



# The Jews of Yemen: Historical and Economic Analysis

## *Executive Summary*



Yemenite Jews waiting to board their flight to Israel

Source: JDC Archives

### Disclaimer

This Executive Summary provides data on the history and economic losses when Jews were displaced from Yemen. Although every attempt was made to collect testimonies and locate all relevant statistical data, this Report should not be considered as definitive. Research was adversely affected by the fact that this mass displacement of Jews occurred more than 75 years ago and there is no central repository where records of losses were maintained.

It is hoped that additional research will be conducted in the future which would expand upon and refine the financial projections contained in this Report.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – THE JEWS OF YEMEN

### Context

The Jews of Yemen stand as another illustration of a broader historic pattern that unfolded across the Middle East and North Africa,

Jews are indigenous to the region, having lived there for thousands of years - roughly one thousand years before the birth of Islam in the seventh century C.E. For the next thousand years, Jews lived under Islamic rule as ‘dhimmis’, a subordinate class, marked by legal inferiority and social humiliation.

Under Ottoman rule, Jews faced fluctuating conditions, from oppression to limited reforms. The arrival of colonial powers to the Middle East and North Africa marked a dramatic turning point for indigenous Jewish communities. Many Jews gained access to education and the ability to contribute meaningfully to the cultural, economic, and professional life of their countries. But this chapter was short-lived.

The rise of Arab nationalism, at times fueled by fascist ideologies, and growing opposition to Zionism unleashed a wave of discriminatory laws, violence, and state-backed repression. While Jews were often victims of violence and pogroms throughout their time in Muslim countries, the situation worsened immediately before and after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

What followed was not a mere exodus, but the erasure of ancient Jewish communities, through forced expulsion, flight under duress, or systemic marginalization. With respect to Yemen:

### Displacement of Jews from Yemen: 1948-2025

	1948	1958	1968	1976	2001	2025 (est.)
Yemen	55,000	3,500	500	500	200	1

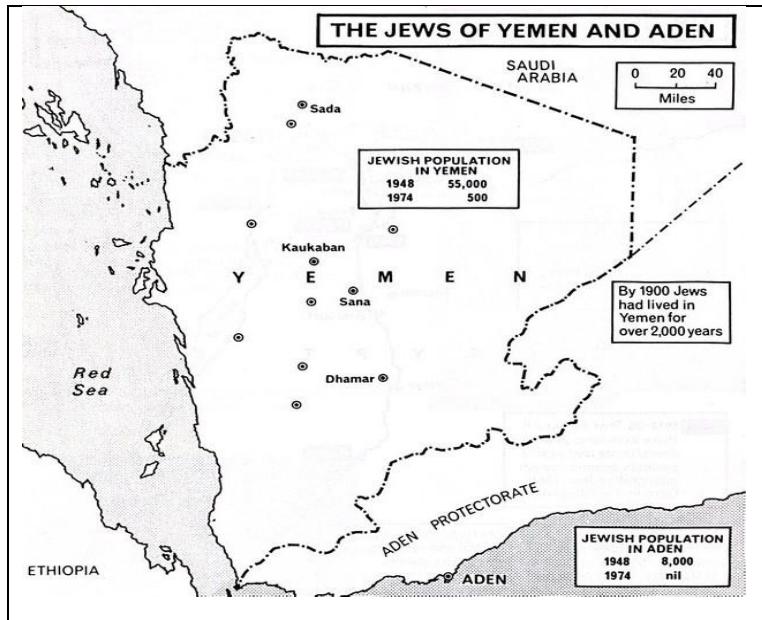
Today, over 99% of the descendants of the historic Jewish communities in 10 Arab countries plus Iran no longer reside in these vast regions.

Neither the mass violations of the human rights of Jews in Arab countries, nor their uprooting from their countries of birth, has ever been addressed by the international community.

This publication is a sincere call to recognize the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries on both moral and legal grounds and to ensure their story is no longer forgotten.

