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BRILL

The Power of Philanthropy

MENA Jewry as Partners in Solidarity

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Abstract

This article explores aspects of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century through their engagement with philanthropy. Specifically, this article demonstrates how many urban Jewish communities in MENA adopted and adapted Western European philanthropic structures to fit the needs of their local communities by engaging with multiple public spheres (Jewish, Arab, imperial) that were, at times, in conflict with each other. By highlighting the transnational nature of MENA Jewry in the twentieth century, this article demonstrates the importance of philanthropic networks as an articulation of power and social status. Finally, this piece suggests that local Jewish philanthropic initiatives can act as a prism by which we understand power structures within transnational religious networks.

Keywords

Jewish history – philanthropy – religious internationalism – Modern Middle East History – MENA Jewry

In 1935 Henry Heskell David, an Iraqi Jew, made a bequest of 40,000 pounds to the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA) in London, the equivalent of over 2.7 million pounds today.¹ The money was meant to fund the studies of promising young Jewish Iraqis in England (or elsewhere in Europe) so that they could eventually return to Iraq trained in professions such as teaching, engineering

1 It is unclear where H.E. David was residing at the time of his bequest.

and medicine, which the new state desperately needed.² In setting up such an endowment, the motivation was that these skilled youth would benefit both the Jewish community of Iraq and Iraqi society as a whole, thus helping to cement the importance of the Iraqi Jewish community as an educated class and individual Jews as active citizens in post-Mandate Iraq. Furthermore, it was suggested by the AJA that this initiative would strengthen ties between Iraqi and Anglo-Jewry for the mutual benefit of both groups.

Given the donor's motivation to empower the Jewish community of Baghdad by increasing access to higher education, one may question why the funds were entrusted to the AJA and not directly to the Jewish lay council of Baghdad. Instead, the Jewish communal leadership of Baghdad was involved in the selection process through the formation of a local selection committee comprised of Jewish notables and members of the British diplomatic corps in Baghdad. This local committee was responsible for reading applications and interviewing promising candidates. The British government was further implicated in the program as the local diplomatic corps in Baghdad was responsible for organizing travel for the students. Thus, although the ultimate decision as to who would be awarded these scholarships lay with the AJA board in London, by organizing the endowment with multiple stakeholders the donor created a structure in which Anglo-Jewry, Iraqi Jewry, and the British diplomatic presence in Iraq were forced to collaborate.

This example of twentieth-century, transnational Jewish philanthropy, although perhaps larger than the majority of endowments set up by individual Jews, is indicative of the types of foundations which were set up by Jews throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) between the two world wars. Furthermore, it is paradigmatic of the ways Jews originating from MENA used philanthropy to influence their local Jewish communities and nudge them towards collaboration with transnational Jewish networks. Endowments, foundations, and charities were rarely administered or controlled by single actors and instead represented transnational partnerships involving Jews across national lines and Jewish sub-groups. These exchanges represent an evolution from nineteenth-century philanthropic networks, which were largely conceived and administered by Western European Jewish organizations, towards a model in which local Jewish communities founded local associations that were connected to larger transnational initiatives. Or, from another perspective: an internalization of older European interventionist frameworks.

2 AJ37/14/2/3 - 28/11/1935; AJ37/14/2/3 - 10/12/1935.

Obviously, the Muslim world is a diverse region and the Jews of MENA did not represent a homogenous group. Jews spoke different languages (Judeo-Spanish, local Arabic dialects, and European languages), followed diverse religious customs (Halabi, Maghrebi, Baghdadi, Masri), and were not organized in a transregional hierarchy in the twentieth century. However, it is of interest to compare these communities and study them as a group, as they have many similarities, in particular their relationship with European colonial intervention in the region and their participation in local nationalist movements. Naturally, there are differences between the British and French colonial Empires and their relationship to Jewish transnational relief associations. However, both the AJA and AIU cut across the defined boundaries of their respective empires. Similarly, the lived experiences of MENA Jewry was not clearly divided between the British and French Empires. By way of an example, one Egyptian Jew when reflecting on his identity in 1918 stated, "I am Italian via my two sons who are serving on the front line, Egyptian by my attachments here, French by education, and English by occupation."³ Furthermore, Jewish migration within MENA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century meant that many urban centers had Jewish communities which were heterogenous in composition.⁴ These geographic shifts also suggest that although most Jews continued to define themselves by their religious customs, they also identified with broader Jewish identities, an idea which was reinforced by participation in transnational and transregional Jewish philanthropic networks.

Aims and Scope

This article aims to understand how MENA Jewry positioned themselves in quickly-shifting political environments, which straddled imperial ambition and nascent nationalism, through their engagement with philanthropy. I suggest that a comparative regional approach to grassroots philanthropic initiatives can act as a prism by which we understand power structures within transnational Jewish networks. Specifically, I present a discreet comparative study of transnational Jewish philanthropy from the perspective of MENA Jewry, focusing on the relationship between MENA Jewry and Western European Jewry via philanthropic networks between the two world wars, by exploring the power differential between these two groups using Thomas Adam's definition of philanthropy:

3 AIU Egypt IB 09-b - 16 Janvier 1918.

4 Stillman 1991: 23–46.

The goal of philanthropy is to advance society by providing necessary social, cultural, and educational services which are not provided by the state or the markets for political or economic reasons or which are provided by the state but not in a way that satisfies philanthropists. Philanthropy constitutes a relationship between donor/giver and receiver – or between collectives of donors and collectives of receivers. Both sides gain something in the process of giving – the receiver gains material and financial support; the donor, financial or social advantages. Philanthropy serves as a way to define social distinctions and social classes. The donor provides money, time, and ideas for a project, which he or she alone, or in connection with other donors, attempts to control. Philanthropy always has something to do with power and the shaping of the future of society.⁵

