

Who were the Yahūd Evlād-ı ‘Arab in Late Ottoman Palestine?

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Context

In June 1914, an unknown scribe compiling a military conscription register listed a group of male Jewish residents of Tiberias under the heading of *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab ta’ifesi*, literally “Jewish sons of the Arabs” or “Jewish children of the Arabs.” The entry was validated with the signet stamp of Yaakov Neḥmad (Ya‘qūb Naḥmād), who identified himself as *muḥtār-i evvel*, the head of a local community bearing the same designation.¹ *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab* as an official community label is both unusual and ambiguous. In administrative Ottoman Turkish, *evlād* often denotes origin, affiliation, or descent rather than strict genealogy. In contrast, “Arab” can refer to Arab ethnicity, Arabic-speaking identity, or “native” as opposed to “foreign,” depending on the context.

From roughly the 8th to the 12th centuries, a large proportion, if not most, of the world’s Jews lived under Islamic rule in Arabic-speaking regions such as Iraq, the Levant, Egypt, North Africa, and al-Andalus, where major Jewish intellectual centers operated predominantly in Arabic. Before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, up to 850,000 Jews lived in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *Arab Jew* has become a controversial term in international debates since the mid-20th century. A hyphenated form, *Arab-Jew*, entered public and scholarly discourse largely through interventions by intellectuals such as Albert Memmi and Ella Shohat,² who used the expression to articulate the hybrid identity of Jews from Arab-majority societies.

Salim Tamari and Menachem Klein discussed this concept in the context of late Ottoman Palestine and showed how certain Jewish communities were socially, linguistically, and culturally embedded within broader Arab environments. This local embeddedness was reflected in everyday language and often contrasted with Jews of other origins, particularly the growing numbers of religious or Zionist immigrants from Europe. They noted two Arabic terms used for this population in the decade before

¹ ISA, Nüfus 362, pp. 21–30 (finalized on 16 Ḥazīrān 1330 [June 29, 1914]).

² Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago: J. P. O’Hara, 1975); Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jews, Palestine and Other Displacements: Selected Writings* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

WWI: *Yahūd awlād ‘Arab* (“Jews of Arab descent”) and *abnā’ al-balad* (“local Jews”).³ Yaron Ayalon mentions a similar term, the Arabized Jews, *musta’ribūn*, in the Ottoman Empire.⁴ They often had strained relations with the Sephardic Jewish community in the Empire, which in Ottoman eyes represented the Jewish community and hence was an officially recognized *millet*. At times, in some cities across the Empire, they cooperated and Arab Jews tended to accept Sephardic dominancy. Most evidence in Ottoman census sources suggests that the government generally avoided such intricacies and instead relied on broad religious labels such as “Jewish,” “Sephardic,” or “Ashkenazi,” in keeping with the logic of *millet*-centered administration and the broader pragmatic rationale of “Ottoman corporatism.”⁵ Nevertheless the appearance of *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab* in the Ottoman census of Tiberias indicates that more nuanced conceptualizations could surface in the interaction between Ottoman officials and local residents. It remains unclear whether the registration of Jewish groups was identical across population registers during the late Ottoman period in Palestine or varied from place to place. Was the label *evlād-ı ‘Arab* an early Ottoman rendering of what was later known as “Arab Jews (Heb. *Yehūdīm ‘Aravīm*)” or “Oriental Jews (*Yehūdīm Mizraḥīm*)” in Israeli society? While these and related questions still await fuller study, this short article offers an initial glimpse into these issues.

The Tiberias Conscription Register

There are hundreds of Ottoman population registers (*Nüfus defterleri*) preserved in the Israel State Archives (ISA) in Jerusalem that are available for online research today.⁶ These registers cover military conscription, *muḥtār* books, marriages, and foreigners,

³ Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 164; Menachem Klein, “Arab Jew in Palestine,” *Israel Studies* 19/3 (2021), pp. 135, 142.

⁴ Yaron Ayalon, *Ottoman Jewry: Leadership, Charity, and Literacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2025).

