jabès, who had experienced exile in the post Auschwitz world, the act of writing formed a vital performative bridge towards the burden of repairing a fragmented and broken world. Failure to communicate would have been an unforgivable mistake. Jabès’s enduring belief in universalism as a means of healing shared its common roots with the ideology of the nineteenth century Français-Israélites and continued to influence him throughout his life.

**Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter has been to identify and to define the specificity of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature of the Middle East within the context of the Jewish, Arab and Francophone corpus of literature. By primarily asking what distinguishes the work of Franco-Jewish-Arab writers, a complex picture emerges of a body of literature that has commonalities with the above genres, yet still remains distinct. It is a genre whose “identifying markers” are not merely restricted to a common language, but are also are culturally and historically linked and seem to endure long after the French educated Jewish writer abandons French and begins to write in other languages such as Hebrew or Arabic. In that sense by proposing the emergence of a genre, that although not written in French language, still carries the markers of French cultural influence originally instilled by its French educated
writers, I have challenged the limitations of the term Francophony which has traditionally been defined as literature written in French.

The first part of this chapter focused on the markers of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature and the components that make it unique. By first examining the genre within the parameters of *écriture juive-française* I have attempted to define “Écriture juive française and the features that render it a specific literary genre. By comparing the work of Français-Israélite writers such as Fleg, Cohen, Spire with that of Franco Jewish writers such as Jabès and Kattan, commonalities become obvious. Like Cohen and Fleg, Jabès was cynical of conventional, orthodox, hierarchized religion controlled by the rabbis. Yet, his texts are deeply invested in Judaism and although there are those who argue that he only became a Jewish writer after encountering anti-Semitism in France in the 1950s, as I have shown, even his hermetic, Cairene poetry can be interpreted as early examples of the writer’s marginalization and altruistic concern for the alienated Jewish “Other”.

The second part of the chapter explored the genre’s differences with Franco-Arab literature. Conscious that the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer is by definition, an Arab writer, I have endeavoured to situate and distinguish the Franco-Jewish-Arab writer from his/her Muslim and Christian contemporaries within the corpus of the modern Franco-Arab literature (and Arab literature in general). By identifying several ubiquitous themes in modern Arab literature (the latter which as I have previously shown in chapter four) that developed during the same time period as both Arab and Jewish nationalism), I have shown that the two genres are very different. Although universalism appears as an erstwhile theme in Franco-
Arab literature of the Middle East, with the exception of some Christian writers such as Amin Ma'alouf whose writing has unmistakable universal themes, because of the path taken by Arab nationalism (explored in chapter four) it is all too often overshadowed by the writer's insistence on political engagement (el Iltizam).

To illustrate, this I examined the work of Franco Arab writers such as Etel Adnan, Nadia Tuéni and Myriam Antaki, who even in their attempts to address the “other” often inflect their work with political commentary such as anti colonial, feminist or anti Zionist discourse, with the hope of effecting political change. Perhaps, as I have suggested, this can be explained by the fact that Franco - Arab writers, even those who are exiled, still retain their sense of belongingness to their native countries and the possibility of return. While the Franco- Arab writer has not lost the belief that his/her pen has the power to effect change in his/her native country, Jewish writers of the region have no such hope. As a consequence, such literary output is remarkably apolitical, and instead focuses on the universalist images emphasized by French education.

Ever mindful that the inclusion of Jewish themes and the concern for” Judaité”, is but one identifying marker of “l’écriture juive”, I have focused on the universalism that was the trademark of the Français - Israélite model of Judaism. By comparing Jabès’s work with that of Cohen and Fleg, it is clear that despite the distance of time, obvious parallelisms emerge. Like his Français- Israélite predecessors, Jabès’s work is infused with prophetic images of the Jew as an instructor, and a blue print for a higher humanity. As I have previously showed in chapter one, these images were the very essence of nineteenth century French
Judaism that in order to promote emancipation, strived for an immediate
dissociation from the tired, old images of the Jew as a hapless victim of anti-
Semitism,