In using Thomas Adam's definition of philanthropy, I consider the evolution of the power differential between the period prior to the First World War and the period between the two world wars through the continuity of the main Jewish philanthropic organizations in the MENA region. Specifically, the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU), founded in 1860, the English *Anglo-Jewish Association* (AJA), founded in 1871. The objectives of these organizations were closely linked to Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," which he dates back to nineteenth century and refers to individual participation in salons, associations, societies, and periodicals, with the aim of improving society.⁶ The emergence of a global Jewish public sphere is tied to the emergence of religious internationalism, defined by Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene as:

[a] configuration [that] drew upon traditional communal institutions and practices, while remaining distinct from them. It may be defined as a cluster of voluntary transnational organizations and representations crystallizing around international issues, in which both "ordinary" believers and religious specialists could serve as protagonists. Spurred on by developments such as revolutions, mass migration, colonial expansion, the spread of the nation-state model or the challenge of secular ideologies, the rise of religious internationals involved a double outward projection of religious energies: into modern society and into the global arena.⁷

5 Adam 2004: 4–5. This definition of philanthropy has been used by other scholars looking at Jewish philanthropy. Most notably in Sperber 2012: 85.

6 Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974.

7 Green and Viaene 2012: 1.

In this conception of philanthropy, I consider the actions of MENA Jewry during the inter-war period as a continuation of the success of nineteenth-century European Jewish internationalism, which included increased wealth and social mobility.⁸ One outcome of this new social and financial status was increased agency in the policies and activities within foreign Jewish philanthropic organizations, the aforementioned H.E. David bequest being one such example of a private initiative that was incorporated into a much larger network. Whereas Jewish internationalism arose in the nineteenth century in the age of empire, this article focuses on the position of MENA Jewry at a moment in which the concept of Empire was constantly being challenged, and therefore analyzes the legacy of Jewish internationalism for MENA Jewry. Jewish transnational networks refer to disparate Jewish communities exchanging and offering solidarity as national units within a framework of philanthropic organizations, societies, and periodicals. Within this context, solidarity movements to aid other national Jewish groups represented a new form of Jewish exchange predicated on national identities (i.e. Iraqi, Egyptian, French, English). This is in contrast to earlier periods, where Jewish networks were predominantly organized around Jewish sub-groups (i.e. Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Maghrebi, Baghdadi).⁹

Furthermore, although this article specifically focuses on transnational Jewish philanthropy, it should not be perceived as unique to the Jewish community. Religious internationalism was an important phenomenon for other religious communities in the same period, and in particular for Christian groups in the Levant.¹⁰ Thus, the study of transnational philanthropic networks from the perspective of the colonial periphery opposed to the metropole is of interest as it proposes new insight into the agency of local groups and their aspirations as their actions are often obscured in colonial histories or Eurocentric histories of religious communities.

There are important differences between Jewish internationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century Jewish solidarity networks were defined by Western European Jewry. In the twentieth century, although there remained a power differential, MENA Jewry were not mere aid recipients, but active players in shaping their community, with local elites participating in the activities of the AIU and AJA, as in the example of the H.E. David bequest. Ideologically, however, there is continuity between the two periods as transnational Jewish collaboration continued to be perceived

8 Ibid.

9 Lehmann 2014.

10 Wattenpaugh 2006.

by MENA Jewry and Western European Jewry alike as a successful strategy to improve and strengthen the position of Jewish communities as they were developing a national identity. It is this ideological and strategic continuity that engendered the long-term structural interconnectivity of these nationally organized Jewish groups. This article follows in the footsteps of recent publications such as Liat Maggid Alon's work on the Jewish bourgeoisie in Egypt, Julia Phillips Cohen's work on Imperial citizenship in the Ottoman Context, and numerous edited volumes that shed light on the agency of MENA Jewry within multiple Jewish and non-Jewish networks, a narrative which is often absent from the histories of transnational Jewish philanthropic organizations and deserves further exploration.¹¹

Although more recently the agency of MENA Jewry within transnational Jewish philanthropic networks has begun to garner interest within scholarly circles, as attested to by the aforementioned works, more work needs to be done. Too often the experiences of MENA Jewry have been subsumed in general Jewish histories and even histories specific to the region by the experiences of MENA Jews in connection to immigration to Israel. In the period 1948–1973 over a million Jews left the MENA; this traumatic experience is well documented.¹² Historic Jewish communities dissolved overnight, families were separated and many were left impoverished due to autocratic governments, political insecurity, and corruption. The trauma of exile was compounded for those who went to Israel by the atrocious conditions of the *ma'abarot* (transit camps) in the 1950s and later resettlement in remote development towns along Israel's border. The experiences left an indelible mark on MENA Jewry, but it was not only the dreadful living conditions (which some Eastern European Jews also experienced) that traumatized MENA Jewry. In Israel, MENA Jewry were treated as second-class citizens by the Ashkenazi establishment, who saw their languages and cultures as inferior to that of the Germanophile Ashkenazi majority at the time.

As a consequence, the active participation of these communities in pre-State of Israel transnational Jewish networks is often framed from a lachrymose perspective to align with the Zionist historiographic narrative of the state of Israel as the savior of the disenfranchised Jews of the Arab world. Or alternatively, MENA Jewry's participation in transnational Jewish networks is downplayed, to align with an anti-Zionist historiographic narratives, which focuses on the intrinsic position of these communities within local Arab societies, asserting

11 Alon, 2019; Boum and Abrevaya Stein 2018; Gottreich and Schroeter 2011; Katz, Leff and Mandel 2017; Phillips-Cohen 2014.

