

Secret Mission Rescues Yemen's Jews



ALP/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); ROBERT A. LUMINS

UNDER SIEGE: The State Department has resettled about 60 Yemeni Jews in the U.S. since July amid rising violence; more are expected to arrive. Top, the father of Moshe Nahari, who was killed in December, with his daughters outside a court in Yemen following a hearing in the murder case. Below, a Jewish woman cloaked in a burqa arrives this summer at JFK airport in New York with her son.

BY MIRIAM JORDAN

MONSEY, N.Y.—In his new suburban American home, Shaker Yakub, a Yemeni Jew, folded a large scarf in half, wrapped it around his head and tucked in his spiraling side curls. “This is how I passed for a Muslim,” said the 59-year-old father of seven, improvising a turban that hid his black skullcap.

The ploy enabled Mr. Yakub and half a dozen members of his family to slip undetected out of their native town of Raida, Yemen, and travel to the capital 50 miles to the south. There, they met U.S. State Department officials conducting a clandestine operation to bring some of Yemen’s last remaining Jews to America to escape rising anti-Semitic violence in his country.

In all, about 60 Yemeni Jews have resettled in the U.S. since July; officials say another 100 could still come. There were an estimated 350 in Yemen before the operation began. Some of the remainder may go to Israel and some will stay behind, most in a government enclave.

The secret evacuation of the Yemeni Jews—considered by historians to be one of the oldest of the Jewish diaspora communities—is a sign of America’s growing concern about this Arabian Peninsula land of



23 million.

The operation followed a year of mounting harassment, and was plotted with Jewish relief groups while Washington was signaling alarm about Yemen. In July, Gen. David Petraeus was dispatched to Yemen to encourage President Ali Abdullah Saleh to be more aggressive against al-Qaeda terrorists in the country. Last month, Presi-

dent Barack Obama wrote in a letter to President Saleh that Yemen’s security is vital to the region and the U.S.

Yemen was overshadowed in recent years by bigger trouble spots such as Afghanistan. But it has re-emerged on Washington’s radar as a potential source of regional instability and a haven for terrorists.

The impoverished nation is struggling with a Shiite revolt in the north, a secessionist movement in the south, and growing militancy among al-Qaeda sympathizers, raising concern about the government’s ability to control its territory. Analysts believe al-Qaeda operatives are making alliances with local tribes that could enable it to establish a stronghold in Yemen, as it did in Afghanistan prior to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

The State Department took something of a risk in removing the Yemenis to the U.S., as it might be criticized for favoritism at a time when refugees elsewhere are clamoring for haven.

The U.S. calculated the operation would serve both a humanitarian and a geopolitical purpose. In addition to rescuing a group threatened because of its religion, Washington was seeking to prevent an international embarrassment for an embattled Arab ally.

President Saleh has been trying to protect the Jews, but his inability to quell the rebellion in the country's north made it less likely he could do so, prompting the U.S. to step in. The alternative—risking broader attacks on the Jews—could well have undermined the Obama administration's efforts to rally support for President Saleh in the U.S. and abroad.

"If we had not done anything, we feared there would be bloodshed," says Gregg Rickman, former State Department Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism.

Mr. Yakub says the operation saved his family from intimidation that had made life in Yemen unbearable. Violence toward the country's small remaining Jewish community began to intensify last year, when one of its most prominent members was gunned down outside his house. But the mission also hastens the demise of one of the oldest remaining Jewish communities in the Arab world.

Jews are believed to have reached what is now Yemen more than 2,500 years ago as traders for King Solomon. They survived—and at times thrived—over centuries of change, including the spread of Islam across the Arabian Peninsula.

"They were one of the oldest exiled groups out of Israel," says Hayim Tawil, a Yeshiva University professor who is an expert on Yemeni Jewry. "This is the end of the Jewish Diaspora of Yemen. That's it."

Centuries of near total isolation make Yemeni Jews a living link with the ancient world.

