Sephardi Identity in Greater Syria in the Late Ottoman Period

Shelby Ranger

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   Identity is fluid for any individual or group of people, and depends on changing cultural,

political, social, and economic environments as well as histories.[1] Tensions between Sephardim

and the Ottoman Empire, Ashkenazim, Arab world, and Europe shaped changes in an already

multi-faceted Sephardi identity, as Sephardi communities in Palestine and Syria tried to find their

place in the changing world of the dying Ottoman Empire and the onslaught of modernity.

Amidst this turmoil, Jewish identity served as the constant background on which Sephardim

shaped their shifting and conflicting identities throughout this period. Sephardim in the late

Ottoman period tended to try on different identities depending on internal and external

circumstances, so that there was no overarching trend toward Zionism, Ottomanism, or any other

singular identity that a majority of Sephardim embraced, but rather tendencies for certain

communities to lean further toward one or the other at different points in time depending on

circumstances from within and from outside the community.

   Modernity's introduction to the Ottoman Empire in the mid to late 19th century catalyzed

change in Sephardi identity through a mixture of external and internal influences of change.

Traditionally, Sephardim treated the present as a continuation of the past, but this period brought

about sudden change and confusion in Sephardi communities of Palestine and Syria because new

factors contributing to shaping the Sephardi identity suddenly appeared with the arrival of

modernization.[2] Some of these were external, seeping into the Ottoman Empire as a means of

westernization through groups like the Alliance, but there were also internal factors such as

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[1] Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem Between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 83.
[2] Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 66.

economics that created an environment for Sephardim that was receptive to the influx of western input.[3]

Although the Ottoman Empire passed laws in the 19th Century guaranteeing equality of citizens, a social custom of Jewish inferiority persisted, further isolating Jews from the rest of society.[4] The Ottoman Empire incorporated some western practices in order to strengthen its power through the Tanzimat reforms in 1839 which guaranteed life and property to all Ottoman subjects, no matter their religion.[5] The 1856 reform decree gave legal equality to Ottoman Jews along with other non-Muslims, and the 1869 citizenship law gave equal Ottoman citizenship to all subjects in the empire.[6] The Ottoman Empire used these legal reforms to give Jews (and other non-Muslims) in the empire an incentive to understand themselves as Ottoman citizens first, and individual religious groups and communities second. Ottoman reformation of the millet system in 1856 that officially recognized the Chief Rabbi as the legal leader of the Jewish community in political matters was another attempt by the Ottoman Empire to incorporate Sephardim under the umbrella of Ottomanism by incorporating Jewish religious structure into the Ottoman political hierarchy, but only reinforced separate Jewish identity for the Sephardim in the empire.[7] While the empire outlawed autonomy for non-Muslim groups, the millet system's survival reinforced non-Muslims groups' identities and obstructed the empire's goal of uniting Ottoman citizens under Ottoman identity.[8] Even as greater numbers of Muslims and other non-Jewish groups began to mix populations in Palestine, Jewish populations, still growing, expanded their Quarters or created new Jewish areas that kept Jewish populations separate from other ethno-religious

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[3] *Ibid.,* 67.
[4] Yaron Harel, *Zionism in Damascus* (Forthcoming, 2014), 4.
[5] Aron Rodrigue, "The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire," in *Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience 1492 and After*, ed. Elie Kedourie (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1992), 180.
[6] *Ibid.,* 180-181.
[7] *Ibid.,* 181.
[8] *Ibid.*

groups in the Ottoman Empire.[9] The shadow of hundreds of years of Ottoman law casting Jews into an inferior position in society kept Sephardim in Syria and Palestine feeling separate from the rest of Ottoman society, and the impact of the economic crisis that forced Jews into low-level labor and destroyed the wealth and power of elite Jews reinforced the separation of Sephardim in Syria and Palestine under a Jewish, and not necessarily Ottoman, identity.[10]

