

Rania Kataf

Hidden Stories of Damascene Jews

A collection of the cultural memory of the last generation of Jews in Damascus

Working Paper II

The Course of (Hi)Stories.
The Narratives of Migrants to Germany
Regarding Jews, Judaism, the Shoah
and Israel

The Course of (Hi)stories is a project by Minor-Kontor and is funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education and the Federal Foreign Office. The project is under the patronage of the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas.



Rania Kataf

Hidden Stories of Damascene Jews

A collection of the cultural memory of the last generation of Jews in Damascus

Working Paper II

The Course of (Hi)Stories.
The Narratives of Migrants to Germany
Regarding Jews, Judaism, the Shoah
and Israel



"The Course of (Hi)Stories. The Narratives of Migrants to Germany Regarding Jews, Judaism, the Shoah and Israel" is a project of Minor – Projektkontor für Bildung und Forschung.
Project duration is from July 2019 until the end of 2022.

Editors: Tanja Lenuweit, Anna-E. Hampel

Layout: Gaston Isoz

November 2020

Minor – Projektkontor für Bildung und Forschung gGmbH
Alt-Reinickendorf 25
13407 Berlin

www.minor-kontor.de

Kontakt: t.lenuweit@minor-kontor.de

www.minor-kontor.de/der-gang-der-geschichten



Table of content

Editors' Preface	6
Rania Kataf Hidden Stories of Damascene Jews. A collection of the cultural memory of the last generation of Jews in Damascus	11
I. Introduction	11
II. Traces	15
1. A 1924 Letter to the Government	16
2. A Student Statistic and a Hebrew School Book	18
3. Jewish Homes	20
4. The Frenj Synagogue	21
5. A Memorial in the Menarsha Synagogue	22
6. Temples and Snakes: Jewish Motifs	23
7. The Syrian Lira of 1977	24
III. Interviews	27
Albert Qamoo	27
Njour Zaki Shamoutoub (Eid)	34
Rachel Qamoo	38
Joseph Jajati	43
Ibrahim Abu Hamra	47
Maurice Nseiri	49
Literature	54
Timeline	59

Editors' Preface

The project “The Course of Histories” investigates narratives about Jews, Judaism, the Shoah and Israel in four specific countries of origin of immigrants and their respective communities in Germany. Its focus is on two countries of the WANA region (Syria, Morocco) and two countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia). In a first step, experts carry out in-depth research on narratives about Jews, Judaism, the Shoah and Israel in these countries. This is not only to identify anti-Semitic stereotypes but also positive images. Furthermore, the research papers integrate Jewish experiences and perspectives in the countries of origin and make them more visible.

In a next step, the project will evaluate these narratives' relevance and resonance in German societies, how they change, if and how they connect to pre-existing narratives prevalent in Germany, and finally, which interdependencies occur.

In a first paper under the title “From a Local to a Global Community. On the Jewish History of Syria”, published in German in July 2020, Ansar Jasim gives an overview of the history of Jewish life in Syria from the 19th century until today. By tracing the political, social, and economic circumstances of Jewish life in Syria under Ottoman rule, French mandate, and after independence and the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the paper provides a basis for putting personal and collective narratives into context. It also questions concepts such as “minority” that limit our current, nation-state shaped understanding of social co-existence and justify suppressive politics in the name of “minority protection”. This, too, can broaden our perspective for understanding the personal Syrian narratives about Jews, Judaism, the Shoah and Israel presented in other publications of the project.

Rania Kataf's research on the traces and stories of the last generation of Jews in Damascus is the first personal narrative-based publication. By tracing places, objects, and documents that are evidence of Jewish presence in her city; and through narrative interviews with some of the last Jews still living or having lived in Damascus, she provides a unique testimony to the long and diverse history of Jewish life in a place that was once the urban centre of Syrian Jewry along with Aleppo. This is all the more significant because Damascus – the former home and place of living – is becoming a place of memory and only a handful of people can still talk about their experiences as Jews in the city: They are (for the time being) the last, small generation of Jews living in Damascus. Moreover, the ongoing war in Syria has shown how vulnerable and perishable the objects and buildings are that Rania Kataf visited and took as a starting point to investigate the history of Syrian Jewry.

In the fall of 2019, Rania Kataf conducted interviews with six Syrian Jews of different ages and professions, most of them male, all of them having an urban upper middle class background, three of whom are still in Damascus and three have already emigrated to Brooklyn (New York City, USA), where one of the largest Syrian Jewish diaspora communities has grown. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated into English by Rania Kataf.

All the interviews have some central themes in common: the deteriorating situation of Jews in Syria as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and anti-Jewish restrictions imposed by the Syrian governments, the subsequent emigration of a large part of the Syrian Jewish population, a look back at “better” times in the late Ottoman period, but also, above all, elements of a natural everyday life and peaceful co-existence in the urban interconfessional society of Damascus: professions, education, neighbourly friendships, central places and quarters, etc. For all of them, these memories and descriptions lead to a reflection on their strong sense of belonging to this urban, Arabic community – in Damascus as well as in the diaspora – and on the concrete decision to emigrate or to stay. All of them identify themselves naturally as both Arab and Jewish, two attributes that are often understood as contradictory under today’s political circumstances.

Despite these similarities, the interviews cannot be representative of all Syrian Jewish experiences. They neither reflect the opinions of the project nor those of many Jewish and non-Jewish Syrians.

This is especially true for the political statements of the interviewees. Here, we must keep in mind under which circumstances the interviews were made: The three interviewees still residing in Damascus live under conditions in which political statements and evaluations must be made – and therefore also be read – with caution. Uncritical or idealizing political statements about the governments under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad are not only the result of their strict suppression of opponents, but also of a “minority” policy that aims to promote the regime as the guardian of religious “minorities”, thus instrumentalizing them for their own legitimization and retention of power, and making their members especially dependent on them. This strategy is embedded in a policy that relies on and therefore fosters sectarianism: the need for a “guarantor of peaceful co-existence” between sectarian groups is itself guaranteed by a structuring of society, politics and military that intensifies sectarian divisions and tensions (Stolleis 2015: 8–10). Aside from the fact that many restrictions on Jews and anti-Jewish statements in the context of a strict anti-Israeli policy kept persisting after Hafez al-Assad put himself into power in 1970, the relief that the interviewees describe having experienced under his rule is not necessarily proof of an appreciative and democratic approach towards groups of citizens who are marked as minorities. Rather, to lift restrictions was often the consequence of pragmatic considerations and foreign policy pressure (Jasim 2020: 34, Zenner 2000: 61).

The interviews from the New York diaspora perspective – especially those of Ibrahim Abu Hamra and Joseph Jajati – are an example of how narratives are passed on and changed through generations: although both left Damascus at an early age, they remember life in the city as if they had lived it themselves. More than that, they express a particularly strong sense of identification with the Damascus community and their assessment of the situation in their country of origin sometimes sounds idealizing. This nostalgic and idealizing view leaves open the question why their families, like most other Jews, nevertheless decided to leave the country.

This finds a parallel in the retrospective view of Jewish life in Syria under Ottoman rule, a period that is remembered in the interviews as a golden age. Here, too, the exemplary figures presented as evidence of the integration and significance of Jews in Syrian-Ottoman society represent only a section of Jewish society: the economic, social, and male elite, to which the majority of the Jewish population did not belong. Moreover, the manifold ways in which Ottoman rule dealt with its Jewish inhabitants over four centuries and in various places cannot be generalized. The legal attitude towards non-Muslim inhabitants especially changed under European influence and radical socio-economic and political shifts in the late Ottoman period from the mid-19th century onwards, the period which the interviewees mostly refer to.

The narratives remain uncommented and unjudged as personal perspectives, even if the depictions in them deviate from common historical and political descriptions. Ansar Jasim's publication and the timeline which was taken from it with slight additions of events mentioned in this paper, may help to put the statements into context. Furthermore, the editors added some footnotes to provide the readers with further information, with explanations about specific terms, background information and further readings.

Another orientation point is a map of Damascus which depicts the main locations mentioned in the interviews.

Like all personal narratives, these interviews not only bear witness to what is described in them from a particular perspective, but also to the political, psychological and social circumstances and dynamics that shape the creation of individual and collective narratives. They are part of a puzzle that can be contradictory and irritating. It is precisely through this, however, that we want to approach the goal of the project and stimulate a renewed reflection on its core themes. This is also the aim of the exhibition "Side by Side – Exhibition about Syrian Jewish (Hi)stories", shown in Berlin in November and December 2020. This exhibition shows the results of a photographic research conducted by Rania Kataf in the Jewish quarter of Damascus.

To make the puzzle of narratives about Jews, Judaism, the Shoah and Israel in Syria and in Syrian immigrant communities more complete, this collection of narratives are and will be replenished by other publications: in one of them, Ansar Jasim examines narratives in Syria, by analyzing both textbooks and cultural productions. A further working paper will be published in spring 2021. It presents the results of qualitative interviews conducted in Syrian communities in Germany.

Rania Kataf's research thus provides an important impetus to rethink pre-existing assumptions about the experiences of Jews in Syria and to better understand them in their complex interrelation with other narratives.

The Course of Histories
Berlin, November 2020

Rania Kataf

Hidden Stories of Damascene Jews. A collection of the cultural memory of the last generation of Jews in Damascus

I. Introduction

For decades, Damascus has been losing increasing numbers of its Jewish population which has once been an elementary part of the Syrian society. While there were at least 16,500 Jews living in Syria at the beginning of the 20th century,¹ in the 2010s there are less than 20 Jews still to be found in the whole country.

It is the aim of this research to document the traces of Jewish life in Damascus and the narratives and memories of the last generation of Damascene Jews who still live there or who left the country between the early 1990s and the period before the Syrian conflict beginning in 2011. The constructive research focuses on collecting and providing detailed images of the lives of the last Jews in Damascus and to present their personal narratives that help convey an unknown reality of the Jewish experience in and after leaving the city. It is a unique attempt to preserve their history and cultural memory of a city they once called home.

The first part of the publication shows traces of Jewish life in Damascus which are still to be found in the city and private collections and which may help us in reconstructing the many aspects of their diverse history: letters, synagogues, symbols on houses, school books, banknotes etc. give us a glimpse of how involved Jews were in the cultural, political, economic and social life of Syria, specifically in Damascus. The detailed interviews have been conducted with six Damascene Jews of different ages, gender, family and professional backgrounds: three interviewees who still live in Damascus were asked about their experiences in face-to-face interviews; the three others who have already left the country and now live in Brooklyn (New York City; USA), had their interviews online via video chats. The interviews were directed in Arabic in October and November of 2019 and translated into English by the author for the purpose of this research.

In order to collect patterns of self-descriptions and narratives on their past yet recent experience as Damascene citizens and the effect the (geo-)political circumstances have had on their lives since mid-last century, the interviewees were asked about their biographical background, about their feelings of belonging and identity, about their life in Damascus and – if so – about their leaving of Damascus. This includes detailed questions about their homes and neighborhoods in the city, about religious sites, schools, social circles, the co-existence with non-Jews, community leaders, rituals, businesses and other details that help us to imagine a vivid community and inter-community life in the city. Furthermore, the interviewees were asked about the impact of restricting laws, discrimination and the reasons which led them to leave the country in the end. This led to questions about how they left and how they felt about their leaving, if they would return and how they still connect with people in the city.

¹ Demographical data from this time are not very reliable. The census made under the Ottoman rule of Abdul Hamid II (reigned 1876–1909) between 1881/2–1893, counted the Jewish population of Damascus with 6.265. For the period between 1930–1948, estimates of the Jewish population vary between 15.000 and 30.000 (Álvarez Suárez/Del Río Sánchez 2013: 112–113, Jasim 2020: 10, Karpát 2002: 146–168, Na'eeseh 2009: 98–107, Zenner 2000: 36).

Editor's note

There are several topics that are frequently brought up by almost all the interviewees:

Facing the almost complete disappearance of the Jewish community today and its gradual marginalization in public life during the 19th century, they look back on the time of the Ottoman rule – especially in its late period – when Jews were still playing central roles in public, politics and economy. The interviewees talk about the important role that the Jewish community had in crafts and trade and bring up notable Jewish figures who had important positions, for example members of the Farhi family who served as high treasurers for the Ottoman Empire.²

When explaining how Antisemitism started growing in Syria, some interviewees go back to this era, long before the establishment of concurring modern nation states in the Middle East: They especially mention the so-called Damascus Affair in 1840, when Jews were accused of the murder of a Christian monk and his Muslim servant and confronted with ritual murder libels.³

However, the radical change in the situation of the whole Jewish community in the country is ascribed to the time before, at and after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and its wars with Arab countries, including Syria. These political conflicts caused outrages against Syrian Jews like the 1949 Menarsha Synagogue attack in which 12 people died and around 60 were injured. Furthermore, it led to surveillance, imprisonments and government restrictions against Jews that limited their lives radically: these included the exclusion from public positions, travel bans, blocking of bank accounts, confiscations, the prohibition to sell property. This situation got even worse after the June War in 1967, and eased only since the mid-seventies when some of the restrictions started to be lifted.⁴

Another consequence of 1948 was that Palestinian refugees started moving into the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus, where they became the new settlers of abandoned houses, and public Jewish houses like the building of the Alliance Israélite Universelle school and the house of Chamahayah with a private synagogue were confiscated and used for the needs of the refugees. The description of the co-existence between the Palestinian refugees and the Damascene Jews who have remained in the city, is ambivalent: while some name the tensions between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ inhabitants of the quarter and the influence of the political events on their relationships, others point out a pragmatic, accepting and peaceful co-existence. This situation is described by Rachel Qamoo in her interview as follows:

“After 1948, the shape of our quarter changed tremendously. Palestinian refugees moved into our quarter and many Palestinians worked with us. The political situation might have been complicated, but in reality, we were able to cooperate with the Palestinians by providing them with jobs in our factories, turning them from refugees to citizens who made money and were able to buy property.”

² The Farhi family poses, according to Thomas Philipp, an example for the fragile power position that several Jews had in the Ottoman Empire. He argues that they were given these influential positions for pragmatic reasons and because they did not have an independent power base and were completely dependent on the rulers whom they served (see Jasim 2020: 14–15). In general, economic privileges were only given to individuals within the Christian and Jewish populations who profited from legal protection by the European powers on which the Ottoman Empire became increasingly dependent. This dependence also led to the settlement of so-called Capitulations, which among other things exempted traders of the European countries – including several local partners and protégés – from specific taxes. For the European powers, in turn, local Jews and Christians were important intermediaries in trade because of their familiarity with the local market and their long-established trade networks with Europe (see Jasim 2020: 18–20, Krämer 2006: 253, Zenner 2000: 40).

Editor's note

³ These followed the patterns of centuries-old anti-Semitic canards in Europe. The smear campaign was mainly pushed by the French consul Ratti-Menton, led to the arrest and torture of leading members of the Jewish communities and caused international attention and involvement (see Jasim 2020, 15–17). It is often put in the context of tensions between the Christian and the Jewish communities (Zenner 2000:41–42). For information about the dissemination of European anti-Semitic motifs in the Arab Near East in the 19th and first half of the 20th century,

This perspective fits into the broader narrative of peaceful co-existence, inter-confessional friendships and a strong feeling of belonging and shared tradition in the neighborhood and city community. The interviewees emphasize that these positive relationship and community feelings survived despite the growing political tensions in the region and government restrictions. Those living abroad, in this case in Brooklyn, explain how strong this identification with the Syrian and especially Damascene community and tradition remains also outside of Syria. One example of this is Joseph Jajati, who spoke in the interview about his feelings of belonging:

“I don’t remember how Damascus used to be in the 1990s, I was only two years old when I left so I grew up in the States. Yet, that did not make me any less Shami, I definitely feel Shami. Not remembering Syria does not make me any less Syrian and not physically being in Syria doesn’t either. My house in the States is a typical Syrian home and my family made sure I grew up the Syrian way. We speak Arabic at home, even at work, and I only speak English when I really have to. Everything we do, we do the exact same way it used to be done in Damascus; the food, the traditions, the ceremonies and celebrations.”

among others through translations of anti-Semitic writings into Arabic which were mostly published by Christians, see Krämer 2006: 255–259.