Many can recite passages of the Torah by heart and read Hebrew, but can't read their native tongue of Arabic. They live in stone houses, often without running water or electricity. One Yemeni woman showed up at the airport expecting to board her flight with a live chicken.

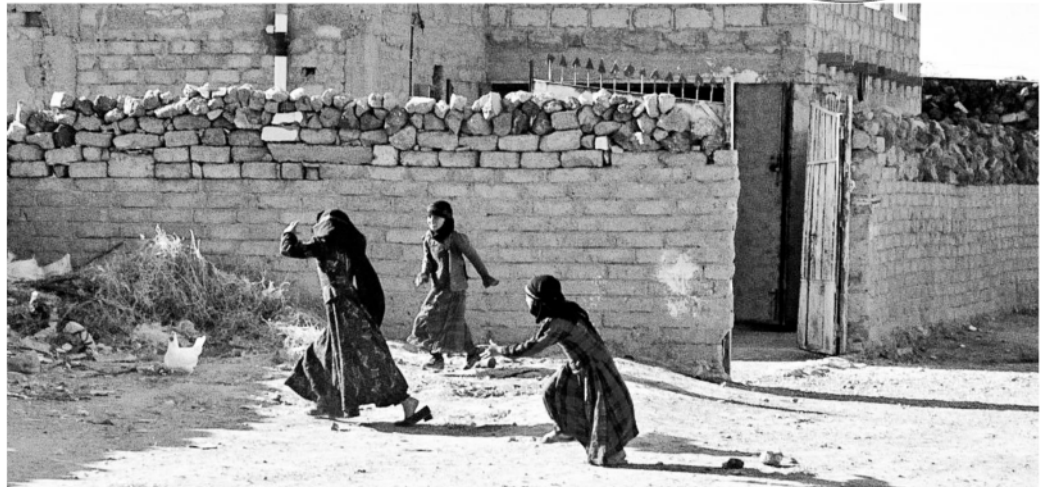
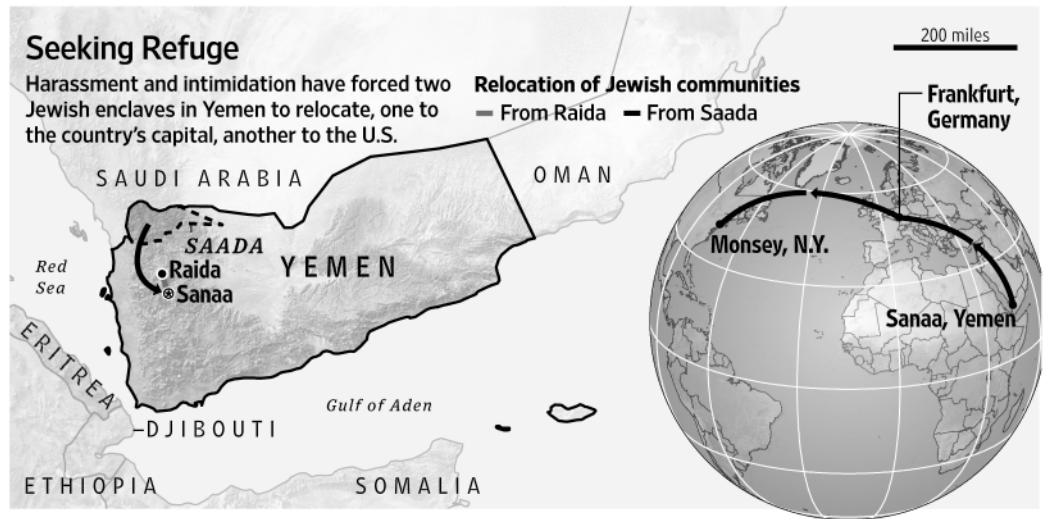
Through the centuries, the Jews earned a living as merchants, craftsmen and silversmiths known for designing *djambias*, traditional daggers that only Muslims are allowed to



AFP/Getty Images (above left); Reuven Schwartz (2)



Left: Yemeni Abdul Aziz al-Abdi attends his first hearing in connection with the murder of Yemeni Jew Moshe Nahari. Right: Mr. Nahari, killed in Dec. 2008 (left) and Said Ben Yisrael, whose house was firebombed, dance at a wedding in Yemen in 2007. Below: Jewish children play in Raida, Yemen.



carry. Jewish musical compositions became part of Yemeni culture, played at Muslim weddings and festivals.

