

Once upon a Time Jews Lived Here

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In his 1986 Nobel lecture, Elie Wiesel recounted a Hasidic legend of the great Rabbi Ba'al Shem Tov. Shaken by the suffering of the Jewish people and humanity at large, he undertakes a desperate mission to hasten the coming of the Messiah, only to be punished for his meddling with heavenly matters by being banished with his servant and having his powers and their memories taken away from them. The one thing the servant remembers is the alphabet, and as the two men repeatedly recite the alphabet, the rabbi's powers are returned to him as he regains his memory. Wiesel then remarked on the legend: "I love it most of all because it emphasizes the mystical power of memory. Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates, like a tomb which rejects the living."

For over six decades, Arabic-speaking peoples have undertaken a deliberate effort to erase part of their memories. No grand council was convened to approve the measure, but a collective decision was nonetheless made. No longer would it be remembered that once upon a time, not so long ago, Jews had lived among them. To aid the deliberate memory loss, a physical one would be attempted. Buildings left empty would soon be occupied. Synagogues would be demolished. No one needed a reminder of what had once existed, for the decision to collectively forget was nearly unanimous. Certainly not the new military governments, whose claims to legitimacy were increasingly crafted around a fight with "the Zionist entity." But the organized efforts by governments to eradicate this memory could not have succeeded had it not been met with enthusiasm and willing participation by the peoples themselves. To remember is to ask and some questions were better left buried, for an individual's as well as a nation's health.

This is not to say that the memory of the Arabic-speaking countries' Jews was completely wiped out. After all, no matter how successful the effort to eradicate all physical evidence, it was impossible to completely erase the existence of more than 850,000 Jews who had lived in the Arabic-speaking countries for centuries. Some things were bound to remain. An abandoned synagogue, a story from a grandmother, an odd name encountered in an old book, a 1949 Egyptian movie called *Fatma, Marika and Rachel*—some traces remained. But these traces were not of humans but of ghosts. The Jew, who had once lived there, was not a complete human being. Jews were mythical figures, of whose lives



little was known except the confidence in their treason to the countries that had hosted them. The Jew was an alien body that had been expelled from the nation, just as the Zionist entity would be expelled from the region, one day, soon.

But inevitably, today or tomorrow, an interest in the lost memory is bound to occur. A moment of personal or collective crisis, a moment of shock, a moment of confusion forcing self-reflection—the urge may take many forms, but the questions are inevitable. And so it has come to pass that the lost memory of the Jews who once lived among them has returned to haunt the Arabic-speaking peoples.

Before memory was to be regained, a few glimpses of the mysterious other were to appear. Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and it was only a matter of time before the cultural interest would follow the political one; but the Egyptian intelligentsia was adamant that no cultural normalization would be allowed. Those who disagreed, like the brilliant playwright Ali Salem, were collectively shunned and forced into retirement. The first Jewish characters to appear in Egyptian movies and TV series were limited to the superficial portrayal of the all-evil enemy. The 1980s and '90s witnessed a number of movies where Israelis were portrayed either in the spy movie genre—*Climb from the Abyss* (1978), *A Dead Man's Execution* (1985), *A Mission in Tel Aviv* (1992), and *Cousins* (2009)—or in movies portraying Jews and Israelis as conspiring against Egypt by attempting to spread HIV among Egyptian youth (*Love in Taba* from 1992) or luring Egyptian men to emigrate to Israel through sex (*A Girl from Israel* in 1999.) Even when Jews and Israel were not the center of the movie's plot, such as in *Hammam in Amsterdam* (1999), anti-Semitism screamed from the scenes. The Jew was obsessed with conspiring against the hero, together with lines questioning the Holocaust and ridiculing Anne Frank. If anything, the appearance of Jewish characters in Arabic movies reinforced the worst stereotypes.