⁵ Johann Buessow and Astrid Meier, “Ottoman Corporatism, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries: Beyond the State-Society Paradigm in Middle Eastern History,” in Shirin Amir-Moazami et al (eds.), *Ways of Knowing Muslim Cultures and Societies* (Boston: Brill, 2019), pp. 81-110.

⁶ <https://search.archives.gov.il/search/obo717068a73b725>; for more about the Nüfus collection in Jerusalem, see Jonathan Pagis, *Ottoman Population Censuses in Palestine, 1875-1918* (Jerusalem: Israel State Archives, 1997) [in Hebrew].

but most are provisional registers (*müsvedde defterleri*) and basic books (*esās defterleri*) from the 1905 census, the last general Ottoman census in Palestine. *Nüfûs 362* includes information about males of conscription age in the city of Tiberias and its district from 1914, an area in northern Palestine which at the time was part of the Province of Beirut. This book provides data about Muslims, three different Christian denominations, and Jews.

The Jews of Tiberias are listed under two headings: the *Yahūdī Şkenāzī t̃ā’ifesi* (“Ashkenazi Jewish community”) and the exceptionally rare category *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab t̃ā’ifesi* (“Jewish community of Arab descent”) that does not appear in other registers studied to date. By contrast, the Jewish population residing in the Jewish colonies in the subdistrict of Tiberias is simply labelled “Jewish (*Yahūd*)” with no further specification of origin. The designation *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab* may signal an intention to distinguish these Jews from the Ashkenazim of Tiberias and from the Jewish colonists in the region, who were thus implicitly classified as “non-Arab” Jews, regardless of their linguistic abilities or cultural identity.

In total, 300 people are listed as *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab* in the city of Tiberias. Unlike in the Basic Books (*esās defterleri*) of the Ottoman census, birthplaces are not indicated, but the last names suggest that these individuals came from the Maghreb (Abū Ḥaṣīra [Abu-Hatsera], Abū l-Ṭubūl [Abutbul], Shiṭrīt, Dahān, Bīṭōn, and Bīṭān) or from the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire (‘Abādī, Mūṣlī/Mawṣilī, Ūrfalī, al-Najār, and Kurdī) (Figure 1). The unusual organization of the Tiberias census register raises broader questions about how the Ottoman authorities perceived Palestine’s Jewish population (the Yishūv) at the time and how they defined subgroups within it, especially in the 1905 census, but also in other registers.

Transcription / Translation

This is the Translation of the first 10 names labelled *Yahūd Evlād-ı ‘Arab* in *Nüfûs 362* out of 300 names in total in this category (p. 28, the City of Tiberias).

Number	Number of Household members	Name	Year of Birth
1	4	Zakā'i Ben İlyā Kurdī	1271 [1855]
2	18	Ishāḳ Ben Hārūn Mālka	1271
3	36	Şemū'el b. Yehūdā Abū Rabī'a	1271
4	42	Mas'ūd al-Darāwī Abū Ḥaṣīrā	1271
5	43	Ibrāhīm Mizraḥī Ben Mūsa Kurdī	1271
6	53	Dāwūd Abū Skīla b. Ibrāhīm	1271
7	81	Yōḥanān Ben Mā'ir al-Şāliḥ Kurdī	1271
8	93	Beḥōr Ben Ibrāhīm Kurdī	1272 [1856]
9	164	Şemū'el b. Dāwūd Ḥayūn	1272
10	173	Yūsuf b. Ḥayyīm Zinī	1272

Facsimile

ضریب نفوس مکلفین مخصوص شخص رفدی

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نامیسی

ترکیسی

لغنی طبریا یهود اور درمیانہ لغت

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as Jerusalem, Hebron, and Tiberias, three of the four cities considered holy by Jews in Palestine, as well as newer hubs like Haifa and Jaffa, cities with minimal Jewish presence such as Gaza, and the colonies founded after 1882. From the 15th century onward, the Ottoman Empire recognized only a single Jewish *millet*, headed by a Sephardic chief rabbi, as the official representative body for all Jews. In the 19th century, however, the Empire gradually acknowledged new *millets*. Thus, the 1905 Ottoman census in Palestine, along with other late Ottoman registers, often subdivided Jews by geographic origin, language, and culture through labels such as Ashkenazim,⁷ Yemenites,⁸ Maghrebis,⁹ Bukharis,¹⁰ Georgians,¹¹ and Karaites (Figure 2).¹²

