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'So that we can safeguard your lives': the Jews of Aleppo between colonialism, nationalism, and Zionism, 1918–1946

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ABSTRACT

In the Middle East, as elsewhere, the protracted transition from empire to nation-state was accompanied by a brutal tide of ethnoreligious homogenisation. One of the more dramatic examples was the destruction of the Arab world's millennia-old Jewish communities.

While this destruction is often discussed only in reference to the creation of the State of Israel, this article proposes a complementary model for understanding it, a model predicated on these Jews' status as ordinary, not exceptional, inhabitants of the Ottoman world, and the disruption caused by the end of the Ottoman empire and its replacement with European colonial rule.

Using interwar Aleppo as a case study, this article demonstrates how the end of the Ottoman system of religious communities led to an extended period of dysfunction for Aleppo's Jewish communal institutions. Under the French Mandate, this dysfunction left Aleppo's Jews unable to contend with a succession of crises, including a three-way competition for the community's loyalty between French administrators, Arab nationalists and the Zionist movement. This dysfunction set the stage for the community's terminal crisis – the 1947 pogroms.

KEYWORDS

Aleppo; Syria; French mandate; millet system; Jews; ottoman empire; chief rabbi; Zionism

On 29 November 1947, the United Nations voted to partition the British Mandate territory of Palestine into two states, one majority-Jewish, and one majority-Arab. Far from resolving the dispute over the land, the resolution was the trigger for civil war in Palestine. The vote also reverberated in Aleppo, the second city of the Republic of Syria, which had itself achieved full independence just twenty months before, with the evacuation of the last French troops from its territory. Two days after the vote, street activists led a citywide strike to protest the planned partition. Fearing violence, Aleppo's 15,000 Jews – comprising one of the largest and oldest Jewish communities in the Arab world – barricaded themselves inside their homes.

The violence they feared soon arrived. The next day, a mob surrounded Aleppo's Great Synagogue, and Syrian soldiers who had been deployed to protect the Jewish community stood down (Harel 2010). In the riots that followed, 150 Jewish homes, 50 Jewish shops, five Jewish schools, the community's orphanage and youth club, and all eighteen of its synagogues were destroyed (Stillman 1991, p. 147). Scores of Jews were murdered. Rioters attacked the shrine where the Aleppo Codex, a thousand-year-old copy of the Jewish Bible, was held, badly damaging the priceless text (Ofer 2008). Professor Ofra Bengio, who was born in Aleppo, recalls that she witnessed 'the torching of the Jewish-owned café opposite our home, and heard the angry crowds chanting that, "Palestine

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is our land, and the Jews are our dogs"' (2021). In the wake of the violence, half of Aleppo's Jews braved government travel restrictions to emigrate out of Syria. The community never recovered. In the following decades, the rest left as well (Shindler 2008, p. 61; Reilly 2019, p. 125).

The December 1947 pogrom often takes pride of place in lachrymose narratives about the flight of the Jews out of the Islamic world, and, for Zionists, the necessity of having a Jewish homeland. Sight should not be lost, however, of how historically strange this pogrom was. Jews had lived under Muslim rule in Aleppo for 1,300 years, and were an accepted, even essential, part of the social and economic landscape of the city. Indeed, although Christians in Aleppo and its hinterlands were repeatedly attacked by their Muslim neighbours between 1850 and 1945, Jews had largely stayed above the fray (Zenner 1987, Harel 1998). What, then, explains the sudden turn of fortune for Aleppo's Jews? Did the violence in Palestine really transform the situation for Aleppo's Jews so quickly and completely? Or was the destruction of their community not as sudden as it might appear at first glance?

Rather than seeking the causes of this tragedy solely in the conflict over Palestine, this article illuminates the role played by the violent end of the Ottoman empire thirty years prior. It argues that the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and with it, its system of religious communities, fatally undermined the ability of the Jewish community in Aleppo to govern itself, leaving it unable to deal with internal disputes or care for its population. At the same time, the empire's end opened up a political contest between three movements – French colonialism, Syrian nationalism and Zionism – all of which claimed the Jews' loyalty. Potential danger lurked behind all three. The chaos inside the Jewish community left it unable to commit to any of these alternatives, until it was too late.

Other scholars have pointed out the structural problems that the seismic political shifts of this era imposed on the empire's Jewish populations. In an article about the Jewish communities of Lebanon during the Mandate period, Aline Schlaepfer notes that 'the fall of the imperial political structures after the end of the first world war, to the benefit of the national state, often threw the communities concerned into a profound crisis' (2022, p. 138). Schlaepfer here speaks specifically of the management of *awqafs* (land held by each religious community), but the pattern of destabilisation after the end of the empire applies more widely. Writing about the Jews of Iraq in the interwar period, Schlaepfer argues that 'the collapse of imperial structures' destabilised the Iraqi Jewish community's sense of identity, forcing them to navigate alternative identifications, such as the novel concept of 'minority' (2019, p. 214). A more positive study is Dina Danon's work on the Jews of Izmir, which shows how the late Ottoman reform period interacted with and buttressed that community's efforts to combat poverty and reform its political structures (2020).

This article uses Aleppo as a case study to push the argument further – to directly connect the crises in internal governance caused by the empire's fall with the end of the ancient Jewish community in the city thirty years later. It shows how the end of the empire threw up new external threats to the community's security, and simultaneously deprived it of the tools used to fend off such threats in the past. By focusing on the community and its institutions, rather than the more abstract concepts of 'religious groups' or 'identities,' this argument enables a more textured, concrete understanding of the tide of ethnoreligious homogenisation that swept across the lands of the Ottoman Empire during and after its collapse. Using the terms of this collection of articles, the Jews of Aleppo can be considered 'ordinary' based on their status. They were excluded from the power elite on religious grounds, but also fully integrated into the imperial system, to the extent that the end of that system inflicted a fatal wound on their community structures.

