

Une si longue presence: comment le monde arabe a perdu ses juifs 1947-1967

by Nathan Weinstock, Plon, 2008, 358 pp.

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The picture on the front cover of Nathan Weinstock's book *Une si longue presence* shows two barred windows. Through the window on the left, the sultan's lions peer out. In the adjoining cage, the Jews of Fez.

When the photograph was taken in 1912, the Jews were sheltering in the sultan's menagerie from a murderous riot on the eve of the establishment of the French protectorate of Morocco.

The implication is clear: the Jews' place is with the sultan's beasts. It was the Jews' job to feed the lions. In times of trouble, what place of refuge could be more natural than the sultan's menagerie?

The lions have long gone, and so have the Jews. Almost all the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa have been driven to extinction: most went to Israel, where half the Jews or their descendants come from Muslim lands. A lethal cocktail of state-sanctioned persecution and mob violence, modulated to the peaks of Arab-Israeli tension, has caused the Jewish population to dwindle from one million in 1948 to 4,500 in one generation. It was an ethnic cleansing, says Weinstock, not even rivalled by Nazi Germany in 1939.

Such a calamity cannot be explained by the Jews' failure to integrate. They were indigenous, having for the most part settled in the Middle East and North Africa over 2,000 years ago – one thousand years before the advent of Islam. Weinstock's conclusion is simple: the ethnic cleansing of the Jews is a consequence of religious and cultural contempt ('the opposite of tolerance') viewing the Jews as subjugated dhimmis.

The dhimma Covenant

Following the Arab conquest, under dhimma rules devolving from the 8th century Covenant of Omar, Jews and Christians were banned from riding a horse or camel, conducting religious ceremonies in public, carrying weapons, converting Muslims

to Judaism or Christianity, building new places of worship or testifying against Muslims. They had to pay a special tax to signify their status of inferiority for rejecting Muhammad as the final prophet of Allah's revelation. In return they were given a modicum of credit as People of the Book, and the ruler gave them physical protection.

Although some rulers turned a blind eye to the dhimma in certain times and places, Weinstock argues that the strength of majority prejudice was such that even in modern times a benevolent Bourguiba of Tunisia or Mohammed V of Morocco could do little to prevent the flight of the Jews. The ultimate humiliation was the creation of Israel, a dhimmi state in the very heart of the Arab world.

'The very existence of Israel represents an unbearable narcissistic attack on the Arabs. If the Palestinians had had another enemy, they probably would have met with the same polite indifference shown by their Arab brethren to Algerians whose throats were cut by Islamists of the FIS and GIA, the Saharans crushed under the Moroccan boot or the population of Darfur martyred by militias and killer gangs.' (p. 296)

Weinstock contends that the very silence surrounding the fate of the dhimmis is symptomatic of 'dhimmi denial.' This information 'black-out' on the fate of the Jews of the Arab world is intrinsic to the problem. The dhimmi are non-persons: even veiled women can reveal their faces to a dhimmi, just as white women in colonial Africa undressed shamelessly before their African boy.

Enter Nathan Weinstock, iconoclast

Weinstock has come a long way since his first book *Zionism: False Messiah* (1969) became the Bible for the anti-Zionist left. The ex-Trotskyist has since repudiated the book, even forbidding it to be re-issued.

I have prohibited my publisher from reissuing *Zionism: False Messiah*. Let me add that, while I naively believed – an error of youth – that this book could fuel a constructive discussion leading to Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, I came to realise that this had been unforgivable naivety on my part: the book served only to salve the conscience of avowed and unconscious anti-Semites.

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Weinstock's newest book sets about demolishing another popular myth: that Muslims were more tolerant to Jews than were Christians. In fact there was little to choose between Jewish submission to medieval Christendom and submission under Islam. The image of the Jew, slapped or beaten as he delivered the community's yearly tribute to the sultan's representative in nineteenth century Morocco, mirrors that of the tribute-bearing Jew upon whose neck the keeper of Rome, on orders of the Pope, placed his foot, before dealing him a sharp blow. (p. 16)

Weinstock believes that the plight of the dhimmi-nished Jews was marginally better under Islam, but Muslim-Jewish relations were certainly not the idyll of harmonious coexistence vaunted, for instance, by the proponents of the Spanish Golden Age. Here Weinstock shares the Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis's view that 19th century Jewish historians idealised the condition of Jews under Islam in order to show up that of Jews in the Christian West. (p. 305)

The dhimmi history of the Jews has been disparaged as a neo-lacrimose narrative. This is the charge levelled at Bat Ye'or, who first popularised the term dhimmi with her books *The Dhimmi* and *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam*. But the history of Jews in Muslim lands as told by Weinstock is not an undifferentiated chronicle of massacre and misery. There were mini-Golden Ages under benevolent rulers. The Jews were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire after the Spanish Inquisition and were permitted to govern themselves. There was a great deal of cultural interchange and symbiosis, especially in Morocco. There were times when Muslim rulers disregarded the rules of the dhimma.