Editor’s note

4 For a more detailed overview on the restrictions see Jasim 2020: 26–34, Zenner 2000: 55–61 and timeline).

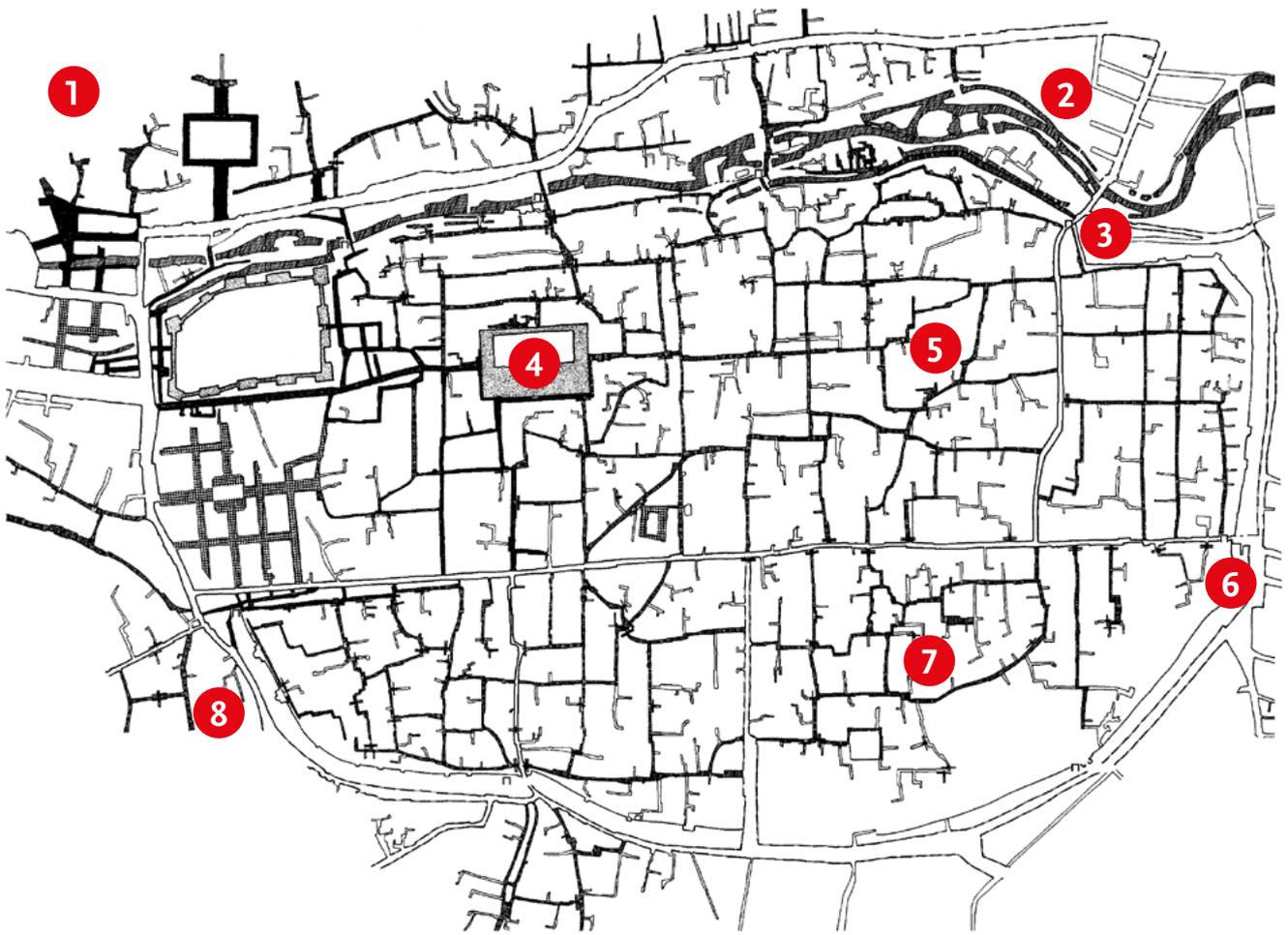
Editor’s note

5 On the previous emigrations and their different economic and political causes see Álvarez Suárez/Del Río Sánchez: 112–113, Jasim 2020: 20, 34.

Editor’s note

The travel ban on Syrian Jews was only lifted in 1992 which also marks a turning point mentioned in most of the interviews as it paved the way for the last big emigration wave of Jews from Syria. After more than a century of gradual decrease of the country’s Jewish population, this last movement left behind only a few hundred Jewish people.⁵

Facing the disappearance of Jewish life in Syria, it is even more important to save the memories of the last generation and to make the traces of the long history of Jewish life in the region more visible.



- 1 Chalaan
- 2 Kasaa
- 3 Bab Tuma
- 4 Ummayad Mosque
- 5 Quemarriyeh
- 6 Bab Shargi
- 7 Jewish Quarter
- 8 Harika

II. Traces

Strolling around in Old Damascus with an open eye, one may still find evidence that the city has been a center for Jewish life in the region for centuries: Lintels with Hebrew inscriptions, temple symbols on former Jewish houses, old synagogues. The letters, Hebrew schoolbooks and banknotes that are to be found in private collections draw an even more detailed picture of the diverse aspects of Jewish life and history in the city. This chapter follows some of these traces.

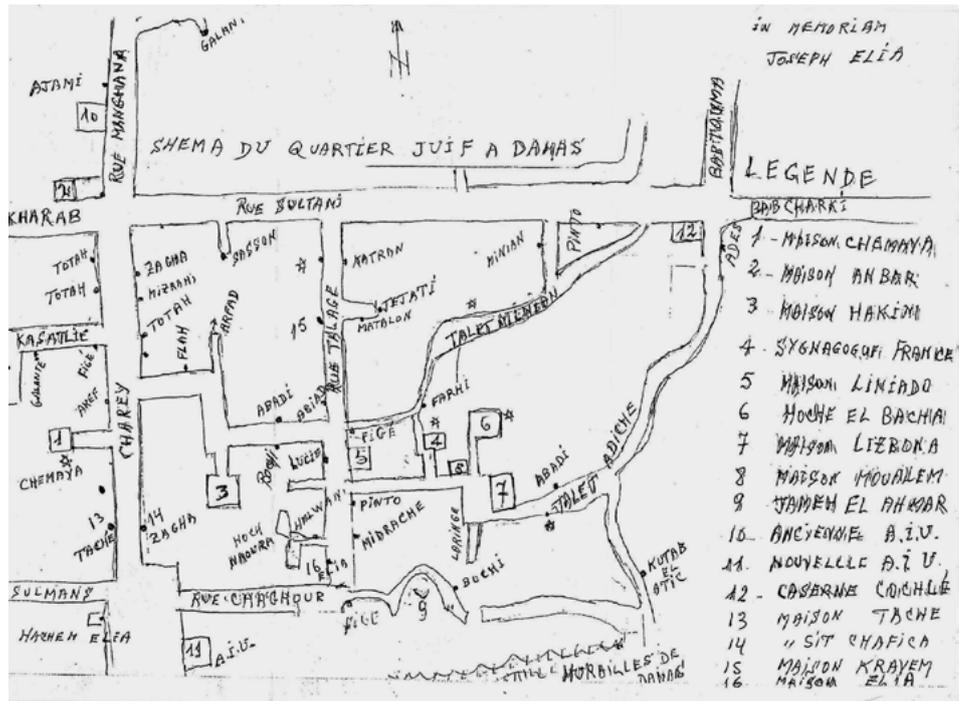


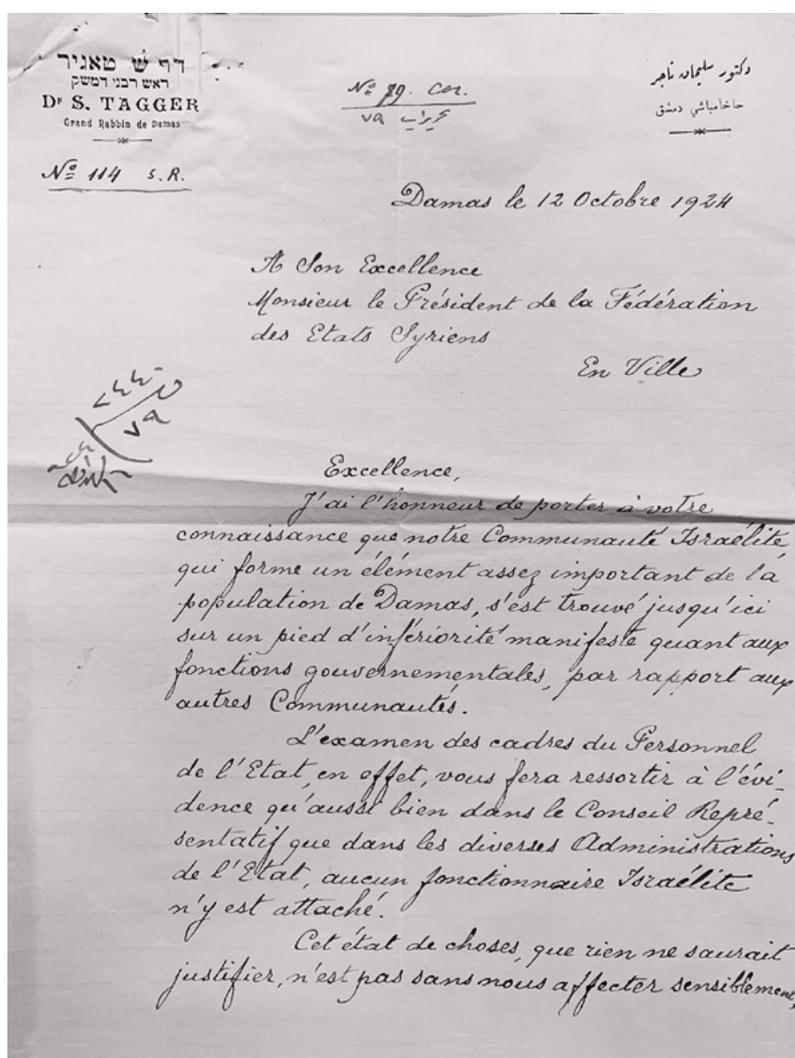
Figure 1: Hand-drawn map of the Jewish Quarter in Old Damascus with French description, dedicated to Joseph Elia. Among others, the map shows the location of the Alliance Israélite Universelle school (number 11), the Frenj Synagogue (number 4), the house of Chamahayah (number 1) and the Bayt Lisbona (number 7). Source: Private Collection.

1. A 1924 Letter to the Government

Most of the Jews of Damascus practiced their private businesses in trade or handcraft, the most popular being in textile, gold and metalwork crafts. During the Ottoman rule over Syria, Jews had the right to earn jobs in administrative government sectors. Yet as Syria began a new era under the French mandate, it seems the current government began eliminating the presence of Damascene Jews in its sectors.¹ In a letter sent by the Chief Rabbi of Damascus² on October 12, 1924, Dr. Suleiman Tagger asks the President of the State of Syria, Subhi Bey Barakat (1889–1939, President 1922–1924), to show fairness for the Jewish community by considering its members for job vacancies in different government sectors, believing in the importance of creating a diverse government administration, which had to include all members of the Syrian community. The letter was written in French, considering that in 1924 Syria was still under the French mandate. Yet the reply was sent back in Arabic, on October 16th of the same year by the President's Secretary General. In his reply, the Secretary General shows gratitude for the Rabbi and the Jewish community who wishes to take part in the country's administration. Yet he explained that jobs of such high-ranking are appointed based on loyalty to the government, experience, and level of education, not religion nor ethnic background.

Since 1947, after Syria became independent in 1946, and in the context of the repression measures against Jews that were taken by the government as a reaction to the political conflicts around the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews were forbidden to take positions in public services.

Figure 2: The first page of the letter from Rabbi Dr. S. Tagger to the Syrian president in 1924. Source: private collection.



1 For further information on the appointment of Jews in the administrative government sector during the late Ottoman period and the French Mandate, see Stillman 1991: 58, Zenner 2000: 39.

Editor's note

2 The office of the Chief Rabbi (Hakham Bashi) was established in the Ottoman Empire to lead, administer and represent the Jewish communities of the Empire and its urban centers before the Ottoman authorities. For the role and the appointment procedure of the Chief Rabbi, see Zenner 2000: 45–46.

Editor's note

Figure 3: The second page of the letter sent by Rabbi Dr. S. Tagger to the Syrian president in 1924.
Source: private collection.

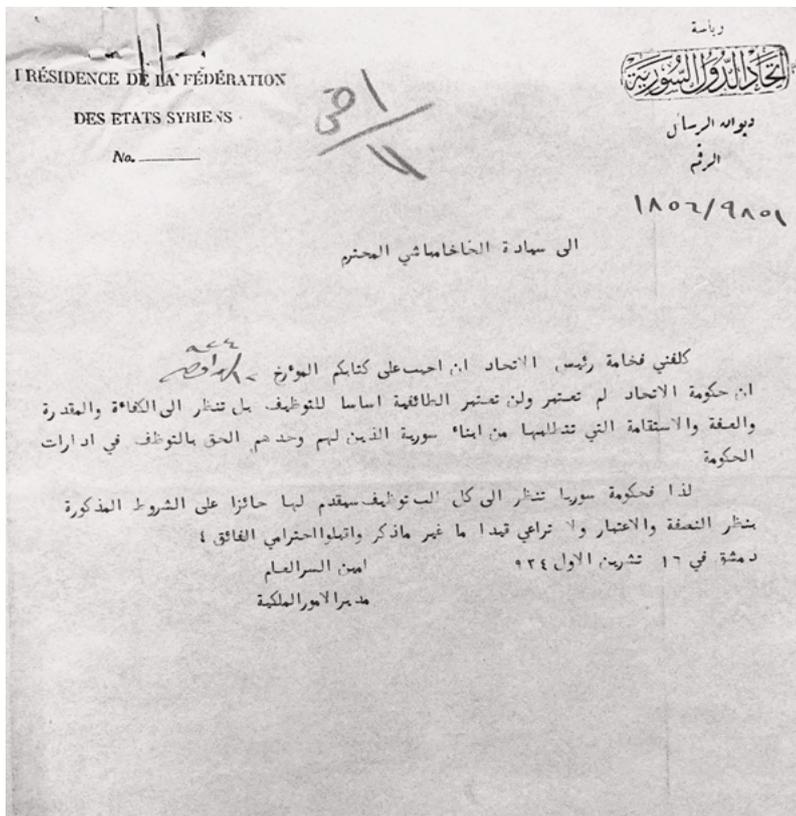
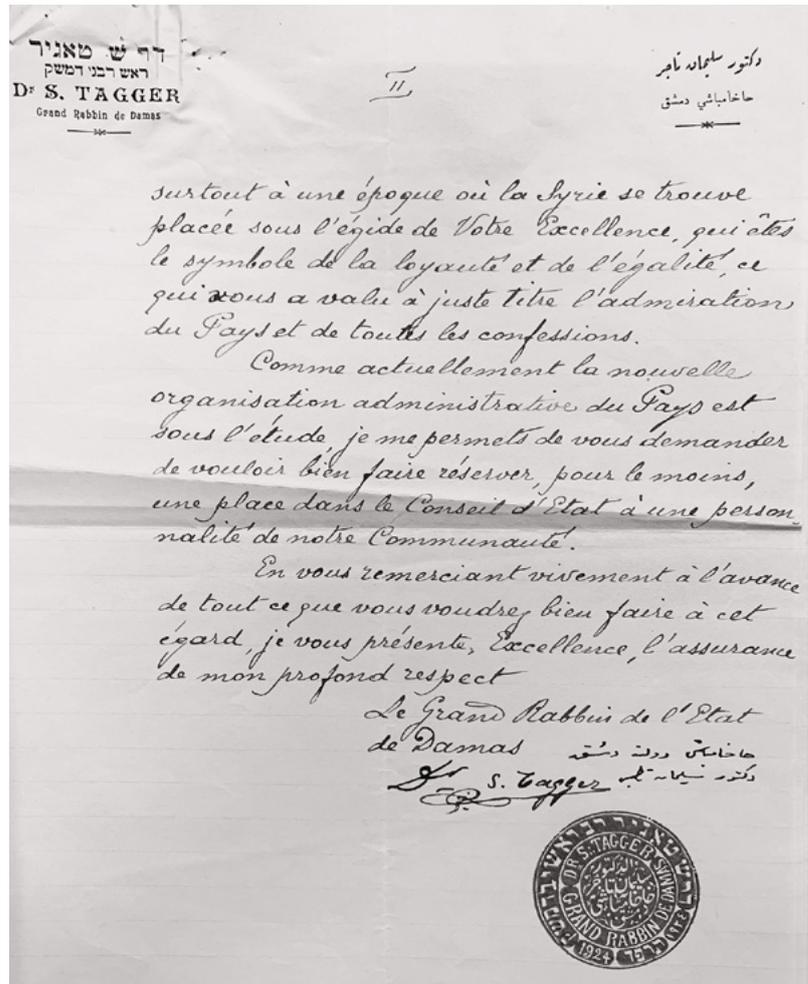


Figure 4: The reply sent by the secretary general of the State of Syria.
Source: private collection.