A small breakthrough occurred in the late '80s with the TV series *Raafat El Haggan*. Proclaimed as a true story of a man who infiltrated Israel posing as an Egyptian-born Jew and provided valuable information to Egyptian intelligence for more than twenty years, the popular TV series—which captivated audiences across the Arabic-speaking world—could not portray all Israelis and Jews as evil for obvious cinematic reasons. True, many of the characters followed the typical stereotypes; Jewish women were beautiful and open for sex, men were misers, and very few had principles. But Arab audiences were for the first time shown a cross section of Israeli society with many characters inevitably eliciting sympathy. The Egyptian Jews shown in the first season were, however, mostly

portrayed negatively as traitors to the country, involved in the Israeli covert operation known as the Lavon Affair. Subsequent TV series were less sympathetic. The notorious anti-Semitic series *A Knight without a Horse* (2002), based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, elicited strong condemnation from the United States and Israel.

A similar development took place in the literary world. The Jews of Egypt had appeared before in literary works which dealt with the cosmopolitan life of Mediterranean cities, such as Lawrence Durrell's famed *Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), but these works were by Westerners writing for a Western audience. Waguih Ghali's now forgotten *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964) was similarly written in English by an Egyptian émigré escaping his country. Autobiographies by Jews who had left the world of the Arabs were soon to appear, beginning with Andre Aciman's *Out of Egypt* (1984). But despite their powerful testimonies and painful memories, they elicited little interest across the Arabic-speaking world. Hardly any of this prose was translated into Arabic during this period. Similar works written by Jews from across the Arabic-speaking world followed: Albert Memmi's *The Pillar of Salt* (1992), Menahem Yousef Mizrahi's *I Dream of Egypt* (1997), Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad Yesterday* (2007), Liliane Dammond's *The Lost World of the Egyptian Jews* (2007), Naim Kattan's *Farewell Babylon* (2007), Ariel Sabar's *My Father's Paradise* (2009), Violette Shamash's *Memories of Eden* (2010), Gabriella Elia's *The Tightrope Walkers* (2010), Daniel Khazzoom's *No Way Back* (2010), Jean Naggar's *Sipping from the Nile* (2012), Lucienne Carasso's *Growing Up Jewish in Alexandria* (2014), and Yitzak Gormezano Goren's *Alexandrian Summer* (2015). All were filled with a deep sense of nostalgia of what had been lost. All were painful reads.

Perhaps the one work that created a literal hole in the wall of Arab silence was Lucette Lagnado's masterful autobiography of her father, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007). Translated into Arabic in 2010, the book became an instant sensation in Egypt, where members of a younger generation, who had never met an actual Jew from Egypt, discovered an aspect of their country's history long suppressed from memory. The same year the book was published in English, Nadia Kamel released her documentary *Country Salad* (2007). Hailing from an Egyptian anti-Israeli left-wing family, the movie traces her shock at discovering that her Christian mother was in fact of Jewish origin and that she had cousins living in Israel. A personal journey of discovery of a lost past follows. The movie was condemned by the high priests of the Egyptian intelligentsia for Kamel's unforgivable sin of visiting her relatives in Israel. But if an Egyptian going to Israel was still a societal taboo, by 2010, it had become permissible to read the autobiographies of people like Lagnado, especially given that the author did not live in



Israel. An Egyptian Jew living in New York was one thing; one living in Israel was still anathema.

In the past decade, the Arabic-speaking world saw an explosion of interest in the suppressed memory of the Jews who had lived among them. A 2013 documentary, *Jews of Egypt*, found a much more receptive audience than *Country Salad*. The documentary was built around interviews with Egyptian Jews, both the few who remained and those who had emigrated to France and the United States. The picture it provided was the opposite of the official narrative. Jews were portrayed as patriotic Egyptians and their life in Egypt pre-1948 as perfect. Gamal Abdel Nasser and his fellow officers were blamed for the forced Jewish exodus, but even more to be blamed were Israel and Zionism. The same narrative shaped the 2015 TV series *The Jewish Quarter*. With the initial episodes showing an Egyptian Jewish family in a positive light, the series was hailed by the Israeli Embassy in Cairo as a breakthrough. Once the series progressed, the embassy reversed course. It quickly became evident that two evil forces had conspired to destroy the utopian life of Jews in Egypt as depicted in the series: the evil Muslim Brotherhood (replacing Nasser and his military officers) and the Zionists. Egyptian Jews were now kosher, but only if they were anti-Zionist.