12 Bashkin 2017; Roby 2015.

that their ultimate downfall was a result of political Zionist ambition.¹³ Often forgotten in both of these conflicting narratives, is that prior to the uprooting of these communities the relationship between MENA Jewry and European Jewry was primarily perceived as positive, constructive, and collaborative and that relatively little of the focus during the inter-war period was on Zionism. This is apparent in the many biographies written by Jews from the Arab world and is also reflected in the collaborative nature of philanthropic initiatives that existed between European and MENA Jewry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁴ However, even in these positive narratives the proactive role of MENA Jewry in these networks and the ways they exerted their agency both on the grassroots and transnational levels is downplayed or simply forgotten.

The importance of transnational and transregional Jewish philanthropy is most apparent within the middle class and local elites, roughly defined as individuals who had received a secular education or were employed in professions such as education, law, engineering, medicine and the civil service. During the interwar period, the actual size of the middle class varied within individual communities, but it was not insignificant, often ranging between 30–60% in urban centers throughout MENA.¹⁵ For example, a 1910 British consular report from Iraq estimates that about 30% of Jews in Baghdad could be considered middle class, a percentage which would expand as the decades progressed.¹⁶ Similarly, it is estimated that about 65% percent of Egyptian Jewry could be considered middle class during the interwar period.¹⁷ These numbers testify to a larger trend, which is seen throughout the Levant and North Africa during this period: the emergence of a sizable urban middle class encompassing all confessions who would, through their access to education and western ideas on secular society, alter the intellectual and social landscape of the age, in part through local modern philanthropic endeavors.¹⁸ The emergence of a large Jewish middle class was primarily due to two factors: access to secular

13 Naturally, the reality is much more complicated than either of these binary positions and more recent scholarship is presenting a more nuanced approach to the position of Jews in the Arab world. These two historiographic narratives are discussed at great length in my excellent works, including: Gottreich 2008; Khazzoom 2003; Levy 2008.

14 Aciman, *Out of Egypt*; Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*; Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*; Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad*; Shamash, *Memories of Eden*; Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday*.

15 Cohen 1973: 85–104.

16 Kadourie attributes the report to Haron Da'ud Shohet, a Jewish dragoman to the British consulate-general: Kedourie 1971: 355.

17 Kramer 1989: 57.

18 Wattenpaugh 2006: 22–23.

education, and commercial opportunities in the British and French trade routes to the Indian subcontinent and other parts of Asia.¹⁹

Therefore, although this article portends to draw general conclusions about Jews from MENA, its focus is on urban communities who developed structural relationships with Western European Jewry in the nineteenth century and continued to participate in transnational Jewish philanthropic networks in the twentieth century, a definition which includes much of MENA Jewry, but excludes certain important groups. Specifically, excluded from my discussion are communities outside of the Arabic-speaking world (i.e. Turkey and Iran) and rural communities from regions such as the Mzab and the Dra'a valley in North Africa and the Jews of the Hadhramaut in Yemen.

Nineteenth-century Innovations in Jewish Philanthropy

In Judaism, charity (or *sedaqa*) is a central value that each individual is obligated to fulfil.²⁰ Therefore it is unsurprising that the clearest pre-modern examples of interregional and intercultural Jewish interactions were centered around charity. With few exceptions, Jewish communities have rarely existed in isolation to each other, however, from the tenth until the nineteenth century Jewish communities around the globe were rarely in regular structural communication, either ecclesiastical or secular, as no such overarching organization existed at the time. There is little historic precedence for diaspora communities

¹⁹ Bashkin 2012: 20.

²⁰ There are four categories of charitable activity attested from as early as the tenth century: poor relief, hospitals, the ransoming of captives and remitting alms to the Holy Land (*haluqah*). Overall, Jewish charitable giving in the pre-Modern Islamic world can be divided into three main spheres: public, semi-public, and private. Public charity was administered through communal channels, with the funds being used primarily for religious education or feeding and clothing the poor. Similarly, semi-private charity included both communal funds and private societies (*hevra*, pl. *hevrot*) often established by wealthy elites. These funds were earmarked for special needs such as ransoming captives or supporting orphans, and could be administered by the community or private societies. Private charity refers to personal charitable acts, often food or money, given from one individual directly to another; this included almsgiving or private donations in connection to family celebrations or religious festivals. Also, within the sphere of private charity were foundations (*heqdesh*, pl. *heqdeshim*). These endowments refer to assets such as immovable and movable property and cash. The functioning of charitable endowments in Jewish communities was essentially analogous to the *waqf* in Muslim communities. In fact, Jews could formally endow money as *waqf*, as long as the purpose of the money was not contradictory to Islamic law, a status which protected funds from debt collection and remained popular well into the twentieth century: Ayalon, 2014: 67–73; Gil 1976: 22–36.

supporting other diaspora communities prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, with the exception of ransoming Jewish captives.²¹ *Haluqah* (remitances to the Holy Land) was decentralized prior to the nineteenth century, as different groups present in the Holy Land competed for financial support by targeting the communities with which they had familial links.²² Instead, transregional connections were generally informal networks, both from a religious perspective, with rabbis offering guidance in the form of *responsa*, or from an economic perspective, with trade and banking networks linking communities (at times oceans apart). Thus, in different periods communities of Jews practiced forms of transnational Jewish solidarity via different Jewish diaspora networks often connected to charity.²³

Given the high level of decentralization, it is impossible to make any judgements regarding transregional Jewish hierarchies in the early modern period through the study of philanthropy. However, the work of Matthias Lehmann demonstrates that early modern interregional Jewish philanthropy was organized around specific sub-groups, most notably the Sephardic trade diaspora, which had vibrant communities in the Ottoman Empire, Western Europe, and Latin America. In these cases, philanthropic networks enforced group cohesion and the power exerted by benefactors remained internal to the specific Jewish sub-group. With the advent of religious internationalism, transnational Jewish philanthropic groups began to look beyond their communities in two ways. Firstly, between Jewish sub-groups within a transregional approach, and secondly beyond Jewish groups by engaging with local governments. The reasons for these changes must be understood within the context of nineteenth-century nationalism and European colonial ambition.