2. A Student Statistic and a Hebrew School Book

In the 1936 edition of *Imtidad al-Ma'arif fi Suria* (The Extension of Knowledge in Syria), an annual journal published during the Damascus International Fair, records show the increase in the number of Jewish students in the schools of Damascus. The 21 % increase from 1929–1935 includes 2300 students of Jewish origin (called “Israelites”) in 1929 and 2800 in 1935. The statistics furthermore shows the number of Muslim and Christian students in Damascus which also increased between 1929 and 1935. This is a very important document because not many records were created, other than in schools, to help estimate the number of individuals in a community.

Such population numbers may also be reconstructed with the help of documents of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) which was founded in France in 1860. The organization’s main activity in order to attain its objectives of international Jewish solidarity, improvement of Jewish welfare and emancipation, was to build a network of schools for spreading “modern”, French-style education among Jews especially in the Middle East and North Africa. The AIU school in Damascus was among the first of those schools. It was established in 1864 and, after being closed in 1869, reopened in 1880 with a boys’ school, followed by a girls’ school in 1983. It was considered one of the most elite schools in the city of Damascus. The AIU school was closed after its building was converted into an UNRWA installation for Palestinian refugees in 1948.

Besides the AIU’s central French secular curriculum, it also offered religious Jewish subjects and Hebrew classes.

These subjects were also offered at Ibn Maymoun school which was established in 1935 in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus³ and closed its doors in the early 2000s, after the last group of Jewish families left the city of Damascus. In the decades before, the school was also open for non-Jewish children and many teachers were Muslims or Christians, while Jewish children also went to non-Jewish schools.⁴ Rachel Qamoo explains:

3 The Jewish Quarter in Old Damascus earns its name from the former Jewish inhabitant majority living there. The quarters and neighborhoods in Damascus and other Middle Eastern cities were never fully homogenous. A complete segregation of the population was neither real nor planned or enforced by the governments. Other factors like occupation and standing also had an influence on a certain degree of segregation in neighborhoods with no clear borders. Therefore, it was not unusual for Jews to live outside the Jewish Quarter and for non-Jewish to live in it (Krämer 2006: 252).

Editor’s note

4 For more information on the modern education of Jews in Arab countries – both in non-Jewish and Jewish schools (like the AIU), see Stillman 1991: 20–26.

Editor’s note

Figure 5: Hebrew school book at Ibn Maymoun, Jewish Quarter of Damascus. This schoolbook testifies to the Hebrew classes taught at Ibn Maymoun until the last Jewish children left Damascus. Photo by H. Ghabra.



“The Jews studied in several schools in Damascus, mostly Christian schools located in Bab Touma or at the Alliance School in the Jewish Quarter. After 1948, our Alliance School was taken over by Palestinian refugees. Since then, the only school we had left for us inside the Jewish Quarter was Ibn Maymoun⁵, which was established in 1935. My sisters and I studied at l’Ecole des Soeurs de Besancon in Bab Touma, my brothers enrolled at Ibn Maymoun because it was the only school that offered Hebrew and religious studies.”

Jewish teaching staff at Ibn Maymoun was very limited and there were no Rabbis in the city to provide Hebrew teachings for the students. The school had to be run by the community itself, and Youssef Jajati, the head of the Jewish community at the time, held this responsibility. As Ibrahim Abu Hamra, one of the youngest members of the Jewish community to leave the city in 2001, states in his interview:

“I was in fifth grade when I left Damascus in 2001. Ibn Maymoun, our school in the Jewish Quarter, was still operating at the time. There were not a lot of Jewish kids my age so my classroom was made up of 15 students ranging from 3rd to 5th grade. And because of the shortage in Jewish staff we all ended up studying the same material. Our school principal at the time was Jewish, but our teachers were mostly Christian, and we studied in the same books as other Syrian schools in Damascus, all printed and provided by the Syrian Ministry of Education.”

5 Named after the Jewish Andalusian scholar Maimonides (Arabic: Ibn Maymoun, died 1204).
6 Bayt Lisbona, the House of a wealthy Sephardi Jewish family that fled to Damascus from Lisbon after the Jews were forced into exile end of 15th century.

Another school mentioned in the interviews is the Maimonides school: the Jewish community decided to renovate an old Jewish building⁶ and open another school in it for the children who could not enroll in Ibn Maymoun. This school had to shut down in 1993.

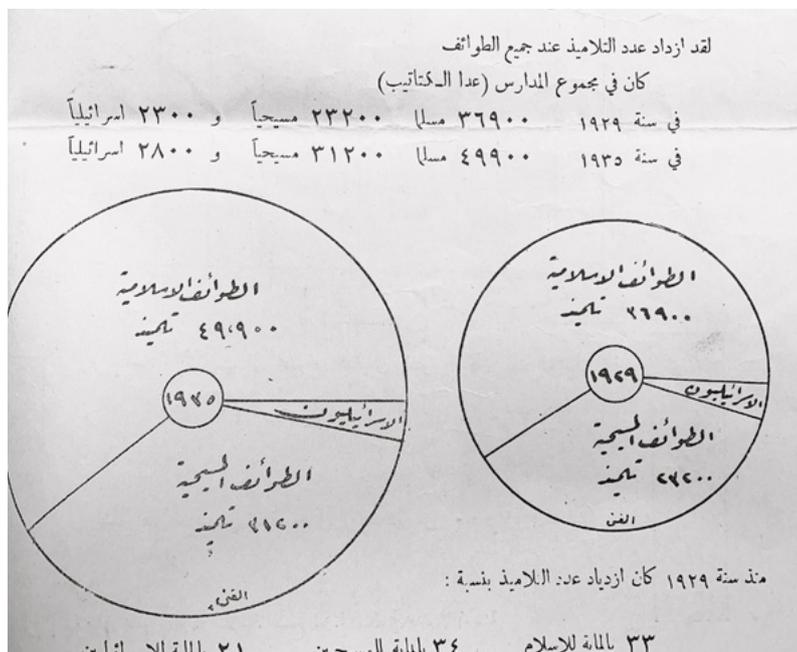


Figure 6: Records including the number of Muslim, Christian and Jewish students in schools in Damascus. Data from the 1936 edition of Imtidat al-Ma'arif fi Suria. Source: private collector.

3. Jewish Homes

In the winter of 2019, a lintel on top of a door of a house in the Jewish Quarter appeared after a major rainfall in the city of Damascus. The lintel is a mosaic marble with a Hebrew blessing from the Torah (Deut 28:6) at the front entrance of Moussa Khaski's house, a family who left Damascus to Brooklyn in the early 1990s. The lintel was covered by the owners with mud bricks in 1948, after many Palestinian refugees came to settle in the empty homes of Jewish families who left Damascus before that date. During that period, many Jews in the Jewish Quarter feared conflict would arise between them and the newcomers, and as a result, the Khaskis decided to remove any clue that identifies their Jewish background. In an interview conducted with one of the Jews remaining in Damascus, Njour Zaki Shamoutoub states:

“In reality, conflict did exist between us Jews and the newcomers. And no one really spoke about the period during and post-1948 or the effect the establishment of the State of Israel had had on us as a Damascene community. Yet, there were many Jews who chose to hide their identity and remain anonymous to those newcomers.”

Today, with only twelve members left of the Jewish community of Damascus, most Jewish property in the old city is closed and is under the supervision of the Higher Committee for Jewish Affairs.⁷ The majority of Damascene Jews sold their homes before leaving the country in the early 1990s. Some put their property up for rent under 99-year contracts. Since the early 2000s, many houses in the Jewish Quarter have been renovated and made into hotels or art galleries by their new owners; the most famous are The Talisman, Bayt Farhi, and Gallery Mustafa Ali.

⁷ The Higher Committee for Jewish Affairs is a non-Jewish government committee to supervise the Syrian Jewish community and its matters. For further information see Jasim 2020: 32.

Editor's note

Figure 7: The marble lintel with a Hebrew blessing from Deuteronomy 28:6 at Khaski's house. Jewish Quarter of Damascus. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*



Figure 8: A house marked as the property of the Higher Committee for Jewish Affairs. Location: Jewish Quarter. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*



4. The Frenj Synagogue

The Frenj Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter of the old city, is the only one in Damascus that is still functioning today. It is said to be founded by the Sephardic Jews who came to Damascus (and the whole region) after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in the end of the 15th century⁸ and to be the first synagogue that was built inside the city walls of Damascus.

The most famous among the synagogues of Damascus though, was the Jobar Synagogue, also known as Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue, as it is associated with the prophet Eliyahu. It is considered one of the most important heritage sites in Syria, situated in the city of Jobar, a suburb of Damascus. According to the legend, the synagogue dates back to 720 BC⁹ and was a major attraction for different Jewish communities for centuries. Unfortunately, it was destroyed completely in 2014, the third year of the Syrian conflict. In an interview conducted for this research, Rachel Qamoo states that:

“What breaks my heart the most is the Synagogue of Jobar. It used to be the second oldest synagogue in Syria, after the Synagogue of Aleppo, before it has been destroyed completely during the Syrian conflict. During the 16th century, many of the Jews who escaped Spain came to settle in Jobar because of its ancient synagogue. Those who moved to Damascus built the Frenj Synagogue, ‘frenj’ meaning foreigner, making it the first synagogue built inside the city walls. After that, seven synagogues were built, in addition to private synagogues inside Jewish homes. The most famous was the private synagogue at the house of Chamahayah, which became a settlement for refugees from Palestine in 1948.”

8 The descendants of Iberian Jewry are called Sephardim. In 1492, the so-called Alhambra Decree issued by the Catholic Monarchs of Spain after the *Reconquista*, expelled Jews from Spain. Many of them resettled in the Ottoman Empire which welcomed them as new subjects.

Editor's note

9 This is probably incorrect, but according to the sources mentioning the synagogue it is at least of medieval origin. For mentions of the synagogue in historical sources see Gottheil, Buhl, Franco 1906.

Editor's note



Figure 9: Torah shrine of the Frenj Synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*

5. A Memorial in the Menarsha Synagogue

This commemorative plate in the Menarsha Synagogue is dedicated to the twelve young victims of a grenade attack on the synagogue which happened on August 5, 1947 during the Shabbat eve service.¹⁰

10 This attack was one of several outrages committed against Jews which occurred at various points in time (see timeline and Jasim 2020: 26–28), including in the period of the UN partition plan in 1947, during the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent war, in times of instability inside the young independent Syrian Republic, and – in this specific case – as a reaction to the Lausanne Conference of 1949 which attempted to resolve these disputes.

Editor's note

Figure 10: In memory of the children who were killed in the attack of 1949 at the Menarsha Synagogue. Photo by Rania Kataf.



6. Temples and Snakes: Jewish Motifs

Despite the fact that the Star of David is considered one of the most popular Jewish motifs used to symbolize Judaism worldwide, a similar design is also known in Islamic art as *Khatim Sulaiman*. Khatim, or the Seal of Solomon, carries specific ideological meanings in Islam and is a very popular motif in mosques worldwide. Therefore, other symbols have appeared to show particular resemblance to Jewish people or Judaism in Damascus, including the shape of the temple and the snake in different Jewish properties throughout the Jewish Quarter. While the temple usually represents a private synagogue if present at a Jewish home, a snake is believed to protect the owners of the building from all evil. This symbol is a special feature of Jewish homes in Damascus.



Figure 11: Decorative lintel on the door of the private synagogue at the House of Chamahayah. Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.

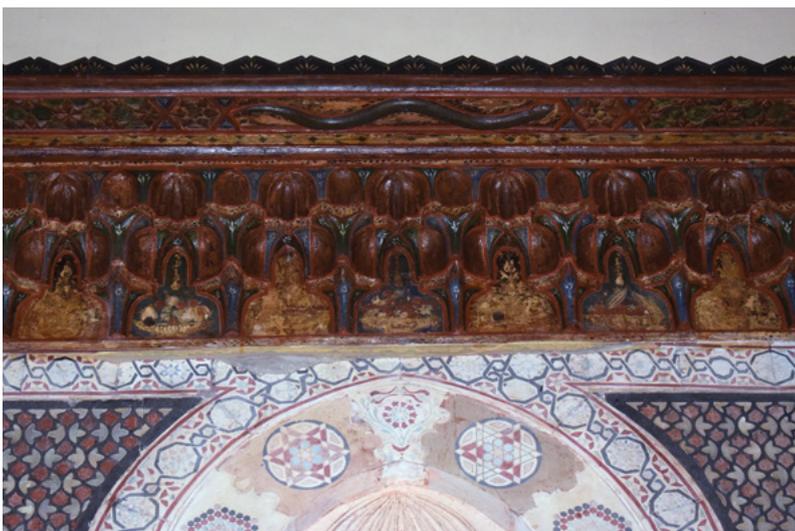


Figure 12: The snake carved onto the Ajami wooden panel in the main reception room of Bayt al-Jasmine, which was inhabited by Jewish, Christian and Muslim families. The snake is the evidence of the period the Jews lived in this house. The lintel decoration also depicts Stars of David/the Khatim Sulaiman. Photo by Rania Kataf.

7. The Syrian Lira of 1977

In 1977, a Syrian paper bill was issued by the Bank of Syria with a photo of Jacque Zaibak, a Jewish metal worker from Damascus, and an illustration of the Umayyad Mosque in the background. Metalwork was among the handcrafts that Jews were most famous for in Damascus.

The next year, the Syrian government passed an order to remove the bill from the market. Many believe that this design caused controversy in the public because it included a Jewish character in an Islamic setting, especially for the merchants of Damascus, who urged that this image be substituted by a craftsman of Islamic background. Some made a remark that Jacque Zaibak actually asked that this bill be removed through a lawsuit, since the bank did not seek his permission to include his photo on the issued paper bill in the first place; and by 1979, the bill was completely removed from the Syrian market.