Dhimmi status was even abolished under the 13th century Mongols. Commerce and trade brought wealth and power to some Jews.

But even in good times, life for Jews and Christians was always precarious and conditions could differ quite substantially across different parts of the Ottoman Empire. Even within a single country – say, Algeria – Jews were treated better in the south than in the north.

The plight of the Jews was generally worse under Shi'a Islam. Furthermore, Shi'ites considered the Jews 'unclean.' In the 18th and 19th centuries Persia was the scene of repression and forced conversions. After a period of emancipation under the Shah, the Jews of Iran are now back to being dhimmis under the theocratic regime of the Ayatollahs.

The emancipation of the dhimmis

The Ottoman Empire finally yielded to western pressure for the emancipation of its Christian and Jewish subjects in the mid-19th century. Non-Muslims began to break through the dhimmi barrier. The Jews of Algeria, offered French citizenship rights under the Decret Cremieux, were able to escape the dhimma altogether. The Jews in Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere in North Africa, looked to the European colonial powers to safeguard their rights under the Capitulations system. The poor treatment of individual Jews gave France and Spain a pretext to go to war in Algeria and Morocco, and for Britain to exercise 'gunboat diplomacy.' Jews acquired foreign nationality where they could: thus, in the minds of the Muslim population, Jews became conflated with colonialists.

After 1860, Jews were hauled out of misery and ignorance by the Alliance Israelite Universelle education system introduced throughout the Ottoman Empire. Under the British and French protectorates and mandates, the Jews were prized for their new western skills and languages. The Arab Muslims simply could not compete with their former underlings, and the hitherto unheard-of phenomenon of the Arab maid to the Jewish bourgeoisie emerged. The humiliators had become the humiliated. The Jews had broken the cardinal rule of the dhimma: to know one's place.

One of the few regions where the emancipation of the dhimmis did not occur was Palestine. Nineteenth-century travellers attest to the utter wretchedness of the majority-Jewish population of Jerusalem, although the dhimma had by 1855 been abrogated. Weinstock records Muslim anti-dhimmi riots against the Christians in Nablus in 1860. It is forgotten that well into the 20th century Jews paid tributes to the Muslims each time they entered or left Jerusalem, and for access to the Western wall. In the 1920s they were still not allowed to sound the ram's horn.

One field demands greater explanation, but appears beyond Weinstock's scope: why did the Jewish and Christian dhimmis respond so very differently – the Christians bending over backwards to assert their loyalty to the Arab nation, and a few, like Michel Aflaq, becoming prime movers behind pan-Arab nationalism? Except in Egypt, the Jews on the whole did not identify with Arab nationalism. Weinstock's explanation is that Christians internalised the dhimmi mentality and acted accordingly. Why not the Jews?

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It is undeniable that much persecution of Jews in Ottoman lands originated with their economic rivals, the Christians. According to Bernard Lewis, the Damascus blood libel of 1840 led to no less than 18 other blood libels in the late 19th century. To Weinstock, the key point is that their Muslim overlords did nothing to stop it.

Politics by pogrom

Weinstock sees the periodic murders and rioting targeting the Jews as part and parcel of the 'humiliations' borne by the dhimmi. He does not mince his words:

One would be wrong to consider these repeated raids into the Jewish quarters as manifestations of western-style anti-Semitism. They were more like 'little white man' knee-jerk reflexes because the 'arrogant' Jews had stepped out of order, a reaction as spontaneous and natural as beating a recalcitrant donkey. (p. 133)

Elsewhere Weinstock uses the analogy of whites mistreating blacks in the American Deep South.

In the 1920s and 30s, with the dissemination of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Arabic and the rise of Nazism, the old dhimmi prejudice became overlaid with western anti-Semitism. The mob called for death to the Jews, not the Zionists, in 1930s Iraq. The Jews of Hebron and Safed, massacred and mutilated in the riots of 1929, belonged to the old, non-Zionist Yishuv. Weinstock says that the pogrom against the Jews of Libya in 1945, killing 136, was not an anti-colonialist exercise – it was a pure anti-dhimmi reaction. Another example was the disturbances in Egypt in 1945. What could have turned into a bloodbath was nipped in the bud by the authorities, but this Islamist-driven event, injuring many and wrecking shops and property, was an anti-dhimmi riot pure and simple, aimed at Copts no less than at Jews.

