

The Situation of Jews in Egypt
at the Beginning of 1957

Subsequent to the Israeli, British and French actions in Egypt at the end of October 1956, the Egyptian Government launched a series of radical measures against nationals of Great Britain and France living in that country, and against permanent residents and citizens of Egypt, of the Jewish faith. According to available public information, the great majority of individuals in both categories who have been affected by these exceptional measures, are of the Jewish faith.

The Egyptian Government at first maintained that its new policies applied only to persons of the Jewish faith who were suspected of sympathy with Israel. The basis and nature of these suspicions have never been defined, nor is any judicial action known to have been taken against the individuals affected. Originally, the Government of Egypt insisted that only 55 persons of the Jewish faith had been subjected to these policies.

Through the wall of isolation and secrecy surrounding internal developments in Egypt, it was difficult to readily ascertain the full scope and effect of these acts. Gradually, however, sufficient information, including official documentary evidence, has become available to make the significance of these policies entirely clear.

There is today official documentary evidence of four specific categories of acts which have already directly and radically affected the rights, status and very existence in Egypt of many hundreds, and probably thousands, of persons of the Jewish faith.

These acts include:

1. Police detention.
2. Sequestration of enterprises and property.
3. Expulsion from the country.
4. Promulgation of a new statute under which Jews may be deprived of citizenship.

It must be emphasized, however, that the data available at present does not adequately convey the fatal portent these measures hold for the future of Egyptian Jewry. The total number of persons affected cannot be precisely computed, nor can the proportion of the Jewish community in Egypt that has already been uprooted be cited with statistical finality.

One reason for the unavailability, at this stage, of such a clear assessment is the prevailing censorship of news and the police control of contacts between Jews in Egypt and observers from abroad. Another reason for the lack of accurate information is the gross inadequacy of Egyptian statistical data concerning the Jewish population of Egypt and its citizenship status.

Jews residing in Egypt are believed to number between 35,000 and 55,000. Of these, only 10 - 15 per cent are Egyptian citizens, because most Jews in Egypt, despite generations of residence in that country, had been prevented by administrative obstacles, systematically applied, from acquiring Egyptian nationality. Many of the so-called "stateless" Jews in Egypt are stateless only as a result of this administrative sabotage of applications for naturalization. The fact is that approximately

one half of the Jewish population, although born in the country, are stateless. The remainder, or about 30 - 35 per cent, are foreign nationals, holding French, British, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and other passports.

Individuals in the category of "stateless persons" are reliably reported to be in the worst position; but, at the same time, there are hundreds of cases on record in which Egyptian citizens have been subjected to identically harsh treatment.

Within the aforementioned four main categories of mistreatment, the following developments have taken place:

1. Detainment, Confinement and Imprisonment

Under Article 3, Paragraph 7 and Article 7 of Emergency Law No. 5333 of 1954, on the Proclamation of a State of Siege in Egypt, authorizing the Military Governor General of Egypt "to order the arrest and apprehension of suspects and those who prejudice public order and security," hundreds of Jews, without charge against them, have been detained, imprisoned or otherwise deprived of their liberty.

According to representatives in Egypt of an important international relief organization, as of December 7, 1956, at least 900 Jews had been arrested. Five hundred were interned in the Jewish school of Cairo at Abassiah. As of December 3, 261 of these 500 were stateless; the rest were Egyptian citizens. At the Petash in Heliopolis another 42 Jews were detained, most of them women, many of them aged. This group included 19 stateless persons and 23 others. At the Barrage Prison north of Cairo, 300 Jews were

detained, half of them stateless, the other half British and French subjects. Limited as they are to the Cairo area, these figures cannot represent the total number of Jews imprisoned in Egypt.

Moreover, there is absolutely reliable information to the effect that almost all Jewish families in Cairo and Alexandria have been held in confinement at their homes for considerable lengths of time, often without funds, food and other supplies, under surveillance of building janitors invested with police authority to control Jewish tenants in their confinement, and supplied with firearms to render this control more effective.

2. Expulsion and "Voluntary" Emigration

It could not be clearly established under what emergency or other legislation the Egyptian Government issued expulsion orders to an estimated minimum of 500 Jews, in addition to a considerable number of persons of the Jewish faith who were citizens of Great Britain or France.