Finally, I have endeavoured to link together the threads of the previous
chapters of this work, to provide a comprehensive picture of the distinctness of
Franco- Jewish- Arab literature. By showing its cultural and thematic links with the
corpus of the early Français- Israélite writers of the first part of the twentieth
century, and its digression from the modern Franco -Arab literature traditionally
associated with Francophone literature (which all too often relies on anti colonial /
anti Zionist discourse), Franco- Jewish- Arab literature emerges as a separate
branch of Francophone literature. Thanks to Alliance educated writers such as
Shimon Ballas and Izchak Gormazano -Goren, who now write in Hebrew, it is a
genre whose growth is now unlimited by language and whose universalism has
permeated the inner crevices of Israeli canonical literature. In doing so it has
perhaps at last, unbound it from the ties of particularistic Zionism.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been multi-fold. The first goal has been to determine the genre’s geographical and historical provenance. The second has been to define Franco-Jewish-Arab literature within the context of French, Arab and Hebrew literature, and the final goal has been to speculate on the genre’s future. None of the above has been easy. During the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, history and politics have mutually conspired to effectively efface these communities, so that all that remains today of the once vibrant Franco-Jewish-Arab Middle East, is a potent mixture of subjective and objective traces. This has led to inherent problems for those who seek to reveal the hidden details of these lost worlds, not least is the fact that memoirs written after and even during the childhood of their authors although often poignant, are also notoriously contaminated by the very subjectivity that makes them so compelling. Archival evidence on the other hand, although objective and factually based, has the disadvantage of hiding the detail and real emotion so necessary for latter day readers to gain a valid understanding of long ago events.

The template for Jewish emancipation in the Middle East was the exemplary nineteenth century French Jewish model, that awakened under the influence of the universalist values of the French Revolution. By allowing French Jews to participate in all levels of French life as equal citizens, while remaining identifiably Jewish, French Judaism provided an example by which Jews could successfully live in the diaspora without fear or limitation. It provided a model that was eventually emulated in other parts of the diaspora. In Poland for example, during the late
nineteenth century, the Galician school promoted emancipation through the betterment of the Jewish community without necessarily mandating the need for an exclusively Jewish homeland. The French model also formed the early basis for Theodor Herzl's cultural Zionism, although this would soon change when Zionism eventually became estranged from its banner of universalism in favor of revisionist particularism. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, French Judaism provided a model by which scores of Jewish children were educated in the Ottoman Empire according to a centralized French curriculum that gave primacy to the French Jewish emancipatory model.

As a result of the Dreyfus affair in 1894, Franco Judaism underwent important transformations during the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. The resurgence of the anti-Semitism that French Jews believed was a figment of the past initially shook the Jewish community of the Hexagon. For many though Dreyfus’s eventual acquittal provided irrefutable proof of French Justice. Although the Affair prompted a resurgence of interest in the nascent Zionist movement, for the majority, Jewish belongingness in France was not seriously in question. Throughout the tumultuous years of the Dreyfus era (1894-1906) as I have shown, the Jewish communities of the Machreq, remained remarkably unaffected neither by the events of the Affair nor by the period of re-questioning that came in its wake. Despite periodic outbreaks of anti-Semitism (usually Christian instigated) they remained comfortably complacent. Schooled by their Paris trained instructors who were fervent in their belief in the superiority of French Judaism, Jewish communities retained their blissfully
idealized images of France— the elsewhere that they had never visited but to which they fervently believed they belonged.

So effective was the transmission of these images by both the Alliance and the nascent French Jewish press, that the perspective of the Jews of the Machreq remained stubbornly resistant to the changes that occurred in the Hexagon subsequent to the First World War. The re-questioning of the tenets of nineteenth century French Judaism eventually led to the Jewish renaissance of the 1920s and the proliferation of a genre of French Jewish literature that now extolled Jewish particularism within the context of French Judaism. Yet, outside the Hexagon, within the Franco-Jewish communities of the Machreq, the post–Revolution, nineteenth century ideology of the Français Israélites was still a potent force. Enamored by halcyon images of a France which no longer existed even within the borders of the Hexagon, the combination of snobbish loyalty to France and an appreciation of the very real values of French education effectively suppressed any change of perspective within the Jewish community. It was an outlook that remained unchallenged through the 1920s and 1930s and rendered Jewish communities oblivious and woefully unprepared for the imminent changes that would occur in their own region of the world.