This article makes use of diplomatic sources in French and English, memoirs from members of the Aleppine Jewish diaspora, several histories in Arabic, and the archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris. The AIU was an association founded by French Jews, with a mission to bring 'modern' education to Jews in the Muslim world and other non-Western lands. Typically, it would bring Jews from these countries to Paris to be trained as teachers and administrators, and then assign them to one of their mission schools to teach their co-religionists. In Aleppo, the two headmasters who ran the local AIU schools during the Mandate period, Elie Penso from Damascus and Ezra Menda from

Edirne, maintained a regular correspondence with AIU headquarters in Paris. While this correspondence inevitably embodies a colonial set of power relations (since the entire project of the AIU was built on assumptions about the superiority of French culture), it nevertheless provides a detailed window into the events of the period, and the character of daily communal life for Jews. As Yaron Harel writes,

> It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this archive for the history of Middle Eastern Jewish communities: representatives of the Alliance were active in almost all the major communities in the region and wrote detailed reports about them, covering a wide range of topics including spiritual and cultural life, forms of leadership and self-government, relations with the government authorities, and the surrounding social environment. (Harel 2015, p. 14)

In her work on the Jews of Ottoman Izmir, Dina Danon makes use of a similar set of correspondences from the AIU administrators in that city, commenting that their 'frequent communications … provide keen, if deeply biased, observations pertaining to all aspects of communal life' (2020, pp. 30-31).

Through the reports filed by Penso and Menda with their superiors in Paris, as well as other correspondence and files contained in the AIU archives, we can begin to reconstruct the internal politics of Aleppo's Jewish community in its turbulent final decades.

This article focuses its analysis on one key moment of the Aleppine Jewish community's history under French rule: the turbulent period of 1935-1936. During these years, a disputed election for the Jewish community's governing council led to a bitter clash between the wealthy ruling elite and a vanguard of younger, westward-facing professionals. At the same time, a major confrontation between the French authorities in Syria and Syria's burgeoning nationalist movement led to major unrest in Aleppo. The Jewish community's inability to navigate this crisis, I will argue, prefigured its demise eleven years later.

From Ottoman rule to French occupation

Aleppo's Jewish community was so ancient that its precise origins are lost to history. Jews in Aleppo traced their community's origins to ancient Israel's King David, and called their city 'Aram Zova', the name of a place which David boasts of conquering in Psalm 60, attributed to him (Zenner 2000, 33; Sutton 2010). Like many cities in the Mashriq, it was also a major destination for Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, and its indigenous Jewish population was enriched by a large influx of Sephardi Jews (Harel 2015, pp. 31-32).

In the modern era, the Jewish community in Aleppo was distinguished by two features: the respect that its rabbi-scholars commanded throughout the Jewish world, and the dynamism of its merchants, who used Aleppo's position on travel routes between Europe and lands east to build an impressive trading empire. In fact, Aleppo was for a time so prosperous that it attracted a permanent colony of European Jews, who settled there in the seventeenth century and never left nor fully assimilated. These so-called 'Francos' were a unique conduit of European ideas and technologies into Aleppo. As Yaron Harel writes, 'the European (or perhaps more accurately the pseudo-European) sector of Jewish society, which exercised such a great influence upon events in the Aleppo community, did not play a role in Damascus or Baghdad' (2015, p. 12).

These two tendencies – one largely conservative, the other cosmopolitan – make the community difficult to categorise. Some histories of the community describe it as essentially religious and closed off to outside influences, others as vibrant and dynamic. These competing descriptions have produced rancorous debates among scholars of Syrian Jewry (see Zohar 2007), debates that reflect the conflicts that raged within the community itself, especially in its final decades.

The Ottoman Empire, which conquered Aleppo in 1516, maintained a religious hierarchy amongst its subjects. The empire was ruled in the name of Islam by a sultan-caliph, and Sunni Muslims held the privileged position in its hierarchy. Christians and Jews occupied an inferior rung, that of the *dhimmis*, or protected peoples. They were the recipients of divine revelations that had preceded the message of Muhammad, 'people of the book,' and were thus entitled to

respect and protection from Muslim rulers, but they had to remain in a state of submission and pay a special tax called the *jizya*.

The Ottoman Empire organised relations between the state and the various religious communities in what has come to be known as the *millet* system. In this system, the religious leaders of each community (or *millet*, literally, 'nation') were given authority over issues of religious practice and family law within their communities, while also representing their communities to the state. Modern scholarship has rightly deconstructed the idea that this system was static and uniformly-applied across the empire; nevertheless, Heather Sharkey finds the term useful for describing how 'the Ottoman authorities consistently, across the generations, had modes of interacting with communities or groups through religious leaders, who exercised considerable autonomy over social affairs, for example, in regulating marriages' (2017, p. 82; see also Braude 1982).

Within the Jewish communities of the Mashriq, power was typically divided between a lay leadership, which managed the community's finances and endowments and arranged for the payment of the *jizya* tax, and a religious leadership, which had power to enforce the community's religious law on matters such as marriage, doctrine and Sabbath-keeping (Harel 2015, p. 3).