In Syria, Sephardim tended towards the traditional Jewish identity, as they generally remained tied to the community and uninvolved with political organizations or any other non-Jewish groups.[11] In the late 19th century, a few years of drought that caused famine and worsening health, including a cholera outbreak in Damascus in the summer of 1875 which killed 147 Jews lead up to the financial crisis of October 6, 1875 in which the Ottoman government declared bankruptcy.[12] The crisis destroyed the wealth of the Jewish financial elite of Damascus and lead to the economic ruin of the Jewish community in Damascus, which shaped the community's development in the economic, political, and social realms.[13] The financial crisis created a barren economic landscape for Jews in Damascus in which most took jobs doing low-skilled, low-wage labor, and those who were educated primarily left or found few jobs in the civil service.[14] The harsh economic decline for Syrian Sephardim left the community weak, as it took away the wealth and power of the Jewish elite on whom the community depended.[15] Many Jews who lost investments with the Ottoman government left Damascus for the better economy of Beirut.[16] An influx of Jews to Beirut in the late 1800s from all over Syria occurred primarily

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[9] Adar Arnon, "The Quarters of Jerusalem in the Ottoman Period," *Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (1992): 15-17.
[10] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 5.
[11] *Ibid.,* 8.
[12] *Ibid.,* 4.
[13] *Ibid.,* 3.
[14] *Ibid.,* 4.
[15] *Ibid.,* 7.
[16] Tomer Levi, "The Formation of a Levantine Community: The Jews of Beirut" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2010), 82.

because of Beirut's uniquely booming economy at a time when other places were suffering from economic downturns.[17] The economic downturn's breaking up of communities within Damascus and destruction of the wealth of Jewish leaders in Damascus as well as the factional migration of Jews to Beirut, where the economy's disconnection from the Ottoman government saved the Jews of Beirut from financial destitution, both served to cut Sephardim away from the Ottoman government economically and in turn politically.

However, the separation of Sephardim from the general Ottoman citizenry and identity in general does not necessarily mean that all Sephardim in Syria and Palestine were devoted to following a traditional Jewish lifestyle. On the contrary, the general trend in the late 1800s was a gradual disregard for traditional Jewish identity and rabbinical leadership.[18] There was no active secularizing rebellion, in part because they still lived under an Islamic society divided along ethno-religious lines.[19] Because there was no active rebellion against traditional rule, the Sephardi rabbinate focused on preserving Sephardi unity not by forcing Jews back to past traditions, but by embracing the shift toward modernity and bringing these changes in line with tradition, meshing traditional Sephardi identity with the changes occurring from modernity's onslaught.[20] This does not mean that all rabbis in the late 1800s to early 1900s in the Ottoman Empire agreed on a tolerant, accepting approach to the changing Sephardi society. The rabbis in Aleppo issued a ban denouncing those who desecrated the Sabbath in 1906.[21] Some rabbis feared the influence that western, secular education might have on the community and the possibility of turning the populace against tradition.[22] But the majority of Sephardi rabbis allowed the modern

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[17] *Ibid.,* 85.
[18] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 10.
[19] Norman A. Stillman, *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity*, ed. Tudor Parfitt and John Hinnels, vol. 1 of *The Sherman Lecture Series,* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH, 1995), 20.
[20] *Ibid.,* 20.
[21] *Ibid.,* 20-21.
[22] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 77.

changes to Sephardi society that brought about Sephardi Zionism and focused on maintaining traditional Judaism within the new modern Sephardi society.[23] Despite the lack of an active rebellion, Sephardim in Syria slowly drifted away from traditional rule, with leaders of Sephardi communities who supported the Ottoman government or foreign governments as ultimate authorities being the first to slide away from tradition.[24] The leaders who were more involved with the Ottoman government tended to push for Ottomanism, while the leaders who kept their positions through the backing of foreign governments generally accepted their identity as a European one, keeping their Jewish identity primarily as a tie to European Jewry.[25]