Historical studies have shown that the relationship between the Jews of the Muslim lands and their Muslim compatriots has been deceptively complex. At times fractious, it was also characterized by long periods of congeniality, mutual respect and co-operation. As I have shown, the institution of the Tanzimaat by the Ottomans and the irruption of Europe into the economy, politics and culture of the Middle
East during the nineteenth and twentieth century conclusively and irreversibly altered this complex relationship. The most important consequence of this was the process of westernization that transformed the social and economic status of Jewish communities and eventually detrimentally influenced their relationship with their Muslim compatriots ultimately depriving them of belongingness in their native lands.

I have shown that the transmutation of Levantine identity by a western / French variant through the shameless promotion of French culture and language bears a considerable burden of blame for the estrangement of the Arab Jewish communities from their Muslim compatriots. While the Alliance Israélite worked to improve the status of all Jews, it cannot escape the fact that the organization operated in the age of imperialism, during the period of domination of the East by the West. In that sense, the teachers of the Alliance were also the counterparts of Muslim reformers. In any event, the new orientation towards the West was shared by many (though not all) of the Jews of the Muslim lands because French education represented the gateway to education and opportunity within the colonial apparatus. Yet in this process which so successfully opened new horizons for them, Eastern Jews haplessly embarked on a path that would eventually lead to a radical and cultural and political dissociation from their traditional moorings, and would eventually render them hopelessly ill adapted to survive the eventual departure of the West from the region and the creation of Arab nation states. It would heftily contribute to the dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Arab lands.
The eventual clash between Zionism and Arab nationalism movements in the Muslim world was complex in its causality and beyond the scope of this work to totally assess. Research shows that both Jewish and Arab nationalism came of age during the latter part of the nineteenth century and were both at least initially, based on similar principles of universalism and emancipation, promoting the whisper of hope that both movements were once theoretically compatible. This was not to last. During the 1920's the growth of Ze'ev Jabotinsky's political Zionism, outlined by his work *The Iron Wall*, favoured the establishment of a Jewish hegemony at all costs. The expansion of Jewish settlement in Palestine was to be achieved by all accessible means and at all costs, which included both increased immigration and the expulsion of the indigenous Arab Fellahen from their ancestral lands when necessary.

As I have shown, initial Arab nationalism was based on the Iraqi reformer, al Husri's replacement of *al Umma al Islamiya* by *al Umma al Arabiya*. By stressing that common ties of nationhood resided in the sharing of a common history and language rather than a common religion, his inclusive model should have theoretically eluded to the incorporation of particularistic communities such as the Jews who shared geographical, historical and linguistic ties to the region within the new nation state. During the 1920's this changed when the old definition of *al Umma al Islamiya* stressing the importance of ties with Islam gained favor. This change in ideology was inherently problematic to the Jewish communities of the Muslim world because it inferred an *a priori* rejection of the possibility of Jewish participation in nascent Arab nation states.
Without doubt, the rise in pan-Arab nationalism played an important part in the eventual clash between Muslim and Jewish communities. In addition, Muslim anger at Jewish settlement of Palestine made it increasingly difficult for Jews to retain the tattered remains of their belongingness in emerging Arab states. But this cannot and must not be understood as the whole story. Like the Français-Israélites of the nineteenth century before them, in theory, Arab Jews initially, but only superficially, supported Zionism. In reality, influenced by the universalist ideas of French Judaism that promoted the establishment of emancipated Jewish communities, they found precious little commonality with the primarily socialist Zionist movement.

As a result of their cleavage to French/Western ideals, Jews were distrusted by Arab nationalists as western collaborators who had handsomely benefited from their dealings with colonial powers. While French influence cannot be exclusively blamed for the dismantlement of the Jewish communities of the Machreq, clearly, the self imposed superimposition of their occidental identity with an occidental facsimile left them ill prepared for political change. As a consequence, they were mal positioned to weather the changes that would come with the rise of Zionism and pan-Arab nationalism. By isolating Jewish communities from their Muslim compatriots, French allegiance irreversibly contributed to the death throes of Jewish belongingness in the region. Because their orientation was firmly orientated towards the Hexagon, Jewish communities, with perhaps the exception of the Arabized Jews of Iraq found scant resonance with either Arab or Jewish
nationalism and overall, were ill prepared to negotiate the changes simultaneously occurring in both movements.