Most of these expellees are known to be heads of families. They were ordered to leave the country within two to seven days. Where, as in most cases, the individual served with a deportation order was responsible for the support of his family, all members of the family were required to leave the country. Thus, this measure has indirectly forced out of Egypt several times the number of people who received expulsion orders.

However, official deportation orders were by no means the most effective instruments of Egypt's policy of getting rid of its Jewish population through forced emigration. In fact, around the end of November, direct, individual expulsion orders ceased, only to be replaced by the more subtle and potent techniques of intimidation and psychological warfare against the Jewish population as a whole. Under these pressures and the simultaneous economic harassment of Jews described below, a much larger and steadily growing number of Jews are "voluntarily" obligating themselves, in formal statements to the authorities, to leave the country and, in the case of Egyptian nationals, to relinquish their citizenship status. The majority consider their further stay in Egypt a hopeless proposition, and as soon as they succeed in booking plane or boat passage, they depart by the hundreds, leaving behind all their properties, save two valises of clothing and twenty Egyptian pounds per person.

Both the formal expulsion orders and the "voluntary" pledges of exile have stricken Jews of every status -- citizens, stateless and foreign subjects alike. All laissez-passer papers issued to them expressly state that the persons leaving Egypt will not be permitted to return, and that they voluntarily renounce all claims against Egypt.

Of late, a large number of boat and planeloads of mostly Jewish expellees have reached various European countries -- Italy, France, Greece, Portugal and others.

On January 6, 1957, another 967 Jewish refugees arrived in Naples, Italy, from Egypt. Many of the refugees were stateless persons, but many others had been forced to renounce their Egyptian citizenship. Virtually all had spent the last months or weeks in concentration camps or prisons. The conditions in their places of detention were described as appalling. Many of the refugees accused the regime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of using brutal police methods, including beatings, to extort from them written pledges that they would never return.

Some of the refugees in Naples estimated that tens of thousands, perhaps even as many as 45,000 persons, might still be detained in seven large concentration camps. However, according to a special dispatch to the New York Times from Naples, dated January 6, M. Robert Porchet, agent of the International Red Cross in Cairo who accompanied the boatload of refugees, the number of persons detained in Egypt was "considerably lower than 45,000."

The large scope of this forced emigration and the magnitude of the burden it imposes upon a number of states at peace with Egypt, are already manifest.

The extent to which the Government of Egypt is forcing the tempo of "voluntary" emigration, is indicated by its policy compelling the Office of the Grand Rabbinate itself to serve as the registration center for emigration of "stateless" Jews. It is reported on the best possible authority that many thousands of Jews have resigned themselves to registration with the Grand Rabbinate for emigration.

3. Economic Strangulation

Under the authority of Military Proclamation No. 4, "relative to commerce with British and French subjects and to measures affecting their properties" (Journal Officiel No. 88 bis A of November 1, 1956), nineteen directives appeared in the Official Journal of Egypt, of which eleven (Nos. 170 - 177 and Nos. 186 - 188) affect overwhelmingly the property of Jews.

Military Proclamation No. 4 appeared under the heading of "Regime of Sequestrations." It states (Article 1) that "The director-general of the management of properties of persons interned or placed under surveillance, charged with the execution of the provisions of Law No. 176 of 1956, will assume the management of the properties of the following persons and institutions:

" 1) All physical persons who were interned or placed under surveillance in execution of the law relative to the state of siege.

" 2) Every society, association or foundation, whatever its purpose may be, functioning under the control of any single person cited above, or any person having an important interest in it.

" 3) All persons who reside outside of the Republic of Egypt but pursue activities which are prejudicial to the security of the State.

" 4) All branches, agencies or bureaus domiciled in the Republic of Egypt and functioning under the control of any of the aforementioned persons or those who have an important interest in them."

A number of persons living in the United States, who are thoroughly familiar with the economic life of Egypt, have examined the published lists of 486 persons and firms whose properties were seized under Military Proclamation No. 4, and have attested to the fact that at least 95 per cent of them are Jews. It is important to note that these Directives issued under Military Proclamation No. 4 do not refer to properties owned by British and French subjects which were sequestered under Military Proclamation No. 5 (affecting a number of persons of the Jewish faith as well), but exclusively refer to assets of Egyptian citizens, stateless Jews and Jews of nationalities other than British and French.

