CHAPTER FIVE

REGIME CHANGE, ANTI-JEWISH VIOLENCE, AND EMIGRATION IN LIBYA AND YEMEN*

Throughout the earlier chapters I discussed the existing polemic narratives of Middle Eastern Jewish history and migration. While there has, of late, been some improvement in the quality of the work in these fields, much is still as concerned with current Middle Eastern politics as with realistically portraying Jewish life in the region. This chapter hopes to further challenge these narratives through a historical comparison of the Jewish communities of Libya and Yemen. Focusing on regime change, anti-Jewish violence, and emigration, it will make two arguments: the first is that colonial rule in Libya aggravated Muslim-Jewish tensions in a way that made collective violence against Jews likely, while in Yemen the retreat of Ottoman colonial rule and the reestablishment of local governance mitigated against collective violence; the second is that, despite superficial similarities, the factors affecting and effecting Jewish emigration from Libya and Yemen were fundamentally different. If there was a common factor it was, once again, colonialism. Therefore, these migrations must not be understood as a single movement. The study of Middle Eastern Jewish migration as a homogenous process, affected by identical historical factors, is misleading and unproductive. In fact, it is the polemic nature of much of the work on this topic that requires overgeneralization since this facilitates the simplification and standardization of the Middle Eastern Jewish experience. Of course, some parallels exist between

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1 For examples of this kind of homogenizing of Middle Eastern Jewry see Meron, “Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries.” Meron states that similar patterns of “Jewish exodus” existed in Libya and Yemen, and other Arab countries; Robert Ivker, “The Forgotten Jewish Refugees From Arab States” *inFocus*, Vol. 2:1 (2008). Ivker says that “Living in Yemen, Egypt, or Libya as a Jew would mean a life of hardship;” Ada Aharoni, “The Forced Migration of Jews from Arab Countries and Peace,” website of the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, http://www.hsje.org/forcedmigration.htm. Aharoni terms Jewish emigration from Arab countries “the Second Exodus,” and states that, “outstanding examples are the Jews of Yemen and Iraq, who were airlifted en masse to Israel between 1948 and 1951. Similarly, the Jewish community of Libya was almost entirely relocated to Israel.”
various Middle Eastern Jewish communities. These, however, are largely related to the same processes – global economics, nationalism, and colonialism, to name a few – that affected the entire world.

Libya and Yemen shared several features that make a comparison between them instructive. Both countries were home to long established indigenous Jewish communities that were spread out geographically, living both in urban and rural areas. Neither country had any other indigenous “minority” group living in it. Jews traditionally lived in both countries as dhimmī, or non-Muslim protected people, which implied both their integral place in society, but also their acknowledged subordination to Muslims. Both countries were characterized by a high level of tribal structure, in which Jews were included. Notwithstanding these commonalities, the modern Jewish histories of Libya and Yemen differ significantly. This comparison, therefore, will call into question the tendency in modern scholarship to address Middle Eastern Jewry as a singular entity by exposing the disparate experiences of these two communities.

Beginning with an examination of the Ottoman reconquests of Libya and Yemen, this chapter will ask how regime change affected the two countries’ respective Jewish communities; what processes were set in motion; what were the outcomes of these processes; were the outcomes similar? Ottoman commitment and presence in Libya were strong, and direct control was therefore established. Yemen, because of its treacherous terrain and its distance from the Ottoman center, was harder to control. As a result Ottoman reforms were implemented more successfully in Libya than in Yemen. Yemeni Muslims resisted these reforms, particularly those which dealt with Jewish subjects, to a far greater degree than Libyan Muslims. While in Ottoman Libya an attempt was made to treat Jews as equal subjects of the Empire, this was impossible in Yemen. Because of this, the position of Jews in Libyan society was substantially altered by Ottoman reconquest; in Yemen the transformation was slower.

At the termination of Ottoman rule in Libya and Yemen, the two countries experienced very different forms of government. Libya became an Italian colony in 1911. This increased the pace of modernization in the country and produced an ever widening cleavage between Libyan Jews and their Muslim compatriots. Yemen, on the other hand, reverted to a seemingly more traditional form of government. Imam Yahyā reinstated Zaydī religious law, by which Jews were governed as dhimmī. Though no improvement in the legal status of Jews took place in Yemen, it also appears that they remained a more cohesive part of Yemeni society than their Libyan co-religionists. And while colonial rule in Libya seems to have