Figure 13: Syrian paper bill with a photo of Jacque Zaibak, a Jewish metal worker from Damascus (1977). Source: private collection



III. Interviews

All interviews were conducted in Arabic and then translated into English by Rania Kataf.

Albert Qamoo | October 30, 2019

Albert Qamoo (born 1940 in Damascus) who beside his sister Rachel Qamoo is one of the last members of his family living in Damascus until today and head of the small Jewish community, tells about the radical changes happening to his community in Syria since the fall of the Ottoman empire. He remembers famous Jewish figures in the past and a time of peaceful co-existence. He describes how the majority of the Jews left the country because of growing tensions and restrictions, and how Jews from Syria despite being scattered in diaspora still feel a strong sense of belonging. As Albert Qamoo took the decision to stay at the only place that he “can call home”, he experienced not only the changes of the neighborhoods and co-existence, but also took part in the remaining Jewish community’s commitment for keeping their heritage alive.

I live in Damascus with my sisters Rachel and Bella. The rest of us, my older brothers and sister, left the city a long time ago and have settled in Mexico. When we were kids, we were taught French and Spanish as a second language at school. Little did we know back then that these languages were preparing us for our new fate, and that part of my family will end up in a new home far away from Damascus. For me, living here was a choice I made decades ago. It was a firm decision, yet I really cannot imagine myself elsewhere, neither can I see myself call another place home or my country. I was very young when my brothers and sister escaped to Lebanon, back then, being a Jew in Damascus meant you were leading a very difficult life, but as I grew up, things became less complicated and I really had no reason to leave.

1 For other estimations of the Jewish population see Introduction and Álvarez Suárez/Del Río Sánchez 2013: 112–113, Jasim 2020: 10; Karpat 2002: 146–168, Zenner 2000: 36.

Editor’s note

2 He refers to the so-called Damascus Affair in 1840 when Jews were accused of the murder of a Christian monk and his Muslim servant and confronted with ritual murder libels which followed the patterns of centuries-old anti-Semitic canards in Europe. The smear campaign was mainly pushed by the French consul Ratti-Menton, led to the arrest and torture of leading members of the Jewish communities and caused international attention and involvement (see Introduction and Jasim 2020, 15–17).

Editor’s note

The situation of the Jewish community in Damascus until 1948: population development, businesses, famous figures, and growing tensions

We, as a Jewish community were centralized in the cities of Aleppo, Damascus and Qamishli. Some people say that before 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish population at the Jewish Quarter of Damascus was estimated to be 25,000.¹ There were many Jewish families from Damascus, yet it was very difficult to determine the exact number of individuals who settled in the city because people were constantly leaving and some of them never returned.

In reality, the number of Jews in the city started declining since the period of Ottoman rule in Damascus. We, as a community, were convicted of several crimes that took place in the city. The most famous being the incident of the murder of Father Touma.² This incident caused a huge controversy between

The house of Albert Salim Qamoo, Bab Sharqi, Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.



the Jews and the locals in the city; leading to a great loss in the number of Jews that made up the Damascene community. People feared judicial punishment and the confiscation of their businesses or properties by the Ottoman government. Consequently, there was a continuous flow of Jews inside and outside of Damascus, yet people always came back.

On another note, Damascus was a home for many Jewish families who fled their counties for safety, like the Lisbonas. Other Jewish families made a fortune by working for the Ottoman Empire, one of the most well-known in the city were the Farhis.³ They worked as bankers and money lenders, but more importantly, the Farhis played a major role in managing the banking and taxation system of the Ottoman Empire. They were known across the country as the treasurers of the Ottoman Government of Damascus. This actually created a sense of bias towards the Jews as a community because many officials from different religions believed that they better deserved this role. Not to mention that during the Ottoman rule also, the government also relied on the Jews to support and strengthen the economy through the trade routes they have established with the merchants and tradesmen of Europe.⁴

How the life of Jews got harder after the fall of the Ottoman Empire

As the Ottoman rule came to an end, these misconceptions and beliefs started to fade, but as soon as the State of Israel was established, the government sought to create many restrictions on the Jews. We did not have equal rights as other Syrians until Hafez al-Assad⁵ became president, but by that time we have already lost a lot of people from our community.

During the French mandate on Syria, many Jews were still settling in the city, like the Niyados, a high-class Jewish family known for establishing the first international bank in Damascus. The founder of the bank was a Damascene Jew named Sabri Niyado. It was named the bank of Zalkha and replaced what used to be The Imperial Ottoman Bank. It was located right in front of the citadel in modern day Harika, Old Damascus. Niyado owned one of the most beautiful houses at the Jewish Quarter. Actually, it was not a house, it was more of a palace, and it had more than one exit, each giving access to a different alley of the Jewish Quarter. Yet Sabri Niyado chose to settle in his other

3 A wealthy Jewish family known as money lenders. Raphael and Haim Farhi worked as financial advisors and tax collectors for the Ottoman sultanate (see Introduction).

4 In general, economic privileges were only given to individuals within the Christian and Jewish populations who profited from legal protection by the European powers on which the Ottoman Empire became increasingly dependent. This dependence also led to the settlement of so-called Capitulations, which among other things exempted traders of the European powers – including their local trading partners and protégés – from specific taxes. For the European powers, in turn, local Jews and Christians were important intermediaries in trade because of their familiarity with the local market and their long-established trade networks with Europe. Jews who were given important positions in the Ottoman administration, did not have an independent power base and, therefore, were highly dependent on the Ottoman rulers (see Jasim 2020: 14–20, Krämer 2006: 253).

Editor's note

5 Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000), President of Syria 1971–2000.



The Bank of Zalkha in Harika, Old Damascus. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*

home in Mazra'a, just outside of the old city, because it was more modern and only the elite could afford to move to that area. This proves the fact that many Jewish families like the Farhis, the Shamayiehs, al-Boushi, and the Totahs were still able to protect their trade, status and power even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Peaceful co-existence, the influence of Arab-Israeli wars since 1948 and changing neighborhoods

Life in Damascus was definitely much better before 1948. Damascus was a true example of a coexistent community. My father, Salim Qamoo, worked with many Muslims in several businesses. We owned a huge store in Midhat Pasha. He was a textile merchant and traded in silk and wool. Many local merchants at the souk trusted him and had great respect for him. I used to love spending time at our store, I am very fond of the memories I have of that place. But there were harsh memories as well, I remember my father being forced to close his shop for weeks, as did many other Jewish merchants in Damascus, when the war broke in Palestine.⁶ People feared the aftermath of this political conflict and chose to stay home where they believed was safer for them for the time being. One morning, a boy from a neighboring shop came running to our home and told us that our shop has been broken into and burgled. This never happened before in Damascus and we never knew who was behind the theft. It was only then that for the first time ever, the idea of leaving the city became an issue we had to think about. My father ended up selling his store, and almost a decade later, the new owner reopened it but chose to divide it into four shops. Can you imagine how huge it was?

There were many Jewish families in the city, I can go on forever, but we did not live amongst our community for very long because our home was situated near the Christian quarter, Bab Touma. So, you can say that since we have moved out in 1946, most of our surrounding community were Christians. Yet I do still remember many details of our daily life at the Jewish Quarter; I

6 1967: Arab-Israeli War.

remember the mini shops that sold snacks near our schools, the popcorn, the honey candy, and the delicious corn. They were all so cheap so student could afford to buy them.

Jewish schools

My school at the Jewish Quarter was Ibn Maymoun.⁷ In the beginning it was a religious school and only Jewish boys were allowed to attend it. Years later, long after I have graduated, other subjects were introduced to the curriculum and many students from different backgrounds and religions enrolled in our school. This took place in parallel with the demographic change that occurred at the Jewish Quarter during the 1970s. Many Muslim and Christian families moved into our neighborhood replacing the empty homes of the Jews leaving the Old City.

In the 1970s, the Jewish community decided to transform Bayt Lisbona⁸, a Jewish home at the Jewish Quarter into a school. The family has left Damascus long before that and so we decided to rehabilitate the building to function as a school for Jewish students who did not get the chance to enroll in Ibn Maymoun. It truly was a great project, and in the early 1990s, we got a fund from the United States to renovate and rebuild the house, so we decided to add two new floors to it. But in 1993, as most of the Jewish community left Damascus, the school was forced to shut down, once again leaving us with only one school to serve what remained of the Jewish community.

I remember we were also very short in Jewish staff, so by then all our schools included staff from multiple backgrounds and religions. Being a minority, we had to depend on other members of the Syrian community to fulfill these positions, and that created a unique diversity in both students and staff in the only school we had left, Ibn Maymoun.

Living together with Palestinian refugees in the Jewish Quarter

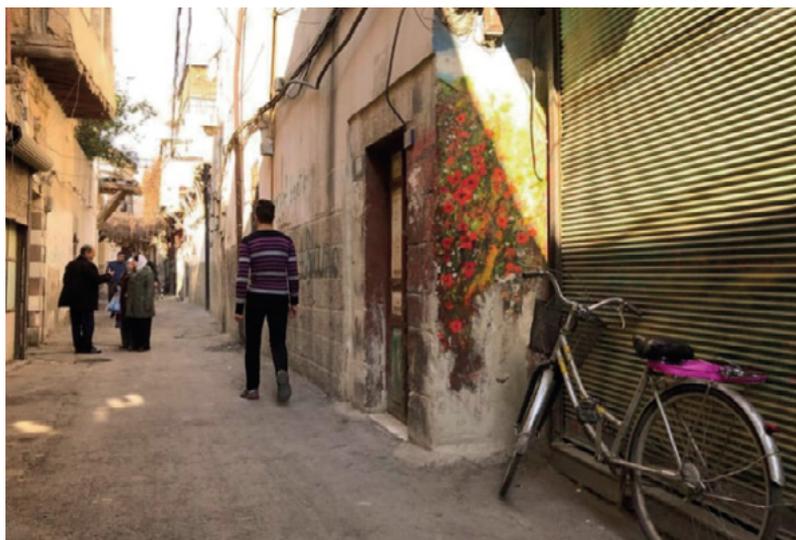
To tell you the truth, locals never really rejected us, even with the establishment of the State of Israel, we lived, worked and studied with Muslims and Christians from all sects of the Damascene community. We were in constant contact with them, but when it came to the Palestinians who settled in the Jewish Quarter, the situation was a lot more complicated. In my opinion, the Syrian government made a huge mistake back then when they allowed Palestinian refugees into empty Jewish homes and into the Alliance School.⁹ More Shi'a

7 Established in 1935 in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus and closed in the beginning of the 2000s when the last Jewish children left Damascus. Named after the Jewish Andalusian scholar Moses Maimonides (Arabic name: Ibn Maymoun, died 1204).

8 The house of a wealthy Sephardi Jewish family that fled to Damascus from Lisbon after the Jews were forced into exile in the end of 15th century.

9 School of the international, French-based organization Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), established in 1864 and reopened in 1880. The curriculum of the AIU schools combined secular and religious studies, including Hebrew classes. The AIU school was closed when its building became an UNRWA installation for Palestinian refugees after 1948 (see Chapter "Traces").

An Alley in the Jewish Quarter, where Muslims, Christians and Jews live together in the same neighborhood. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*



also settled in these houses during that same period. This is what explains how the Jewish Quarter became known as al-Amin neighborhood, it was named after a famous Shiite scholar who moved into our quarter decades before the Jews left the city.

Family reunion – Keeping close despite Diaspora

In 1975, President Hafez al-Assad allowed the return of any Jewish citizen who has left the country prior to 1948, except for those who have settled in Israel. So, after years of living abroad, my brothers and sister returned to Damascus. My brothers, who left as teenagers, returned with their wives and children. We got a call that informed us that they were arriving from Mexico in a couple of hours. My parents were so excited they could not feel their feet.

I ended up going with Rachel to the airport. The moments before the reunion were probably the happiest moments of our lives, we stood there trying to figure out who were our siblings; even my brothers must have changed after 25 years. When they finally found us, I remember holding on to them so tight I could barely breathe, I literally choked out of happiness, and that was for me a moment I will never ever forget.

My mother stood by the window for hours waiting for us to arrive and the moment she saw us she ran down the stairs to welcome the grandchildren she has never met. I remember watching her cry and say: “I don’t know how I got here, I can’t believe I am walking again. My feet were so numb moment before I saw you.” We went to visit our old home in Quemariyyeh and just as my brothers entered the door, they ran to the trees they have planted in the courtyard as teenagers. Saluting them, they kept repeating to us: “We planted those trees,” as if they were telling us that no matter where they end up, a part of them will always remain in Syrian soil. Our house seemed like a piece of heaven, we were surrounded by grape trees, apricot trees, lemon and orange trees, even apple trees. Suddenly the house became so full of life, the life we once dreamed and planned for. “Now I can finally taste my fruit,” said my brother with a smile.

Our nephews and nieces loved Damascus, yet they did not feel any sense of attachment to the place. And though they consider themselves 100 % Mexican and could barely speak any Arabic, I could sense Arabic character in all their personalities. My brothers were very selective when it came to choosing their wives, all three of them married Mexicans of Syrian origin. Many Jewish families from Syria immigrated to North and South America during the Ottoman period, and all of them created their own communities everywhere they settled. This made it much easier for us to find each other and to protect our Syrian identity and traditions in foreign land.

Emigration in the 1990s – Preserving the Arabic-Jewish heritage

The largest group of Jewish immigrants left Syria in the ‘90s after President Hafez al-Assad permitted their leave and issued passports to all Syrian Jews. All the Jewish children, teenagers and young adults left Damascus then.

This group is the last young group of Syrian Jews to learn Arabic in Syria and to speak it as a first language. My brothers who live in Mexico still insist on speaking Arabic at home with their wives and children. Changing countries never changed who they were. Most of our generation preserved their mother tongue language and dialect by speaking Arabic at home, as if they were still in Damascus.

A couple of years ago, two women from the Lisbona family flew to Damascus from Paris and contacted us to help them find their family home and show them around our quarter. The Lisbonas are one of the most well-known Jewish families in Damascus, originally from Lisbon, Portugal. They have settled in Damascus almost four centuries ago, after fleeing to Istanbul, as a result of the persecutions of the Jews in Spain and Portugal.¹⁰ We weren't able to get them into their family home. The once famous Lisbona Damascene house was sold years ago by Abu Khalil Jajati¹¹ to the Haddads, a Christian family from Damascus, and as private property we had no right to enter. The house was known for its exquisite interior, its main hall was removed and sold as well and no one knows where it ended up. For us these interiors make up part of our Jewish heritage, and should all remain in place.

Restrictions, surveillance, but freedom of religious practice

There was a time when our Syrian IDs had the word 'Mousawi'¹² printed on them in red ink. The fact that we were Jewish restricted our freedom in many ways, especially when it came to leaving the old city. We were not allowed 5 km outside our quarter, and we were watched over 24/7. I remember this one time we went out on the weekend for lunch in Rabweh, a few kilometers outside the old city; two men from the authorities accompanied us and sat with us on the same table. My sister Rachel was really young back then, and decided to drive them crazy by running up and down the stairs so they would follow her, giving some privacy to our family gathering. I laugh so hard every time I remember how they kept chasing a child up and down the stairs because she was Jewish. All she wanted was to play around, and to buy some candy and slices of watermelon. She was just a child, I mean, they could have just let her be.

But the irony of it all was that these opposed restrictions ended up protecting in the early 1980s, during the rage against the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³ Back then everyone was suspected except for us. The authorities saw our IDs and immediately set us free, without any form of investigation, just a simple goodbye, "ma'a al-salameh." They really did us no harm, and the locals stood by our side although there were many attempts by the Muslim Brotherhood to create hatred between us and the local community. Gladly, all these attempts failed. We practiced our religion freely. None of these authorities stood against that idea, and ever since the incident of 1949¹⁴, we were granted protection through authorities that guarded the synagogues during our prayers. Muslims and Christians supported us as well. We even had our own Rabbi from Damascus, I remember Rabbi Zaki Minfakh, also known as Rabbi Zaki Afsa. In addition to his work at the synagogue, he was also responsible for

10 This refers to the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, ordered by the so-called Alhambra Decree issued by the Catholic Monarchs of Spain after the Reconquista. Many of the expelled Jews from Spain, called "Sephardim", resettled in the Ottoman Empire which welcomed them as new subjects.