Some elites in the Sephardi community who were involved with the Ottoman government tended towards an Ottomanism first, Judaism second Sephardi identity under the authority of Ottoman law, in order to restore their status in society.[26] The Tanzimat Reforms were one of these Ottoman efforts to resist westernization by using western state-building practices, as previously mentioned.[27] These reforms took away legal autonomy from communities in an effort to Ottomanize the Sephardi population of the empire, but ended up emphasizing ethnic differences.[28] Another downfall of the Ottoman movement for a united Ottoman citizenry was the lack of a good cohesive education system run fully by the Ottoman government, which pushed Jews to search for education elsewhere like Christian mission schools and Alliance schools.[29] French was the lingua franca of trade in the Levant, so the most popular schools were European oriented and taught French well.[30] Nonetheless, with the influx of Ashkenazim challenging the authority of local Sephardi leaders, and finding wealth by skirting the Ottoman

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[23] Stillman, *Sephardi Religious Responses*, 5.
[24] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 10-11.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.,* 5.
[27] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 68.
[28] *Ibid.,* 70.
[29] *Ibid.,* 71-72.
[30] Rodrigue, "Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire," 183.

legal system through the Capitulations which increased tension between the two groups, some

Sephardim in Palestine maintained a separate Ottoman identity as a way to understand the

differences between Sephardi Jews and the Ashkenazi immigrants of the late 19th century.[31] This

distinction of Sephardim as "Ottoman Jews" was evident particularly in Palestine.[32] The

Ottoman government pushed for a strengthened Jewish identity within the framework of a

greater Ottoman identity through the millet system and the establishment of the chief rabbi in

Jerusalem in the mid-1800s.[33] Sephardim in Palestine understood an Ottoman identity in terms of

opposition to the Ashkenazim who retained foreign protection and thus, in Sephardi eyes,

retained their foreign identity, so that Sephardim were the locals of Palestine.[34] Many Europeans

made this distinction between Ashkenazim as Europeans and Sephardim as Ottomans, which

emphasized the Ottoman identity for Sephardim in Palestine.[35] Even many Ashkenazim in the

late 19th century recognized Jewish identities in terms of origin, considering themselves as

Eastern European, and understanding Sephardim in relation to a long lost Spanish homeland,

spurring many Sephardim to clutch onto an Ottoman identity in opposition to the Ashkenazi

invaders.[36] Most Sephardim considered themselves inclusive of not only Jews of Spanish origin,

as many Ashkenazim asserted, but also "Oriental Jews," including Jews in Palestine who only

spoke Arabic and might have been excluded from the Hebrew focused identity, and this more

comprehensive Sephardi definition that was widely accepted by many Sephardim shows again

the propensity for Sephardi Jews to see themselves as a larger, less exclusive group in an identity

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[31] Matthias B. Lehman, "Rethinking Sephardi Identity: Jews and Other Jews in Ottoman Palestine," *Jewish Social Studies* 15 (2008): 93.
[32] *Ibid.,* 96.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.,* 94.
[35] *Ibid.,* 93.
[36] *Ibid.,* 92.

like Ottomanism.[37] In fact for some Palestinian Sephardim, the idea of a Sephardi ethnicity may

not even have been on the radar until the influx of Ashkenazim and onset of modernity which

brought outside influences, thinking of themselves purely as local Ottoman Jews before this

point.[38]

The Young Turk Revolution in 1912 marked a turning point for Sephardim in Palestine

and Syria, as the promises of equality and liberty from the new regime gave way to little

revolutionary change at all from the past governments' laws and economic situation for Jews.[39]

The Young Turk Revolution gave people hopes of united under an Ottoman identity.[40] Following

the regime's disappointing stagnation, many Sephardim turned instead to a Jewish, Hebrew, or

Zionist national identity or assimilation.[41] Just following the Young Turk Revolution, popular

belief in and support for promises of equality made by the government kept Sephardim

supportive, even through the 1912 first Balkan War.[42] Those who feared the uncertainty of

modernization and western influence looked to Ottomanism as a stable alternative for identity.[43]