Literary works had already caught up with the newly discovered memory and interest. In the past decade, a dozen or so novels were published in Arabic that dealt with the lives of the Jews of the Arabic-speaking world. Previous works of fiction depicted Jews, from Abdel Rahman Munif's trilogy, *Land of Darkness* (1999), to Amin Maalouf's works. But for the first time, Jews in the Arabic-speaking world were not merely characters in a novel but made the center of the story line. Attempts to depict Jews as ordinary people who, like all other religious minorities had lived in the Middle East for centuries, were made with varying degrees of success. These attempts included the Egyptian Kamal Ruhayyim's *Diary of a Jewish Muslim* (2004), the Iraqi Mohamed Saeed's *The World through the Eyes of Angels* (2006), the Saudi Abdel Wahab al-Marei's *The Jew and the Arabian Girl* (2006), the Syrian Ibrahim al-Jubain's *Diary of a Damascus Jew* (2007), the Iraqi Ali Badr's *The Tobacco Keeper* (2008), the Egyptian Muataz Feteha's *The Last Jew of Alexandria* (2008), the Yemeni Ali al-Muqri's *The Handsome Jew* (2009), the Algerian Amin el-Zawi's *The Last Jew of Tamentit* (2012), the Egyptian Mamoun el-Maghazy's *Synagogue* (2013), the Iraqi Mohamed el-Ahmed's *The Maze of the Lost One* (2013), the Egyptian Rasha Adly's *Tattoo* (2014), and the Moroccan Mohamed Ezz el-Din el-Tazi's *I the Forgotten* (2016). The authors' nationalities from across the Arabic-speaking world indicate a genuine interest across the region to discover what had been hidden for decades.

The two novels reviewed here—Abdel Gabbar Nasser’s *The Last Jew* (2015) and Khawla Hamdi’s *In My Heart Is a Hebrew Woman* (2013)—offer us an overview of this new interest in the lives of Jews, of how the authors attempt to depict these Jews against the background of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and of the limitations and taboos still shaping the attempt to remember.

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Al Amarah, Iraq, seems like an odd setting for a novel about memory and loss. The capital city of Maysan Province became famous in the United Kingdom after the ambushes of British soldiers there during the occupation of Iraq and the subsequent battle against Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi army. Home to over half a million overwhelmingly Shiite Iraqis, the city is actually a modern creation. Established by the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s as a military post to keep the peace between warring tribes, the city grew into a small trading post in the south of Iraq, due to its proximity to Iran, about 30 miles away. But Al Amarah of the early twentieth century, built on the tip of the marshlands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, was a city where the marshes’ Mandaean lived side by side with the majority Shiite population of the south, as well as Christian and Jewish communities, surrounded by feudal landlords who held the real power in the absence of a strong central government. The small Jewish community in the city, which numbered some three thousand in the 1920 census, grew in part due to the city’s proximity to Ezra’s tomb, which became an important site of Jewish pilgrimage in pre-World War II Iraq and continues to be visited by Shiite pilgrims today. It is against this background of the city’s religious mosaic, as well as the culture of the Marsh Arabs, that our story takes place.

The Last Jew is the fourth novel by Abdel Gabbar Nasser. An Iraqi, he fought and was taken prisoner during the bloody Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, which became the theme of his first novel, *Writing on Sand*. In 1995, he left Iraq for Jordan, before moving to Australia in 1998. As an immigrant himself, longing for his homeland, saddened by its current state, and nostalgic for an older Iraq before the horrors of Saddam and the bloodshed of the civil war, he not surprisingly finds echoes of his sense of loss in that of the Jewish community of Iraq.

The story takes place in the first months of 1963 against the backdrop of the last days of Iraqi dictator Abdel Karim Qasim and the February coup by Arab nationalists. It tells



the story of Nagy Naoum, the last Jew residing in the city of Al Amarah. In flashback scenes across the novel, we are told he was born in Baghdad in 1915 into a relatively middle-class family. Engaged to a beautiful Jewish girl, Tamam, he studied medicine and by the beginning of the 1940s was a doctor in Ramadi. His world fell apart on a summer day in June 1941 as the British forces entered Baghdad and brought down the pro-Nazi government of Rachid Ali al-Kaylani. With the city in chaos and the British refusing to police it, the mob turned its anger toward the Jews, who were celebrating Shavuot. During the pogrom that day, which became known as the Farhud, Tamam was gruesomely murdered by the mob, while Nagy's family was saved by a Muslim neighbor. Tormented by the loss, Nagy's world continued to disintegrate with the deaths of his father in 1943 and mother in 1947.