In the nineteenth century, fearing the power of the encroaching Western European states, the Ottoman Empire undertook a series of defensive reforms called the Tanzimat. These aimed to make the functioning of the state more efficient and rational, and to bind the empire's subjects more closely to the state. As part of these reforms, in 1856, the Empire took the radical step of abolishing, at least on paper, all traditional limitations on the equality of Jews and Christians in the empire. The traditional *jizya* tax on the People of the Book was done away with, replaced by the *askariyya* (military) tax, which exempted Jews and Christians from the military conscription Muslims would henceforth be subject to (another radical innovation) (Davison 1963; Masters 2001, pp. 134-141, 159).

Another part of the Tanzimat was the regularisation and rationalisation of the various *millets* (Danon 2020, p. 152). In 1835, the Ottomans created the institution of the *hakham bashi*, a chief rabbi who would be responsible for all Jews in the province over which they were appointed. Each provincial *hakham bashi* reported to the *hakham bashi* in Istanbul, who represented the Jews of the whole empire to the sultan. Although a religious figure, the *hakham bashi* was also a government official, with responsibilities towards the Ottoman state. As Danon writes, 'the chief rabbinate was recast as an official extension of the Ottoman state' (2020, p. 167).

Yaron Harel describes how this innovation affected Jewish communal life in Aleppo. Harel's thesis is that, by confusing the traditional lines separating civil and religious authority in the empire's Jewish communities, the creation of the office of *hakham bashi* set the stage for nearly a century of internal turmoil in the Jewish communities of the Mashriq. This was especially the case since many *hakham bashis* were tyrannical figures, seeking to control both civic and religious life in their communities. Harel notes that during the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the chief rabbis of Damascus, Baghdad and Aleppo 'were at some point removed from their posts' (2015, p. 1) – usually as the result of their own communities rising up against them.

The *hakham bashi* was nominally endowed with an impressive set of powers over his community. But these new powers flowed from his role in the Ottoman state, and he relied on support from the Ottoman authorities to enforce his will: 'It was not the rabbinate but the Ottoman state that served as the ultimate enforcer of Jewish law' (Danon 2020, p. 166). This meant that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman state began to intervene in the affairs of Jewish communities in an unprecedented fashion. In consequence, the Jewish communities of the Mashriq became dependent, as never before, on recognition and support from the Ottoman state to function.

Harel's account of the chief rabbi-ship of Hezekiah Shabetai in Aleppo demonstrates this reality clearly. In 1895, Aleppo's Jews deposed their *hakham bashi*, Abraham Dweck Hakohen. He was followed by two ineffectual chief rabbis, neither of whom enjoyed official recognition by the Ottoman authorities, and both of whom, as a result, waged fruitless battles against western influence in the community. Recognising the need for a new chief rabbi who would be able to represent the

community in Ottoman politics, the city's Jewish elites, including the wealthy Francos, formed a committee to search for a replacement. Eventually, they asked the *hakham bashi* of Istanbul to send them the chief rabbi of Tripoli in Libya, Hezekiah Shabetai. The committee members also used their considerable wealth to ensure that *this* chief rabbi would receive a *firman* from the sultan confirming his authority.

When Hezekiah Shabetai arrived in Aleppo in March 1908, he was feted as no other non-Muslim religious leader in memory. Thousands of people, Jews and non-Jews, flocked to meet him at the train station, and to watch him ride through the city in a chariot escorted by Ottoman soldiers. Shabetai would enjoy a great deal more power over his own community than his predecessors, power that was rooted in his relationship with the Ottoman state. The *firman* granting him his position also empowered him to banish community members from the city, approve or deny all marriages, prevent community members from being buried in the Jewish cemetery, impose taxes, and command local police to enforce his orders (Harel 2015, pp. 276-283).

Several incidents from Shabetai's tenure demonstrate how important it could be for Jews, as a historically marginalised religious group, to have a powerful and respected *hakham bashi*. Although the sultan had decreed the equality of Jews before the law, and the 1908 revolution had made inter-religious equality an integral civic value, in the sociopolitical milieu of late Ottoman Aleppo and Syria, Jews were still often seen as inherently inferior. In 1909, Ottoman officials in Aleppo imprisoned several Jewish notables to try to extort payment of the *askariyya* tax, even though that tax had been made obsolete by the extension of mandatory military service to Jews in the same year. In 1911, Aleppo's *qadi* (chief Muslim religious judge) imprisoned a Jewish woman, the wife of a Jewish convert to Islam, to try to force her to convert to Islam as well. Shabetai was able to secure the release of both the notables and the convert's wife. In another case, Shabatei intervened to rescue a Damascene Jewish musician who had been reduced to sex slavery by her Muslim bandmates. The police in Aleppo had tried to forcibly return her to her captors, and Shabetai had to intervene with Istanbul to get her set free (Harel 2015, p. 293, 301, 305).

Shabetai was also able to bring his opponents within the community to heel. The powerful new chief rabbi asserted his authority over that of the community's rabbinic court, enforced new forms of taxation, created a new religious school to compete with the more secular Alliance schools, and founded a range of new charities under his direct control. Fearing his growing power, a group of elites soon moved to depose Shabetai. But with the support of the Ottoman governor, Shabetai parried the attempts to depose him and put down an attempt by the so-called 'Francos' – Aleppo's colony of European Jews – to form their own community (Harel 2015, 290-307).

Shabetai's relationship with the French authorities who ruled Aleppo after 1920 was much less helpful. Although Shabetai moved quickly to build close ties to the French, he soon found that he could not count on them to support his rule as the Ottomans had done. In the first six years of the French Mandate, Shabetai's adversaries within the Jewish community mounted at least four attempts to have him removed. The local Muslim authorities – the police, the governor, and others – also seemed to delight in making trouble for Shabetai. At one point, the governor of Aleppo issued an order turning the Jewish quarter of Bahsita into a 'zone of tolerance' for prostitution (Shabetai to Billotte 1924). On another occasion, in 1924, Aleppo's governor refused to certify the results of the community's election for its communal council after Shabetai's allies won the vote (Saqqal 1965, p. 2:221). The French came to Shabetai's defence only rarely, and even then, often after months of chaos within the community.

