



Reimagining the lives of North African Jews

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REVIEW ESSAY

Reimagining the lives of North African Jews

A Semite: a memoir of Algeria, by Denis Guénoun, translated by Ann and William Smock, foreword by Judith Butler, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. xvii + 176, \$35.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-231-16402-3

Saharan Jews and the fate of French Algeria, by Sarah Abrevaya Stein, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. xv + 261, \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-226-12360-8; \$27.50 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-226-12374-5

Memories of absence; how Muslims remember Jews in Morocco, by Aomar Boum, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. xvii + 220, \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-8047-8699-7; \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8047-9523-4

Muslims and Jews in France; history of a conflict, by Maud S. Mandel, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 272, \$35.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691125817

An exciting new development in the field of Jewish Studies in the Muslim world is its expansion beyond the narrow confines of ethno-religious studies into the wider fields of area and global studies. Commonly known as 'Mizrahim', 'Sephardim', or, more recently, 'Arab Jews', the Jewish peoples of North Africa and the Middle East and the Muslim societies that hosted them have recently come under intense scholarly scrutiny. Once the privileged domain of a small group of specially trained philologists, the history, culture and politics of North African Jewry now attract social scientists from different points of the intellectual compass. The close historical links between Maghribi Jews and the French colonial enterprise is one kind of inquiry that has stimulated new research; another is the relationship between Maghribi Jews, the Zionist project, and the State of Israel. But the angles of inquiry are hardly limited to these two issues. With nearly 2000 years of continuous coexistence as background, the historic ties between Jewish and Muslim populations in North Africa are densely interwoven and not easily disentangled. The bifurcated sympathies and competing loyalties that characterise much of the older research are being rethought, built upon, synthesised, and expanded.

The study of the recent Mizrahi history often leads to surprising convergences. For example, differing attitudes within Israel among Jews towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can be traced in part to divisions along the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) and Sephardi/Mizrahi divide. In France, tension between its Muslim and Jewish citizens (with the majority of Jews in France today of Mizrahi origin) has its footing in distant times and places, when Muslims and Jews parsed their relations according to religious values. While the end of empire was a point of no return, marking a secular turn in Mizrahi self-identity and its gradual uncoupling from its native Muslim milieu, it was by no means the end of the story. The recovery of long forgotten narratives of departure as seen from both Jewish and Arab perspectives is a fundamental component of memory for both groups, serving as material for contemporary claims of a historical, legal, and political nature. These topics, and many more, enter into current thinking about Jews of the Muslim world that is enjoying such a spirited revival.

Four new books that cut across conventional geographical and historical divides contribute to this revival by throwing light on individuals and communities that no longer exist. At the same time, they confront head-on some of the more troublesome and enduring questions about the causes behind decolonisation and the ‘great exodus’ – the massive exit of Jews from Arab lands at mid-century – by calling into question conventional causalities and worn-out explanations. By setting aside received wisdom and returning to the archives – either the ‘official’ archives, or the informal archives of memory – they offer new perspectives on how the triangular contest among French colonial officials, the indigenous Jewish minority, and the native Muslim peoples eventually played itself out.

Denis Guénoun’s reminiscence of his father, the Algerian Jewish communist activist René Guénoun, comes in the compact yet beautifully written memoir, *A Semite*. Memoirs of departure occupy a significant place in the literature of modern Sephardi identity, serving as wellsprings for our understanding of both culture and personality: Albert Memmi’s *Pillar of Salt*, Edmond Amran El Maleh’s *Parcours immobile*, and André Aciman’s *Out of Egypt* are exemplars of the genre. Guénoun’s memoir is of a different sort, unfolding at some distance from the events it describes. A Parisian theatre director turned public philosopher, Guénoun has written a riveting account of his larger-than-life father that brings into sharp focus the last chapters of Jewish life in French Algeria in the 1960s. Based on a forgotten family archive, the memoir traces his family’s odyssey from Algeria to France in the context of war and revolution. Chapters demarcated by the different phases of his father’s checkered career accord closely with stages of modern Algerian history, emphasising the close proximity between the grand narrative of the nation and the more modest retelling of one man’s life journey.