In 1948, Nagy and his sole remaining family member, his younger sister Violet moved from Baghdad to Al Amarah following more attacks on Jews in Baghdad. In the station, they were met by Hammoud, a folksy horse-cart driver who quickly became Nagy's assistant in his clinic. (With the death of Violet a year later, Hammoud became the doctor's handyman, keeping his house and clinic in order.) Upon arrival in the city, Nagy and Violet had rented a house from a relative in the city's Al Baghdadi Street, which included the city's synagogue, closed since 1951, as well as the local church. The street used to be home to a collection of Jews, Christians, Mandaean, and Muslims. Even in a small town, the street and its religious mosaic were reminiscent of the larger cosmopolitan coastal cities of the Middle East. Shortly after their arrival the relative, as well as the remaining Jewish community, fled Al Amarah as sentiments in Iraq took a more violent turn toward Jews, making Nagy the sole remaining Jew in the city.

All these events from the past are introduced to the reader through flashbacks that are woven into detailed descriptions of the life of the people of Al Amarah. We are introduced to life in a small provisional town that is neglected by the central authorities in Baghdad. Many characters are introduced representing a cross section of Al Amarah's society, including Nagy's poor but well-read friend, the Muslim Sami who works as a teacher; Geme'a, a seventy-year-old night guard who is haunted by his wife and two daughters' prostitution and dreams of killing them to avenge his honor; the communist police officer Sawadi, who hates the doctor and seeks ways to humiliate him; and Hassan el-Samarrai, the politically active lawyer followed everywhere by a secret policeman. But the novel centers on Nagy's life and fears. Quickly establishing himself as the city's most competent and humane doctor,

Nagy is loved by everyone, achieving a nearly saintly reputation after helping a young girl regain her eyesight. He is famous for not taking any compensation from his poor clients.

The political tensions of Iraq in 1963 surround Nagy. The novel starts in January 1963 with the tensions and street wars between communists and Arab nationalists, with glimpses of the Cuban missile crisis and Syria's coups. Nagy is confronted by his being a Jew throughout the novel. A conversation in the local coffee shop turns awkward when a guest proclaims that Nasser will throw the Jews in the sea, only to quickly correct himself by changing it to "the Zionists." Nagy is described as an Iraqi patriot and a strong anti-Zionist. The plight of Iraq's Jews, he says, is the result of extremists: Zionists and Arab nationalists. His views on Israel are no different from those of any other Iraqi or Arab. Jewish life in Iraq before the 1940s is described as "heaven," until the growth of pro-Nazi sentiments. Islam's early tension with Jewish tribes in Arabia is dismissed as the result of Jewish actions. Even the Farhud is compared by Nagy to what Zionists are doing in Palestine; the Holocaust is described as targeting all of the Nazis' opponents, including Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, communists, and the mentally disabled. Nagy adamantly refuses to leave Iraq. "Where would I escape?" he asks. "This is my country."

We do not know much about the author's political views, but based on the novel we can discern that he is pro-Qasim and the communists. Nagy himself is sympathetic to Iraq's dictator, whose crimes are never addressed. The Arab nationalists, on the other hand, are the novel's villains. The military coup of February 8, 1963, is followed by a reign of terror to which Nagy is not immune. He and hundreds of other city residents are imprisoned, with many tortured. Nagy is only saved from that fate because of unrest in the city by the many people he had healed. His luck does not run for long, however. Warned of a plot to arrest him on false charges of being a Zionist, he quickly attempts to escape through the marshes, guided by Hammoud. There a soldier's bullet puts an end to his tormented life.