As Nora Şeni argues in *Les inventeurs de la philanthropie juive* (The Inventors of Jewish Philanthropy), the radical change in how Jewish communities approached charity and perceived their relationship to other Jewish communities were closely linked to the idea of the “age of modernity,” as expressed by the European Enlightenment and the *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment), modifying how European Jews viewed their relationship and responsibilities towards Middle Eastern and North African Jews.²⁴ One of the reasons European Jewish intellectuals took interest in “Oriental Jewry” was their search for authentic Jewish practice, a newfound interest in Jewish history and a general intellectual curiosity. In turn, they wrote about their findings in *Haskala*

21 Bornstein-Makovetsky 1988: 195–196; Orfali 2002; Ya’ari 1951: xii.

22 Lehmann 2014.

23 Lehmann 2014: 8–14.

24 Şeni 2005: 16.

newspapers, making European Jewry aware of the existence of these other Jewish communities.²⁵ Additionally, with the rise of modern journalism, events like the Damascus Affair of 1840, the Mortara Affair in 1860 and anti-Jewish riots reached European Jews relatively quickly.²⁶ These events were of great concern to “enlightened” European Jews such as James Mayer de Rothschild, Moses Montefiore, and Adolphe Crémieux, who felt an obligation to help their co-religionists, and thus these “emancipated Jews” laid the foundations not only of modern Jewish philanthropy, but also as a consequence modern international Jewish solidarity through the founding of organizations dedicated to the plights of Middle Eastern and North African Jewry. In the Middle East and North Africa, as previously mentioned, the two most important of these organizations were the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU) founded in 1860, and the English *Anglo-Jewish Association* (AJA) founded in 1871.

There are several important differences between the pan-Jewish aid networks of the eighteenth century which Lehmann writes about and the transnational Jewish philanthropic networks of the nineteenth century which Şeni discusses. Firstly, the eighteenth-century networks were exclusively focused on helping the Jews in the Holy Land and thus only looked to other Jewish communities outside of Palestine as potential donors. Secondly, the eighteenth-century networks were organized by Jewish sub-groups, the most active of which were the Sephardic Jewish networks.²⁷ Thus one major change in the nineteenth century Jewish philanthropic networks was the rapprochement between different Jewish sub-groups, and that these associations organized themselves along national lines as opposed to religious traditions.²⁸ Thirdly, the eighteenth-century networks were relatively conservative in their objectives, aiming to assist the impoverished in times of crisis, whereas the nineteenth century philanthropic networks aimed to “westernize”, “modernize”, “improve” and “civilize” the communities they were aiding.²⁹ Finally, the organizations of the nineteenth century had strict hierarchies, a bureaucratic apparatus, and a defined ideology, thus a marked difference from the dynamic networks of the eighteenth century.³⁰

25 Bashkin 2005: 108–109.

26 Frankel 1997.

27 Lehmann 2014: 4–5.

28 This is apparent in all of the Jewish philanthropic organisations in which the leadership represented a mixture of both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, as in the case of the AIU and AJA, and in the case of the JDC a mixture of Ashkenazi Jews with Eastern and Western European origins.

29 Lehmann 2014: 14.

30 Ibid. 11.

Western Orientalism and Power Differentials

These new Jewish philanthropic organizations were founded with European biases of cultural superiority, as implied by the aforementioned objectives of these organizations and conformed within archival documents. Reading letters written by European Jews describing MENA Jewry in the late nineteenth and even the early twentieth century, the language used to describe local communities is less than salutary. The MENA Jewish communities are often called backwards – personal hygiene, education, and social mores are regularly criticized. Examples from Aron Rodrigue’s collection of primary source documents from the teachers of the AIU include a teacher in Casablanca in 1898 discussing the arduous task to teach students to “exchange greetings politely, and to answer questions without vulgar interjections.”³¹ Seven years later, a teacher in Damascus describes “the frightful dress of Syrians” and their nature as “apathetic and lazy.”³² Perhaps one of the most shocking examples I have come across dates from 1910, in a letter discussing the need for a moral education of Persian Jews. The author states that, “we are dealing with little amoral beings whom lying, deception, denunciation, and dishonesty are qualities as natural as their opposites are to young Westerners.”³³ To remedy these social ills, European Jews speak of their objective to “regenerate” the communities of their impoverished co-religionists, a language which is not far from that of many normative colonial approaches to indigenous populations in which Oriental non-Western societies are exotic, primitive, and inferior, and is based on a world view that considers “the East” as inferior. The language may be similar and certainly disturbing, yet the philosophies and outcomes both in regard to socio-economic mobility and inter-group perception were markedly different.

As Aziza Khazzoom writes in her seminal article, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel,” world Jewry has historically been “orientalized” by European Christendom.³⁴ In this context, “orientalized” refers to a pejorative and inherent otherness by virtue of one’s Jewishness, which challenged the idea that Jews could be full participants in modern European society. European Jews internalized the stigma of being “orientalized” and in response attempted to fashion themselves as Western by presenting their brethren in the Muslim

³¹ Rodrigue 1993: 74.

³² *Ibid.* 76–77.

³³ *Ibid.* 79.

³⁴ Khazzoom 2003.

world and Eastern Europe as the true “Jewish Orientals.” From the vantage point of Western European Jewry, in this conception, it was their responsibility to educate and civilize their brethren in “the East” (i.e. MENA and Eastern Europe) if they were to truly convince the “civilized” West they were not “orientals.” The ultimate objective was to demonstrate that all Jews were capable of becoming fully emancipated citizens.