By 1926, Shabetai had had enough. After yet another conflict with the community's leaders, he resigned his position and went to Jerusalem to serve as a rabbinic judge ('Hacham Hezekiah Shabtai'). He was to be the last chief rabbi in Aleppo's history.

The challenges that drove Shabetai to abandon his position were not unique – every religious community experiences internal dissensions, and in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world, where religious communities were substantive political and social entities, the stakes were much higher. In neighbouring Iraq, Baghdad's Chief Rabbi Sasun Khaduri faced a revolt from the rabbis on his

community's spiritual council, who sought to limit his authority over questions of personal status, like marriage and divorce. The dispute lasted for years.

What set Aleppo apart from Iraq was the response of the state. In June 1931, the Iraqi state resolved the dispute largely in the Chief Rabbi's favour, imposing a new set of governing regulations on the community (Bashkin 2012, p. 65; Schlaepfer 2019, pp. 217-218). The willingness of the Iraqi government to support Khaduri's authority – just as the Ottomans had supported Shabetai's authority – made it possible for the Baghdad Jewish community to settle its disputes and continue to function. In post-Ottoman Aleppo, there was no such higher authority to appeal to.

A new guard rises

By 1935, the situation in Aleppo's Jewish community had become grim. The world economic crisis had hit Aleppo particularly hard, as had a three-year drought. The AIU headmaster reported that dozens of Jewish merchants had been forced to declare bankruptcy, hundreds were behind on their debt payments, and many rich families had sunk into poverty, with dire consequences for the poor who had previously relied on their generosity (Penso 1934).

Nor had the community's internecine conflicts diminished after the chief rabbi's departure. In Shabetai's absence, the community's religious leaders, notables and other elites had more or less reached an accommodation over control of the community's affairs. But this elite consensus was challenged from the outside, by a coalition of civil society organisations led by young professionals. These groups saw themselves as a vanguard bringing enlightenment and modernity to Aleppo's Jews. The Union of Jewish Youth at Aleppo was one such activist group. Another was the local branch of the B'nai B'rith, a Jewish international organisation of fraternal lodges.

The elections for the Communal Council in January 1935 were a trigger for a new round in the conflict. These were at least the fourth elections since the beginning of the French occupation, and all had been won by the allies of Rahmo Nehmad, the Council president and one of the wealthiest Jewish landowners in Aleppo. Nine days after the elections were held, the Union of Jewish Youth of Aleppo wrote to the French High Commissioner's delegate, asking him to annul the results.

In their petition, the activists explained that, 'shortly after the Armistice' of 1918, commissions had been set up within the community to estimate the wealth of each of its members – and that only members with a certain amount of resources were allowed onto the electoral lists. This was the case even though all community members were subjected to the communal taxes, the revenue of which was controlled by the elected council. The result was that 'those who govern are not those who pay, but those who possess'.

The petitioners explained what was at stake in these elections:

> The communal council … possesses extensive powers. It handles the temporal affairs of the nation [that is, the Jewish nation, or *millet*] and its material interests, the collection of national taxes, and the protection of the property of orphans. It controls the assets and liabilities of the national treasury, establishes and assures the execution of the budget, and represents the nation in all the acts of public life. … [These powers] touch indeed the interests and rights of the entire community, and not at all only or especially those who, in fact and against all right, monopolise the right of election.

The mismanagement of these powers, the petitioners insisted, had led Aleppo's Jewish community to its 'current state of decadence', in which few if any of its charitable agencies still functioned. The Youth claimed that the Jewish hospital had shut down the year before, that the Talmud Torah school was closed, and that the charity programme supporting new mothers had been cancelled, along with all other benevolence programmes. Despite the taxes that all Jews in Aleppo were obligated to pay to the community, which gave the Council a large budget to work with, few of its services were functioning.

The remedy the petitioners actually sought is instructive: they wanted the French High Commission to play the sultan. 'Since the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire', they wrote, 'the absence in the States under French Mandate of an organ of control and of a Supreme Authority with power

over the whole Community, has caused the gravest abuses'. Nevertheless, the 1864 *millet* decree was clear: the membership of the Communal Council 'must be approved by the Sublime Porte' (the court of the Sultan). On that basis, the petitioners asked the French High Commission to fill the empty space left by the Sublime Porte and 'refuse its approval to those elected on 27 January 1935, annul the elections and prescribe new ones' (Nahon and Sasson 1935).

Ezra Menda, the director of the AIU schools in Aleppo after 1935 and a pugilistic moderniser who once described the community's leaders as 'the enemy within' (1936c), shared the view that the French should take on the role of the sultan and write a new set of rules for the community. In a report he sent to the AIU in July 1936, he regretted that 'the Mandatory Power never wants to get involved in religious affairs'. With the Jewish communities still officially run according to Ottoman-era laws, but with no Ottoman authorities to regulate their execution, the communities had entered a period of 'anarchy'. In Iraq, Menda noted approvingly, the 'advanced' Jews had succeeded in persuading the newly independent Iraqi government to impose majority rule on their community (1936b). He hoped the French High Commission would do the same for Aleppo's Jews. But it never did.

