



World Directory of Minorities

Middle East MRG Directory → Yemen → Jews

Jews

Profile

Jews are Yemen's only indigenous religious minority. Only 300-500 Jews remain in Yemen today, concentrated around Raydah. There are only two or three synagogues still active, as well as two private schools where Jewish pupils can learn Hebrew in addition to their Arabic mother tongue.

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 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 1948 almost all remaining Jews were brought to Israel. Jews were forbidden to leave from 1962 until 1992, when 250 migrated to Israel. 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.

Current issues

In 2007 followers of the deceased extremist Muslim cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi issued direct threats to the Jews of the Al-Salem village in northern Yemen. In January, al-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 launched an offensive against the militants. Amid increased fighting in the area, the government again relocated the displaced Jews, this time to the capital, Sana'a, and has provided them with housing and other assistance. Members of the group have expressed a desire to return to their village of Al-Salem.

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