In the final scene of the novel, the dying Nagy tells Hammoud of an old Jewish legend that the body of a Jew who dies outside of the Holy Land crawls beneath the earth until it reaches Palestine. "But my Holy Land is Iraq," he tells him. "My body will not have to crawl. Write on my tomb that here lies Nagy, the Iraqi, Arab, and Jew." It is precisely that narrative that prevails throughout the novel. The Jews of Iraq were not only Iraqi patriots but even Arabs in their identity. Zionism is an evil foreign implant that was as alien to them as it was to their Arab Muslim and Christian neighbors. Their



lives in Iraq were a utopia destroyed by religious fanatics, both Muslims and Jews (Zionism is alluded to as a form of religious fanaticism). Never mind that, in reality, the Jews of Baghdad, fearing fanaticism and intolerance, had never warmed to the idea of an Arab-dominated Iraq and had petitioned the British authorities in 1918 to become British subjects.

Nor does the novel portray Iraq as merely a Jewish utopia. It was a utopia for all its citizens regardless of their religious background, the author contends. Such a narrative is of course nothing short of mythology. In an article on the kingdom of Iraq, the eminent Middle East historian Elie Kedouri, himself an Iraqi Jew, writes, “For brief as it is, the record of the kingdom of Iraq is full of bloodshed, treason and rapine, and however pitiful its end, we may now say that this was implicit in its beginning,” before recounting the various massacres of Assyrians, Kurds, Yazidis, and various tribes. Nor are the Sunni vs. Shiite tensions ever mentioned in the novel, despite how prevalent they were in Iraq since its establishment. A 1932 Shiite petition addressed to the League of Nations, which is reproduced in Kedouri’s *The Chatham House Version*, lists nine demands, including “The Shiite sect shall take charge of the administration of the country . . . government jobs shall be given to Shiite in numbers proportionate to their population. . . . the majority of educational missions sent abroad each year shall be composed of Shiite.” As Kedouri again argues, “The Shiite were persuaded that the Baghdad government was a creature of the British and an instrument of Sunni persecution.”

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For Abdel Gabbar Nasser, the good Jew was one who was passively anti-Zionist and who identified first and foremost as an Iraqi. That is not enough for Khawla Hamdi. In her much longer novel, the author takes us on a journey from the Tunisian island of Djerba to the southern Lebanese city of Qana as she depicts the interlinked lives of Jewish families in both countries. Djerba has been a center of Jewish presence for 2,500 years, while Qana has become associated in Arab minds with Israeli massacres. Born in Tunis in 1984, Hamdi received her master’s degree and doctorate in France in industrial engineering and mining and now teaches at the King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. *In My Heart Is a Hebrew Woman* is her second novel. In her interviews, Hamdi leaves little doubt as to what her priorities are as an author. She declares as her goal “to write respectable novels with no sexual content” and in answering a question about non-Muslims’ reactions to her novel, admits her novels are intended for a Muslim audience. In the first page of the novel, she claims it depicts a true story

she learned from the book's heroine on a social media website. Reading the novel, it quickly becomes clear this claim is highly unlikely.

The story begins in Djerba in 1998 with a Jewish clothing factory owner, Jacob, standing in front of the mosque awaiting Reema, a fifteen-year-old Muslim orphan entrusted to him by her dying mother, who worked as his housekeeper and made him promise to keep the child's faith. Though he has a family of his own—wife, Tania, and children Sarah, seven years old, and Pascal, who is five—Jacob's world revolves around Reema, whom he loves more than his own children. Tania is obsessed with raising genius children, forcing them to study from the moment of their birth, and as a result even at this young age the kids are cold toward their father, never showing emotions.

Jacob's world begins to fall apart as Reema emerges from the mosque clearly troubled, not allowing him to touch her and quickly growing distant from him. She had been told by the sheikh in the mosque that non-Muslims will go to hell and she is afraid for Jacob. Things quickly deteriorate, with Reema wearing the hijab (headscarf) and informing Jacob that he is alien to her. What could have become a fascinating plot of identity crisis and fundamentalism is, however, viewed by the author as the natural and essential interpretation of Islam. A Muslim woman must wear the hijab, we are informed. The situation in Jacob's household becomes unbearable as Tania demands the girl be sent away. Reluctant at first but forced to make a choice as his wife leaves the house, Jacob decides to send Reema to live temporarily with his sister Rachel in southern Lebanon.

