

The Jewish Community of Djerba, Tunisia and the event of La Ghriba

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INTRODUCTION

The island of Djerba, off the southeastern coast of Tunisia, is a religiously unique environment, as it is one of few places in the Arab world where Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexist in peace. This community has been distinct and important for over a millennium due to its deep history and location in an ever-changing environment. Tracing its history back to 586 BC, it is the oldest existing Jewish community in Africa. Having faced hatred and persecution in the past, many Jews around the world feel that growing anti-Semitic sentiments are simply another challenge facing their communities which have survived such hatred in the past. However, with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, some Jewish communities have experienced great decreases in population, and many no longer exist due to mass emigration. This loss of Jewish communities worldwide brings up questions about those that still exist and the futures they have, if any at all. The Jewish community on the island of Djerba, the oldest on the African continent, faces unique challenges and questions in addition to the issues shared by other Jewish diaspora populations around the world.

For hundreds of years, Djerba has housed the only Jewish community which also, in some cases, identifies as Arab. In recent years the island has experienced several acts of aggression against its historic Jewish community, most notably a bombing in 2002 directly outside of the El Ghriba synagogue, the oldest and most revered synagogue in Africa and the site of an internationally important annual pilgrimage during the Jewish holiday of Lag ba'Omer. This paper will investigate the decrease of the Jewish population on Djerba over the past half

century, after their historically peaceful coexistence on the island for centuries, in particular examining the level of participation in the Lag ba'Omer pilgrimage.

Because of Tunisia's cultural and geographic relevance in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East, the specific religious history of Tunisia is constantly changing and can only be found in this particular place. Jews on Djerba can trace their history back to their ancestors' flight from persecution after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC, making it the oldest Jewish community in Africa.¹ Unfortunately, anti-Semitism in Tunisia, and the surrounding Arab world, began and has grown since the creation of the state of Israel, an event that marks the beginning of the Jewish emigration from Tunisia. As a result, the Tunisian Jewish community has decreased by 98.5% (from 110 000 to 1700) in the last half century.²

Despite the mass emigration of Jews from Tunisia, the Jewish community on Djerba remains one of the most important in Africa, because of its long history and relatively large population. Djerba is the destination of an annual pilgrimage during the Jewish holiday of Lag ba'Omer (May 25-26 of 2016). The Jewish community on Djerba has been historically separated into two quarters, the Hara Kebira ("big quarter") and the Hara Saghira ("small quarter").³ In the Hara Saghira sits the El Ghriba synagogue, one of several on the island and the oldest on the African continent, where it is believed the first African Jewish community began.⁴ The vast history of Jewry on the island makes it an extremely important place of worship for Jews in the area. This unique history differentiates the Jewish community on the island from others in North

¹ "Virtual Jewish World: Djerba, Tunisia". *JewishVirtualLibrary.org*. Web. 17 Feb. 2015.

² "European Jewish Congress: Uniting European Jewry". *EuroJewishCongress.org*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

³ "Virtual Jewish World: Djerba, Tunisia".

⁴ "PHOTO ESSAY: Ancient Jewish Community Endures on Tunisian Isle". *TimesOfIsrael.com*. 26 Nov. 2015. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.timesofisrael.com/photo-essay-ancient-jewish-community-endures-on-tunisian-isle/>>

Africa. The Jewish community on Djerba is also unique in that it is the only one to consider itself, in some cases, Arab.⁵ By contrast, the extended Jewish community throughout the country of Tunisia tends to place a far greater importance on their history in a Mediterranean context rather than an Arab one. The community on Djerba is a very specific and individual, even in the context of such a small country.

While this individuality allows for a beautiful and unique culture of which many Tunisians are very proud, it also makes the community a target. In 2002, the El Ghriba synagogue was the victim of a bombing that left 21 people, mostly European tourists, dead.⁶ Al-Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the attack, declared that “a young man could not see his brothers in Palestine butchered and murdered... [while] he saw Jews cavorting in Djerba”.⁷ Therefore, despite the Jews' identity on Djerba as Arab as well as Jewish, they were still targeted as ‘other’, even ‘guilty’ in the face of the Arab struggle in Palestine. One of the most severe results of the bombing is the effect it has had on the annual pilgrimage to the El Ghriba synagogue. In 2001, before the bombing, the number of pilgrims who partook in the journey to Djerba reached its peak at 10 000 people.⁸ By 2010, the year before the Tunisian revolution, the number had dwindled to 4 000 people; however, by 2013 the number reached an all new low of less than 2 000 people.⁹

⁵ Tessler, Mark A., and Linda L. Hawkins. “The Political Culture of Jews in Tunisia and Morocco”. pg. 366 *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11.1 (1980): 59–86. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.