Jews who accepted the Ottoman identity tended to be closer to Arabs because Ottomanism

allowed for the sloughing off of ethno-religious barriers, and the acceptance of other groups as

Ottoman citizens on equal footing.[44] More Sephardim who turned to Ottomanism in the short

period following the revolution got involved with the government, with five Jews joining the

Ottoman parliament and a few others gaining civil service jobs, as a "wind of liberalism" hit the

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[37] Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire*, 85.
[38] *Ibid.,* 91.
[39] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 19.
[40] *Ibid.,* 27.
[41] Michelle U. Campos, "Between 'Beloved Ottomania' and 'The Land of Israel': The Struggle over Ottomanism and Zionism Among Palestine's Sephardi Jews, 1908-13," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 461.
[42] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus*, 19.
[43] Rodrigue, "Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire," 188.
[44] Abigail Jacobson, "Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the 'Arab Question' in Pre-First World War Palestine: A Reading of Three Zionist Newspapers," *Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2003): 109-110.

empire.[45] But the ultimate disappointment of Sephardim about the new government's failure to follow through on its promises, the lack of equality under an Islamic power, and the poor economy of Damascus Jewry pushed Sephardim away from Ottomanism as a primary identity after the disappointment of the Young Turk Revolution.[46]

Other Sephardi elites found wealth through foreign involvement, using protection of the foreign government to circumvent Ottoman tax and legal systems, focusing on a European identity rather than Ottomanism or Zionism. Capitulations allowed foreign governments to maintain power in the region, at the expense of the Ottoman government.[47] These elites were even more able to gain positions of power and wealth within the community because of the protection from foreign powers and status gained from western involvement. Sometimes these elites used their leadership positions to help encourage community interests, but more often than not, their own interests took precedence over the community's.[48] The Tanzimat Reforms as previously mentioned also encouraged collaboration with European Jewish elites.[49] Many elite Jews who were involved with the Jewish Enlightenment movement Haskalah jumped on the opportunity for Jews to become more open to the west.[50] Educational influences from Europe were not limited to the limited Zionist movement before 1908. The Alliance Israelite Universelle was a French organization that was created in 1860 to teach students about French culture and language.[51] After the Damascus Affair in 1840, which spurred the idea for a Jewish public

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[45] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry,* 71-87.

[46] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 19.

[47] Isaiah Friedman, "The System of Capitulations and its Effects on Turco-Jewish Relations in Palestine, 1856-1897," in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, ed. David Kushner (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1986), 298.

[48] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 6.

[49] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 70.

[50] Esther Benbassa, "Associational Strategies in Ottoman Jewish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *The Jews of the Ottoman* Empire, ed. Avigdor Levy, trans. Eric Fassin and Avigdor Levy (Princeton: The Darwin Press Inc., 1994), 459.

[51] Benbassa and Rodrigue*, Sephardi Jewry,* 73.; Harel, *Zionism in Damascus*, 37.

opinion and political identity, Jewish political solidarity mobilized itself through institutions like the Alliance.[52] Alliance tried to quell enthusiasm for Zionism and to make Jews in the Ottoman Empire assimilate to French culture.[53] Other European based groups set up camp in the Ottoman Empire with their attentions turned toward Jews, like the World Zionist Organization, and Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, which focused on Eastern European Jews and Jews of the Levant.[54] Sephardim in Syria and Palestine had such poor economic and political conditions, that many accepted the help from external powers from Europe more readily.[55]

Assimilationists used a more fluid idea of identity to include both European influences and Jewish-Arab relations.[56] This view tried to bridge the gap somewhat that remained between Ottomanism and European focused Jews from the late 19th century. However, two major factors pushed against assimilationist efforts from the early 19th century to the early 20th century. The first was anti-Semitism, which caused a greater separation and isolation of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, the animosity discouraging Sephardim from leaving their communities.[57] Anti-Semitism was no new occurrence, with blood libels spouting up throughout early 19th century in Syria.[58] But out of nowhere, another blood libel appeared in 1890 in Damascus, because the Christian public gained economic power as the Jewish community lost power, and French clergy targeted anti-Semitic teachings toward Christians in Damascus.[59] These blood libels stymied the assimilationist movement by encouraging Sephardim in Syria to stay isolated in their old quarter