In an era of historic reconciliation, inspired by the spirit of the Abraham Accords, the time has come to face history with honesty and courage. Only through truth and justice can the peoples of the region move toward a future of dignity, healing, and lasting peace.

### History of the Jewish Community of Yemen



The Jewish presence in Yemen is one of the most ancient in the world, dating back to biblical and pre-Islamic times. Historical evidence suggests settlement from as early as the 1st century CE, with flourishing communities by the 3rd century. In the early centuries CE, the Himyarite Kingdom in southern Yemen embraced Judaism as a state religion, creating a rare Jewish kingdom that controlled key trade routes and left a lasting mark on the land's identity.

The Muslim conquest of Yemen in the 7th century had a significant impact on the Jewish community, as Jews in the region were classified as dhimmis, a status that granted them protection but subjected them to a subordinate and humiliating social position. As dhimmis, Jews were required to pay the jizya (a tax), which symbolized their inferior status. They were prohibited from holding public office, had limited legal recourse, and were often subjected to social segregation. However, Jews were allowed to practice their religion and maintain their communities, albeit under these significant constraints.

In 1172, amid forced conversion under a fanatical Muslim ruler who issued anti-Jewish decrees following the appearance of a false messiah, Yemenite leaders reached out to Maimonides in Egypt. His reply, known as the Epistle to Yemen, became a lifeline. It encouraged them to hold firm in their faith, refuted a false messiah, and strengthened their spiritual resilience for generations.

For many years, Yemeni Jews endured widespread persecution and humiliation. This included discriminatory clothing laws, restricted housing, prohibitions on riding animals like Muslims, and degrading forced labor laws such as the “Dung-Gatherers Decree.” Most traumatic was the 1679 *Expulsion of Mawza*, where Jews were forcibly deported to harsh conditions in the Mawza desert, resulting in mass death and lasting communal trauma.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yemen’s partial exposure to Ottoman and British influences brought limited modernization but also intensified resistance from the Muslim population to any relaxation of anti-Jewish restrictions. Ottoman reforms that aimed to lift Jewish legal inferiority were blocked by local opposition. Social hostility, including routine insults and physical abuse, remained pervasive. Notwithstanding, the Jewish community of Yemen played a key role in the country's economic and cultural life. Jews were renowned for their craftsmanship – especially in silversmithing, blacksmithing, and leatherwork. They also contributed significantly to local and regional trade, acting as intermediaries in markets and engaging in spice and textile trade.

However, discrimination against Jews was deeply rooted. In 1913 the enforcement of Sharia law worsened Jewish dhimmi status. A particularly devastating practice was the *Orphan Decree*, under which the Imam forcibly converted orphaned Jewish minors to Islam. Families responded with early marriages, concealment, or smuggling children to the British protectorate of Aden.

The emergence of Zionism and the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine further exacerbated tensions. Yemeni Jews were accused of supporting Zionism and were targeted in anti-Jewish violence, culminating in the 1947 Aden pogrom, which left 87 Jews dead and dozens of businesses and homes destroyed. In 1949, Jewish property was registered for ransom. While in that same year Jews were officially banned from emigrating, these conditions precipitated a mass exodus.

Operation “On Wings of Eagles” (1949-1950) brought over 49,000 Jews to Israel in a dramatic airlift. Although some Jews remained, further waves of immigration occurred into the 1990s. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Yemen's Jewish community had been reduced to a handful of individuals, many of whom continued to face harassment and threats until their eventual evacuation. The story of Yemeni Jewry is one of profound endurance, identity preservation, and eventual rescue after millennia of marginalization and suffering.

## Economic Analysis of The Jews of Yemen

### **Methodological Benchmarks & Economic Indicators**

For the purposes of this report, a total Jewish Yemenite population of 55,000 Jews was estimated. The Yemenite Jewish population was determined to be 85% rural and 15% urban. The definition of 'urban' in the case of Yemenite Jewry is different from that of other countries in the region. In the case of Yemen, there is no correlation between the urban/rural divide and the socioeconomic distribution of the population. It was further determined that the average size of a Jewish family in Yemen in and around the 1948 period was 5 people. Therefore, based on a population of 55,000 a total of 11,000 Jewish households was calculated.