⁶ “Deadly Attack Keeps World on Alert”. *TheGuardian.com*. 4 Sept. 2002. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
<<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/04/september11.usa>>

⁷ “Al-Qaeda Claims Tunisia Attack”. *News.BBC.co.uk*. 23 June 2002. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2061071.stm>

⁸ “Tunisian Synagogue Struggles to Bounce Back”. *AlJazeera.com*. 3 May 2014. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/05/tunisian-synagogue-struggles-bounce-back-201451112722667317.html>>

⁹ Ibid.

Tunisia has experienced a great number of events that have damaged the Tunisian Jewish population. The largest group of Jews in Tunisia still resides on Djerba (about 1,000), but this is a massive decrease from the number that used to live on the island, a great loss for such an important and historic place in Jewish history – not only in Tunisia but the dwindling African Jewish population as a whole. Many believe that the only solution for the Jewish minority communities in the Arab World is to move to Israel, their homeland, where they face less persecution than in their surrounding Muslim majority communities. While a fair amount of research has been done on the population on Djerba, it tends to be in the greater scheme of Jews as a religious minority; there has yet to be an in-depth study of the direct effect of the Arab Spring on the Djerbian Jewish community and its plan for recovery or, possibly, complete relocation to Israel.

CONTEXT

As the oldest existing Jewish community in Africa, significant research has been conducted on the community and its position of historic relevance. However, there has been relatively little research on the community since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and even less since the Tunisian revolution in 2011. The majority of research done on Djerba is hired for publicity's sake and consists of news articles of a few hundred words each. Several dozen journalists and news reporters show up for La Ghriba every year, coming from Tunisia, Israel, France, and America. Mark Tessler and Michael Laskier are two of the most notable researchers of Jewish communities in the Arab world and both focused on Djerba at some point. However,

both conducted their research during the 1980s and 1990s, leaving decades of Djerbian history largely unrecorded during a time when the community changed greatly.

The studies conducted in the 1960s and '70s are useful to provide a contrast of the situation today with that of several decades ago, and to follow the changes in the communities. In their study, The Political Culture of Jews in Tunisia and Morocco, Mark Tessler and Linda Hawkins provide an in depth analysis of the Jewish communities in the 1970s with a focus on the comparison of the communities in Tunis and on Djerba, as well as their Muslim counterparts in the same areas. Tessler and Hawkins discovered that the Jews on Djerba were far less receptive to the intrusion of American, European, and Israeli Jewish organizations for financial aid or help for emigration. In his book, North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century, Mark Laskier discovered that after the 1956 revolution the Jews of Djerba had far less desire to emigrate than those in other parts of Tunisia. This discovery is still seen today in the steadfast mentality on Djerba that, being such an old and historic community, there should be no reason to want to leave their home. The mass emigration in the 1980s shows that fear in the Jewish community on Djerba grew to a point that many felt it necessary to leave; however, the Jews have since felt comfortable enough to remain in their current communities with no plans to leave.

EMIGRATION FROM DJERBA

The event to which each interviewee pointed that, they claimed, marked the largest emigration from Djerba, were the attacks of 1985. In that year Israel, claiming retaliation for the murder of three Israeli civilians, carried out their longest airstrike in a Hamam Shatt, a suburb

just outside of Tunis.¹⁰ Their target was the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters. The attack resulted in the deaths of 36 people, according to official reports, with over 60 wounded. While Israel claimed that the attack was not against Tunisia but rather just the PLO itself, the Tunisian government called on the U.N. Security Council to denounce the attack.¹¹ A week later, on October 8, 1985, a Tunisian police officer opened fire in a synagogue on Djerba, killing five people.¹² The attack, while not widely reported, had a profound effect on the Jews on Djerba, causing them to believe that their community was no longer safe on the island and that they had reason to fear for their lives. Even without the attack, Memoun claims, the majority of Djerbian Jews would have emigrated because of the great tension developing between Israelis and the rest of the Arab world at the time. These attacks blurred the lines between Israelis and Jews. Most of the Jews on Djerba began to feel unsafe and so emigrated, largely to Israel, to live among other Jews. According to Mr. Ghribi, only about 400 Jews remained on Djerba after the 1980s. Since then, however, the population has seen a resurgence almost completely because of the large families most of those who remained have. Most families in the Jewish communities on Djerba have around seven children, creating a very young population. Thanks to the quick regrowth of the community, the Djerbian Jewish population is now at around 1,000 people.