The Farhoud, on the other hand, when a rampaging mob murdered 180 Iraqi Jews over two days in 1941, was naked Nazi anti-Semitism. But how and when one form of anti-Semitism morphs into another, Weinstock does not make entirely clear. The book barely dwells on the influence of Nazism and the role of Hitler's ally, the Mufti of Jerusalem, in fomenting anti-Jewish incitement throughout the Arab world.

Conclusions

Une si longue presence expands on Weinstock's last book, *Histoires de chiens* (2004) which claims that Palestinian Arab nationalism was based on little more than anti-Jewish bigotry. *Une si longue presence* is more ambitious, covering the entire Arab and Muslim world. It is a tall order when Arab state archives remain firmly off-limits to historians and much historiography is propaganda, produced by paid servants of police states. As for the Jews of the Arab world themselves, they have never written down their history. There is only one comprehensive modern history of the Jews of Iraq in English, for instance; only a few memoirs exist.

Only now are reminiscences being published in English by Egyptian and Iraqi Jews in their dotage. As the majority of Jews who fled Arab lands resettled in Israel, doubtless much material in Hebrew remains inaccessible. Weinstock has drawn on all the objective material there is in English, Italian and French – including 'classic' academic works by Norman Stillman, Michel Abitbol and Renzo de Felice. (Weinstock does not delve into Koranic anti-Semitism as expounded by Dr Andrew Bostom, for instance.)

Although Weinstock tries valiantly and includes some fascinating detail, he has overreached himself a little. A potted history of 2,000 years of Jewish presence in Muslim lands is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. He is also handicapped by the patchy and uneven nature of his source material. Whereas the dhimmi theme emerges clearly from his last work, *Histoires de chiens*, about Muslim-Jewish relations in Palestine, it does not readily fit each of ten countries.

He is the first to admit that the age of the dhimmi had become a distant memory for the Jews of Iraq and of Egypt. Its only vestige, he argues, was street violence targeting Jews and Christians. Otherwise the Jews were already enjoying their emancipated status, with representation in Parliament and even in government. Iraqi Jews who ran trade, business and transport had little in common with the oppressed Jews of Yemen, who were still mandated to clean the public latrines in 1950, or the Jews of Morocco, locked up in their mellahs after dark.

How does one make sense of the variation in Jewish experience across ten countries? Weinstock argues that Algeria most closely resembles Palestine. In both cases the local nationalism deliberately excluded the Jews. Arabs who settled in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s were brothers, while Jewish immigrants were always foreigners.

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The manner of Jewish uprooting was different too. In Iraq, Libya, Syria and Egypt the Jews suffered wholesale dispossession – it was deliberate government policy to despoil the Jews of their wealth and property. In Tunisia, the Jews were ushered towards the exit. In Morocco – a sense of an opportunity wasted and lost. That said, the constitutions adopted by newly independent Arab states were almost all based on Islam and marginalised non-Muslims. Even in militantly secular Turkey, Weinstock argues, perhaps a little churlishly, that the spectre of the dhimma still hovers in the background. The Jews have never been completely accepted, and must ‘know their place.’

Israel was the only place to which the destitute and often stateless Jewish masses of the Arab world could escape from the twin pressures of anti-dhimmi and anti-colonial prejudice, and regain their self-respect. Weinstock argues that Zionism only acted as a ‘pull’ factor in the case of Yemenite Jews and Moroccan Jews from the Atlas mountains. Demolishing the myth that Zionism coerced the Jews into leaving, he devotes an appendix to the Baghdad bombs canard, long a staple of Arab propaganda. He marshals new evidence to suggest that the grenades that killed four at the Messouda Shemtob synagogue in January 1951 were police issue and could not have been thrown by the Zionists. (p. 316)

For all its flaws, the book is dynamite to readers accustomed to seeing the Arab-Israeli struggle as a simplistic colonial conflict between European newcomers and Arab natives. *Une si longue presence* deserves to have as profound an impact on the Left as Weinstock’s Trotskyist writings had 40 years ago. The book lifts the veil on a long suppressed but quintessential aspect of the Arab conflict with Israel, as well as casting light on the Islamist mindset towards the infidel. It is compelling reading in French, but deserves to reach a much wider English-speaking audience.

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