René Guénoun was no ordinary person. He was a big-voiced man who monopolised centre stage, making trouble for himself while offering a model of incorruptible courage and moral conviction to others. Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Oran in 1912, René grew up against the background of vicious anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism that characterised settler politics at the turn of the last century. Unlike most Jews, he was an early and ardent supporter of Algerian independence who felt ‘Arab suffering as his own’ and believed in the

justice of the Arab cause (16). Mirroring the tumult of the times, René was often at war with himself, seeking a balance among the various parts of his soul – Jewish, Arab, French, Algerian, native, and ‘European’. He finally settled on the ambiguous term ‘Semite’ to describe himself, knowing full well that the word was highly problematic and embraced far too many meanings. Yet its very vagueness captured the fragmented identity of the Algerian Jew, shaped and reshaped by a history not of his or her own making.

René’s childhood is reminiscent of another Algerian childhood, retold by Albert Camus in his thinly disguised autobiography, *The First Man*.¹ The two memoirs resemble each other in respect to the intensity of family relations, beginning with the two half-mad grandmothers who evoke both fear and passion; the endless parade of relatives and friends; the forays into a luxuriant nature; and the deep connection of each protagonist to French literature and language. René tells his son, ‘France lifted us [up], the future came and made off with us’ (20). Both Albert Camus and René Guénoun were taken in by a culture that was not their own; Camus’ mother was of Spanish origin, Guénoun was a Jew whose ancestors were culturally Arab, spoke Arabic, and before France’s colonisation of Algeria, had no identity other than that of the Arab Jew. But history changed all that. The Guénouns (along with most other Algerian Jews) became French due to the Cremieux Decree of 1870 that naturalised them by fiat; the vaguely Catholic Camus was a *piéd noir*, adopted by France thanks to a father killed in the First World War. There the similarity between the two ended, for unlike Camus, Guénoun – despite his ancestors’ naturalisation – continued to feel like an outsider because of a primordial tie to a Jewishness that his French side could not undo. What of this Jewishness? The young Denis asks his father: How can we (as good atheistic Communists) be Jews? The father’s answer, in the post-Holocaust context, silences any objections: ‘One cannot deny being a Jew without insulting the dead.’ So the contradictions multiply, as both father and son, each in his own way, struggles to put in order the complex components of a multi-sided self.

René’s biography is set within a larger historical frame. Part One, ‘December 1, 1940’, concerns his experiences during the Second World War, when he served, in rough sequence, as a soldier for the Third Republic, as a soldier for Vichy, as a prisoner because of his communist sympathies, and once demobilised, as an electrician, after losing his teaching post because he was a Jew. Following the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942, René joined the Free French and quickly renewed his love for *la mère patrie* now magically purged of its Fascist toxicity. He ended the war in a delirium of patriotism, hopeful about the future and feeling as if the world was transformed.

Nineteen sixty-one, the penultimate year of the Algerian War of Liberation, is the setting of Part Two. Though René had long since left the outlawed Communist party, he believed that history was on the side of revolution and ironically turned to the conservative General Charles de Gaulle as the new leader of post-liberation France, trusting he would bring an end to Algeria’s agony. Once again René deviated from the mainstream, for nearly all Europeans in Algeria, including most Jews, held to the notion of *l’Algérie française*, Denis’s most vivid memories

come from this time when the radius of daily life shrank to fill the confines of their tiny apartment where they huddled surrounded by fear. A powerful bomb set by European extremists at their front door clinched the decision to move. Reading about this family's chaotic departure, we taste what it must have been like for the million-plus who fled during those last days. Their goal was France, their 'adoptive, yet perfect mother' (74). Because of his staunch anti-Zionism – René thought Zionism served the interests of a small bourgeois elite – immigration to Israel was not an option. Indeed, the vast majority of the 140,000 Jews who fled Algeria in those days went to France and began the slow process of integrating into French society. After the move, Denis records how his father entered a period of slow decline. His interest in politics atrophied and he passed his days playing bridge, though he never completely lost the three essential aspects of his personality – 'a Sephardi, a schoolteacher, and a unionist' (132). His death in 1989 was an afterthought, for it is abundantly clear that life for him ended the moment he left Algeria.

