Jewish Immigration to East Africa

Remarkable emigration from Yemen became another manifestation of the profound transformation that the Yemeni Jewish community underwent during the nineteenth century and until the middle of the twentieth century. This trend, which began in the nineteenth century, is generally recognized as almost solely directed to Palestine and Israel. Nevertheless, the initial characteristics of this emigration movement are evident in migrations to places such as Egypt, India and the United States, but are probably best epitomized by the migration of Yemeni (and Adeni) Jews to nearby destinations. These migrants—similar to other people of the nineteenth-century migration trends that resulted from global and local developments—sought improved economic and social prospects. They thus travelled to East Africa where they created a sort of satellite community that remained attached to the migrants’ homeland in South West Arabia, and eventually, sometimes reluctantly, merged with their brethren who immigrated to Israel.

It was only natural that Africa attracted Jewish immigrants from the Arab peninsula. The Red Sea and its environs—the coast of East Africa and the Western coast of the Arab peninsula—are part of one geographic zone, united but separate. One can discern climatic similarity, likeness of demographic features, political ties, and comparable cultural influences. Yemen and Ethiopia, two countries on opposite sides of the Red Sea, have historically had continuous relations, both agreeable and not. One feature of these relations was the


migration of people from one territory to the other. Political developments during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the increasing influence of European powers in the Red Sea region resulted in an increase in the flow of Jewish and non-Jewish migrants from Yemen and from Aden to Ethiopia and Eritrea.³

Political Survey: The Intervention of World Powers

The importance of the Red Sea as a strategic waterway *en route* to Eastern Africa and the Far East has long been known and became even more important after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. As mentioned earlier, by 1839 the British had captured the port town of Aden, transforming it into an important base on the way to India.⁴ The Ottoman Empire, fearful of the growing British presence in the area, conquered the Yemeni Red Sea coastal plain in the mid-nineteenth century, and took over central Yemen in 1872, to remain there until 1918. In the 1880s, following the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, Italy also became a major player in the region. In 1885, Italian forces landed in the Ethiopian port town of Massawa, and from there advanced inland. In 1890, they completed the conquest of the Ethiopian Red sea coast and established the colony of Eritrea. Italy’s attempt to take over all of Ethiopia was blocked by Melenik II in 1896, in the famous Adwa battle. In 1935, Mussolini’s Italy conquered all of Ethiopia. The country remained, like Eritrea, an Italian colony until 1941 when, in the course of World War II, the Italians were ousted by the British.⁵ Following the British withdrawal, Emperor Hayla-Sellase ruled over a united Ethiopia, but in 1952 Eritrea became an autonomous province of Ethiopia and in 1962 was annexed to Ethiopia. The Emperor was overthrown in the 1974 revolution, and in 1977 Mengistu Hayla-Maryam took over the country. He established a centralistic-military government and held Marxist-Leninist ideas. In 1991, following a civil war, Eritrea became an independent state.

The world powers’ involvement in the Red Sea region in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century brought about new activity

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³ Part of this migration ended up in Egypt, which will not be discussed in this study.
⁴ For the commercial and strategic importance of Aden in medieval times, see Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade—150 Years in the life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).