Editor's note

11 As head of the Jewish community, Jajati represented absent members of the Jewish community, selling and renting Jewish property on their behalf. Left Damascus in 2001.

12 Arabic for "Mosaic/Followers of Moses". The addition on Syrian IDs was introduced in 1963 and removed in 1992. For the background of the usage of the term in the Ottoman and Arab Nationalist administrative language see Álvarez Suárez/Del Río Sánchez 2013: 111, Karpát 2002: 153).

Editor's note

13 See timeline and Jasim 2020: 33–34.

Editor's note

14 An attack during a Saturday prayer at the Menarsha Synagogue which killed 12 persons (see Chapter "Traces").

teaching butchers how to slaughter the animals so the meat met kosher standards. When all the Rabbis left Damascus in the 1990s, the government helped us bring a Rabbi from Turkey. He used to visit Damascus once a month, along with Aleppo and Qamishli. But after the war broke in Syria in 2011, none of the Rabbis were able to reach us and most of us started buying meat from local Muslim butchers.

Leading the last generation of Damascene Jews

I don't like to count how many Jews are left in Damascus, but we are less than 20 people, most of us are of old age, the youngest being in his late 50s. The last time we counted, four Jews passed away starting with Mr. Hilwani who was responsible for guarding the Frenj Synagogue.¹⁵ His brother passed away just months later, then Mr. Hamra, followed by a woman from the Farhi family just a couple of weeks ago. We barely see any of the Jews who are still in the city. Our neighbors are Christian, and most of the shops surrounding us belong to Muslim merchants. They all treat us like family.

I have worked as the head of the Jewish community of Aleppo and Damascus for the past 13 years, and I can tell you that it has been the most exhausting job I have ever had. My responsibilities include taking care of and supporting the needs of the remaining members of the Jewish community, in addition to paying field visits to Jewish property that still belongs to the Jewish families who have left the country. Every month, I have to pass by the bank in person to withdraw the monthly salaries of those individuals who need financial support. The bank account is managed as Jewish property and only I, as head of the Jewish community, have access to it. It truly is a huge burden, so I assigned a lawyer, a Muslim, to help me finalize any responsibilities I could not finish myself. It is my duty to make sure that they are being taken care of, yet I always hear criticisms for how I help some people more than others. There are specific cases who really need this money, mostly for medical support, and I prefer helping those who are truly in need.

¹⁵ The Frenj Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus, is the only one in Damascus that is still functioning today. It is said to be founded by the Sephardic Jews who came to Damascus after their expulsion from Spain in the end of the 15th century (see Chapter "Traces").



A mezuzah case at the entrance of Qamoo's house in Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.

When I travel, I am usually surrounded by people of my own community. But there are instances where you meet a stranger who will surely ask you: “Where are you from?” and I always tell them: “I am from Sham¹⁶” with so much pride. There’s a famous local Arabic saying I always like to repeat: “Can you detach a nose connecting your eyes?” I am Syrian, it is as simple as that, a Syrian from Sham. You cannot detach me from my identity, it is an unbreakable bond. Home is home, whether it is your happy place or a place connected to your suffering. I might have faced many difficult times because of my religion, but every time I travel, I find myself counting the days to return to Damascus. A bad day won’t erase my beautiful memories of this place. My heart has but one desire ... called Damascus.

Njour Zaki Shamoutoub (Eid)

October 27, 2019

Njour Zaki Shamoutoub (born 1954 in Damascus), also called Eid, was famous for his tailoring in Damascus. When most of his family left the country, he decided to stay for personal reasons. He admits that with children he wouldn't have stayed because the restrictions on property, movement etc. made life very hard for Jews. He describes how the co-existence with the old Damascene community and the refugees from Palestine developed after 1948.

My name is Bakhour Z. Shamoutoub, the son of Zaki Shamoutoub. People here know me as Eid, this is my Arabic name. Shamoutoub in Hebrew means a box of happiness, it refers to the gift boxes people give out during celebrations, such as engagement parties or weddings. My father used to own an antique and gift shop in Chalaan, outside the old city, and most of his customers were French tourists who always came to his shop in search for gifts. But this was all before 1948.

Ambivalent relationships with Palestinian refugees in the Jewish Quarter after 1948

With the establishment of the State of Israel, many Palestinians were forced to escape to Damascus. Most of these families ended up settling inside the abandoned houses of the Jewish Quarter. And believe it or not, my father helped provide them with all the furniture and the equipment they needed at a much cheaper price than that available at the Syrian market. In reality, conflict did exist between us Jews and the newcomers. And no one really spoke about the period during and post-1948 or the effect the establishment of the State of Israel had had on us as a Damascene community. Yet, there were many Jews who choose to hide their identity and remain anonymous to those newcomers. Do you remember Fouad Hilwani? Fouad still fears announcing the fact that he is Jewish, until today! The same goes for Mousa Boukaie, the gas seller at al-Amin; although no one has ever confronted him about his religion before. The fact that many Muslim, Christian and Jewish families hold the

¹⁶ Local name for Damascus.

same last names, regardless of religion, actually helped many Jews hide their identity. Even the name Mousa is used in all three religions. Fouad Hilwani's name too can mimic you to believe he is either Muslim or Christian. These names were all Damascene and Arabic, only in the Levant can you see this kind of trend in local communities. In truth, no one ever rejected the Jews because our names also sounded so Damascene to everyone. Even our looks helped, we look very Arab and similar to most of the people in the city.

A family in diaspora

My mom died of cancer at a very young age. We were twelve children, three boys and nine girls. Our names were both Arabic and foreign: Mosa, Jida, Evon; who married a Christian, Stella; who married a Muslim, Badiaa, Marcel, Olga, Touneh, Rene, and Latifa. Today, we live in different countries, between Syria, the USA, Mexico, and Israel. Many people ask me why I chose to stay here. Truth is, I used to love a Muslim woman from Midan¹⁷, and I could not leave although I knew there was no chance we could ever end up together. I have known her for 24 years now, and believe it or not, she and I remained single till this day. She made me a promise she would never be with anyone else, but we stopped talking years ago.

“The best tailor in Damascus”

My main profession was tailoring. Back then everyone knew me, and many considered me one of the best tailors in the country. I used to work from my home at the Jewish Quarter. People used to stand in line at the doorway to get an appointment, the same scene you see every morning of the queue line for freshly baked bread. Back then, I used to charge 10 or 15 Syrian pounds per pair of pants, every other tailor charged 20, this was almost 40 years ago but I remember it like it was yesterday. One day, it got so crowded at my door that the police dropped by to check what was going on. They could not figure out a rational reason to why people kept visiting my house in particular. But back then, all Jews had no choice but to work from home, there were so many restrictions and we could not move freely outside the Jewish Quarter. People responded by telling the police that “Eid was the best tailor in Damascus,” and that they did not want any other tailor to saw their pants. Today, although I have moved on and started a new business, some clients still insist that I make their pants, and would never trade them for a ready-to-wear piece from the market.

I learned this profession from a Jew named Rafoul Saedy and with time I became as good of a tailor as he was and maybe even better. I started work at a very young age because I dropped out of school when I was in 9th grade. I got very sick that year and as I skipped so many classes my principal got me expelled before the end of the school year. I was so good in Arabic, I especially loved poetry and no one excelled me at it. Ibn Maymoun¹⁸ had students from every religion, although it was the only school at the time that gave Hebrew classes and was situated inside the Jewish Quarter. There was a time

17 A neighborhood south of the old city walls. Was created by the merchants of Damascus and farmers of Horan, south of Syria, as a trade center about 400 years ago.

18 A school that was established in 1935 in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus and closed in the beginning of the 2000s when the last Jewish children left Damascus. Named after the Jewish Andalusian scholar Moses Maimonides (Arabic name: Ibn Maymoun, died 1204).

Shamoutoub's house at the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.



when the government appointed a Muslim principal to direct our school, these things were viewed as norms, and never mattered really. The other day I bumped into one of my classmates. Her name is Huyam Kabboushi, a Christian from Bab Touma, and she came up and saluted me very warmly. I was so glad she still remembered me.

Restrictions of property and movement, marked IDs and a diminishing community

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Jews were not allowed to buy or sell property. This was a great deal for me because I am the kind of guy who prefers to invest his money in buying shops or houses. To resolve that issue, my Muslim brother-in-law would register his name instead of mine on the day of signing the contract. This was pretty much the only way a Jew could own property back in the days. I always felt having one property was not enough. When my brothers left Damascus in the 1980s through the mountains of Lebanon, the government wanted to confiscate the house because they believed the whole family had fled illegally outside of Syrian land. Then the matter was handed to the UNRWA, who at the time, used all the empty Jewish homes to house Palestinian refugees. Until today, I have to pay rent to the UNRWA to protect our home from being confiscated.

We were not even allowed outside the Jewish Quarter unless we got a permit. Our IDs were marked in red to resemble the fact that we are of Jewish background, or the word 'Mousawi', meaning followers of Moses¹⁹ was added to our cards. We felt very discriminated, although our IDs also stated the fact that we come from Quemarriyeh²⁰ in Old Damascus, like many other Damascene families. I admit I thought of leaving Damascus several times, these restrictions really disturbed us as a Jewish community. I always say that if I were to have children I would have never stayed, I would never let them experience this. Plus, with the limited number of Jews in the city, my

¹⁹ Arabic for "Mosaic/Followers of Moses". The addition on Syrian IDs was introduced in 1963 and removed in 1992. For the background of the usage of the term in the Ottoman and Arab Nationalist administrative language see Álvarez Suárez/Del Río Sánchez 2013: 111; Karpát 2002: 153.

Editor's note

²⁰ A melting pot of Muslim and Christian neighborhood in Old Damascus. People who lived nearby were also registered as settlers of Quemarriyeh.



Financial record proving the ownership of property and the annual tax payments of Njour Zaki Shamoutoub issued by the Ministry of Finance in 2019. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*

children would end up growing up around a Muslim and Christian community, and that might detach them from their original identity as Jews.

We did not gain the right to purchase property until the mid-1980s, but sometimes even after that, some shop owners felt hesitant towards selling their property to a Jew, even if he was of Damascene origin. I remember I wanted to buy a shop near Sham Hotel at the city center and when we met to finally sign the contract the owner changed his mind when he found out I was Jewish. I thought a good business and reputation was all people cared about when judging others. At that time, I was still working as a tailor but I moved to my store in Bab Touma. Believe me, everyone in the city knew me and no one has ever confronted me with my religion before this incident.

I don't own my tailor shops in Bab Touma anymore. I sold them all years ago although they meant a lot to me because they were some of my first purchases after we regained the right to own property. But that does not matter really. Because today, I own three houses; our family home where I live and two other apartments outside the old city which I put out for rent.

Interconfessional co-existence

The other day when I was taking photos at the Jewish Quarter, a young Palestinian came up to me yelling: "I am Palestinian, what about you?" He knew very well who I was, my religion and even where I live. I replied by saying: "And I am Jew." I know that I could have just said that I was Syrian but I did not want to. We were both wrong, it was nothing more than childish behavior. This never happened to me with a Syrian, we were never disturbed in any way by our local community.

As a result of the current conflict in Syria, the idea of anti-Semitism was actually erased completely. People realized that certain events or actions do not define a whole group or community. Since 2011, peaceful co-existence started to resurface in our community, and people started caring for those few

Jews left in the city. Our family was always open minded and accepted the idea of marrying someone from a different religion, we had to accept the fact that there weren't many Jewish men in the country anymore. I have a sister married to a Muslim and another married to a Christian. My sister Stella even changed her name to Leila after getting married to a Muslim man. So basically, I am the Jewish uncle with Muslim and Christian nephews and nieces. Do you know any better example of a coexistent society?

Rachel Qamoo

October 30, 2019

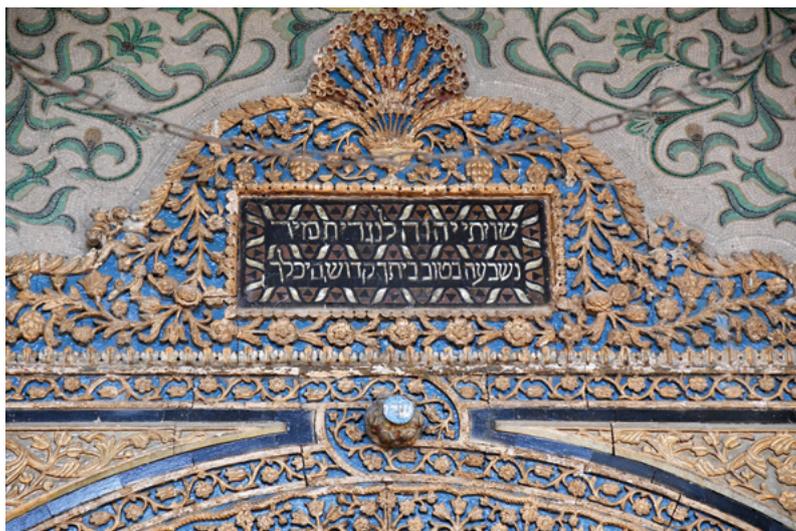
Rachel Qamoo (born 1941 in Damascus), sister of Albert Qamoo, returned to Damascus because she made it her mission to take care of the city's synagogues. Even if she would like to leave the country and live with her family in Mexico, she stays to make sure that the synagogues will be preserved. In this interview, she also tells about the crafts and trades that Damascene Jews were famous for; about the history of the former Jewish houses and schools. As the others, Rachel Qamoo reflects to what extent inter-confessional neighborhood friendships could persist despite growing political conflicts in the region.

Most of the Jews of Damascus left Syria years ago and since then all of the buildings, including the synagogues, in the old city have been neglected. I am here today for these synagogues, I chose to return to Damascus out of pure will, although part of me still hopes that one day I will get the chance to leave as well. I've always wanted to reunite with my brothers in Mexico and to live with them for the rest of my life. But before I do, I plan to renovate all the synagogues of Damascus or else we will end up losing them the same way Damascus lost its Jewish community.

Damascene Jews as craftsmen and merchants

The Jews of Damascus were known for their ingeniousness in craft and trade. Our motto is "We sell quality not quantity" and we know how to make good money out of it. Socially, the Jewish community was divided into a lower, middle and upper class, yet we were all resident at the Jewish Quarter. You can never tell the difference in class or status between us, we all dressed up very well. Our community gives much value to looks and appearance. While the

The ark at the Frenj Synagogue, with an Hebrew inscription from Psalms 16:8 and 65:5. Jewish Quarter in Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.



rich bought their clothes from Beirut or Paris, the poor sewed their own with high quality fabric from Europe. These fabrics were usually smuggled into the souks of Damascus through Antakya, Turkey.

Damascene Jews were well-known textile merchants. Some families have been the pioneers of textile trade for centuries, especially between Europe and Ottoman Syria. Yet, Jews were better known for their craftsmanship in copper and gold metalworking. Back then, our quarter was called the Taiwan of Damascus. We used to work from our homes and shops inside the Jewish Quarter. It wasn't until the early 1980s that our shops and factories spread everywhere in Damascus; in Salhiyyeh, Chalaan, and even in Bab Touma.