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[52] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 73.
[53] Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 90.
[54] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 75.
[55] *Ibid.,* 75.
[56] Campos, "Between Beloved Ottomania," 466.
[57] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 8.
[58] *Ibid.,* 9.
[59] *Ibid.,* 10.

and to refrain from interaction with non-Muslim groups as much as possible.[60] The second factor that hurt assimilationist identity's chance of reaching a majority population of Sephardim in Palestine and Syria was western influence on schools, namely the Alliance. It focused on Sephardim learning French and maintaining ties to European Jews, which reinforced Jewish identity, with the original intent being a religious link, but isolation from other communities in the Ottoman Empire drove this connection into a nationalistic one.[61] The nationalistic tie with other Jews outside the Ottoman Empire hindered any development of local nationalism among assimilationist groups who sought to reconcile these opposing external and internal forces.[62] In fact, the AIU failed at its own assimilation doctrine because it Europeanized Jews of the Ottoman Empire, but did not integrate them into the society in which they lived, which propelled many AIU graduates in Syria to leave the empire for western lands.[63] The Alliance school director in Beirut from 1905 to 1910 noted that Sephardi Jews, Arab Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews tended to maintain separate identities, with little to no crossover, even as the populations increased, showing the failure of the AIU's assimilation goal.[64] The emergence of Zionism posed a threat to the Alliance by threatening the assimilationist goals, in the eyes of the Alliance, even though many of the original goals of both groups matched in a way that the Alliance, if not so focused on destroying the powerful fledgling ideology, might have cultivated a partnership and meshing of the ideologies.[65] On the other hand, new Zionists were also quick to distinguish their movement from the "assimilationist" and "antinationalist" Alliance, and the clash between these

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[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.,* 7-8.
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] Levi, "Formation of a Levantine Community," 89.
[65] Benbassa, "Associational Strategies in Ottoman Jewish Society," 469-470.

two ideological and political camps ended with the emergence of Zionism as the main Jewish voice.[66]

      Many Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire tried on the Jewish-Hebrew-Zionist identity before and after the Young Turk Revolution, individualizing and personalizing it, so that there was not a mass, overarching Zionist identity that Sephardim in the empire followed. In general, the only Zionist consciousness surrounded small intellectual groups, but personally, many Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire liked the idea of the restoration of the Land of Israel.[67] In Damascus and Aleppo, the Zionist movement found its way into the Jewish community much later than the rest of the empire.[68] Many Sephardim viewed the Zionist movement as an Ashkenazim one because the World Zionist Organization gave more Ashkenazim immigration certificates than Sephardim, and they didn't include nearly as many Sephardim in the organization.[69] By 1907 many Sephardim in Beirut felt sympathy for the Zionist cause, but this personal relation to the cause did not translate to establishments of Zionist associations in Syria and Palestine, and Sephardim kept support for the Zionist cause in a purely ideological zone.[70] In Damascus before the Young Turk Revolution, Zionism did not have much of a following. The majority of the Ottoman Empire's Sephardim did not take hold of a lasting grassroots Zionist movement, even though Sephardi religious elites and many Sephardim approved of a Jewish national revival.[71] Jewish nationalism in Syria was limited to intellectual youth who studied in Beirut in mission schools.[72]

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[66] *Ibid.,* 471.
[67] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 36.
[68] Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 81.
[69] *Ibid.,* 91.
[70] *Ibid.,* 81.; *Ibid.,* 84.
[71] Stillman, *Sephardi Religious Responses*, 5-6.
[72] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 27.