For example, the most well-known Jewish international philanthropic organization, the AIU, was founded as a response to European anti-Semitism. The AIU and other similar organizations used transnational Jewish collaboration as a strategy to mitigate anti-Semitism and improve the position of Jews throughout the world. The AIU’s official mission was to work for the global emancipation and moral progress of the Jews and to lend effectual support to those who suffered through being Jews.³⁵ Thus the primary objective was to liberate Jews in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East from anti-Semitism by curing them of their own backwardness and alleviating poverty through secular education and vocational training. It was thought that by combating the social ills associated with Jews everywhere the global perception of world Jewry would improve. The *mission civilisatrice*, as it came to be known, to emancipate Jews in poorer countries, was linked to enlightenment universalist ideology which sought to undo the traditional segregation of Jews and to encourage their “regeneration” as an enlightened and educated people in the wider societies in which they lived, be they Muslim or Christian majority spaces.

The Western European Jewry elites (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi) of the nineteenth century saw themselves as superior due to their wealth, education, pedigree, and status as emancipated citizens. In articulating their opinions on the state of world Jewry, they made little appreciable distinction between Eastern European or MENA Jewry. Instead, they saw Jews from both regions as being victims of their own superstitions and backwardness in need of support from their emancipated and educated brethren.³⁶ One need only look at the travels of Moses Montefiore, which included trips to Morocco, Eastern Europe, and the Ottoman Empire, to appreciate the pan-Jewish perspective of the *mission civilisatrice*.³⁷ More importantly, Western European Jewish elites genuinely believed that with access to secular education and social emancipation

35 Bigart 1900: 46.

36 This is most evident in the two publications of the AIU, *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* (1860–1913) and *Paix et Droits* (1921–1940), in which the language used to discuss the struggles of both MENA Jewry and Eastern European Jewry is analogous.

37 Green 2010; Şeni 2005.

all Jews could be redeemed. The proof of this position is that by the early twentieth century members of the leading Eastern Sephardi and Baghdadi families were given prominent positions on the boards of the leading transnational Jewish philanthropic associations, married their children to members of European Jewish aristocracy, and developed important business partnerships with these families as well.

The European Jewish philanthropists strove to give MENA Jewry the tools to prosper in the modern world and gain access to skilled employment. The ultimate goal, from the vantage point of Western European Jewry, was to further embed Jewish communities in local, non-Jewish societies, to combat global anti-Semitism. The road to this objective was quality education. The Western European Jews ascribed the perceived backwardness of MENA Jewry due to a lack of opportunity and oppressive conditions, the exact same backwardness they saw in Eastern European Jewry in this period. These philanthropists genuinely believed that through education and emancipation all Jews would become model citizens for their countries and become active participants in combating anti-Semitism, albeit via a rigid conception of acceptable social norms (and a heavy dose of ethnocentrism). They were willing to invest in these communities to help take them out of poverty through partnering with communal elites and respecting social hierarchies. Therefore, although these organizations were founded with pre-conceived biases about MENA Jewry, and within a context of colonial hierarchies, MENA Jewry was encouraged to become active stake-holders within these organizations, and as a result in the twentieth century Jews within MENA came to hold prominent positions within Jewish organizations. Furthermore, they developed local grassroots initiatives which would feed into the larger projects of the AIU and the AJA, such as vocational training for orphans and ad hoc employment agencies. Thus, by the twentieth century MENA Jewry would use these philanthropic networks for political and social aims both locally and internationally in a manner similar to that of their Western European brethren.

Twentieth-century Agency and Activism among MENA Jewry

This section presents different facets of MENA Jewry activities within Jewish transnational networks in the first half of the twentieth century in four specific areas. The first example looks at the widespread phenomenon of AIU alumni associations in North Africa and the Levant. It considers the importance of the middle class, and the ways they used philanthropy to leverage social capital both within Jewish and national networks. The second explores grassroots

fundraising to support Eastern European Jewry. In this case MENA Jewry raised funds for Jews with whom they were not directly linked and whose actions did not have any impact on their political position within Arab society. The third example explores how MENA Jewry organized itself in an attempt to help their brethren in Europe during the rise of Nazism. Finally, I will return to the H.E. David bequest to demonstrate how objectives and impact could quickly change in light of shifting political realities.

Together these examples are indicative of the diverse ways MENA Jewry participated in the global Jewish public sphere through transnational philanthropic networks. In each instance, I highlight different types of exchanges, to demonstrate the motivations for participation in intellectual and social projects of other Jewish communities as expressed through philanthropic networks. The examples I have chosen demonstrate the delicate balance between communal, national (non-Jewish), and global Jewish affinities.

Alumni Associations & School Management

By the beginning of the twentieth century the AIU had educated generations of Jews throughout the Muslim world. Former AIU students found employment in foreign firms, the civil service, and as educators, and fashioned themselves as a new “Westernized elite” within their countries of origin.³⁸ The majority of former students maintained close ties to the AIU and formed alumni associations, the first of which was founded in 1895 in Tangier and was quickly replicated across the region.³⁹ These alumni associations often took over the existing communal charities, whose focus was on feeding and clothing the poor, and rebranded these initiatives as philanthropic endeavors that strove to, returning to the definition of Thomas Adam, “advance society by providing necessary social, cultural, and educational services.” Thus, in addition to traditional charity, their initiatives included adult education courses, the creation of libraries, and scholarships for promising students who wished to study abroad, which can also be categorized as philanthropy. These programs were also financed through new types of entertainment, such as conferences and tea dances to which they invited foreign diplomats and local elites, in addition to members of the Jewish community.⁴⁰ As Jessica Marglin asserts in the context of the Tangier alumni organization members in the early twentieth century: “...these individuals, part of Tangier’s new elite, perceived themselves and their coreligionists as members of a distinct group. The Alumni Association