Aleppo's Jews were not alone in this dilemma. During this period, the French and British mandatory authorities' refusal to serve as referee for intracommunal disputes repeatedly led to chaos within religious minority communities. As Laura Robson shows in her book *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine*, the British refusal to intervene in the prolonged struggle in the Greek Orthodox Church between its Greek ecclesiastical hierarchy and its Arab lay majority allowed the church's institutions to badly deteriorate, and permanently damaged the position of Orthodox Christians in post-Ottoman Palestine (2011). A succession dispute over the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch similarly roiled the Greek Orthodox community in Syria and Lebanon in 1928-1931, with the French failing to provide the oversight that the Ottomans might have. And the French refusal to support the traditional authority of the Armenian Apostolic Church over its flock nearly led to the end of the centuries-old Catholicosate of Cilicia (Veldkamp 2021, pp. 102-104). Diverse motivations lay behind these policies of malign neglect – the British were wary of the incipient nationalism that they saw animating the lay-Arab movement in the Orthodox Church, the French tended to favour their Catholic clients over their Orthodox rivals, and so forth – but the deleterious effects were similar, and predictable.

Left to its own devices, without the authority structure that had traditionally undergirded its functioning, the Jewish community's dysfunction accelerated at a time when it could ill afford it, ruining its ability to care for its more vulnerable members while economic crisis was already driving young Jews to seek a living elsewhere. With no way to resolve the dispute, the battle for control over the community's resources, and the overlapping conflict over the modernisation/westernisation represented by the B'nai B'rith and the AIU, raged on, badly damaging ties of social solidarity.

Competing claims

Even as the Jewish community was riven with internal divisions, three competing political movements were laying claim to its members' loyalty: French imperialism, Syrian Arab nationalism and Zionism.

Unsurprisingly, many Jews had felt no particular attachment towards the Ottoman state, and welcomed France's claim to be the protector of religious minorities in the region. Moreover, many Jews, especially Western-educated professionals, saw the French Mandate not just as a source of protection, but as a gateway to culture and empowerment. For them, France represented not just equality, but civilisation, modernity and progress.

Opposing French claims to the Jews' loyalty, of course, was the Syrian Arab nationalist movement. Nationalists recognised that the French could exploit Syria's religious differences to prevent their movement from gaining steam, and they worked determinedly to include non-Muslims in their movement. Amir Faysal, who had briefly ruled inland Syria between October 1918 and July 1920,

was fond of proclaiming, 'The Arabs are Arabs before Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad' (Al-Ghazzi 1926, 3:655-657). His ideological successors largely preached a gospel of non-sectarian nationalism, of a common Syrian or Arab identity that would transcend religious differences. Their well-known slogan was, 'Religion is for God, the homeland is for all'.

This programme had some paradoxical effects in interwar Syria. Religious minorities, Jews included, were in a position to do great damage to the nationalist agenda, since Muslim nationalists could not be anti-sectarian all by themselves. If Christians and Jews dissented from the nationalist movement, or withheld their assent, they would disprove the movement's entire *raison d'être*. At the same time, Christians and Jews remained socially and politically inferior to their Muslim neighbours. These two realities, combined, gave the nationalists a strong incentive to try to *compel* Jewish and Christian assent. These attempts at compulsion, naturally, pushed Christians and Jews closer to the French.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that evidence for Jewish support for the nationalist movement in interwar Aleppo is scant (though the pro-French Menda suspected that his enemies in the Jewish ruling clique would make common cause with the nationalists) (Menda 1936b). The January 1926 elections in Aleppo, and the violence that followed, are an instructive example of how this dynamic played out (Veldkamp 2021, pp. 176-182, 243-247). As a massive revolt against French rule raged in southern Syria and Lebanon, the French decided to reward Aleppo and Syria's other peaceful regions by allowing them to hold elections for a constitutional assembly. Aleppo's Syrian nationalists (nearly all Muslims at this point) launched a boycott of the vote, appealing to 'Aleppines faithful to their nation [Arabic: *watan*]' not to be a party to 'splintering the country' (Hananu 1926). This appeal left Jews and Christians largely unmoved. On election day, Muslims stayed away from the polls, and nearly all the voters were non-Muslim. For his part, Penso reported, 'several enlightened *légionnaires* and I did our duty of gratitude towards the Mandatory nation and discretely encouraged Jewish citizens to leave their torpor and go to accomplish their electoral duty' (1926).

The election boycott eventually ended in a deadly clash between French troops and protestors in Aleppo's central square, the worst violence in the city since 1919 (Khoury 1987, pp. 185-188). Penso reported that, following this violence, 'panic reigned in the city; the Muslims refused to reopen their shops; the Christians and the Jews guarded their homes out of caution'. Two days later, the AIU schools in Aleppo were open again, but over half of the students were absent. 'I am sending people to find the students in their homes and encourage them not to interrupt their studies,' Penso wrote (1926).

In this instance, then, one of the most pivotal political moments of 1920s Aleppo, the city's Jews willingly participated in the French political programme, even when their Muslim neighbours refused to. In contrast, a protest by anti-French activists, made in the name of 'the nation' that Jews and Muslims ostensibly shared, was taken by Aleppo's Jews, not as an opportunity to participate in national politics, but as a signal to stay indoors until it was over.

As the years passed, the appeal of French governance waned, especially among young educated Jews, while the assurances of Syrian Arab nationalists became no more reassuring. This left the field open for a third challenger: Zionism.