Young women played a major role in these crafts as well. They mastered the art of silver inlaying on copper ornamental objects. Earlier on, women established factories inside their homes, sewing cloths and fur jackets. Our men were the kings of gold jewelry making, especially in the city of Qamishli, which was also known for oil pressing, ghee, yogurt, and cheese making. In Damascus, we controlled the gold market. The most famous gold merchants were the Muwaddebs, they were responsible for forecasting the price of gold in the Syrian market. In Aleppo, Jews gained the reputation for being the pioneers of international trade, they were the wealthiest in the country. Jews were also money lenders, and not only that, we did not mind selling our products on debt, and that really angered many merchants because it encouraged more people to purchase our products. In no time, our businesses took over the whole Damascene market.

Pragmatic relationships with Palestinian refugees

After 1948, the shape of our quarter changed tremendously. Palestinian refugees moved into our quarter and many Palestinians worked with us. The political situation might have been complicated, but in reality, we were able to cooperate with the Palestinians by providing them with jobs in our factories, turning them from refugees to citizens who made money and were able to buy property. The Jews were smart, instead of focusing on our political differences, we were able to create a relationship that gave benefit to both sides, and this was done through business. The Palestinian labor helped us expand our businesses, especially during the 1980s when we started exporting our goods to Russia and Eastern Europe; it was our golden era again. But this all ended when the Jews left Damascus in the 1990s, leaving behind their businesses and skilled Palestinian workers who tried to reestablish the latter but failed.

Education

The Jews studied in several schools in Damascus, mostly Christian schools located in Bab Touma or at the Alliance School²¹ in the Jewish Quarter. After 1948, our Alliance School was taken over by Palestinian refugees. Since then, the only school we had left for us inside the Jewish Quarter was Ibn Maymoun,²² which was established in 1935. My sisters and I studied at l'Ecole des Soeurs de Besancon in Bab Touma, my brothers enrolled at Ibn Maymoun

²¹ School of the international, French-based organization Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), established in 1864 and reopened in 1880. The curriculum of the AIU schools combined secular and religious studies, including Hebrew classes. The AIU school was closed when its building became an UNRWA installation for Palestinian refugees after 1948 (see Chapter "Traces").

²² Established in 1935 in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus and closed in the beginning of the 2000s when the last Jewish children left Damascus. Named after the Jewish Andalusian scholar Moses Maimonides (Arabic name: Ibn Maymoun, died 1204).

because it was the only school that offered Hebrew and religious studies. We were very young in 1948, but I remember very well how all the kids were taken out of our school, the Alliance, and placed in alternative schools across the old city. Many kids got sick because of fear and the feeling of detachment, but no one was harmed or faced any form of violence.

Keeping Damascene friendships despite political tensions and restrictions

Although being a Jew in Damascus may have been difficult, it did not change the way we felt towards our city. We were Damascene, we always have been; but after 1948, the law and the government were against us, but never did that change how the people of the Damascene community treated us; except for a few maybe. One of my teachers at school used to kick us out of class because she refused to teach Jews. But she was one out of many other Syrians who never treated us based on our religious background. She was the only one to treat us this way really. On the other hand, there were many Muslim merchants who remained loyal to my father and were very close friends of the family, like the Haffars and the Dawamnehs, two very well-known Damascene families. My father's partner in business, a Muslim as well, helped get my brother out of the Citadel's prison when authorities started investigating with the Jews²³ during Quwatli's rule.²⁴ We were not allowed outside our homes after 5 pm, things got very tough really, and most of our businesses were stopped or confiscated by the government. I even remember how my Christian friend would enter our home through the back door so authorities would not see her visiting a Jewish home. But this all ended in the early 1970s after Hafez al-Assad²⁵ became president. In no time, we were treated as Syrian citizens again. We gained our right to buy and sell property, to trade locally and internationally, and to move around freely.²⁶ It was then that many Jews started establishing major businesses outside of Old Damascus, in Bab Touma, Chalaan, and other major parts of the city center as I have mentioned to you before.

Family houses and their transitions

We owned a huge house in Quemariyyeh²⁷ where most of our neighbors were Christian, and for over 30 years we always felt like we were one big family living in the same neighborhood. We bought it in 1946 but unfortunately my parents decided to sell it back in 1980. Our house used to belong to an Austrian doctor. Today, it has been transformed into a hotel known as Aginor. Everyone knew that doctor, he used to move around the old city on his white donkey. You could never miss him although he was very short, but at that time, riding a white donkey was like riding a Cadillac, and how tall that foreign doctor was suddenly didn't matter anymore. You see ... Money talks.

Our home was a huge Damascene house, with more than ten rooms and a beautiful courtyard full of trees. Some were planted by my brothers who left for Mexico just a couple of years after we have moved into the house. When my father bought the house, he paid for it with English coins, it was just after

23 A series of investigations were run to collect information concerning the Arab-Israeli War.

24 Shukri al-Quwatli (1891–1967), President of Syria 1943–1949, first president of post-independence Syria.

25 Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000), President of Syria 1971–2000.

26 Not all restrictions were lifted in the 1970s. See Preface and Timeline.

Editor's note

27 A melting pot Muslim and Christian neighborhood in Old Damascus.

World War II and the owner was shocked to find that my father owns that amount of English money. There were ten Christian families in our neighborhood, the Sabbaghs and the Syoufis were the most popular. Our neighborhood was also known as the Sultaneh²⁸ because it was considered a high-class neighborhood. It even had its own water system, through aqueducts that carried the water from nearby rivers directly into our homes. Our original house at the Jewish Quarter became a hotel as well, the Talisman Hotel. Those houses were huge and only rich people could afford to live in them and call them their home. We owned half of it, while the other half belonged to the Shattahs, another Damascene Jewish family. I was born in that house, and so were my brothers and sisters. As our family got bigger my father decided to sell it and buy us a bigger home, and that's how we ended up moving outside the Jewish Quarter. My father always said, "my family's happiness comes first," and for that reason only did he move outside of our neighborhood.

We didn't sell the house for the money, we sold it because we thought of leaving. But as soon as we moved into the apartment, my father passed away, followed by my mother. They couldn't stand the idea of leaving. The idea of being away from home, their beloved city and their neighborhood cost them their lives; and instead of leaving to Mexico, they left to remain in Damascene soil.

Returning to Damascus to preserve its synagogues

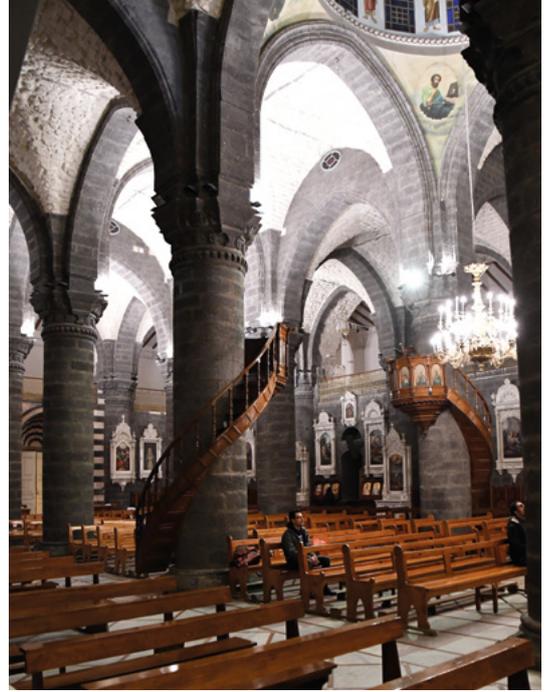
When my parents passed away, Albert and I decided to leave Syria and follow our brothers, so we did. But in a little less than six months, we were back in Damascus because we decided we had to protect and renovate the synagogues in the old city. They are a very important part of our Jewish heritage and cannot be left neglected. I still have a lot of work to do. And for the past year and two months, all I have been doing is helping out and watching over the work of the construction workers. My plan is to save all the synagogues in Damascus, then maybe I can head back to Mexico and reunite with my brothers and sister with a more peaceful heart and mind. We don't want to be here alone anymore.

28 For sultans, reflecting class and authority.



Decorative lintel depicting a temple on door of a synagogue at the Jewish Quarter, Old Damascus. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*

The Zaytoun Church which replaced the Karaite Jews' Zaytoun Synagogue after their mass migration to Turkey during the early 1830s. Photo by Rania Kataf



What breaks my heart the most is the Synagogue of Jobar.²⁹ It used to be the second oldest synagogue in Syria, after the Synagogue of Aleppo, before it has been destroyed completely during the Syrian conflict. During the 16th century, many of the Jews who escaped Spain came to settle in Jobar because of its ancient synagogue. Those who moved to Damascus built the Frenj Synagogue,³⁰ 'frenj' meaning foreigner, making it the first synagogue built inside the city walls. After that, seven synagogues were built, in addition to private synagogues inside Jewish homes. The most famous was the private synagogue at the house of Chamahayah, which became a settlement for refugees from Palestine in 1948. The house, which was actually a palace in size, fit up to 50 Palestinian families. And as it was divided, different parts of the interior were removed and sold outside of Syria. The most famous being the reception room which has been reinstalled in a villa in Saida, Lebanon, and belongs to the well-known Lebanese Druze Naseeb Jumblatt. There used to be a synagogue nearby Bab Touma³¹ for Karaite Jews, but when they all left Damascus centuries ago, it was sold and transformed into a church³² during the 19th century. If you visit it, you will see how similar the structure of the church is to that of the Frenj Synagogue. Losing our synagogues really aches my heart, I really do not want this to happen anymore.

Syria is the only country and government that has protected its synagogues even after the Jews have left the country. In Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon most of the synagogues have been destroyed or removed to be substituted by new buildings. Syria, on the other hand, is cooperating very well by helping us renovate these historical religious buildings. When I finish renovating the synagogues, I will sell this apartment and move to live with my family in Mexico. Ever since my parents passed away, I really had no reason to stay here, except for the fact that we finally felt free again. President Hafez al-Assad gave us all the freedom we dreamed of as Syrian citizens. We felt home again. This is why we returned, I had to take care of what was left of the Jewish community's assets, homes and synagogues. The Syrian government really helped with that, and accepted the fact that we, as a Jewish community, want to protect our Jewish cultural heritage.

29 Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue, which is known as one of the oldest synagogues in the country and is situated in Jobar, a suburb of Damascus. Was destroyed completely by a bombing in 2014 (see Chapter "Traces").

30 The Frenj Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus, is the only one in Damascus that is still functioning today. It is said to be founded by the Sephardic Jews who came to Damascus after their expulsion from Spain in the end of the 15th century (see Chapter "Traces").

31 Christian neighborhood in Old Damascus.

32 The Karaites are a Jewish sect that derives its religious teachings and laws only from the Written Torah/Hebrew holy scriptures, and not from rabbinical authorities and the authoritative writings of rabbinic Jewish traditions (the Oral Torah, such as the Talmud). They made up a recognizable part of the Jewish population of the Middle East from the 9th–11th century.

Editor's note. After the last Karaite Jews had left Damascus, their synagogue was sold by a representative of the Karaite Jews from Jerusalem. It was transformed into the Zaytoun Church between 1832–1834.

Joseph Jajati (born 1994 in Damascus) left Damascus for Brooklyn (New York City, USA) with his mother and his brother when he was only two years old. Although having left in such a young age, he emphasizes the strong feeling of belonging to the Syrian community, a collective identity that he keeps and presents proudly in Brooklyn where he still lives and works as a businessman. Joseph describes the house and businesses of his family and the central role his grandfather played in the Jewish community nostalgically. In 2018, Joseph traveled back to Syria for the first time after leaving as a child, a trip that he remembers rhapsodically.

Remembering the family's house, business and influence in the community

Our house was located in the midst of the old city, nearby the Roman Arch on Straight Street, in an Alley called al-Tallaj. It was a tiny neighborhood, with houses built so close to each other you literally felt like you lived with your neighbors. Our neighbor back then was the famous Syrian actor, Rasheed Assaf. We have known them for a very long time. Neighbors in Damascus become your family, that's how it is all over the country. Al-Tallaj alley is considered part of the Quemariyyeh³³ neighborhood and it is the same address mentioned on our IDs. I only lived there for two years, then in 1996 I left Damascus with my mother and sister for Brooklyn. My mother decided to move because her parents were already in the States. My father and grandfather chose to stay and ended up settling in Damascus until 2001; making them one of the last people of the Jewish community to leave the city.

³³ A melting pot of Muslim and Christian neighborhood in Old Damascus.



The Roman Arch on Street called Straight, Old Damascus. Photo by Rania Kataf.

My father and grandfather, Youssef Abou Khalil Jajati, owned the biggest textile store in Damascus, called al-Makhzan al-Kabeer, in other words the large warehouse. Their business was huge and very well known in Damascus and it was located just in front of the Damascus Governorate Building. My grandfather bought the store in 1972. And in 2001, when he finally took the decision to leave, he sold both our house and the store. Today our shop makes up one of the branches of a Syrian telecommunication network company called MTN. Yet people still remember the store as al-Makhzan al-Kabeer.³⁴ I know very well that our name and reputation in the Damascene market have not been forgotten.

Back then, my grandfather shared a very good relationship with the Syrian government, and was appointed as the representative of the Jewish community of Aleppo and Damascus. For years, he was the man handling all Jewish matters behind closed doors. Even during the 1980s and early 1990s when Rabbi Hamra³⁵ was Head of the Syrian Jewish Community. My grandfather helped out in most of the work without any credit really. It wasn't until Rabbi Hamra left for Israel in 1994 that people knew about my grandfather's support and work; and Abu Khalil Jajati officially became known as the Head of the Jewish Community.

The situation of the Jewish community after the last emigration wave in the early 1990s: to leave or not to leave?

By 1994, 95 % of the Jewish community was estimated to have departed the city of Damascus. There were no Rabbis, no butchers that provided kosher meat, and a very small number of young Jews; the reason why many Jewish women who sought marriage had to leave as well. I heard once that some people have returned to Damascus in 1996, believe me Jews were not happy in the States, it was not their home. By 2001, most of the Jews have already left Syria and my father and grandfather were surrounded by a very small Jewish community. I remember how they kept trying to convince the Jews not to leave, insisting that they were going to regret it and end up returning to Damascus. This was why they chose to stay, but once my grandfather realized that people were not coming back, he too decided to follow his community. Eventually everyone had to leave. Jews needed to be surrounded by their community.

Yousef Abu Khalil Jajati passed away almost six years ago and his brother passed away just two days ago. I know for a fact that if the choice was theirs, what they would have really wanted more than anything was to spend their last days in Syria, especially my grandfather Abu Khalil.

Keeping the Syrian (collective) identity in Brooklyn

I don't remember how Damascus used to be in the '90s, I was only two years old when I left so I grew up in the States. Yet, that did not make me any less Shami, I definitely feel Shami. Not remembering Syria does not make me any less Syrian and not physically being in Syria doesn't either. My house in the

³⁴ Arabic for "the large warehouse".

³⁵ The last rabbi in Damascus. Left Damascus for the United States, then to Israel in 1994.

States is a typical Syrian home and my family made sure I grew up the Syrian way. We speak Arabic at home, even at work, and I only speak English when I really have to. Everything we do, we do the exact same way it used to be done in Damascus; the food, the traditions, the ceremonies and celebrations. If you compare us as a Damascene Jewish community to other Jewish communities in the States and Europe, you will find that we are truly very different. We might share the same religion but in reality, we are very different. You and me as Syrians are a hundred times more similar than a random Jewish American walking in the street of New York.

To be honest, we are doing very well here as a family, so no one really regrets leaving Syria. But, do we miss home? Yes! Every day! All the time! Syria is all we talk about when we are together, especially when my grandfather from my mom's side is present. His name is Salim Abou Habib Halabi, also known as Salim Hasbani. You see, even our names are Arabic. Everything about us is purely Syrian.