The population in Yemen circa 1948 was overwhelmingly rural and was not divided into urban cities and rural communities per se. Villages in Yemen were not regionally concentrated and instead were dispersed all throughout the countryside, with significant urbanization waves only beginning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The geographic distribution of the Jewish community of Yemen was similarly dispersed, with Jews settling mainly in the country's agricultural belt and living in thousands of different villages. Most of the 15% of urban Yemen Jews lived in Sana'a.

Yemen Jews were predominantly artisans, craftsmen, and traders, often participating in international commerce via the port of Hodeida. Despite the variance in occupations held by Jews, it appears that all the occupations represented a similar socioeconomic class and there was no significant distinction of wealth brackets based on types of occupation. The Jewish community of Yemen also had a few members who were extremely wealthy, usually merchants. Given the relative poverty of Yemen compared to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 1948, it can be assumed that the entire Jewish community of Yemen, aside from a wealthy class of 0.1% were poor.

### **Asset Categories & Types**

This project considers losses suffered by Jews as individual members of Jewish households, as well as assets that belonged to each Jewish community, respectively. These losses include urban and rural land, urban and rural immovable property, personal property and moveable assets, financial assets, employment losses, business losses, and communal losses. This report does not

attempt to account for non-pecuniary damages, such as pain and suffering, nor personal injury or death.

Unlike other countries with stronger colonial influence, Yemen was not subject to the same kind of land administration. Jews in Yemen were not typically involved in agriculture, with experts suggesting they were not permitted to work in agriculture as a rule. Yemen Jews in the poor class typically lived in homes that were two or three stories tall and 200 sq meters in size. These homes were owned by the Jews themselves and usually housed a nuclear family together with their daughters in law and grandchildren. It is also noted that there is no distinction in the value of assets of rural vs urban Jews, and instead they are discussed according to class division (wealthy and poor).

Reliable testimonial and historical data was not available for Yemen to make any conclusions as to the value of losses across the different asset categories. Instead, discussions and summaries were carried out for each asset category to provide further historical context. In addition to private ownership by Jewish individuals throughout Yemen, the various Jewish communities in the country owned communal assets that belonged to the Jewish community. Jewish communal property did not exist in the immoveable form in Yemen, however, Torah scrolls, and other holy books were owned by the Jewish community.

### **Summary of Findings**

Due to the lack of reliable testimonial and historical data for Yemen, it was determined that the analysis for Egypt, Syria, and Iraq would be used for illustrative purposes. Lost assets found in the first three countries at 1948 values were used to determine the value of lost property per person. This yielded a range, with Iraq providing the lowest value of lost property per person among the three countries, and Egypt being the highest. The low and high values were then multiplied with the population of each remaining country, and a mid-point was calculated from this range. In the absence of “best evidence” to reach accurate and verifiable country-specific values a discount factor of 50% was determined based on precedent discounts and applied across the mid-point value for Yemen. Finally, a compound interest formula which makes use of the principal amount and an average yearly rate based on the ten-year yields on US treasury bonds over a total compound period from January 1, 1949, through December 31, 2024, was applied to the mid-point value for each of the countries on a yearly compounding basis. As there is no

internationally recognized, risk free rate, the 10-year US Treasury Yield rate was chosen, as it is an accepted benchmark for the time value of money over long horizons and aligns with established practices in historical asset valuation. The table below illustrates the calculated mid-point of lost assets for Yemen:

Yemen	Range of Lost Assets (\$) 1948	Estimated Present Value (\$, 2024)
Population	55,000	
Estimated – Low Range	267,508,206	
Estimated – High Range	841,207,261	
<b>Estimated – Mid-Point</b>	<b>554,357,734</b>	
<b>Discount</b>	50%	
Estimated – Mid-Point (with Discount)	<b>277,178,867</b>	<b>14,457,139,985</b>