Simultaneously, we are introduced to a mixed-religion family living in Qana. The Jewish Sonia, who we later learn is Jacob's cousin, had married a secular Muslim man, giving birth to two daughters: Dana, nineteen years old, and the novel's heroine, eighteen-year-old Nada. After fights with her husband, Sonia had fled Tunisia fourteen years earlier, full of hate toward all Muslims. A year later she met George, a Lebanese Christian, widowed with a son, Michael, from a previous marriage. They marry and in 1985 move to southern Lebanon. It is of course highly unlikely that any sensible human being, let alone a Jew, would move to southern Lebanon in 1985 with the ongoing civil war and the emergence of Hezbollah. Instead, the novel depicts the life of this half-Jewish family as great, never facing any harassment by "the resistance." Hezbollah is never named in the novel, likely because of the current Sunni sentiment toward it as a result of the Syrian civil war.



But “the resistance” has an omnipotent presence in the novel. Ahmed and Hassan are resistance fighters, conducting their first operation in occupied southern Lebanon where Ahmed is wounded in the leg. They knock on the door of Nada’s family home. The young Jewish woman, described as deeply religious, conservative, and veiled, hides them in the family’s warehouse, bringing her half brother Michael, a priest who had studied medicine, to treat Ahmed. It is love at first sight between Nada and Ahmed. The two resistance fighters are shocked at the sight of her Star of David necklace, but in a second warm to her kindness. Nada herself is sympathetic to the resistance. Independent-minded, she reads books by Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy despite her deep commitment to her faith.

The two plots move simultaneously. Reema, who is now obsessed with converting Jacob to Islam, moves to Qana, where Rachel’s husband beats her as she refuses his sexual advances. Ahmed is similarly obsessed with converting Nada. He proposes to her despite his family’s rejection, and she accepts despite her own family’s objections. Remarkably, the resistance has no problem with one of its fighters marrying a Jew, with the conversation between Ahmed and his commander on the subject taking less than thirty seconds. Nada becomes fascinated by Ahmed’s religious practices; despite living in southern Lebanon, she had never before seen a Muslim pray. Ahmed gives Nada a copy of the Qur’an and a book about the Prophet’s life, and she falls in love with the Prophet’s character. The most conservative interpretations of Islam regarding the prohibition of a man and woman sitting alone, or Ahmed’s refusal to attend her sister’s wedding because it takes place in a church, are presented as the only possible interpretation of the religion. Ahmed proves to Nada that the Bible had been altered by Jews and she has no response; despite being a religious Jew, she had never read the Torah. Discovering her husband’s abuse of Reema, Rachel, who as a Jewish woman is helpless in front of her husband, sends Reema to live with Nada’s family. The girls quickly bond, easing Nada closer to Islam. Reema dreams of dying as a martyr. Her wishes are answered, as she is killed in an Israeli airstrike, which shocks Nada.

The second part of the novel opens five years later. We learn of what transpired in those years through flashbacks. Nada is now engaged to Hassan, as Ahmed had disappeared during the chaos of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, one week before their wedding. We learn that while she was engaged to Ahmed, Nada had joined the resistance, carrying out operations because Israeli soldiers trusted her when she told them she was Jewish and spoke Hebrew. The resistance, of course, immediately welcomes and trusts a Jewish woman. Ahmed had developed second thoughts regarding

marrying her as his mission to convert her had not succeeded, but once she joins the resistance, all is well. After Ahmed's disappearance, Nada receives a scholarship to study in France, but in a melodramatic scene reads the Qur'an and declares, "There is no God but God. Mohammad is the Messenger of God." This follows her reading of Maurice Bucaille's book *The Bible, The Quran and Science*, which persuades her that Islam is the true religion of science.

Throughout the novel, Jews and their religious beliefs are ridiculed. Jews are misers who never help anyone but their fellow believers. They are intentionally not taught the Torah by the rabbis to stop them from questioning the ridiculousness of their faith. Jews had never been treated badly under the rule of Islam and the Zionists are treacherous, just like the old Jewish tribes that the Prophet fought in Arabia. Jews don't believe in the afterlife, judgment, or punishment, a view one assumes the author got from reading about some Reform Jews and imagining Orthodox Jews were the same.