A Semite is a remarkable memoir – touching yet unsentimental, knowing yet not bitter, accurate but not boring. The striking details, the contiguities between the protagonist and the wider histories that shaped him and his family, the tenderness and insight, along with the author's patent love for his father, elevate it far above the ordinary reminiscence. Denis Guénoun succeeds in accurately portraying the existential pain that goes along with carrying multiple selves often in conflict with each other. In its modest 145 pages, this memoir reveals as much about the tortuous condition of the Algerian Jew as a shelf of learned monographs.

Denis Guénoun's inspiration was the discovery of a family archive forgotten in a small box; others go to the vast colonial archives in France and the former colonial possessions for enlightenment. Sarah Stein's archival explorations into the question of Jewish citizenship under colonial conditions led her to the Jews of the Mزاب, a tiny community of about 2000 souls that once lived on the northern edge of the Algerian Sahara. Methods of domination and control, strategies of divide-and-rule, and the creation of typologies of a specious kind are known mechanisms of colonial administration; however, in the case of the Mزابi Jews, it seems that these methods were pushed to an extreme.

The central mystery of Sarah Stein's absorbing monograph, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria*, is why this obscure group of isolated Jews, cut off from the mainstream of modernising Jewish life in the North, merited reams of correspondence and a unique legal status, the so-called 'Mosaic law' not applied to Jews in northern Algeria. Considered as 'indigenous' along with native Muslims, the Mزابi Jews were allowed to practice polygamy, repudiation, and other breeches of modern civic behaviour not permitted to Jews elsewhere. Moreover, over time, they regarded the special status conferred on them by the colonial system not only as a 'right', but also as part of their religious and ethnic identity – an immutable definition of who they were to be preserved at all costs.

Admittedly, Algeria's native Jewish population as a whole was a constant thorn in the side of colonial administrators. Northern Jews indoctrinated by the tenets of

the 'civilising mission' were forever demanding civic equality with European settlers yet forming voting blocs that ran counter to mainstream settler goals. At the same time that they failed to assimilate completely as Europeans, they retained, like René Guénoun, a curious affinity with the subjugated Muslims. The Cremieux Decree of 1870, aimed at remedying Jewish 'irregularity', in many ways only exacerbated it, for full equality stubbornly continued to elude them. The Jews of the Mzab were a special subset of this knot of Jewish difference, complicating the task of constituting Jews as a constituent part of the Algerian imperium. Even their fellow Jews in the North regarded them as exotic, archaic, and decidedly out of synch with the times. The colonial predicament of how to deal with them deepened with the passing years. The bulk of Stein's book describes the evolution of conceptions of French sovereignty vis-à-vis these strange desert people, from the moment of the conquest to the end of the nineteenth century, through the inter-war and Vichy periods, and into the era of decolonisation. During this long sweep of time, colonial bureaucrats strove to recalibrate policies regulating Mzabi Jewish identity without upsetting the basic principle of their inherent difference.

The hidden factors in this story are the conjuncture between pressures from outside and inside that shaped colonial actions, and the acrobatic ability of colonial administrators to respond to them. Stein shows how bureaucrats often fell prey to stereotypes that inhibited clear thinking, by picking up the nuances of the condescending, racist language that is laced throughout these archives. The most striking examples of hatred came during the war years, when colonial administrators responded with alacrity to Vichy laws that stripped most Algerian Jews of their civic rights, their government jobs, and their children's state-run schooling; ironically, these same administrators defied official policy by shielding southern Jews from these very same laws, demonstrating the extent to which the colonial regime was committed to the concept of an inviolate, French-protected nativism, even when it came to certain Jews.

