

# Los Angeles Times

## WORLD

### **ISRAEL: Recognition for Jews displaced from Arab countries**

(February 14, 2010) A year and a half ago, M., an Iranian-born Israeli, walked into the Iranian Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, and bribed his way into obtaining Iranian ID papers. He then traveled to his native city in Iran where he met with local businessmen in an attempt to sell his considerable property before it got nationalized. Shortly after his arrival, Iranian intelligence took him to Tehran, where he was questioned. He was no one big, knew nothing important and they let him go about his business. Returning, the Israeli police and security services picked him up too and charged him with visiting an enemy state. Last week news media reported he was sentenced to four months of community service and a token fine.

There is more traffic between Israel and Iran than people think. Family and the fierce tug of nostalgia pulls people back and forth on trips that some might think could be asking for trouble but are usually all right.

And there the business and property to take care of.

Jews who migrated to Israel left property everywhere from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. Some research estimates that about \$1 billion worth of personal and community assets were left behind by 850,000 Jews who forfeited all when they left their old countries for the new one. After Israel's establishment, the Jews' standing in many countries deteriorated and the choice for most was clear: offer or not, they were in no place to refuse.

A few months ago, work began on Israeli legislation to protect the rights of Jewish migrants from Arab countries. The bill, submitted by legislator Nissim Zeev and supported by the government, proposes that Israel secure the right of these Jews' to compensation within the framework of the peace process. Supporters say these Jews are every bit as refugees as the Palestinians displaced with Israel's establishment and should be an equally important issue in the peace process. Critics say taking such a stand will hamper the peace process.

A conference on the subject is being held at the Knesset, Israel's parliament, on Monday, with international guests and supporters attending such as Stanley Urman, chairman of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), Prof. Irwin Cotler, Canadian lawmaker and human rights lawyer, U.S. Rep. Eliot Engel, supporter of the congressional resolution on Jewish refugees from Arab countries and others.

The JJAC issued a comprehensive report in 2007 on Jews displaced from Arab countries, writing that there was no legal doubt that they were bona fide refugees. The report aims to assert their rights and rightful place on the international agenda in the context of a peace process but also to claim these Jews' rightful place in the Middle East narrative, from which they say their "forgotten exodus" has been "expunged."

The JJAC says its campaign is not against Palestinian refugees, nor is it anti-Arab, about money or compensation. "Let there be no doubt about it: where there is no remembrance, there is no truth; where there is no truth, there will be no justice; where there is no justice, there will be no reconciliation; and where there is no reconciliation, there will be no peace," wrote Cotler in the report.

It's not only financial assets that get nationalized.

Before Babylon was a blog, it was the home to an ancient Jewish community in what is now Iraq. And before Al-Kuwaiti Brothers was a street in Tel Aviv, Saleh and Daoud were among Iraq's greatest musicians. They wrote for Umm Kulthum, collaborated with Abdel Wahab and shaped the nation's classical music. They were also Jewish and left Iraq without their considerable assets. The musicians are now known as "traditional" or "popular," as the music itself was "nationalized" under Saddam Hussein, who obliterated the names but kept the music. Israeli singer Dudu Tassa is their grandson; he honors them in Iraq'n'roll.

Those who had property lament its loss. Many had little to begin with. But the sentimental, historic, cultural legacies are the real treasures. These, though bruised, mostly survived the journey. (For extra credit, read anything by Israeli novelist Eli Amir.)

— Batsheva Sobelman in Jerusalem.