38 Laskier 1983: 129–130.

39 Marglin 2011.

40 Laskier 1983: 129; IOR/L/PS/11/139 P 4484/1918.

did not seek the AIU or its French Jewish leaders. Rather, Tangier's AIU alumni engaged in a process of collective self-definition as the modern manifestation of Moroccan Jewry."⁴¹

This statement is equally valid for AIU alumni associations throughout the region and demonstrates how MENA Jewry employed Western European philanthropic structures and recrafted them to fit their needs. In this case the alumni associations acted as a communal platform, open to members of the growing middle class, to publicly articulate the new socio-economic position as western-educated, civilly-minded Jewish citizens belonging both to Western Jewry and to local elites. In fact, by the 1930s many of the AIU schools in urban areas came under the administration of their local Jewish communities, as opposed to earlier periods, where the central committee in Paris directly managed each school. For example, by 1919 the AIU transferred its schools in Alexandria and Cairo back to the local communities, seeing their role in the *mission civilisatrice* in Egypt as complete.⁴² In Iraq, the Jewish community formed a school committee in the mid-1920s which slowly took over the management of all but a few of the over twenty Jewish schools in the city of Baghdad.⁴³ Similarly, by the 1930s the AIU schools in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran fell under the jurisdiction of the AIU office in Baghdad led by Ibrahim Nahum, a member of the Baghdad Jewish Lay Council and the Iraqi Parliament.⁴⁴

This transfer of responsibility symbolized the transition towards a more equitable relationship, in which the communities of MENA gave greater input into the school curriculums and played an important role in the recruitment of staff.⁴⁵ Thus, the AIU central office became a resource center providing material and staffing for Jewish communities, as opposed to a charity sending administrators and doling out money. For example, in 1919, the alumni of the AIU school in Cairo wrote to the AIU headquarters stating that, having found themselves with a surplus of funds, they had decided to put the money towards expanding their library.⁴⁶ The reason for the letter was that the Cairo members of the AIU were requesting that the AIU in Paris act as an intermediary with French publishers for the purchase of books which were not easily ordered from Cairo.

41 Marglin 2011: 575.

42 Barda 2010: 175.

43 Goldstein-Sabbah 2019: 143–173.

44 Goldstein-Sabbah 2019: 204.

45 Ibid.

46 AIU Egypte III B 42-g - 13 mars 1919/ 8 janvier 1931.

These examples demonstrate how local alumni organizations evolved into satellite branches of the AIU. As such, they were used by MENA Jewry to make a powerful statement about their independent commitment to social progress. Thus, over time both the AIU and the AJA central organizations became a service provider to many local branches opposed to a philanthropy to which they were dependent. Furthermore, these local branches used philanthropy as a platform to demonstrate the commitment of MENA Jewry to addressing social concerns to a wider audience. This commitment was expressed through the organization of events such as practical lectures on topics like public health and child development, in addition to abstract themes related to art and music. These events provided a public forum beyond the local Jewish community to engage with local elites, colonial officials, and visiting Europeans.

Transnational Solidarity

In addition to local AIU branches taking responsibility for the administration of AIU schools and health clinics, these branches began to support foreign Jews communities as well. In 1907, the Jewish community of Alexandria sent 1,000 francs to the AIU central office to support the humanitarian works of the AIU in Casablanca.⁴⁷ Similarly, in 1919, the Jewish community of Cairo made 450 francs available from their local budget to purchase books for the Jewish club in Damascus, stating that “Syrian Jews were eager to build a library of their own” and they felt it an important symbol of solidarity to assist them in achieving this goal.⁴⁸ The interest in supporting these communities is not surprising, as many Jews from both Syria and Morocco settled in Egypt during this period. Therefore, it is likely that these programs originated from Jews with direct ties to other Jewish communities as those who had moved abroad were aware of the needs of these foreign communities. Furthermore, channeling their philanthropic gifts to their communities of origin through transnational Jewish organizations provided an official veneer by which individuals could publicize socio-economic ascension.

More surprising is the support which MENA Jewry extended to their co-religionists in Eastern Europe. For example, on May 6th, 1920, Felix Tauby of Egypt wrote to the president of the AIU in Paris to inform him that the Jewish community of Alexandria had pledged 20,000 francs for the AIU’s campaign to aid Ukrainian and Polish Jewry.⁴⁹ In the context of transnational Jewish philanthropic networks, the Alexandria case is not unique, the archives of

47 AIU Egypte I B 09-a 12 - October 1898/28 October 1919.

48 AIU Egypte IIIB 42-g - 13 mars 1919/8 janvier 1931.

49 AIU Egypte IB 09-c - 11 avril 1920/ 2 September 1930.

the AIU are replete with similar instances of Middle Eastern Jews regularly sending aid to their brethren in Eastern Europe and to other communities in MENA, a process which accelerated during the 1930s.⁵⁰ Although the majority of philanthropy originating from MENA Jews was, unsurprisingly, destined to benefit local communities or other communities in the region, these examples signify that Jewish communal matters were global in the twentieth century and thus represent the internalization of the norms of international Jewish philanthropy of the age.

Remittances to alleviate Jewish suffering in Eastern Europe cannot be explained by initiatives taken from Eastern European Jews residing in MENA rallying members of the local communities to donate to money to Eastern European Jewry, as many of the donor lists do not include any “Eastern European” family names nor does the archival material relating to these fundraising campaigns make mention of any personal connection to these communities.⁵¹ Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to MENA (excluding Mandate Palestine) was limited and, unlike Western Europe, MENA Jewry was not concerned with the Eastern European Jews settling in their communities.⁵² Furthermore, these funds were never sent directly to Eastern Europe, but were instead given to Western European Jewish organizations who had a developed philanthropic infrastructure within Eastern Europe.⁵³ It is probable that the recipients of this aid in Eastern Europe were not even aware that a portion of the funds came from the MENA region, as the amounts remained relatively small in comparison to the amount of money remitted to Eastern European Jews by their brethren in Western Europe and North America.⁵⁴ A more likely explanation for the largess of MENA Jewry towards their Eastern European co-religionists is that participation in larger fundraising campaigns was a strategic decision to show support for Western European Jewish organizations. Similar to the aforementioned thesis of Aziza Khazzoom, MENA Jewry was replicating the “Great Chain of Orientalism” within internal Jewish hierarchies to demonstrate their equality to their brethren in “the West,” by offering their support to the suffering Jews in “the East.”