Despite their official status as a recognized *millet*, Sephardic Jews are often referred to as being “from the Jewish [*Mūsevī*, ‘Mosaic’] community [*ṭā’ife*]”¹³ rather than specifically designated as Sephardic Jews (“*Mūsevī Sefaradīm*”).¹⁴ In keeping with the corporatist logic of Ottoman administration, the authorities upheld the principle of a single Jewish *millet* (*millet-i Yahūd*) headed by a chief rabbi (*hahambaşı*). In practice, however, faced with the diverse communal and linguistic groups in Palestine, they appear to have granted some of these groups a limited, quasi-corporate status at the local level. It does not appear that there were official directives on ways to designate different groups, so that local clerks had a certain amount of latitude. For example, Nüfūs 39, a basic registration book dealing with the Jewish population of Jerusalem between 1915 and 1917 divides the Jewish population into numerous subgroups including Sephardim, Maghrebis, Georgians, and Bukharis. Other Jerusalem registers from that period are restricted to the Ashkenazi population.¹⁵ In Nüfūs 64, for example, they are interchangeably called “Jewish (‘Mosaic’) [community], Ashkenazi

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ ISA, Nüfūs 74, basic registration, Jews in the District of Jerusalem, 1905-1917.

⁹ ISA, Nüfūs 65/1, Maghrebi Jews in Jerusalem, *muḥtār* book.

¹⁰ ISA, Nüfūs 39, basic registration, Jews in the City of Jerusalem, 1915-1917.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² ISA, Nüfūs 48, provisional book, Sephardim in Jerusalem, 1905-1911.

¹³ ISA, Nüfūs 74.

¹⁴ ISA, Nüfūs 39.

¹⁵ ISA, Nüfūs 58, provisional book, Ashkenazim in Jerusalem, 1905-1911.

[section] (*Müsevî Şkenāz*),” or simply *Şkenāz*.¹⁶ Nüfus 362 discussed above divides Tiberias’ Jewish population into Ashkenazi Jews and *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab*, even though the last names suggest that further subdivisions might have been applicable and that heterogenous groups were involved (for instance Maghrebis).

Even within the same register, some groups are referred to in different ways. The geographic and Ottoman administrative divisions in the region may have led to differences, when relevant teams of officials and scribes did not use the same definitions. For example, Nüfus 48, a provisional book dealing with the Sephardic community in Jerusalem between 1905 and 1911 uses Sephardim (*Sefaradīm*), Jewish Sephardim (*Yahūd Sefaradīm*), Sephardim of the Mosaic faith (*Müsevî Sefaradīm / Sefaradīm Müsevî*), or simply Jews (*Yahūd*). Karaites (*Müsevî Qarā’în, Qarā’în Müsevî*) are also designated separately in this register. More than one official may have conducted the survey for this specific register. All relied heavily on the *muhtārs* and other local informants, which would account for the different terms. Alternatively, the same official may have used alternative terms, suggesting that the terms themselves were open to interpretation, thus reflecting the fluidity and liminality in their everyday usage.

Many Jews in the colonies founded after 1882 retained their previous nationalities until WWI, when Entente nationals were expelled. Some gradually accepted Ottoman citizenship, while others who had migrated within the Empire or already lived in Ottoman Palestine were Ottoman subjects. In most registers, however, they are simply listed as *Yahūd* or *Müsevî*.¹⁷

¹⁶ ISA, Nüfus 64, basic register, Jewish community of Jerusalem, 1905-1917.

¹⁷ Nüfus 379, Foreign Book, the city of Haifa and its district, 1901-1917; Nüfus 391, Basic Register, the district of Haifa, 1911-1916.