"Yemeni Jews have always been a part of Yemeni society and have lived side by side in peace with their Muslim brothers and sisters," said a spokeswoman for the Embassy of Yemen in Washington.

In 1947, on the eve of the birth of the state of Israel, protests in the port city of Aden resulted in the death of dozens of Jews and the destruction of their homes and shops. In 1949 and 1950 about 49,000 people—the majority of Yemen's Jewish community—were airlifted to Israel in "Operation Magic Carpet."

About 2,000 Jews stayed in Yemen. Some trickled out until 1962, when civil war erupted. After that, they were stuck there. "For three decades, there were no telephone calls, no letters, no traveling overseas. The fact there were Jews in Yemen was barely known outside Israel," says Prof. Tawil.

After alienating the West by backing Iraq during the first Gulf War, Yemen sought a rapprochement with Washington. In 1991, it declared freedom of travel for Jews. An effort led by Prof. Tawil and brokered by the U.S. government culminated in the departure of about 1,200 Jews, mainly to Israel, in the early 1990s. Arthur Hughes, American ambassador to Yemen at the time, recalls that those who chose to remain insisted: "This is where we have been for centuries, we are okay; we're not going anywhere."

The few hundred Jews who stayed behind were concentrated in two enclaves: Saada, a remote area in Yemen's northern highlands, and Raida to the south.

In 2004, unrest erupted in Saada. The government says at least 50,000 people have been displaced by fighting between its troops and the Houthis, a Shiite rebel group.

Animosities against Jews intensified. Notes nailed to the homes of Jews accused them of working for Israel and corrupting Muslim morals. "Jews were specifically targeted by Houthi rebels," says a spokeswoman for the Yemeni embassy in Washington.

In January 2007, Houthi leaders threatened Jewish families in Saada. "We warn you to leave the area immediately... [W]e give you a period of 10 days, or you will regret it," read a letter

signed by a Houthi representative cited in a Reuters article.

Virtually the entire Jewish community in the area, about 60 people, fled to the capital. Since then, they have been receiving food stipends and cash assistance from the government while living in state-owned apartments in a guarded enclave, says the Yemeni embassy in Washington.

President Saleh, a Shiite, has been eager to demonstrate goodwill toward the Jews. On the Passover holiday, he invited TV crews to videotape families in the government complex as they feasted on lamb he had ordered.

Raida became the last redoubt of Yemeni Jews, who continued to lead a simple life there alongside Muslims.

Ancient stone homes dot the town. Electricity is erratic; oil lamps are common. Water arrives via truck. Most homes lack a TV or a refrigerator. The cell phone is the only common modern device. Some families receive financial aid from Hasidic Jewish groups in Brooklyn and London, which has enabled them to buy cars.

Typically, the Jewish men are blacksmiths, shoe repairmen or carpenters. They sometimes barter, trading milk and cow dung for grass to feed their livestock. In public, the men stand out for their long side curls, customarily worn by observant Jewish men. Jewish women, who often marry by 16, rarely leave home. When they do, like Muslim women, only their eyes are exposed.

For fun, children play with pebbles and chase family chickens around the house. At Jewish religious schools, they sit at wooden tables to study Torah and Hebrew. They aren't taught subjects like science, or to read and write in Arabic, Yemen's official language.

"I showed them a multiplication table and I don't think they had ever seen one," says Stefan Kirschner, a New York University graduate student who visited Raida in August 2008 and says he sat in a few classes.

In September 2008, militants detonated a car bomb outside the U.S. Embassy in Yemen's capital of Sanaa, killing 16 people. The attack raised fresh concern about Muslim extremism and the government's stability.