The genre of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature has evolved as a complex body of work that bears commonality with yet stubbornly retains distinctness from Jewish, Arab and French literature. The genre’s identifying markers are neither limited linguistically nor historically but they are indelibly linked to the influence of the nineteenth century Judaism whose education shaped their ideology. These traces have endured long after the writers have left their homelands and in some cases after authors have ceased to write in French at all. In that sense, I propose that the dismantling of the Franco-Jewish Arab communities and its resultant literature has promoted the emergence of a novel type of Francophone literature which retains its “frenchness”, even when its authors write in Hebrew or even in Arabic.

By exploring the distinctness of Franco-Jewish-Arab literature, I have endeavored to situate the corpus within the body of Franco–Arab literature. I have identified several ubiquitous themes in modern Arab literature, which illustrate that the two genres are quite different. Although universalism appears as an erstwhile theme in the Franco-Arab literature of Andrée Chedid, Miryam Antaki, Venus Khoury Ghatta, Nadia Tuéni and Etel Adnan, with the admitted exception of some Christian writers such as Amin Ma’alouf, it is all too often overshadowed by these writers insistence on el Itizam, the political engagement so integral to Modern(post Nada) Arab literature. I have postulated that can be partially explained by the fact Franco-Arab writers, unlike their Franco-Arab Jewish
counterparts, retain their belongingness, even in exile, and therefore write with the possibility of effecting change in their native countries. The Jewish writer, on the other hand has no such hope. His/ her work is necessarily permeated by the nostalgic landscape of memory and is often uniquely imbued with universalist images of co-existence, such as the imaginaire of those Arabs who they left behind. Interestingly, this ideology bears the remnants of their French universalism orientated education.

In focusing on the markers of Franco- Jewish- Arab literature and the components that make it unique, I have also specifically examined the genre within the parameters of l’Ecriture juive. By comparing the Franco- Jewish- Arab literature of writers such as Jabès, Kattan and Jacques among others with the work of writers such as Fleg, Spire and Cohen I have established that like their Français Israélite predecessors, Franco- Jewish Arab writers are cynical of the hierarchized religion of the rabbis, yet texts such as those of Jabès and Kattan are still deeply embedded with Judaism. In addition, like his Français israélite predecessors, Jabès’s work in particular, is infused with prophetic images of Judaism as a blueprint for the betterment of humanity at large. As I have emphasized, these images were the very essence of early twentieth century French Judaism that promoted the Jew as a prophet, with a mission to better a fractured world.

Finally, I have endeavored to tie together the themes that make up Franco- Arab literature, to provide a comprehensive portrait of the distinctness of the genre, and to establish its effects on Francophone literature. By establishing its cultural and thematic links with the corpus of the early Français Israélite writers of the
nineteenth century, and its digression from modern Franco-Arab literature, I propose that the Franco-Jewish-Arab corpus emerges as a separate branch of French literature whose exiled writers are no longer bound by geographical borders nor by static adherence to a single unifying language. This digression from the ubiquitously accepted belief that Francophone literature is fundamentally literature written in French, has important ramifications for French literature and indeed for world literature, which warrant further study. Jewish Arab writers such as Shimon Ballas, Izchak Gormazano Cohen who among others are French educated and Francophone but now reside in Israel and write in Hebrew. Their work, permeated with the universalism that was the hallmark of late nineteenth century French Judaism, has arguably changed the corpus of Israeli literature. It has effectively severed it from the ties of the particularistic Zionism that have for so long been the emblem of the Israeli literary canon, proving that French cultural values have actively promoted political change long after writers cease to write in French.
Bibliography

Primary sources

Books


... *L’Héritage de tante Carlotta.* Paris: Mercure de France, 1987


Ma’off Habarborim. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2011.


Samuel, Edmond. Mémoires d’un juif de Baghdad: Derniers jours d’un exil. Paris:


**Primary Source Periodicals**


---

**Secondary sources**


Apiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London:


2005.


Secondary source periodicals

