

Jews - Minority Rights Group

Jews

Jews are Yemen's only indigenous religious minority. Less than 50 Jews remain in Yemen today, concentrated around Raydah and in Sana'a.

Historical context

Yemen was a Jewish kingdom in the fifth century CE that succumbed to Ethiopian and Byzantine assault in 525. Jews remained subject to *dhimmi* status (granted special status in return for paying capital tax) throughout the Islamic period and endured persecution in the nineteenth century. Once 50-60,000 strong, some moved to Palestine from 1874 onwards, drawn by economic opportunity rather than interest in Zionism.

In 1947, strikes organized in Aden against the UN's decision to partition Palestine turned into bloody riots that led to the deaths of 82 Jewish people. Shops were looted, homes and schools burnt. This is thought to have been the main trigger behind the airlift of Yemeni Jews to Israel, beginning in 1949, though many of those who left were also motivated by socio-economic reasons and the desire for a better life. Following the departure of the majority of the community in the late 1940s, Jews were forbidden to leave from 1962 until 1992, when 250 migrated to Israel.

In 2007, the Houthi movement issued direct threats to the Jews of the Al-Salem village in northern Yemen. In January, Houthi militia members issued written warnings to the 45 Jews of Al-Salem, giving them ten days to leave. The government responded by relocating the threatened group to the nearby town of Sa'ada and launching an offensive against the rebels. Amid increased fighting in the area, the government again relocated the displaced Jews, this time to the capital, Sana'a, and provided them with housing and other assistance.

Further attacks against Yemeni Jews continued to occur. In 2008, Moshe Ya'ich Al-Nahare, a resident of Raida, was killed by another resident who reportedly shouted 'Convert or die!' Instability and violence following the 2011 uprising and ouster a year later of then-President Saleh – who in some ways had sought to present himself as a protector of Yemen's Jewish community – have contributed to an upsurge in the numbers of Jews leaving the country. They have increasingly faced hostility and harassment, and in a relatively well-known incident in 2012, Aharon Zindani was accused of practicing witchcraft and murdered in a market near Sana'a. The lack of protection and possibility of harassment became even more acute after the civil war began in 2014. Across large segments of Yemeni society has persisted a widespread conflation of the Jewish faith with Zionism, which engenders animosity towards Jews.

Yemen's remaining Jews are caught between Zionists urging migration and Hasidic Satmar Jews urging them to stay and avoid 'contamination' in Israel. Emigration of

the remaining Yemeni Jews has also slowed due to adverse reports of returnees who found Israel culturally alien or who found their socio-economic conditions difficult. Furthermore, the Jewish community has long been widely accepted in Yemen, and many of its remaining members are elderly and thus reluctant to leave.

When in public, individuals have sought to conceal their Jewish identity and have refrained from practicing religious rituals outside the privacy of their homes. Unique cultural traditions for which the community has historically been renowned in Yemen and further afield, such as metalworking and, in particular, the handcrafting of silver jewelry, are close to disappearing. The country's deteriorating economic situation has put even greater pressure on the community, and in March 2016, in what was thereafter deemed the final operation of its kind, 17 Jews were secretly airlifted from Yemen by the Israeli government. The country's remaining Jewish population resides near the northern town of Raida as well as in a compound in Sana'a. The community is now thought to number less than 50 people.

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