The Jewish authorities in Aleppo were overwhelmingly hostile to Zionism (Zohar 2013, p. 120). Abbas Shiblak notes that the same was true in Iraq and Egypt (2005, pp. 57-64). However, the world economic crisis and local drought that hit Aleppo in the early 1930s made emigration to Palestine an attractive choice for many Jews. In November 1934, Elie Penso reported that 'numerous heads of families and hundreds of young people had found work in Palestine. Eyes are turning towards this prosperous country, and every day we record new departures' (Penso 1934). In September 1933, the head of the Committee of the World Federation of Sephardi Jews in Aleppo, Meir Nahmad, wrote to the Committee's headquarters in Jerusalem, protesting that the Jewish Agency had not provided any immigration certificates to Jews from Aleppo. 'Nearly everyone has the desire to travel to Palestine', he wrote, describing how Jews without certificates tried to sneak past British border patrols to enter the territory (Nahmad 1933).

Economic need overlapped with, and reinforced, the spread of Zionist ideology. From the very beginning of the Mandate period, the Zionist movement exercised a kind of magnetic power over the Jewish community in Aleppo, both by virtue of its undeniable successes on the ground in Palestine, and by the way in which the growing Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine reverberated throughout the region. As communal violence flared between Jews and Arabs in Palestine in 1921, 1929, 1933 and 1936, Muslims in Aleppo began to look at their Jewish neighbours with new suspicion, alienating Jewish youth already fascinated by the Jewish nation-building project taking place just a few hundred kilometres to their south.

Joseph Sutton, the Aleppo-born historian of the city's Jewish diaspora, writes that, 'It was only in the mid-to-late 1930s that Zionism began to grow in Aleppo – although not to flourish. Zionist-influenced sports and cultural activities on a small scale began then, manifested by the 'Maccabi Football (soccer) Club' and small Zionist discussion groups'. Sutton also recalls that, when he visited the city in 1933, Jewish community leaders 'were required by the Muslim authorities to publicly disavow any sympathy with Zionism', showing again the vulnerable position Jews in Aleppo continued to occupy (Sutton 2010).

By the summer of 1936, Menda reported more than 1,000 of Aleppo's Jews had left for Palestine over the past year (1936f). By December 1937, he wrote that the ongoing violence in Palestine 'has, in the thoughts of the Muslim Syrian, confounded the Jew and the Zionist. This state is all the more dangerous since the Jewish youth of Aleppo has, in large part, adopted Zionism' (Menda 1937).

Weakened by the prolonged economic crisis, and beset by divisions that it lacked the means to resolve, the Jewish community of Aleppo stumbled blindly into interwar Aleppo's greatest crisis.

The crisis of 1936

For forty-three days in January-March 1936, Syria's towns were paralysed by a violent general strike against French rule. Protestors engaged in street battles with French troops trying to maintain their control, and daily life in most cities came to a halt.

At the beginning of March, the French gave in to the pressure. Concluding that they could not govern Syria without the help of the nationalist party, they chose instead to try to rule through them, just as Great Britain had opted to do in Egypt and Iraq. The French invited the leadership of the National Bloc, a nationalist coalition dominated by Syria's Muslim landowning notables, to Paris to negotiate a treaty of independence for Syria. This marked a sea change in French policy towards Syria, and once again threw Syria's religious minorities into uncertainty (Khoury 1987, pp. 457-462).

The nationalists knew that, at these treaty negotiations, rights for Syria's religious minorities would be at the top of the agenda, and they desperately wanted to keep a future independent Syria free of restrictions on its sovereignty, such as the minority treaties that had been imposed on the new nation-states of eastern Europe after World War I. They therefore worked assiduously to produce inter-religious support for their negotiating position. The National Bloc sent a delegation to the leaders of the Jewish community in March, asking them to issue a declaration in solidarity with the nationalists and deny that they were fearful for their fate after a French withdrawal (Parr 1936). The Jews did not do so – at least not yet.

But in the following months, Aleppo's Jews began to feel much more vulnerable. In April, Arabs in Palestine launched a massive revolt against British rule, which led to large-scale violence between Jewish and Arab armed groups. The Great Revolt excited anti-Zionist and, implicitly, anti-Jewish sentiment in Aleppo. In May, a group of Muslim shaykhs in Aleppo launched a moral purity campaign to discourage Muslims from frequenting establishments where alcohol was served or where men and women moved in the same space – especially cinemas, cafés and concert halls. Soon, this campaign expanded in scope. Maʿruf Dawalibi, a young shaykh with close ties to the National Bloc (Khoury 1987, pp. 421, 474) (and a future prime minister of Syria), called for a boycott 'not just of Zionist settlers' products but also of the cloth manufactured by native Christian and Jewish weaving

establishments' (Watenpaugh 2006, p. 266). The boycott call quickly received a wide following (Union des Français de l'étranger 1936).

This boycott campaign, of course, was distinctly at odds with the Bloc's goal of suppressing anti-minority sentiment and garnering non-Muslim support, and the Bloc leadership soon intervened to denounce it (Meyrier 1936, Watenpaugh 2006, p. 266). But the boycott and violence did not end completely. Later in the summer, Menda wrote that Jews in the city were continuing to be boycotted, that Jewish merchants were being threatened with death to keep them from attending the city's weekly markets, and that the call to boycott Jews was spreading to the nearby town of Afrin. The director related disquieting reports of a rabbi being attacked in Aleppo's heavily-Jewish Jamiliya quarter, of Jewish schoolchildren being harassed in the street, and of windows being smashed in Aleppo's poor Jewish quarters and police refusing to intervene (1936f).

It was in this context that a terse telegram was sent from Aleppo to the French Prime Minister's office. Signed by five leaders of Aleppo's Jewish communal council, it read only, 'We support the Syrian Delegation in all its claims' (Copie du Télégramme 1936).