Brooklyn is basically an updated version of our Jewish Quarter in Damascus. The city became a hub for all the Jews of the Syrian community, including the Jews of Aleppo and Quamishli as well. Some Egyptian and Lebanese Jews integrated into our community in Brooklyn too. In reality, the Damascene Jews have a better relationship between themselves than with Jews from other cities and countries. Even in the States, most of my friends are from Sham, we are much connected by nature.

I never hide my identity, I tell everyone where I come from, with pride of course. People do get a little surprised when I am outside our area, but in Brooklyn there is a huge Syrian Jewish community so I never need to explain myself to anybody. The fact that I am Syrian and Jewish and speak Arabic very well can sometimes shock some people. I don't speak any Hebrew; I only understand some of it. My Arabic is a hundred times better than my Hebrew actually and even my family does not know how to speak the language. I only know a couple of words because we were taught some Hebrew at my Jewish school in Brooklyn when I was a kid. But not one word from my home.

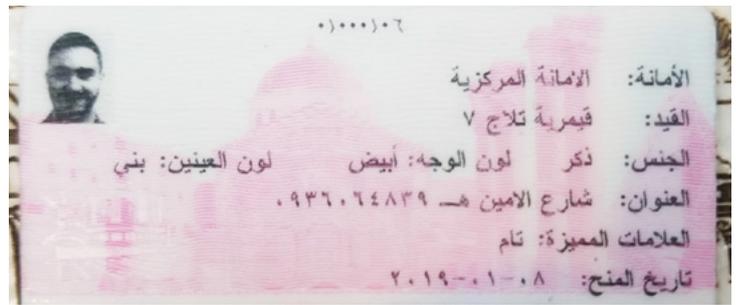
Traveling back to Damascus

I travelled to Syria in August of 2018. It was my first time in Damascus since I left the city as a child. I was finally going to visit home after 22 years of living abroad. I cannot explain to you how I felt the moment I arrived to the city; it was an indescribable feeling. How can I explain to you what being home means to someone like me? It was a dream, truly surreal... When I shared the photos I took during my trip with my father, he got so jealous he decided he was going to take a break from work and fly over to Syria. And in September 2018, he finally travelled home. Damascus, oh Damascus, it will always be our home.

The trip was one of its kind. When I arrived to the Syrian border, the authorities asked for the legal documents concerning my military service.³⁶ I laughed and told the border guard I am Jew and that we do not serve the Syrian army. Everyone was shocked when hearing the word 'Jew'. No one expects a Jew to

³⁶ Under the Service of the Flag Law of 1953, all Syrian males, with the exception of the Jews, must serve in the military.

Photo of the Syrian identity card of Joseph Jajati, issued on 08/01/2019. Source: Joseph Jajati.



visit a war-torn Syria at a time when many are still fleeing the country. The border guard asked me, “how long have you been living abroad?” I told him since 1996. This time he laughed, then he said: “Oh, then I guess you missed out on all the action.” He then stamped my passport and said, “welcome back to Syria.” Because of this experience, I decided to go back again. And since then I have been to Syria three other times, in January, April and August of 2018.

Visiting our house for the first time in 22 years was probably the best memory I have of all my visits to Damascus. This was the house I was born in, but after my parents have sold it the new owner turned it into a hotel he called Inanna. I went there with my cousin Ibrahim who arrived from the States a couple of days after I have. And as I introduced myself to the hotel owner, he immediately let us in and told me that we were always welcome to visit stating that “il beit betak!”³⁷ I truly felt so at home. You can never find anyone in the States who talks to you in this manner, we share true intimacy when we communicate with each other as Damascenes.

I do a lot of travelling, but I never left my home in Brooklyn for over 10 days, and I always count the days to go back. But in Damascus things are different, I never want to leave and it is so hard to travel back every time. I made so many friends during my four visits to Damascus and I love that being a Jew did not mean I was different. To be honest, many Jewish Syrians in Brooklyn warned me not to go back, they feared I would not be accepted. I can't blame them, some of them have had bad experiences when they used to live in Damascus. As for me, I had to travel to know the truth, and the most pleasing experience was coming back with so many great memories and proving them all wrong.

³⁷ Arabic saying for welcoming a person, meaning: “This home is your home.”

I realized that even after my family has left the city no one has really forgotten the Jajatis. When people in Damascus know of my last name, they immediately recognized us, especially my grandfather Youssef. We were not forgotten, and that said it all. My family lived a happy life in Damascus, they were successful merchants, they had great neighbors, and I can't remember a time I heard them speak of a bad memory they had of home.

Ibrahim Abu Hamra

November 26, 2019

Ibrahim Abu Hamra (born 1990 in Damascus) was eleven years old when he moved to Brooklyn (New York City, USA) where the Syrian Jewish community was already quite big back then. Until his emigration, he still went to Ibn Maymoun school for a couple of years and starts his interview with memories about that time. As Joseph Jajati, also Ibrahim still feels a strong sense of identification with Damascus. He joined Joseph in his journey back to Syria in 2018 and tells with a similar enthusiasm about the positive experiences when seeing and meeting again the places and people of his childhood. He still lives in Brooklyn and works as a Businessman.

The last generation of Jewish school kids in Damascus

I was in fifth grade when I left Damascus in 2001. Ibn Maymoun,³⁸ our school in the Jewish Quarter, was still operating at the time. There were not a lot of Jewish kids my age, so my classroom was made up of 15 students ranging from 3rd to 5th grade. And because of the shortage in Jewish staff we all ended up studying the same material. Our school principal at the time was Jewish, but our teachers were mostly Christian, and we studied in the same books as other Syrian schools in Damascus, all printed and provided by the Syrian Ministry of Education.

I used to sing the Syrian national anthem every day before going to class. I remember standing in the school courtyard and watching my uncle do his daily routine of raising the Syrian flag then directing us through the morning assembly, the same way every Syrian student in other schools in Damascus did each day. In reality, we are as Syrian as any other Syrian in the country. We truly shared the same experience as other students of our age, our religion never detached us from our surrounding community. We all shared a common background and for me that reflects on creating a common identity.

Emigration to the diaspora community in Brooklyn

I was 11 years old when I moved to Brooklyn. And to be honest I did not feel like I was in a foreign country and that was because a large part of my family had already settled in the States way before we have. The presence of my uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents really helped me adapt to the place quickly. I was more accepting to the idea of moving and settling in a new home only because I knew I was not alone.

³⁸ Established in 1935 in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus and closed in the beginning of the 2000s when the last Jewish children left Damascus. Named after the Jewish Andalusian scholar Moses Maimonides (Arabic name: Ibn Maymoun, died 1204).

Brooklyn was nothing like Damascus. I know for a fact that I have missed out on a lot of things as a Syrian child growing up in the States. For instance, not being able to play soccer in the narrow alleys of our Jewish quarter anymore really gave me great grief. Kids in the States don't play soccer in the street, they all prefer football and are more interested in other activities I don't see myself engaging in. Back in Damascus, I played soccer with the whole neighborhood, even with our Palestinian neighbor's children. Living in the same neighborhood meant we were all the same. I know that I adapted really fast to my new home in Brooklyn, but deep inside I was still Ibrahim from Damascus; the Ibrahim who had what many other Jewish boys of his generation did not have: The ability to speak Arabic as my mother tongue and a childhood in Damascus.

Travelling back to Syria

Sometime certain signs or instances somehow keep reminding you that no matter where you end up, nothing can change the fact that our roots will always be connected to Syria. I was with Joe³⁹ on his trip to Damascus, and I still can't get over how he was granted a Syrian ID in only 48 hours after applying for citizenship. This made us feel like we are VIPs, like we still belonged. We truly felt like we were in our country, retrieving what originally belong to us, our basic right of being Syrian citizens; not tourists visiting a foreign land. I will never be that visitor waiting for a Syrian to welcome me to his country. I was born here; I am from here and my family has lived here way before many other Syrian families have.

In the beginning, I felt a bit hesitant about travelling to Syria with Joe, and I remember him telling me: "I don't care if you don't want to come, I am going anyway." And that is exactly what he did. He arrived to Damascus on Sunday and the minute he got to the hotel he sent me a video. When I watched it, I felt a burn in my chest, I could not believe my eyes. I bought my ticket to Beirut on Wednesday and by Friday I was in Damascus. I could not even pay for my ticket via credit card because my trip was in less than 24 hours. It all happened so fast.

I passed through the Syrian borders on my own, no one wanted to take this trip with me and that did not stop me. I remember very well the moment I arrived to the hotel and saw Joe sitting outside at the terrace drinking orange juice with a friend. We both jerked out of our seats and I ran over the hotel's fence into the entrance and hugged Joe so hard screaming in his ear: "Oh my God Joe, Oh my God! I can't believe it! We are both here in Damascus." Words cannot explain how we felt at that moment. You can only feel such moments.

I went to visit our old house in Kasaa, the Christian neighborhood nearby Old Damascus. When I knocked the door, our neighbor, who did not recognize me yet, immediately welcomed me and let me in his home. "Don't you want to ask me who I am?" I asked. All he said was: "Welcome to my home." If this was to happen in the States, I am sure the house owner would have called the police, especially with two 'strangers' knocking at his door. I stood

³⁹ Joseph Jajati, see previous interview.

by the entrance telling him: “Just a minute. Do you remember your old neighbor? Sometime around 15 years ago?” His eyes lit with hope, he was so happy and hugged me saying: “You are Ibrahim, aren’t you?!” Even his wife remembered me and we even face timed my mom in Brooklyn. To tell you the truth I was not surprised, the Lattashs were Damascene, and their reaction was exactly what I have been looking forward to and expecting.

Maurice Nseiri

November 3, 2019

Maurice Nseiri (born 1944 in Damascus) left Syria for Brooklyn (New York City, USA) in 1992 after dedicating his life to the art of metalwork which he had learned from his father Sion Nseiri. In the interview, Maurice focuses on telling about this profession and how he represented and passed on this Damascene tradition in the city and abroad.

The Art of Metalworking

In the 1960s, Shafik al-Imam was the director of the Museum of Syrian Crafts at the Azem Palace⁴⁰ of Damascus and the man organizing the most important event of the year, the Damascus International Fair. Al-Imam was responsible for selecting and bringing together the best Syrian craftsmen in the city. Every year, I would receive a phone call from Shafik asking me to participate at the event as the master of one of the most famous Damascene crafts, the art of metalworking. Shafik was a close friend, he was an expert in Syrian heritage and I always enjoyed his company and long discussions on culture and craft. He used to visit my father Sion and me constantly at our workshop in the Jewish Quarter or at my office on Street called Straight; we were the only men he trusted to provide him with accurate information on the history of Syrian handcraft and the traditional techniques behind each one. When diplomats visited Damascus, he would bring them to my workshop and store, The Umayyad Bazar, to tell them: “This shop is a true Damascene treasure.” He had great respect for me as a man and as an artist, which is why I never hesitated to participate in any event he told me about, and I always did it for free. My aim was to portray the beauty of Damascene metalwork, all that mattered to me was to show the world the art born out of this city’s craftsmen and merchant.

40 The Azem Palace the private residence of Asad Pasha al-Azem (1706–1758), a governor of Damascus during the Ottoman Empire.



Bazar Umayyad on Street called Straight, Old Damascus. *Photo by Rania Kataf.*

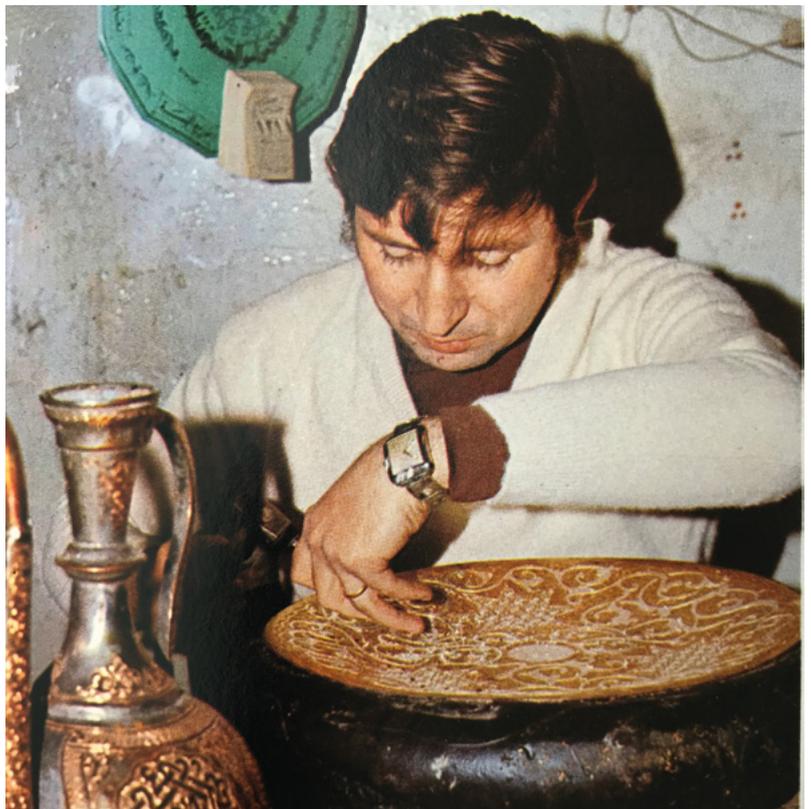
Our booth attracted many, and I can tell you that people came to the Damascus International Fair just to see what Nseiri has prepared for display in his booth this year. We were a great success for two years in a row, but on the 3rd year, Shafik did not contact me! I called him to ask: “Shafik Beik,⁴¹ isn’t it about time you pay me a visit so we discuss this year’s booth? I have a great idea I want to share with you.” He remained silent to I continued: “My plan is to create a piece that illustrates the techniques used in every stage of copper metalwork production, including the inlay techniques and the tools all from A–Z. I am sure this year’s idea will be a great success!” He was still silent, then he told me he was going to pass by my office and I knew then that something was wrong.

Shafik Beik visited my shop later that afternoon, he hugged me and started crying. “They do not want you to participate in the Damascus International Fair this year Maurice. I am very sorry.” It was the 1960s, so I wasn’t surprised at all. That year, our booth remained empty. I kept telling Shafik that cancelling our presence in this year’s international fair does not mean anything. “They might have removed our booth but they can never remove us from this city!” I said.

The 1960s was a very difficult period for most Syrian Jews, especially following the period of the Israeli-Palestinian War of 1967. As a Damascene artist and craftsman, it largely disturbed me that some people stopped appreciating my work just because I am Jew. My artwork was devalued and so I decided to become extremely selective about who were my future clients going to be. I only sold my pieces to intellectual collectors and never for the purpose of making money. For me, these metal works were unique and a visual representation of true Damascene masterpieces, so they were not for everyone. I always told my clients: “Appreciating my work is not enough, you should also appreciate Maurice the artist, or else this piece does not belong to you.” But to be fair, most of my clients were VIP collectors and merchants who appreciated my work. Our relationship has always been based on trust, and no one ever bargained with the prices I set for my work.

⁴¹ Bey; used as a title for a leader during the Ottoman period.

A metal worker at Bazar Umayyad, Old Damascus. Source: Maurice Nseiri.



Some of my clients loved consulting me when it came to decorating their homes. One of them bought a house in Malki⁴² in the '80s and invited me over to see his new home and to ask me how he should decorate it. And although I kept reminding him that I was not an interior designer, he kept insisting that one of the rooms be of my creation. So, I chose the dining room, and created the whole table set of brass with copper and silver inlay; in addition to the lamps and a large mirror. It really turned out to be a very rare Damascene masterpiece. I never gave this design to another client, and until today, no one has been able to recreate that same customized dining room.