Nada's conversion drives her mother crazy, especially after Nada starts wearing the Islamic veil and fasts during Ramadan. Kicked out of the house by her mother, she moves in with her half brother Michael, who criticizes her conversion to Islam. He says Islam is the reason for the Muslims' material decline (a theme that Islamists are obsessed with disproving, from Mohamed Abdu to contemporary Islamists) and criticizes its treatment of women. Before Nada is strong enough in her new faith to answer him, he dies with his wife and two children and her adopted father in a car accident. Nada is shocked—not by the loss of a man who cared for her as his daughter, but by the fact that he and the rest of the family had died as non-Muslims. She attempts to see their dead bodies before they are buried to whisper the Muslim *shahada* (Muslim declaration of faith) in their ears and is saddened that they had died in a state of *jahiliya* (state of ignorance: pre-Islamic historical period in Arabia). Kicked out again by her mother, she moves in with Ahmed's family, where Hassan proposes to her. Unsure of her feelings, she moves to Tunisia to live with her Muslim father. The secular father is shown as uncaring toward his daughter and she moves in with Jacob and his family.

What follows is page after page of Nada (and the author) being obsessed with converting all Jews to Islam. Nada attempts to compensate for her failure to convert her own family before their deaths. She starts buying books for the extremely rational eleven-year-old Sarah, who converts. (Our heroine and author have no ethical qualms about converting an eleven-year-old child.) Upon hearing of her mother's medical problems, Nada returns to Lebanon to take care of her. However, the conversion spree is not stopped. Realizing



that his daughter, the most rational person in the world, converted, Jacob himself converts. In time, even the Muslim-hating Tania and the young child Pascal convert. Back in Lebanon, Nada agrees to become engaged to Hassan. Slowly, even her mother opens up to Islam. The conversion obsession plays out over a full 123 pages, one-third of the novel.

Suddenly, we discover that Ahmed has returned in 2004, a year before the current events. He had lost his memory and was taken care of by an old priest. As a result he is now John, a Christian. Finally found by his family, he struggles to regain his memory to no avail. Nada is torn between her two fiancés. Ahmed/John finally begins regaining his memory after reading the Qur'an and a stack of Nada's letters that she had kept sending to an empty family house in the countryside. Now, Nada has to make a choice. She follows her head and not her heart and chooses Hassan. But, in a dramatic scene, he revokes their engagement, thus opening the door for her return to Ahmed. In the novel's last page, we find Nada wearing her wedding dress and writing a last letter to Ahmed that sums up the author's views. She tells him she is now a Muslim and her responsibility in life is to correct Islam's image in the eyes of nonbelievers.

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In a 2008 interview with NPR, Elie Wiesel returned to the theme of memory: "Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future. After all, God is God because he remembers." After more than six decades of suppression, the memory of the Jews who lived in the Arabic-speaking countries is finally being recovered. But the returning memory is not that of the actual past, but of an imagined one that carries with it the full baggage of the previous decades. This baggage, from Arab nationalism to Islamism, inevitably shapes how that past is being remembered.

There is an undeniable wave of nostalgia taking over the citizens of the Arabic-speaking world, and who could blame them? Surrounded by the ugliness of the Arab present and the bleak prospects of the Arab future, many take comfort in an imagined Arab past, one where everybody—regardless of their religion—lived happily together in a utopia, an imagined City of God. And the nostalgia is not limited to the lost Jews of the Arabic-speaking world. The 2007 TV series *King Farouk*, which attempted to offer a positive assessment of Egypt's pre-1952 monarch, stirred the country's memory. Today, a Facebook page dedicated to King Farouk and sharing posts about how great life was in Egypt before Nasser's military coup, has over 4.2 million followers.

Nostalgia is nothing new to the Arabic-speaking world. A more powerful specter captured the region's imagination during the previous decades—the distant glorious Islamic Muslim past, the age of El Salaf El Saleh (the pious ancestors), as Islamists describe it. Confronting the “crisis of modernity” born out of the discovery of Western military, material, and technological supremacy following Napoleon Bonaparte's brief occupation of Egypt, Islamists starting with Gamal el-Din el-Afghani and Mohamed Abdu attempted to answer the question that Bernard Lewis so brilliantly captured in the title of his famous work, *What Went Wrong?* Like the contemporary nostalgia for the Jews who lived among us, the past is depicted in utopian terms with little interest in facts. Remembrance for the Arab-speaking peoples has often been an act of omission.