Post-war brought the rise of Algerian nationalism, and the dilemma of where Jews might fit into a revived Algerian nation. As French sovereignty loosened, so did the imperial grid that had kept everyone in his place. But even now, France had interests to protect, and the need to preserve French access to newly discovered Saharan oil had to be weighed against the nationalist call for a 'purified' Algeria that did not include Jews. Though it is unclear how many Mzabi Jews claimed French citizenship in the closing days of French Algeria, or what political currents may have shaped their thinking, we do learn that the plan to keep them in place failed. Saharan Jews headed for the metropole in droves, leaving behind deserted streets, abandoned synagogues, and nary a soul. They also left behind their peculiar identity, constructed through centuries of proximity with their Muslim neighbours and re-inscribed in legal form by their French protectors. Once settled in France, it seems that their ambition was a quick and seamless assimilation into the normative culture. Thus the category of the Algerian Jew who was more Arab than Jew became obsolete.

This diligently researched study does a fine job reiterating the twists and turns of France's administrative policies in Algeria, offering an important new

perspective on the nature of colonial rule, especially towards its Jewish subjects. It also throws down a challenge to other scholars to fill in the gaps and to investigate more closely the various choices offered to the colonised Jew. Underplayed in this account is data of an 'ethnographic' kind, such as information about beliefs and practices, attitudes towards rabbis and to petty colonial officials, the nature of ties to northern Algerian Jews and to world Jewish organisations that might have smoothed the transition of the Mzabi Jews from isolated desert dwellers to citizens of the Republic. Stein offers hints of Jewish agency in the Mzab – an effort to gain health care, to join the military, to improve education – that offer tantalising glimpses into what seems to be the persistent but unarticulated theme of their quest for a modern, collectivised, political activism.

This study also draws attention to the general observation that research on 'disappeared' Mizrahi communities requires a leap away from a dependency on state archives to an engagement with vernacular sources. This operation poses its own challenges, pointing in the direction of employing techniques of memory recovery such as interviews and storytelling. This genre of research also invites a horizontal comparison with indigenous Jewish communities elsewhere in the Maghrib who were similarly held tightly in the colonial grip. A side-wise glance at the Jews of southern Morocco, or the Jews of Djerba, would locate the Mzabi Jews within a comparative regional context, demonstrating not only their singularity, but also the crosscutting and complementary aspects of their legal situation. Stein's beautifully written monograph, with its convincing argument about the vagaries of French colonial policy in Algeria, expands the boundaries of what we know about the processes of transformation that turned wildly divergent types of North African Jews into conventional 'Mizrahim'.

It would be difficult to find anyone as capable of recovering submerged memories about Jews and Muslims living together as Aomar Boum, who studies rural communities in the South of Morocco. The Moroccan-born, American-trained anthropologist is ideally suited to this task; he is an accomplished ethnographer immersed in the history and cultures of the peoples of the pre-Saharan regions. His research focus is on Jews who once lived in the remote Tata province and their relations with their former Muslim neighbours. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* serves several purposes at once: it is an inquiry into the history of colonial exploration into this remote corner of the Maghrib; it is a historical ethnography of a Jewish community prior to its migration; and it is a snapshot of present-day attitudes of young people towards a Jewish minority they know only from hearsay.

Questions of identity are at the heart of this book, especially questions that ask how Muslims construct the ways in which Jews fitted into this close-knit desert society. Generational differences between grandparents and grandsons are revealing. For the elders, the Jews were 'cousins', sharing religious practices (food taboos, saint worship), social values, and commercial ventures. Their departure was a historical break; after they left, life became more difficult and the times more confusing. How much of this memory is suffused with nostalgia, how much of it is accurate history, is hard to tell. The elders are less than credible witnesses:

for example, they seem to be unaware of the political side of the Jewish exodus, of the organisational role played by international Jewish organisations in their departure, of the complicity and corruption of Moroccan officials, and of the Moroccan nationalists' ambivalent attitude towards the migration. Unlike the Mzabi Jews, whose path into exile is still unknown, the Jews of southern Morocco were vetted, tabulated, and accounted for at every turn; their migration to Israel in the 1950s was a carefully planned and executed exercise in communal dismantlement. However, in spite of the smoothness of the operation, some questions persist. For example, the willingness of Akka's Jews to go along with the project of removal is insufficiently explained by an alleged attachment to 'a deep historical narrative of return' (92), as Boum claims. Such sentiments were important, but only a part of the story. The mass exodus of the 1950s was a complex process in which religious fervour and local politics intersected with larger global forces, fundamentally reshaping the historical trajectories of the Jews who departed, as well as the Muslims who were left behind.