Restrictions on movement and travel bans

It was difficult for us to travel around Syria, we were banned from moving four km outside of the city unless we had a permit. These permits needed time to be issued and we had to indicate the exact travel date and destination. These restrictions mostly applied during the 1960s. I used to travel a lot to Aleppo for business purposes and had to pass by the Syrian authorities every time to inform them of my departure and arrival. Even my family had to get permits for weekend trips out in the suburbs. This did not change until the mid-70s, after the horrifying incident of the kidnapping and murder of the Jewish teenagers who were killed by their smuggler on their way to Lebanon.⁴³ It wasn't until sometime between 1974 and 1975 that we were finally allowed to travel freely again, but under the condition that a member or two of our family remains in Syria. We were also forced to place a bank deposit of 25,000 Syrian pounds per person (6000\$/person) as a guarantee until our return.

Exporting metalware to Europe

In addition to my work in metalware, I also worked in the exporting business. Every Thursday a shipment of second hand goods was packaged and shipped off to Germany. The Germans loved my work and were some of my most loyal customers. I used to collect each and every piece of unwanted antique and metalwork in the Syrian market. I would polish them, then place them in containers so they were ready for the next shipment. All these goods were photographed and added to our store's catalogue, with information including the history, measurements and source of each piece. No one appreciated these pieces in Syria because people were ignorant about their cultural value. I knew that they were unreplaceable, and for this reason I found a way to revive their presence by introducing them to the international market. Syria is a melting pot of cultures, and every city had its own unique identity which is portrayed through its handcrafts. I was the only merchant who was also an expert in the history of Syrian metalworks. I had clients in Germany, France, Italy, Denmark and even England. People in Europe are truly fond of our culture and handcrafts.

After all travel bans were removed, I started traveling more to Europe to attend different exhibitions in France, Germany, and Italy. These exhibitions were only for European participants, but I joined every time to see what was

42 High class neighborhood in Damascus.

43 On March 2, 1974, bodies of four teenage Jewish girls from the Zaibak and Saad family were found in Zabadani, a town near Damascus. They were murdered by their smuggler in their attempt to leave the country through the border to Lebanon. (See Jasim 2020: 32–33).

Editor's note

trending and who were the big names attending these events. Sometimes I would take samples of my work for people to see, it was very important for me to show off my work on these trips, not only for personal business purposes but also to represent my country's craftsmen. After each trip, I would return to Damascus with so much enthusiasm to create more. My idea of design was to recreate outdated oriental pieces with a modern twist that would attract the European market. One of my favorites were the lanterns I made out of traditional copper water jugs. The original French army soldier hats were very popular as well, I added copper plates to each one and the whole batch was sold to Germany. This is how I became one of the most well-known and well-respected merchants of Damascus, but that was mostly on an international level, at least during the 1960s and early 1970s.

One of my clients was a German tradesman from the Handke family, he had a warehouse in a town nearby the city of Munich, and every time I visited Germany, he would insist I would stay over at his home by the lake. Mr. Handke bought goods from many different Arab countries. He used to tell me: "I buy goods from Egypt, Iraq, and Iran, but nothing compares to the gems you sell me Maurice." Mr. Handke had a team of experts that managed the inventory at his warehouse. Every piece that entered the warehouse underwent a series of inspections. The results were then compared to the data from each order. This was the procedure they followed every single time, except for my shipment. Mr. Handke's warehouse supervisor never touched my lot, and it went straight into storage. No inspection, no security measurements, no data collection, nothing but trust!

Helping out colleagues to pass on the tradition

There was a lot of competition in the market, especially in a city like Damascus where trade and craft were the heart of the city's soul and economy. Yet, that never stopped me from helping others. Merchants always came over to my office to seek my advice, some even shared the same business as mine. My workers always criticized me for helping them out, thinking it was naïve of me to support my rival in the Syrian market. One afternoon, one of my workers came up to me and asked: "Why would you give away all your knowledge? The techniques you taught us? Our designs? Aren't you worried they would copy your work?"

Work of Sion Ibrahim Nseiri
(1968), father of Maurice Nseiri,
in a church in Kassaa, Damascus.
Photo by Rania Kataf.





A copper plate designed by Sion Nseiri, Maurice Nseiri's father, at the Museum of Syrian Crafts – Azem Palace, Old Damascus.
Photo by Rania Kataf

For me this was never an issue because my main concern was for our craft to survive. I always felt it was my responsibility to pass on this ancient Damascene art to future generations the proper way. When people come up to you for advice it means you are held countable for transferring and sharing the right information, these are my ethics. History and man will remember that, and so will my Damascus. This was the lesson my father Sion Nseiri, also known as Abou Brahim, taught me, he always told me, “Maurice, it is our duty to help them do it right, or else this city will lose this art and craft forever.”

Sion Nseiri was a great man. When I was seven years old, I used to visit him at his old workshop, at Khosh al-Hakim, in the Jewish Quarter and watch him work his magic with copper. His warehouse was smaller than that of the Umayyad Bazar but it was filled with Jewish craftsmen and young Jewish women who were the experts in inlaying silver on the copper plates produced by the men. My father always asked for my opinion, and sometimes he applied my ideas on his own work. I was a kid back then but he always encouraged me to speak out, he was a great listener, and he taught me how to be creative in our craft. On January 1, 1992, at exactly 7:00 am, my father's warehouse collapsed. It was snowing heavily in Damascus on that day. At that same moment, believe it or not, I was saying my final farewells to Damascus, while waiting in line to board the plane that was taking me to the United States ... for good.

III. Literature

Literature – Rania Kataf

Abadi, Moussa, 1993: *La Reine et Le Calligraphe* [The Queen and the Calligrapher]. France: Bartillant.

Al-Jabin, Ibrahim, 2016. *Ayn al-shark* [Eye of the East]. Beirut, Damascus: MK Publishing.

Lewis, Bernard, 1999: *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Na'eeseh, Youssef, 2009: *Yahoud bilad al-sham fi-l-qarn al-tasee ashar wa-l-nisf al-awwal min al-qarn al-ishreen* [Jews of the Levant in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century]. *Al-Turath al-Arabi* [Arab Heritage] 113: A93–A124.

Olabi, Akram, 2011. *Yahoud al-sham fi-l-asr al-othmani* [Jews of the Levant in the Ottoman Period]. Syria: The Syrian General Organization of Books.

Literature – Preface and Editor's Notes

- Álvarez Suárez, A. / Del Río Sánchez, F., 2013: The Current Syrian Popular View of the Jews. *The Levantine Review* 2 (2): 108–118.
- Gottheil, Richard / Buhl, Frants / Franco, M., 1906: Damascus. pp. 415–420 in Singer, I. et al. (ed.): *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4861-damascus> (29.10.2020).
- Jasim, Ansar, 2020: Von einer lokalen zu einer globalen Community. Zur jüdischen Geschichte Syriens [From a Global to a Local Community. On the Jewish History of Syria]. Working Paper 1 in: Minor Kontor (ed.), *Der Gang der Geschichte(n). Narrative über Jüdinnen und Juden, Judentum, die Shoah und Israel*. Berlin: Minor Kontor. https://minor-kontor.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Minor_Narrative_Working-Paper-I_2020.pdf (29.10.2020).
- Karpat, Kemal H., 2002: *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History. Selected Articles and Essays*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.
- Krämer, Gudrun, 2006: Anti-Semitism in the Muslim World. A Critical Review. *Die Welt des Islams* 46(3): 243–276.
- Stillman, Norman A., 1991: *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publications Society.
- Stolleis, Friederike, 2015: Discourses on Minorities and Sectarianism in Syria. pp. 7–11 in Stolleis, F. (ed.): *Playing the Sectarian Card. Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1oF-biOkBD5aGdEF51H3ETOL1Nc7iCi7JRtd_3mHrEgeSupBLqFLY3OyTk (29.10.2020). [<https://bit.ly/38nusit>]
- Zenner, W. P., 2000: *A Global Community. The Jews from Aleppo, Syria*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

About the Author

Rania Kataf is a Damascus-based photojournalist and researcher working on documenting the city's memory and cultural heritage through stories and photographs. With her Facebook community group "Humans of Damascus" she tries to engage Damascenes through oral history and media records into this process online. She holds a degree in Food Science and Management from the American University of Beirut; and later continued her studies in Art Crime and Heritage Protection at the Association for Research into Crimes against Art (ARCA) in Italy.

Syrian History

Ottoman Empire

Since the 16th century: Trade privileges for France, Great Britain, Netherlands

1831–1840: Syria under Egyptian administration

1838: Further opening towards France and Great Britain: two trade agreements lift existing restrictions and monopolies

From 1838: Integration of Syria into the world market leads to strong changes in all social areas

1839–1876: *Tanzimat* period of reforms: far reaching changes in administration, education system, etc. and army affairs

August 2, 1914: Alliance agreement between the Ottoman Empire and the Wilhelminian German Reich

Jewish History in Syria

Dhimmi status; communal and internal autonomy of Jewish communities

1831–1840: Establishment of *majlis* (interdenominational local councils)

1839: Reform Edict of Gülhane: Jews officially become citizens of the Ottoman Empire

1840: Damascus Affair: ritual murder accusations against Jews in Damascus

1856: Abolition of the *dhimma* system for Jews; the Jizya (special tax for dhimmis) is replaced by a military tax for non-Muslims

1864: New constitution for Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire, recognition of the Chief Rabbi as head of the Jewish *Milla* (community) with fixed salary

1864: Opening of the first school of the Jewish-French organization Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) in Damascus (re-opening 1880)

1869: Opening of the Suez Canal, economic changes through the *Tanzimat*, emigration of Jews from Aleppo and Damascus especially to Egypt

1872: Opening of the first AIU school in Aleppo

1876: Conference of Constantinople: Agreement on the first mixed confessional general assembly (1877: 40 % non-Muslims in elected house of representatives)

1909: Introduction of compulsory military service leads to increased emigration

Syrian History

First World War: Thousands of Syrians fight in the Ottoman army; hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians die of hunger and disease

October 1, 1918: The British-Arab alliance conquers Damascus under the leadership of Faisal I, Faisal takes over the government affairs, but the British commander holds the central power position in Syria

March 7, 1920: The Syrian General Congress declares the independence of Syria as a constitutional monarchy under Faisal

April 19, 1920: Conference of San Remo: The Ottoman Empire is divided into so-called mandate areas by the European victorious powers; French mandate: Syria and Lebanon; British Mandate: Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan

June 24, 1920: France defeats the Syrian army, occupies Damascus and puts Syria under French administration

Jewish History in Syria

Jews can hold leading positions (e.g. editor-in-chief of the Arab nationalist Al-Hayat Journal)

1922–1946: French Mandate

1922: League of Nations confirms the Convention of San Remo

1925–1927: The Great Syrian Uprising against French rule and against social grievances are quelled with great military rigor

1940: With the capitulation of France, Syria is subordinated under the control of the fascist Vichy regime

Summer 1941: Units of Great Britain and of the anti-Nazi resistance movement France Libre conquer the territory

May 1945: Hope for independence, opposition against French occupation is met with military forces

Syrian History

April 17, 1946: Proclamation of the independent Syrian Republic

April 1, 1947: Official founding date of the Baath Party under the slogan "Unity, Freedom, Socialism"

1948: First Arab-Israeli War (Israeli War of Independence/Nakba): Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq attack Israel, expulsion and flight of Palestinians to Syria; Israel is not recognized by Syria until today

1949: General Husni Al-Za'im leads a first bloodless coup in March, and is already arrested in August by officers of the Syrian Social National Socialist Party (SSNP) in a second coup, in the same year Adib Shishakli promotes himself to power by a third coup and pursues a policy of Pan-arabism

1954: Shishakli goes into exile after a military coup; the first free elections are held in autumn under his civil successor Hashim Al-Atassi

February 1, 1958: Shukri Al-Quwwatli (Syria) and Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) found the United Arab Republic (UAR); in the following Egypt dominates the UAR

1961: Syrian dissatisfaction discharges in a coup leading to the dissolution of UAR; Foundation of the Syrian Arab Republic

Jewish History in Syria

Mid-1940s to mid-1950s: Jewish communities lose more than half of their 15,000 members through emigration

1947: Wave of anti-Jewish attacks in Aleppo following the UN resolution on the partition of Palestine (number of fatalities unclear, figures fluctuate between 0 and 100)

From 1947: A series of repressive measures that are explicitly directed against the Jewish minority: dismissal of all Jews from public service, prohibition of the exercise of public offices and the sale of property, for departure to Lebanon (known route to Israel) a special authorization becomes required, bank accounts are frozen and driver's licenses get confiscated

1948: The AIU school in Damascus closes after its building is turned into an UNRWA installation for Palestinian refugees; Palestinian refugees settle in the Jewish Quarter of Old Damascus

1948 to 1992: Ban on legal emigration for Jews

1949: Grenade attack on the Menarsha Synagogue in Damascus during a Shabbat service

1954: Short period of legal emigration from Syria

Syrian History

1963: Military coup brings Baath Party to power, strikes and protests are quelled violently

June 1967: The third Arab-Israeli war (Six-Day War/June War or Naksa) begins with a preventive surprise strike of Israel against Egypt and ends with the defeat of Syria, Egypt and Jordan; Israel occupies the Syrian Golan Heights which are finally annexed in 1981 violating international law

Jewish History in Syria

1963–1992: Further anti-Jewish repression: Permission required for all trips that exceed a radius of 5 km; Jewish identity cards include the note 'mousawi' (Mosaic)

1967: Anti-Jewish attacks. Monitoring Jewish life by the High Commission for Jewish Affairs; arrests and interrogations

1968: 4,000 Jews still live in Syria

1970–2000 Hafez al-Assad in Power

November 16, 1970: Hafez al-Assad, member of the Alawite religious minority, Minister of Defense and head of the military wing of the Baath Party, puts himself into power; so-called "Corrective Movement": leaders of the state and civil wing of the Baath Party are arrested; concentration of the state and military power in the person of Hafez al-Assad, his family and his confidants

October 6–25, 1973: Fourth Arab-Israeli War (Yom Kippur War/October War): Egypt and Syria attack Israel. The Arab oil-producing countries are increasing the price of oil to put pressure on the states supporting Israel; after the end of the war it comes to a Syrian-Israeli agreement, in the course of which Israel withdraws from a small part of the Golan. The war is celebrated as a success by the Syrian government

The war is celebrated as a success by the Syrian government

June 1, 1976: Syrian military moves into Lebanon, takes part in the internal power struggles; until 1982 the mission is officially part of a "peace-keeping force" of the Arab League, it ends in 2005

End of the 1970s: Increased domestic political criticism, difficult economic situation, corruption

Despite continuous prohibition to leave the country, constant clandestine emigration of Jews

Week-long curfew for Jewish Syrians

1976: Purchase and sale of property possible again, travel permits (but no exit permits) are issued

Syrian History

From 1979: Mobilization of various political forces against Hafez al-Assad (including leftist parties and unions); series of attacks, for which the Muslim Brotherhood is held responsible

June 26, 1980: Hafez al-Assad barely escapes an assassination attempt

February 2, 1982: The uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood, lasting since 1976, is defeated with a massacre in the city of Hama led by Rifaat al-Assad and Mustafa Tlass, between 10.000 and 40.000 people are killed

Jewish History in Syria

1980s: About 1,400 Jews still live in Syria

1983: Syrian Foreign Minister Mustafa Tlass publishes the anti-Semitic inflammatory writing "Matze of Zion"

1992: Ban on leaving the country for Jews is lifted

1990s: Last major migration movement of Jews especially to Israel and to the USA

Since 2000 Bashar Hafiz al-Assad in power

June 10, 2000: Death of Hafez al-Assad, his son Bashar al-Assad takes over the power

March 2011: Start of the uprising through civil protest; military response through Syrian government, arming of part of the Syrian opposition and international interference lead to a continuing war up until today

Further emigration due to the war (especially from Aleppo)

2014: Destruction of the synagogue in Jobar (Damascus) by bombing

2019/20: Less than 20 Jews live in Syria (Damascus)