After the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, many Sephardim were unhappy with Ottomanism's failures, and they transferred this support instead toward Zionism, hoping it would bring them equality and a better economic, political, and social situation than they were facing.[73] Zionism was not a completely new idea to the Ottoman Empire, and some Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire had been followers of traditional Zionism.[74] The trend had not caught on very well though, and the elites who supported either Ottomanism or European influence were somewhat resistant to Zionism because they thought it could hurt their leadership positions and economic wealth from keeping close contact with the governments.[75] Modernity created a communal stagnation, which Sephardim fought against with a push toward Hebraism, as they tried to modernize their communities with a mixture of Jewish identity and culture.[76] Many Jews remained indifferent to Zionism, but some distinctly Sephardic Zionist movements appeared after the perceived failure of the Young Turk Revolution that were shaped by cultural Hebraism and a Jewish identity and collective consciousness and that incorporated Jewish culture alongside communal and economic development.[77] This Zionist movement focused primarily on revival of Hebrew language and culture, pushing against the Alliance's focus on the west and the remaining ties to the disappointing Ottoman government.[78] Sephardi Zionism retained a bond with Judaism, even when the focus was more toward secular forms of Zionism, so there was little to no opposition from the Sephardi rabbinate.[79] Sephardi Zionism, with its multi-faceted Sephardi identity shaped by years of Ottoman rule, sudden changes in society caused by an

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[73] Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 198.
[74] Esther Benbassa, "Zionism in the Ottoman empire at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century," *Studies in Zionism: Politics, Society, Culture* 11 (1990): 131.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 207-208.
[77] *Ibid.,* 207-208.
[78] Benbassa, "Associational Strategies in Ottoman Jewish Society," 464.
[79] Stillman, *Sephardi Religious Responses,* 5.

entrance of modernity and westernization, and changing relations with other groups within the Ottoman Empire over time, never focused on Palestine as an exclusively Jewish state, keeping it open to being a national home of the Jews under Ottoman rule, so that even Arabized Jews could support this moderate Sephardi Zionism.[80] Even Arab nationalists could cooperate with Sephardi Zionism, because of its malleable definitions and goals, and its openness to changing ideas, so that the rise in Arab Nationalist opposition to Zionism beginning in the early 20th century was an effect not of the Sephardi Zionism that many people supported on a personal level and used as a part of their identity, but of the Zionist movement that was taking greater measures toward the achievement of Zionist goals.[81] Thus, even with rising tensions between Arabs and the general Zionist movement, the Sephardi Zionists, who may have identified themselves with more of a Jewish-Hebrew-Zionist identity than a purely Zionist one, focused on cooperation with Arabs in Palestine, as opposed to the general Zionist focus on Jewish development in Palestine that might spill over and benefit Arab populations there as well.[82] The conquest of labor movement that took hold of greater Zionism did not necessarily enter the Sephardi Zionist ideology, which still focused on ways to get Arabs involved in the Zionist movement, and criticized Ashkenazi Zionists for leaving Arabs out of the Zionist movement.[83]

Understanding these three Sephardi Jewish identity groups is important to understand the way in which Jews interacted with Arabs in this period and beyond. The Sephardi identity as Ottomans or as Zionists was not an exclusively Jewish identity in the eyes of many Sephardim, and they left the option for close relations with other ethno-religious groups wide open.[84] In part this was because of their close ties with the Arab community in much of the Ottoman Empire,

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[80] Rodrigue, "Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire," 186.
[81] Abigail Jacobson, "Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the 'Arab Question,'" 110.
[82] Jacobson, *"Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and the 'Arab Question,'"* 123.
[83] *Ibid.,* 124.
[84] Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire,* 83.

but more specifically Syria and Palestine.[85] The question of Arabic's status for Palestinian

Sephardim and the Sephardi focus on influencing Arab Press and turning it toward supporting

Sephardi Zionism illustrates the unique situation of Sephardim in their ability to mesh their

identity and ideas with Arabs.[86] Jews in Syria felt caught between Syrian Arab national goals and