50 Egypte IB 14-a; Egypte IB 14-b; Egypte IB 16-e; Egypte IB 16-f; Egypte IIIB 42 g.

51 Ibid.

52 Goldstein-Sabbah 2019: 35–68.

53 Granick 2021.

54 Bauer 1974: 305.

Nazism & World War II

Whereas the abovementioned examples of transnational Jewish philanthropy were intended to anchor Jewish communities within the larger societies in which Jews resided, the direction of philanthropy notably shifted in the 1930s. This was due first to the global economic crisis, which caused all institutions to reduce their spending and look inward to maintain existing institutions.⁵⁵ More significantly, by the mid-1930s MENA Jewry was concerned about the predicament of German Jewry due to the rise of the Nazi party.⁵⁶ In the next examples we see how MENA Jewry entwined political activism with philanthropy, both as an act of transnational Jewish solidarity and as a tactic to stave off the infiltration of Nazism within the region. In Egypt, shocked by the Nazi political victory in Germany in 1933, disparate Jewish institutions came together to form a local branch of the *Ligue Contre l'Antisémitisme Allemand* (LICA) campaigning to prevent the publication of Nazi propaganda in Egypt and to boycott German goods.⁵⁷ Likewise, local branches of LICA were also active in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia between 1936–1940, at times partnering with local Muslim elites to combat both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment espoused by many European settlers in North Africa.⁵⁸ Similarly, the Jewish community of Baghdad organized a boycott of German goods which saw some success, due to their prominence within the Iraqi chamber of commerce.⁵⁹ Iraqi Jews also arranged for German Jewish refugee doctors to settle in Baghdad on the pretext of staffing needs for the Meir Elias Hospital, Reema Kadoorie Eye Clinic, and Dar al-Shifa Hospital, and other communities made similar attempts to secure travel visas for both German and Austrian Jews after 1938 on the pretext of staffing needs for Jewish schools and hospitals.⁶⁰

Farther afield, the Baghdadi community in Shanghai decreased its remittances to Baghdad from 1938 until the end of the war because of the large assistance they were providing to Ashkenazi Jewish refugees arriving in Shanghai.⁶¹ However, many other attempts to aid Eastern European Jewry were stifled due to growing political instability and the breakdown of the international banking systems, which made the transcontinental remittances of funds difficult. Furthermore, as Arab nationalist sentiment grew, many countries enacted

55 Ibid. 19.

56 *JT*, May 1941, 9.

57 Krämer 1989: 130–134.

58 Boum 2014.

59 Goldstein-Sabbah 2019: 129–131.

60 *JT*, May 1941, 9; Roland 1989: 220–225.

61 JDC NY AR1933/44 711, May 29, 1936. For a history of the Shanghai Ghetto and the role the Baghdadis played, see Eber 2012.

laws which prohibited the remitting of funds to American or European Jewish organizations with ties to the Zionists in Palestine, furthering complicating the participation of MENA Jewry to assist in global relief attempts.⁶² Ultimately, MENA Jewry throughout the region was politically too weak to arrange for mass visas for fleeing European Jews; however, they did their utmost to aid those who managed to escape and who found themselves in their communities.

Reactions to the plight of German and Eastern European Jewry are yet another example of MENA Jewry as active agents in transnational Jewish philanthropy. Although this case illustrates the limits of philanthropy as a modicum of power, corresponding with the decline of Jewish internationalism which ultimately failed to save the majority of European Jews in WWII, it also illustrates the parallels between the motivations of Western European Jewish internationalism in the nineteenth century with MENA Jewry's motivations for participating in transnational Jewish philanthropic networks in the twentieth century.

H.E. David Bequest

Returning to the H.E. David bequest, it is interesting to look at how these funds were re-appropriated within the context of WWII. As soon as the education fund was announced applications began streaming into the Jewish lay council in Baghdad and the AJA in London.⁶³ In the period from 1936 to 1949 at least twenty young Iraqis were awarded scholarships from the funds, which covered tuition and living expenses. However, there is no record that any student ever returned to Iraq. In fact, the entire program, as it was envisioned by the founder fell apart in 1941, when Britain stopped issuing Iraqi students visas due to WWII. Instead, the funds were re-appropriated to aid young Iraqi students stranded in the United Kingdom due to the war.

The most famous student to receive a scholarship from the H.E. David Bequest was Elie Kedourie, who would become professor of politics at the London School of Economics. Coming from a wealthy Baghdadi family and wanting to study politics, he did not fit the original profile for the scholarship. However, when it became impossible for his family to transfer funds to support his studies in London, he was forced to look towards endowments within the Jewish community, with the H.E. David Bequest ultimately supporting him until he became financially independent. Like the other students aided by the bequest, he settled in the United Kingdom, where many members of his extended family would later join him. In the case of the H.E. David bequest

62 Goldstein-Sabbah 2019: 137–138.

63 AJ37/14/2/3.

the desired outcomes of the benefactors and the philanthropic organizations were never realized, although the program itself was considered successful by all parties involved, as many Iraqi Jews owe their education to this program.