The names of persons and firms affected by this measure represent the bulk of the economic substance of Egyptian Jewry, the largest and most important enterprises and the main sustenance, through voluntary contributions, of Jewish religious, educational, social and welfare institutions in Egypt. The resulting paralysis of these institutions substantially aggravates the uprooting effect of the anti-Jewish policies of the Government of Egypt, and greatly intensifies the pressure for the exodus of Jews from the country.

In addition to depriving owners of their properties and incomes, the sequestration measure indirectly affects the livelihood of a much broader circle of Jews, those employed by firms placed under custodianship. It has been reliably reported that all sequestered firms have received instructions to discharge all employees of the Jewish faith, and have acted accordingly.

Nor is the elimination of Jews from the economic life of Egypt confined to sequestered firms and assets. There are other measures, mostly unofficial, which prevent a large additional number of Jews from earning a living. For example, most Jews have already lost their positions in public companies and many private firms which were not subject to sequestration. At the same time, many Jews in independent private enterprises are prevented from doing business by the denial of trade permits, export and import licenses, foreign currency allocations, and other administrative facilities essential to the continuance of their activities. As a result, Jews are either forcibly excluded or voluntarily withdrawing from business. Likewise, a steadily growing number of Jewish physicians, lawyers and engineers have, by various means, been prevented from practicing their professions.

These developments admit of only one conclusion: that most of the Jews in Egypt are already without economic resources. Their businesses are being taken away or prevented from operating, their bank accounts blocked, and their jobs lost. These measures clearly bring to a drastic head Egypt's policy, at least ten years old, of "national homogeneity" and the "Egyptianization" of the national economy.

The character and intent of the sequestration regime is rather clearly revealed by one of its own original provisions. Sequestration Order No. 189 authorizes the director-general of sequestered properties to deduct from all capital assets under his custody, ten per cent of their value, as well as ten per cent of

the current income of properties producing income, to be used for administrative and other undefined purposes. This provision transforms the measure into an instrument for at least partial confiscation of these assets, pointing, at the same time, towards the serious probability that this policy is aiming at something more drastic and final than mere custody.

4. Denationalization

Another long-standing device to achieve "national homogeneity" has been the Egyptian nationality law No. 160, of September 13, 1950. On November 22, 1956, this law was amended by a decree-law promulgated by the President of the Republic; Article 1 proclaims that only individuals "established on Egyptian territory before January 1, 1900, who conserved their residence until the date of promulgation of the present law and who are not under the jurisdiction of a foreign state," are Egyptians.

The debilitating intent and effect of this provision is, in spite of the camouflaging formulation used, quite manifest. First of all, the law may easily be interpreted to mean that if an "undesirable" individual left the country even for a brief stay abroad, he thereby automatically failed to "conserve his residence" until the date of the new law. Through this device, Egyptian citizens of the Jewish faith may easily be deprived retroactively of their acquired citizenship status. Second, an even more dangerous loophole seems to be hidden behind the prescription of the cut-off date of January 1, 1900. According to persons familiar

with conditions in Egypt, there is simply no documentation in existence in that country which would, with official validity, attest to the residence of people in Egypt at that remote cut-off date. Through this loophole, not only can the delivery of new certificates of nationality be denied to undesirable applicants, but existing certificates also may be annulled retroactively.

But the new law does not stop at these restrictions; it goes on to impose special disabilities expressly upon Jews alone. Article 1 further stipulates that "neither Zionists, nor those against whom a judgment has been handed down for crimes of disloyalty to the country or for treason, shall be covered by this provision" (this refers to the first paragraph of Article 1, cited above, which defines "Egyptians.")

To make the intent of this provision clear beyond doubt, Article 1 adds that "no request for the delivery of a certificate of Egyptian nationality will be accepted from persons known as Zionists ..."

To our knowledge, this is the first instance in the history of law where the concept of Zionism is used in a nationality statute as a criterion of citizenship, and as an indirect basis of denationalization. Since the law furnishes no definition whatsoever of the term "Zionism," it is obvious that the Egyptian authorities can apply this provision at will, to any person of the Jewish faith.

It is even more obvious that as a legal corollary to policies of mass detention, property seizures, economic and occupational ostracism, and general pressure for "voluntary" emigration, this law is another potent weapon in the hands of the rulers of Egypt to accomplish their aim of driving out the Jewish population of that country, with relentless and irreparable finality.

New York

January 7, 1957