Two days before the Jewish communal council sent this telegram, Menda sent his own letter to the AIU headquarters in Paris. 'Last night at 10 o'clock', Menda wrote,

> the Jewish Consistory of Aleppo sent, with the greatest secrecy, a delegation formed of important personalities in the Jewish community to inform me of the following matter: The representatives of the Syrian Nationalist Bloc have asked the Jewish Community of Aleppo to address to the French government a telegram approving and supporting all the Syrian claims, obliging them as well to renounce their rights as minorities and the French protection that the Treaty being elaborated at Paris would accord them. Here are the terms in which the representatives of the Syrian Nationalist Bloc of Aleppo asked the Jewish Community to send this message: 'We ask that you send this message in the goal of appeasing the Arab population, which is excited against the Jews by the events in Palestine, so that we can safeguard your lives and your property'.

According to Menda, the covert delegation had asked him to 'secretly inform the AIU of the real situation and ask it to intervene to resolve this delicate question'. The Jews of Aleppo, Menda said, 'like all the other minorities of Syria, despite the apparent protestations to the contrary, want to be placed under the permanent protection of France and not be delivered into the hands of a people whose ambition, fanaticism, aggressive instinct and inconstancy continually threaten their right to life'.

Menda told the AIU that, 'Today, the representatives of the Jewish community feel forced to send this message to Paris which will perhaps be followed by several others equally obtained under threat. The signatories to the message will abstain from specifying the official functions which they hold in the Community' (1936a). Two days later, he passed along a copy of the telegram sent by the leaders of the Jewish community. As Menda had predicted, they had added to it only their names, not their titles (Copie du Télégramme 1936). A few weeks later, the AIU wrote back to Menda, saying, 'The concerns which your latest letters raised have deeply worried us. What is necessary has been done' (AIU Secretary 1936).

Was Menda telling the truth? It is conceivable that he, as a bitter opponent of both the Communal Council and the nationalist movement, having gotten wind that the Council was about to express its support for the Syrian Delegation, tried to pre-empt them by inventing this story. Perhaps he was even recruited by French intelligence officers in Aleppo eager to avoid an end to French rule. However, fabricating such a story would have been both risky and superfluous. The AIU as an organisation largely shared Menda's hostility to the Council and support for French rule in Syria, and Menda could just as easily have asked the AIU to intervene with the French government on the grounds that the Council was, once again in their view, betraying Jewish interests.

Read one way, the community leadership had chosen, at long last, to make common cause with the nationalists who claimed Aleppo's Jews as part of the Syrian Arab nation, while Menda and his allies worked furiously to undermine them. Read another way, the threats the nationalists made against the Jewish community produced a rare moment of cooperation between the community's warring factions. Forced to send a message under duress, the Communal Council used their own adversary, Menda, to send another message to Paris behind the nationalists' back. Whatever the

case, the questions raised by the seemingly imminent independence of Syria would soon lead to yet another clash within the community.

The reorganisation question

Even as the French were negotiating with Syrian nationalists on a treaty of independence, they were also trying to fulfil one of their long-held goals: the rationalisation and secularisation of Syria's personal status system, and the religious communities that comprised it.

Under Ottoman law, different religious communities were governed by different personal status regimes, based on the religious law of each community (with Islamic religious law being supreme in case of disagreement). A person's religious identity determined who they could and could not marry, and which community's religious law would apply in case of divorce, marriage disputes or disagreements over child custody. French administrators sought to reform this system, and especially make it possible for people to opt out of it – to change the religious community they belonged to, or to benefit from civil marriage and family law if they chose. Unsurprisingly, this project drew widespread opposition from Christian and Muslim religious leaders and was never fully realised (Méouchy 2006).

On 13 March 1936, as the nationalist delegates were still on their way to Paris, French High Commissioner Martel issued Decree No. 60, reforming Syria's personal status system. Its implementation was immediately put on hold while talks with religious leaders dragged on, but its contents hung like a sword of Damocles over Syria's religious communities, especially with independence seemingly in sight.

The decree granted provisional recognition to ten Christian 'personal status communities', five Muslim ones, and to the three Jewish communities of Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut separately. To obtain full recognition, which would give the community's official decisions the force of law, each community would have to submit a draft constitution, defining the organisation of its leadership, how its leaders were chosen, the jurisdiction of its religious courts, how communal property would be managed, and more – that is, precisely the things Aleppo's Jews had been arguing about for decades (Haut-Commissariat 1936, pp. 170-173).

For a community as disorganised and divided as the Jewish community of Aleppo, this decree was a grave ultimatum. But for the dissenters opposing the existing communal council, it represented an opportunity. The B'nai B'rith, the Union of Jewish Youth and the AIU director Menda tried to use this decree, and Syria's looming independence, to pressure the Council to negotiate with them on a new statute for the community.

On 4 August 1936, Menda invited the Communal Council and the leaders of the B'nai B'rith and the Union of Jewish Youth to a meeting at his house to discuss drawing up a statute. Rahmo Nehmad, the long-serving president of the community, did not come; only three of the Council's nine members did.

According to notes taken by a B'nai B'rith member, Menda began the meeting by stressing the urgency of organising the community before the treaty of independence came into force. The council members angrily rejected the idea that the community was 'disorganised', and stated that the community was governed by a *firman* from the Ottoman sultan. They admitted, however, that a commission should be drawn up to make a formal submission in accordance with the decree. Menda and the notetaker asked for the commission to be appointed then and there. The Council members protested that with only three members present (the president, they said, had personal affairs to attend to) they could take no action, and anyway, shouldn't they wait to see how the Jewish communities in Beirut and Damascus handled the question? From that point, Menda wrote, 'excitement began to build in the meeting'. The discussion dissolved into insults and threats, some of which came from the notetaker, and at least one council member stormed out.