This endowment is perhaps a metaphor for the intentions of much of transnational Jewish solidarity between the two world wars. Although designed to secure well-being and permanency of Jewish life in MENA, the works of these organizations were ultimately preparing these Jewish communities for life beyond the borders of their native lands. Supporting foreign language acquisition was seen as way to ensure that the Jews could gain employment within colonial government and foreign firms throughout MENA. Ultimately, these skills allowed many Jews to settle in Europe and North America. Similarly, training abroad for the most capable students, originally seen as further cementing transnational ties to aid in local infrastructure building, ultimately became a stepping stone to permanent residency abroad and a means to bring over other family members. This exemplifies the shifting aims within Jewish communities after WWII, objectives which would continue to evolve after the creation for the state of Israel, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the decolonization of MENA, which would ultimately result in a mass exodus of Jews from the Arab world in the period 1948–1973.

Conclusions

This article attempts to correct misconceptions about transnational Jewish philanthropic networks in the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of which are predicated on reading the history of transnational organizations from a Europe-centric perspective as opposed to from a local communal perspective. In doing so I have striven to present MENA Jewry not as a homogenous unit, but as an entity linked by similar communal aspirations and political realities. Philanthropy has always been used as a means to shape societies. The use of philanthropy as a tactic for socio-economically mobile groups, in this case MENA Jewry, is a perfect example of religious communities using philanthropy to gain greater agency within multiple public spheres. These examples also demonstrate the ways in which public, semi-private and private philanthropy became intertwined in the modern period as endowments became closely linked to large philanthropic organizations.

Prior to the nineteenth century political and social statements articulated through charity generally remained within Jewish networks and focused on religious obligations. In the nineteenth century this began to change as Jews in Western Europe gained civil rights through emancipation and began to

participate in emergent national public spheres as citizens. One outgrowth of this was the development of transnational Jewish philanthropic networks as a means for Western European Jewish elites to have relevance within the politics of empire and nation states. Interestingly, MENA Jewry used transnational Jewish philanthropic networks in a similar manner vis-à-vis colonial authorities and Arab states in the first half of the twentieth century.

After World War I, the entire geopolitical organization of the Middle East and North Africa shifted, with local populations finding themselves either under direct colonial rule, as in the case of Algeria or Iraq (during the Mandate) or indirectly such as in Egypt and Lebanon, where the French and British governments found creative ways of implicating themselves in both national and local politics. The Jewish communities were well aware of the implications of finding themselves within large empires. Thus, Jewish communities began to employ new strategies to ensure their security and continuity within the framework of an unstable political landscape. A large part of this strategy related to fostering relationships with Western European Jewish philanthropic organizations, as they not only provided resources to support local institutions, but also offered access to foreign governments. Within this unstable context, transnational Jewish philanthropy was perceived as one of the most successful means for assuring the longevity and security of Jewish communities in MENA, as it was a tool to strengthen both transnational and local ties.

Returning to Thomas Adam's statement "philanthropy always has something to do with power and the shaping of the future of society," we can draw several conclusions about transnational Jewish philanthropy.⁶⁴ First and foremost, philanthropy became a tool of empowerment. One reason for this may be that philanthropy remains a form of "soft power," ideal for weak minority groups striving to justify their position within multiple spheres of influences. More specifically, we can identify different areas in which Jews in MENA used philanthropy to leverage their agency. Firstly, they used philanthropy to strengthen their position within local societies by presenting the strength of Jewish networks in developing local education and public health institutions that were open to all members of society. Therefore, networks which at first glance would seem closed were actually a tool for the Jews to demonstrate their desire to participate in the local civil society.

Secondly, MENA Jewry used philanthropic networks to assert their agency within a transnational Jewish public sphere by offering to support global

64 Adam 2004: 5.

projects by way of financial contributions. Participation in philanthropic campaigns destined for Eastern European Jewry are particularly interesting when considered from a perspective of power and hierarchies, because they did not materially benefit the local Jewish communities or the wider Arab societies in which the donors lived. Furthermore, they cannot be understood from a perspective of global politics, as contact between MENA and Eastern Europe was relatively limited in this period and it is unlikely that local governments were aware of such fundraising campaigns. This is in contrast to Western European Jewry, whose philanthropic motivations in Eastern Europe were driven by national political concerns and in particular the fear of Eastern European Jews migrating *en masse* to Western Europe and thus becoming both a financial and social strain on local communities.

Therefore, participation in such projects can primarily be understood as a means for MENA Jewry to craft an image of itself that aligned with Western values for a Western audience. With that in mind, this understanding of the motivations for modern philanthropy is not meant to undermine the idea that these initiatives were also driven by a feeling of moral and religious obligation. Furthermore, these modern organizations existed in parallel to traditional charities, which continued to feed and clothe the poor. However, modern philanthropic initiatives took center stage over more parochial forms of charity. They highlight the delicate nuances of transnational Jewish networks and the ways in which Jewish groups used these networks to make statements about their social aspirations within the global Jewish public sphere.

Interestingly, the multilayered nature of these organizations meant that individual actors often had different and at times conflicting objectives, most clearly evident in tensions between colonial aspirations of Western nations to which European Jewish organizations aligned themselves and emergent Arab nationalist movements in which Jews actively participated. MENA Jewry was careful to avoid being accused of having dual loyalties, a traditional anti-Semitic trope, although this became progressively more difficult in the Muslim world, particularly after World War II and the increasing instability in Mandate Palestine, ultimately contributing to the downfall of these communities.

In conclusion, MENA Jewry used transnational Jewish philanthropic networks to make a statement about their position in the modern world. They used transnational philanthropic ties to demonstrate their “Westernness” and commitment to European concepts of modernity in a context of colonialism, particularly through the building of secular schools and encouraging women’s rights. However, they also used philanthropy to make powerful statement about their place as active citizens within emergent Arab states as supporters

of nation building through the establishment institutions which were open to citizens of all creeds. In doing so these communities are demonstrative of the multivalent facets of philanthropic networks as an articulation of power and as an expression of communal values.

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