

Ethnicity in Motion:
Social Networks in the Emigration of Jews from Northern Morocco to Venezuela and
Israel, 1860-2010

Dissertation Abstract

by

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During the second half of the twentieth century, most Jewish inhabitants of Arab countries left their countries of residence. Much of the popular discourse and scholarly narratives concerning this historic episode attributed the motives for mass migration to the rise of local nationalism, and to related political tensions among Jews and Arabs. In concert, many scholars maintained that static and rigid, national and ethnic identities of Jewish migrants (i.e., Zionist, non-Zionist, pro-European, pro-Arab nationalist, or *Mizrahi*) were the main factors shaping the nature of their emigration, and patterns of assimilation into new countries. As a consequence, such politically-oriented narratives have left only marginal space to explore the role of social developments and the dynamic nature of identity in the course of these emigration and assimilation processes. Moreover, such narratives focused extensively on *aliyah* (immigration to Israel), following the founding of the State of Israel (1948), thereby pushing aside other, earlier and parallel emigration phenomena among Jews from Arab and Muslim countries.

This dissertation challenges these and other concepts that still dominate much of the discourse on the emigration of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries in the mid-twentieth century. It proposes an alternative narrative that would leave more space for research into the dynamic and evolutionary nature of national and ethnic identities; and thereby, to the role played by individual migrants in the course of emigration. Throughout the dissertation, prominent dichotomist and rigid concepts such as “olim”(immigrants to Israel) versus “emigrants”, “Zionists” versus “non-Zionists”, “Israeli” versus “Moroccan, or “traditional” versus “modern” take on a dynamic shape in the course of ever-changing human interactions, rather than serve as stable categories of analysis.

I focus on the mass migration of Jews from northern Morocco to Venezuela and Israel, between 1860 and 2010, suggesting that: a) social networks generated identities that waxed and waned, within the daily routines of potential migrants and migrants, as they moved in space interacting with others; and that, b) over time, such dynamic networks evolved to cause, self-sustaining processes of emigration and assimilations among large Jewish populations from northern Morocco. By focusing on the immigration of northern Moroccan Jews to Latin America from the mid-nineteenth century - alongside the more typical research on aliyah from the mid-twentieth century - I expand the geographical frame of analysis, which focused more narrowly on aliyah as the only major, ethnicity-based migratory option open to Jews from Arab and Muslim countries.

The narrative in my dissertation begins with the evolution of local (Judeo-Spanish) ethnic identities among northern Moroccan Jews in the 1940s and 1950s. I suggest that such evolution took shape in reaction to intensifying encounters among Jews and non-Jews in light of Spanish-dominated immigration into northern Morocco. I then show how the concept of ethnic migration among Jews in northern Morocco was also gradually ingrained into their ethnic identity; beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, due to their “century-old” migration to Latin America. There, Moroccan émigré communities evolved to accommodate ongoing immigration of Jews into new non-Jewish environments. These ethnic communities, in turn, came to shape the nature of migratory decisions among those remaining in their country of origin.

I later recount how Israeli and Moroccan statehood (in 1948 and 1956, respectively) added complexity to the already existing migration decision-making matrix among Jews in northern Morocco, rather than shaped it directly. I examine the role of networks of pioneer Zionists, potential olim, against the backdrop of other emigration, or non-migration, alternatives available to them. I then show how, following Moroccan independence, similar ethnic networks gradually turned Venezuela (of all countries in the Americas and Europe) into an attractive migratory haven for northern Moroccan Jews, some of them Zionist activists that could have chosen aliyah. I conclude this section of the dissertation by analyzing how evolving aliyah networks in the 1960s, changed practices of migration decision-making in the region. These networks would shape the aliyah of many whom, a decade earlier, had not been attracted by this migratory option.

In the last part of the dissertation, I study the reconstruction of Moroccan identities in two different post-migration settings. First, I focus on the evolution of Moroccan identities in Venezuela, where, in the absence of non-Jewish immigrants from Morocco- as in the case of Moroccan aliyah to Israel- Moroccan Jews constituted the sole immigrant population from Morocco. I show how, under such circumstances in Venezuela, *ad hoc* ethnic networks came to solidify a collective Moroccan identity among Jewish immigrants, which, in retrospect, created a sense of alienation from the Moroccan nation-state. Such alienation, as I claim, was strongly dependent on forms of recollection in ethnic social contexts. I then discuss the group's post-aliyah era, in which olim from northern Morocco scattered throughout Israel as they resettled in this country. I reveal how dynamic ethnic voices waxed and waned in individuals' daily lives. Moreover, I show how ethnic networks generated such aspirations on the part of olim to forge a unique and differentiated northern Moroccan identity; mostly against the backdrop of a Mizrahi-Moroccan identity that began emerging in Israel in the 1980s.

This dissertation therefore builds toward a long-term, geographically broad narrative, according to which human movement in space and ethnic and national identities, evolve reciprocally. Seen from this perspective, migrations of Jews from northern Morocco, and their patterns of assimilation into new countries, were not direct outcomes of their fixed ethnic or national identities and aspirations. Rather, they depended on dynamic and evolving networks. I thus, suggest that the emigration of Jews from northern Morocco is a case that may contribute to the de-generalization of current perceptions in the history of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, including their migratory journeys.

The methodology stems from my approach toward identity formation and migratory movements, and the attempt to capture their dynamic interrelationships as they evolve over time. It is based on the ethnohistorical reading of sources: an interdisciplinary combination of oral history, ethnography and archival work. The sources include in-depth interviews, statistical records, historical videos and audio contents, periodicals, personal and official correspondence, and websites and blogs.