Transcription/ Translation

Six Examples of Variations in *Nüfus* Designations

	Document	<i>Nüfus</i> Number	Page	City and Neighborhood	House Number	Name	Occupation	Father's Name
1	Basic Register (<i>esās defterlerī</i>)	39	7	Ḳudūs [Jerusalem], Wād <i>maḥallesi</i> [neighborhood of al-Wad]	21	Maryam		‘Aṭiyya
2	Basic Register	39	9	Jerusalem, Wād <i>maḥallesi</i>	1	Mā’īr Menāshrūf	<i>ḥaḥām</i> (rabbi)	Mūsā
3	Basic Register	39	9	Jerusalem, Wād <i>maḥallesi</i>	3	Iṣḥāḳ al- Yafūlā		Dāwūd
4	Basic Register	39	79	Jerusalem, Yahūdīya <i>maḥallesi</i> [Yahūdīya neighborhood]	3	Rufā’īl		Iṣḥāḳ Şāydōf
5	Basic Register	48	65	Jerusalem, Ḳarā’īn [Karaite Neighborhood]	304/5	Yāfit al- Ḳarā	<i>şinā’atı yokdur,</i> <i>Arabça</i> <i>söyler</i> (no occupation, speaks Arabic)	Mūsā Lēvī al-Ḳarā, <i>müteveffā</i> (died)
6	Basic Register	8	69	Jerusalem, Waqf	224/3	Iṣḥāḳ Lēvī	<i>şinā’atı yokdur,</i> <i>Arabça</i> <i>söyler,</i> <i>İbranice okur</i> <i>yazar</i> (no occupation, speaks Arabic, reads and writes Hebrew)	Sa’īd Ḥasan Yamanī <i>müteveffā</i> (died)

Continued

	Mother's Name	Religion	Date of Birth	Place of Birth	Height	Eye Color	Skin Color	Prominent Marks	Married and whether to One Wife
1	Sibōra	Müsevī Maghribī	1250	Tūnus (Tunis)					<i>Zevcesi yokdur</i> (single)
2	Sāra	Müsevī Sefaradīm	1259	Rūsya (Russia)	Tall (<i>uzun</i>)	Hazel (<i>ela</i>)	Darkish (<i>buğday</i>)	Healthy (<i>tām</i>)	<i>yokdur</i> (single)
3	Ḥana	Müsevī Korjī (Gorji)	1258	Rūsya	Average (<i>orta</i>)	Hazel	Darkish	Healthy	<i>zevcesi vardır</i> (married)
4	Lina	Müsevī Buḥārālī	1280	Bukhārā	Average	Hazel	Darkish		Married
5	Hāna al-Ḳarā	Müsevī Ḳarā'īn	1264	Ḳırım (Crimea)	Average	Hazel	Darkish	Has an eye problem (<i>gözleri ma'lûldur</i>)	Married
6	Maryam <i>müteveffıyye</i> (died)		1281	Yemen	Average	Hazel	Dark (<i>esmer</i>)		Married

Continued

	Corrected Date of Registration
1	27 Mayıs 1331 [June 9, 1915]
2	26 Mayıs 1331 [June 8, 1915]
3	24 Mayıs 1331 [June 6, 1915]
4	24 Mayıs 1331 [June 6, 1915]
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Conclusion

Ottoman census records from Palestine reveal that the idea of an “Arab Jewish community” was acknowledged and recorded by Ottoman census officials. The designation *Yahūd evlād-ı ‘Arab ṭā’ifesī* challenges the assumption that categories such as “Arab Jew” were purely retrospective constructs, by showing that local Jewish communities as well as Ottoman officials recognized communal distinctions. It stands out as an unusual assertion of a shared “Arab” identity among Maghrebi, Syrian, Iraqi, and Anatolian Jews. As the signet ring bearing the community’s name indicates, “Jews of Arab descent” was not merely an ad hoc administrative label: Jewish leaders in Tiberias themselves endorsed it to signal common origins and, perhaps, belonging within the Arabic-speaking milieu, in which social belonging, linguistic identity, and imperial classification converged in unusual ways. It suggests that debates over Arab-Jewish identity have deeper historical roots than previously recognized. Complementary sources are needed to illuminate the dynamics behind this administrative act.

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Nüfus 65/1, Maghrebi Jews in Jerusalem, *muḥtār* book, 1904

Nüfus 74, basic registration, Jews in the District of Jerusalem, 1905-1917

Nüfus 362, males of conscription age in the city of Tiberias and its district from 1914

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