Then, on Dec. 11, a lone gunman shot dead Moshe Nahari, a father of nine and well-known figure in Raida's Jewish commu-

nity. Abdul-Aziz al-Abdi, a retired Air Force pilot, pumped several bullets into Mr. Nahari after the Hebrew teacher dismissed his demands that he convert to Islam. In June, the shooter was sentenced to death.

Israel's offensive against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip later in December sparked protests in Yemen. Jewish men and children in Raida were heckled, beaten and pelted with rocks. A grenade was hurled at the house of Said Ben Yisrael, who led one of three makeshift synagogues in Raida, and landed in the courtyard of his two-story home.

From the safety of his new home in suburban New York, Mr. Yakub recounted his last months in Yemen. Rocks shattered the windows of his house and car. Except for emergencies and provisions, Jews began to avoid leaving home. When they did, Mr. Yakub and other Jews took to disguising themselves as Muslims.

"This was no way to live," he said, seated at the head of a long table surrounded by his wife and children.

Salem Suleiman, who also arrived recently in New York, bears scars from rocks that hit his head. "They throw stones at us. They curse us. They want to kill us," he said. "I didn't leave my house for two months."

New York had a community of about 2,000 Yemeni Jews. Yair Yaish, who heads the Yemenite Jewish Federation of America, says he was barraged with "desperate calls from the community here saying we have to do something to get our families out."

The U.S. Ambassador to Yemen urged Yemeni ministers to facilitate the departure. After initial reluctance—the government preferred to give the Jews safe haven in the capital city—Yemen agreed to issue exit permits and passports.

"It was the embassy's view, and the Department concurred, that because of their vulnerability, we should consider them for resettlement," says a spokeswoman for the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

Jewish Federations of North America raised \$750,000 to help the effort. Orthodox groups also pledged to pitch in. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society was tasked with their resettlement.

Word reached Jews in Raida that there was an American plan afoot to rescue them.

The first applicants signed up at the U.S. Embassy in January. To avoid attracting attention, families convoyed to Sanaa in taxis at dawn.

Later they traveled to a hotel for interviews with U.S. officials. To establish a case for refugee status, they had to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution. For many of the women, it was the first time speaking with anyone outside the home.

As news spread of their imminent departure, many families reported trouble selling property. Potential buyers offered low prices or refused to bid, thinking they could get the property free after it was deserted.

"All they have is this little house worth \$15,000," says Yochi Sabari, a Jew from Raida who lives in New York and has relatives in Yemen. "They can't leave until they sell it."

About three weeks before their travel date, the U.S. embassy contacted the first four families cleared for travel. On July 7, their 17 members traveled to the airport in Sanaa and boarded a Frankfurt-bound flight.

When the Yemenis landed in New York the next day, Jewish organization officials there to greet them spotted several women cloaked in black robes, only their eyes exposed.

"The Jewish women were the ones in burqas," says Gideon Aronoff, president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. He says he was "initially shocked."

Several families missed the two flights offered to them by the U.S. and, therefore, forfeited their chance to move here. Family members say they are having trouble disposing of assets. An undisclosed number of people have reached Israel, including the family of Mr. Ben Yisrael, whose home was the target of a grenade, and the family of Mr. Nahari, who was slain in December 2008. In the U.S., the Yemeni refugees are being settled in Monsey, a suburban enclave of ultraorthodox Jews, lined with strip malls that sell black coats and wide-rimmed hats worn by Hasidic men.

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society's network established a Monsey office, where case managers arrange housing and disburse food stamps, cash and other refugee benefits to the Yemeni arrivals. Many of the adults, caseworkers say, aren't yet capable of budgeting, following a schedule or sitting still in a structured classroom to learn English.

On a recent morning, Mr. Suliman, a 36-year-old father of three, retrieved an alarm clock that he received with his furnished apartment.

“I still don’t know how to use this,” he said. “The children have been playing with it.”