For the Jews who lived in the Arabic-speaking countries, life was much more complicated than the rosy picture that contemporary nostalgia seeks to portray. The hatreds that Nasser and his fellow military coup leaders across the Arabic-speaking world unleashed did not emerge out of the blue. They were a reflection of the failures of that imagined utopian society, where—contrary to nostalgic imaginations—Copts were excluded from the public sphere, Jews were harassed by their neighbors, and the country's attempt at modernization and liberal democracy was a spectacular failure. Even the city celebrated the most by the current nostalgia, the cosmopolitan Alexandria, was in reality a segregated city. A small segment of the Egyptian population, those who had attended modern schools, mingled with the city's European inhabitants. But the majority of the population, the illiterate Egyptian masses, is never to be found in the fairy-tale depictions of the “city of loss.” Nasser and his fellow officers may have played a significant role in the Arabic-speaking world's misery, but they were not its creators. Instead, they were the symptoms of the diseases of those societies.

The current remembrance of the “Arab Jew” is naturally flawed. For one thing, it is shaped by the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict and by social taboos. (Ali al-Muqri's *The Handsome Jew* deserves credit for depicting a love affair between a Jewish man and a Muslim woman, which is prohibited by Islam.) But also, the very term itself is imaginary. Few Jews who lived in Arabic-speaking countries identified themselves, at the time, as “Arab Jews,” a term that limits Jewish identity to a religious one with their ethnic identity being Arab. It also places Arab identity as transcendent to the many other identities of the region's peoples, a projection of an Arab nationalist discourse championed by men like Sati al-Husri, who declared, “Every Arab-speaking people is an Arab people . . . under no circumstances, should we say: As long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then



he is not an Arab. He is an Arab regardless of his own wishes. Whether ignorant, indifferent, undutiful, or disloyal, he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feeling, and perhaps even without conscience.” Such sentiments approach identity like a hat, with an individual capable of wearing only one hat at a time. This approach, which rejects the possibility of a multiplicity of identities and seeks to suppress pluralism, has brought the Arabic-speaking peoples much misery.

Perhaps the most profound issue at stake is the Arabic-speaking world’s inability to imagine coexistence between Zionism and the rest of the region. Jews may be humanized for the first time in Arabic novels and movies, but it is only one type of Jew: an anti-Zionist Jew or, in the case of Khawla Hamdi, one who converts to Islam. To paraphrase a quote attributed to General Sherinden, “The only good Jew is an anti-Zionist Jew.” History, of course, was more complex. Some Arabic speakers, even after the Balfour Declaration (in which the British government endorsed creation of a Jewish national homeland), did not see a necessary conflict between their national aspirations and that of Zionism, as indicated by the Faisal-Weizmann agreement (a short-lived Arab-Jewish agreement to cooperate). Contemporary Arabic speakers may be shocked to discover that a leading member of the Egyptian intelligentsia declared in the 1920s, “The victory of the Zionist ideal is also the victory of my ideal.”

Most importantly, the Jews of the Arabic-speaking world who are now being remembered and imagined are not ghosts of a lost past, as they are portrayed by contemporary Arabic-speaking authors. Many of them may be dead, and they certainly are no longer living in Arabic-speaking countries. That part is lost forever. Egypt today has seven Jews left in the entire country, and the rest of the Arabic-speaking world is no different. But Jews with roots in that world have not disappeared from the planet. They and their descendants live close by in Israel, where they now represent nearly a majority of the country’s Jewish population. If the Arabic-speaking peoples really want to remember and get to know them, all they need to do is to cross the border and visit them. They may be surprised by what they find.



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For over six decades, Arabic-speaking people have undertaken a deliberate effort to erase the memory of the Jews who lived amongst them. The collective decision was successful with governments and citizens joining in eradicating the physical presence of the Jewish presence in Arabic-speaking countries, which had lasted for over twenty-five centuries. For the past decade, Arabic-speaking people have begun to show interest in this erased memory. In this essay, Samuel Tadros reviews two recent novels dealing with the presence and loss of Jews from Arabic-speaking countries. He explores how the authors attempt to depict these Jews against the background of the Arab Israeli conflict, as well as the limitations and taboos still shaping the attempt to remember.