In the days that followed, rumours spread that the president had been on the verge of sending the local police to keep the meeting from happening, and that he was threatening to have Isaac Marcos, the president of the B'nai B'rith lodge, expelled from the community. Marcos, who had

already survived one such excommunication in 1926, retorted, 'If Mr. Nehmad thinks he is strong enough to excommunicate me, I am ready to suffer his attacks and intrigues. I await them with feet firmly planted' (Procès-Verbal 1936).

In retrospect, it seems clear that the youth activists overestimated their leverage. Just because the Communal Council would have to submit a statute to the French did not mean they had to offer their opponents any hand in writing it. In fact, Menda was convinced that the Council was trying to run out the clock. 'The current rich and obtuse leaders enjoy a certain influence with the Arab authorities. If the Community at Aleppo is only organised after the ratification of the treaty … it is very likely that they will be able to impose the statutes they would like' (Menda 1936b).

In the wake of this disastrous meeting, the youth party in the community set to work preparing yet another petition calling on the French High Commission to intervene (Menda 1936d). It does not seem to have been any more effective. In December 1937, over a year later, Menda lamented that 'it is rare to find a community where the apathy, the hatred, the cowardice and the lack of desire to do good reign with more intensity than in Aleppo'. As an example of the community's self-destructive tendencies, Menda pointed to the telegram the Communal Council sent to Paris during the treaty negotiations: 'Did the leaders of the Community not send a message to Paris renouncing their rights as a minority, while no other Jewish community of importance consented to send a similar message?' At this very moment, Menda wrote, the members of the community were using the press to 'accuse each other of Zionism in order to discredit each other with the fanatical Muslim element' (Menda 1936e).

In the end, the community's dysfunction outlived the end of French rule in Syria. Following the evacuation of French troops from Syria in April 1946, the independence government forced all the French schools in the country – including the AIU schools – to close and seek special authorisation to reopen after they had met certain requirements, including receiving the approval of the religious community they were attached to. Getting the approval of a community as divided as the Jewish community was no small feat. Jennifer Dueck writes, 'It took considerably longer in Aleppo [than in Damascus] to reopen the school, not because of difficulty with the Syrian government, but rather because of divisions within the Aleppine Jewish community'. The AIU schools in Aleppo did not reopen until September 1947 (Dueck 2010, p. 88). Three months later, the anti-Jewish riots in Aleppo would bring Jewish communal life in Aleppo to an end forever.

Conclusion

The destruction of the Jewish community in Aleppo is usually presented as a by-product of the creation of the state of Israel. In this telling, with the partition of Palestine, a furious Syrian state and society pushed Aleppo's Jews out, and the Zionists pulled them in. The community's destruction is thus depicted as the function of nationalist politics at a regional, not a local scale.

The sorry events examined here, however, force us to consider alternative, or at least complementary, explanations. By the time the December 1947 pogrom took place, the Jewish community in Aleppo had been without a chief rabbi for over twenty years. Many of its charitable and educational institutions seem to have ceased to function, at a time when a prolonged economic crisis was impoverishing the previously prosperous community. If the figures provided by Ezra Menda are to be trusted, almost ten percent of Aleppo's Jews had already emigrated to Palestine by mid-1936. For comparison, around five per cent of Iraq's Jews migrated to Palestine in same time period, overwhelmingly Jews of Kurdish origin (Shiblak 2005, p. 36, 63-64). As the sectarian-tinged battle for Syrian independence and the Great Revolt in Palestine erupted almost simultaneously that year, Aleppo's Jews found themselves in an extremely delicate position, lacking either a unified response to the events affecting their community, or the ability to devise one.

The community's internal conflicts existed in a mutually-reinforcing cycle with the external three-way competition for the Jews' loyalty that accompanied the messy transition from empire to nation-state in the region. The demise of the Ottoman State and the resulting lack of a singular external

authority made it impossible for any party in the community to establish itself over the others. As a result, no one in the Jewish community was able to bind their community to either French imperialism, Syrian Arab nationalism or Zionism. The resulting indeterminacy made the community suspect for partisans of all three.

Added to the problem of this competition for the Jews' loyalty was the administrative chaos caused by the French occupation. Hostile local officials took advantage of the disorder to inflict misery on the Jewish community, and French officials were often slow to respond, assuming they did at all. When the French Mandate authorities launched their attempt to reform the personal status system in 1936, even the very definition of the community was thrown into question.

Would a better-organised community, with a strong, united leadership that enjoyed both legitimacy with Aleppo's Jews and good relationships with local authorities, have been less vulnerable to events like the pogrom of 1947? It is impossible to say for certain. However, the tragic history of the Aleppo Jewish community invites us to attend to the multiple ways in which the rise of nationalism in the Middle East might have led to its ethnoreligious homogenisation. Nationalism did not just create new conflicts over identity. It destabilised *communities*, communities that religious and ethnic minorities depended on to make their way in a polity that had never belonged to them. The modern nationalist mode of governance – whether the variety the French tried to implant in Syria, or the one practiced by the Syrian Arab independence movement – promised to make religious minorities into equal citizens. Instead, and all too often, it only destroyed the limited protections they had painstakingly preserved over the centuries.

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Notes on contributor

Joel Veldkamp is an independent scholar specializing in modern Syrian history. He received his doctorate in international history from the Geneva Graduate Institute in 2021, with a dissertation concerning the Christian communities of Mandate Aleppo. He currently serves as the editor of the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin.

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