This critique aside, Boum's genius is his ability to talk to anyone and everyone in their native tongue, even to the angry young men of Akka who have taken an Islamist turn. Their attitude towards the long-departed Jews is more negative and politically coloured than that of their grandfathers' who actually witnessed the exodus. To his credit, Boum does not hush their voices, but situates them fully within the present. Rebellious against the patriarchal family and government authority, Moroccan youth look for guidance to Islamic values coupled with Western notions of liberalism picked up through an intense involvement with the Internet. For these young people, Israel and Jews (for the two are seamlessly elided) are allies of a Muslim-hating West. No positive memories of *convivencia* here, only an aversion to the topic of 'Jews' that is fraught with moral outrage and cultural menace. Yet this aspect of the story, as disturbing as it is, serves to link absence to presence, in a carefully stitched, continuous narrative. Aomar Boum's rapport with his Moroccan subjects is the cement that holds this book together, linking elders and youth in a single discourse about the loss of pluralism that once characterised Moroccan society, and its probable link to the constraints on personal freedom found in Morocco today.

Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict, by historian Maud Mandel, traces the dramatic evolution of ties between these two communities once they were resettled in France, from the more benign days of the 1950s to the charged encounters of century's end. Noting that the conflict between them is often in the headlines, Mandel argues that 'a narrative of polarization' (2) has taken hold, transforming them into crude 'political symbols' and 'implacable adversaries' in the public mind – an image she contends is incompatible with a more nuanced historical reality. In a carefully wrought accounting of how this came about, Mandel shows how public discourse has become calcified so that that the two groups – in fact highly diverse internally – appear to be binary opposites, feeding popular opinion with simplistic notions about what makes each tick. One has only to peruse the titles on display in any Left Bank bookstore to be persuaded that – at least for the French reading public – Jewish-Muslim enmity has deep roots in the distant past.

This narrative offers a thorough explanation of how this distorted idea actually evolved. Jewish and Muslim immigrants arriving in France after the Second World War from identical places were received in different ways. North African Jews were warmly welcomed by established French Jewry (many of them recently returned from the Nazi death camps) as a sign of Jewish rebirth, while Muslims had no greeters and received little help. North African Jews were already French speakers and many even citizens, while Muslims were neither. Yet connections between the two groups based on a shared culture and language developed in any case, especially among the working classes in the *banlieues*.

Mandel's research focuses particularly on Marseille, that vibrant port city where Jews and Muslims mixed together in the casual ambiance of quays and cafés. Nevertheless, the 'combustible' atmosphere of the Israel–Palestine conflict was soon felt, especially in Marseille, a key transit point for Maghribi Jews making *aliyah* (emigration) to Israel. One imagines Aomar Boum's Akkan Jews passing through Marseille in 1948, processed by young Jewish volunteers working frenetically against the imagined beat of a rising Arab 'fanaticism' felt to be sweeping the Muslim world in the aftermath of the Palestinian debacle.

Propelling the mass exodus forward, at least from the Jewish point of view, was the creation of independent nations across the Maghrib between 1956 and 1962 that set in motion ambitious programmes of state-building that seemed to deliberately exclude them. Aid organisations such as the AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) compounded the mood of anxiety: 'There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the days of Jews in Morocco are numbered,' intoned one report (40). On arrival in France, Jewish immigrants found that crude typologies created in the colonial context persisted, as Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian Jews were lumped together in one undifferentiated mass, with no sensitivity to their cultural differences. A similar homogeneity was imposed on Muslims, with distinctions between Arab and Berber, city and rural, educated and undereducated, Tunisian and Moroccan, blurred into a single category of *les arabes*.