Zionism, revealing their ties to Arabs in Syria, who lived beside them and were involved in their

everyday lives, were greater than the ties to Ashkenazi Jews in far off places who did not have a

day to day connection with Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire.[87] The prevalence of

Ottomanism in Sephardim of Syria and Palestine also indicates this unique Sephardi tie to other

communities in the Ottoman Empire aside from their own, including Arab communities.[88]

Sephardi hopes for the success of the Young Turk revolution and the changes it promised to

bring about, and the fact that many held onto this optimism about this new government long after

it exhibited clear evidence that the promises of the new regime would not play out shows more

than just government loyalty, but also loyalty to the Ottoman identity as an overarching, all-

encompassing identity which includes Muslims, Christians, Arabs, Jews- anyone who wanted to

take on this identity as their own.[89] The same Sephardi desire for inclusion of non-Jews in the

cultural and political environment, or at least a recognition of the importance of taking these non-

Jewish groups into account, translated into Sephardi Zionism which focused on an inclusive

identity in which, while Judaism formed the foundation, Arabs might find a role as cooperative

partners in the movement for a homeland in Palestine.[90] The rise of Arab nationalism, in part as a

response to Zionism, threw a wrench into the Sephardi Zionist focus on inclusion, turning their

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[85] *Ibid.*
[86] *Ibid.,* 89.
[87] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 96-97.
[88] Jacobson*, From Empire to Empire*, 90.
[89] *Ibid.,* 92.
[90] *Ibid.,* 98.

practical application of Sephardi Zionism into a push to influence Arabs to allow for Zionist expansion, as well as to turn cooperative Jewish-Arab partnerships into partnerships to help Jews gain a foothold of power in the region.[91] Alongside this cooperation, however, European Zionist leaders pushed instead for a movement completely devoid of Arab input, valuing the influence of western powers like Britain and France instead.[92] Thus, while some Arab leaders were open to cooperation with Sephardi Zionists in order to reach the goal of an Arab nation, the combined effect of Arab nationalism pulling and the general Zionist disregard for Arab sentiment pushing these leaders away from Sephardi Zionism created a schism between Arabs and Jews.[93] Sephardi Zionists found themselves caught between Arabs who were growing increasingly detached from their Sephardi neighbors, and Ashkenazi Zionists who were willing to steamroll through the wishes of the Sephardim in Syria and Palestine for Arab cooperation in order to achieve the goal of a Jewish homeland in Palestine through support of European powers.[94] Sephardim who opposed the general Zionist movement's tactics of avoiding Arab involvement in an effort to bulldoze Jewish control into Palestine usually suggested that the leaders of the Zionist movement should have instead focused on working with the Arabs, and this might have curbed the Arab Nationalist movement in the cradle.[95] Perhaps the Sephardi way of incorporating outside forces and groups into its Jewish identity in the form of Sephardi Zionism, or even Ottomanism before that, would have been a more successful method of drawing Arabs into a peaceful dialogue and even a cooperative effort toward a Palestinian homeland. There is no clear way to know how the Arab-Israeli Conflict might have turned out had this been the case, but certainly it would have offered the opportunity for a far more agreeable outcome with the possibility of a clear-cut

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[91] *Ibid.,* 101.
[92] Harel, *Zionism in Damascus,* 167.
[93] *Ibid.,* 98-99.
[94] *Ibid.,* 167.
[95] Jacobson*, From Empire to Empire*, 111.

solution. Abigail Jacobson argues, rather sadly, that the days of trying on complex identities like those of the Sephardim in the late Ottoman period are no more, and a more rigid Zionist, Jewish identity has replaced these changing, flexible identities, fixed by outside influences.[96] The ship may have sailed for such fluid Sephardi identities to open the door for greater cooperation on the Palestine issue, but perhaps future leaders on both the Arab and Jewish sides can look to the Sephardim of the late Ottoman period for guidance on the conflict.

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[96] *Ibid.,* 116.

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