Mandel carries us smoothly through the various stages of a growing disassociation between the two groups, despite their initial proximity: the speedy enfranchisement of Jewish (but not Muslim) newcomers; the polarising student radicalism of the late 1960s; the 1967 war that hyped both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian solidarity. Each of these events served as a benchmark on the way to a growing separation that soon hardened along fixed lines. Her account ends with an illuminating discussion of the 'multi-culturalism' that is associated with the 1990s in France. The *Beur* movement, made up mainly of the French-born children of North African immigrants, focused on solidarity, just as Jewish activists were also renewing their connection to a secular, core ethnic identity. Remarkably, each group was still willing to engage in friendly debate, encouraged by the political ambitions of the liberal elite that formed (and still forms) the ruling class in France. Mandel describes how the movement *SOS Racisme* that made its appearance in the mid-1980s (supported by the state) was a brave attempt to find common ground between Jews and Muslims within the growing turbulence of French political life.

Meanwhile, in the background, a feeling of unease gathered momentum, fuelled by rhetoric from an angry right. Jean-Marie Le Pen's newly formed Front National called into question core republican values, supplanting the discourse of tolerance with talk of race, religion, and primeval blood ties. Le Pen's bombast appealed to many in France's silent majority, suddenly frightened both by Islamic militancy and the fantasy that 'the Jews were running everything'. As these developments unfolded in the political arena, Mandel shows how events in the real world – the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the First Intifada of 1987, the first Gulf War of 1990 – pushed Jews and Muslims into ever sharper confrontation. The result was a turgid mess of dashed hopes, broken promises, and the end of dialogue.

Pointedly excluded from this discussion are key factors that also helped to ruin the peaceful equation of Jews and Muslims in the late twentieth century. The broadening of the French Muslim community beyond its North African roots to include immigrants from all parts of the Muslim world, the sharp and decisive turn towards a more militant Islam, and a growing economic disparity in which Jews appeared to be 'winners' and Muslims 'losers' widened the gap. Moreover, a virulent anti-Semitism began to take root in the *banlieues*, paralleled by a striking Islamophobia among the 'white' middle classes, spoiling any chance for detente. A full discussion of these developments lies beyond the frame of this narrative, which abruptly and somewhat inexplicably ends in the year 2000. Nevertheless, these developments cast a long backward shadow over it. An epilogue knitting together the historical background with present realities (the book was published in 2014) would have been most useful, especially if it took into account epic events such as 9/11, the atrocious Ilan Halimi affair of 2006, and the bizarre popularity of the so-called 'comic' Dieudonné. Missing also is a bibliography to complement the excellent endnotes. But these points are minor when compared with Mandel's overall achievement of showing that polarisation was not necessarily inevitable, but rather the result of cumulative historical factors including government neglect, Jewish indifference, Muslim intransigence, and unfortunate world events, to name only a few of the salient themes highlighted in this admirable account.

The quartet of books outlined in this essay, when taken together, constitute a welcome addition to the library of resources on the history of the Jewish minority of North Africa and their movement into a central place on the world stage. In recent years, minority narratives have helped to elaborate post-colonial historiographies on a variety of topics, from the structure of colonial policies, to the processes of decolonisation, to the internal politics of immigrant groups and their uneven assimilation into the metropolises that received them. Cooking, design, architecture, gender histories, nationalism, music, slavery, radicalism; the list of topics now garnished from a minority perspective is practically endless. In the late twentieth century, minority histories resonate at the global level, intertwined with the great historical themes of the age. And all this happened despite a scarcity of sources, an often-painful amnesia, and a diminishing number of actual witnesses to the transitions that minorities have made out of forgetfulness into

intelligibility. As each of these books shows, that rich vein of human experience is now being worked and reworked with stunning results.

Notes

1. New York: Knopf, 1995.

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