A more recent attack occurred on April 11, 2002, just weeks before the La Ghriba event was to take place. A bus was driven next door to the synagogue and exploded, killing 20 people, including the driver, and wounding over 30.¹³ Those killed were largely German and French

¹⁰ http://articles.latimes.com/1985-10-02/news/mn-16021_1_israeli-warplanes

¹¹ http://articles.latimes.com/1985-10-02/news/mn-16021_1_israeli-warplanes

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/13/world/tunisian-synagogue-blast-called-accident.html>

¹³ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/05/09/israeli-government-issues-severe-warning-against-djerba-pilgrimage/>

tourists in the synagogue. This attack caused the Israeli government to issue a warning for the country of Tunisia, encouraging its citizens to avoid travel to the country and not to participate in La Ghriba. The attack, later claimed by Al Qaeda, marks the beginning of the large decrease in Israeli participation. In 2011, after the Tunisian revolution, the event was canceled due to concern about lack of proper security. During this time, many anti-Jewish acts brought fear of further violence.¹⁴ The Tunisian government, after the revolution, also banned the entrance of Israelis to the country because of their lack of diplomatic ties with the State of Israel.¹⁵ However, in 2014 the government decided to allow Israeli citizens entrance into the country.¹⁶ Despite the allowance of Israeli citizens, the La Ghriba event has still experienced a great decrease in the number of participants since 2011, a fact mentioned by almost all participants this year.

METHODOLOGIES

To explore these changes in the community and their causes, I conducted one-on-one formal interviews with several participants in La Ghriba, most with relatively important roles in the event, and informal interviews with participants during the event. The formal interviews led to a more complete view of the large changes in the event since the 1950s and their commonly perceived causes. The informal interviews were conducted to understand more fully the daily lives of the Jews on Djerba and their desires either to stay or leave the island. The informal interviews were conducted in the synagogue and the building facing it, in which the majority of the celebrations were being held. I also participated fully in the event, in order to get to know the

¹⁴ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/05/26/jews-pilgrimage-festival-lag-b-omer/84969278/>

¹⁵

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2016/05/25/Jews-celebrate-Tunisia-s-Lag-BaOmer-Jewish-festival-.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/05/16/annual-jewish-pilgrimage-to-historic-ghriba-synagogue-begins-in-djerba/>

many aspects of the celebration and their importance to the various participants. In the weeks following the event, I remained on Djerba to collect the data from the formal interviews and develop more of a sense of the daily life in the communities outside of La Ghriba.

The formal interviews I conducted began with participants reading through a standard questionnaire I had written and given them, though interviewees could respond in any of a variety of ways to most of the questions. My intention was to keep my questions fairly open-ended. The questionnaire also gave interviewees the opportunity to decide whether or not to participate at all, and informed them they could skip any question that made them uncomfortable. Twice I was meant to have an interview with Djerbians who, after hearing some of the questions, decided not to partake in the interview. Finding willing participants proved more difficult than I first expected, due to the conservative nature of the Jewish communities on Djerba. No women consented to interviews and most men were very skeptical. For this reason, of the four formal interviews referenced in this study, only one still lives on the island. Another challenge was the ability to converse with the participants. Tunisia is a francophone country, but the first language is Arabic, and the vast majority of Djerbians speak only Arabic. While I conducted a few interviews with the help of a translator, there was a great amount that was lost in translation and worded in a way that did not answer the questions being asked.

LA GHRIBA 2016

La Ghriba¹⁷ this year was a lively event that brought in participants from around the world, mainly the descendants of Djerbian Jews who had emigrated to France and Israel. The

¹⁷ Though commonly referred to as a pilgrimage, the participants at La Ghriba had varying conceptions of the nature of the event, many opposing the perception of it as a pilgrimage, so from here on out the event will be referred to simply as “La Ghriba”

largest foreign participation came from France, a clear distinction from before the Tunisian revolution in 2011, when La Ghriba brought in hundreds of Israelis, most returning to the homeland of their Djerbian ancestors. However, a rise of anti-Semitism in the Arab world has made the Israelis worry for their safety in Arab countries. This year in particular, Israel issued a “severe travel warning for Tunisia [as] terrorist elements ... continue to operate in Tunisia and commit attacks.”¹⁸ Since the revolution the number of Israelis at La Ghriba barely reaches more than a few hundred. When asked about the participation in the event this year, the native Djerbians expressed deep sadness at the falling numbers. While “the number of pilgrims reached 10,000 in 2000,” the number dropped to 4,000 in 2010 and the optimistic numbers for the 2016 participation were 2,000 people, though most expressed doubt at the number.¹⁹ The vast majority of the Tunisian population which has emigrated since the 1950s is now in France, explaining the large French presence at La Ghriba.

The Tunisian government is careful with the publicity of the event every year, as La Ghriba is so public and renowned. Tunisia’s office of tourism uses the event to encourage tourism and uses the opportunity to show Tunisia’s acceptance of diverse outside visitors and the high level of security it provides to ensure their safety. With relations so tense between Muslims and Jews across the Arab world, Tunisia sets itself apart by providing overwhelming amounts of security to protect and reassure the Jews on Djerba and those from around the world who come to participate. At every intersection across the island, large military vehicles sit with an average of 5 – 7 military personnel ready to check the papers of anyone passing. Dozens of plainclothes police lurk in public spaces outside the synagogue, as well as the Hara Kebira and Hara Saghira,

¹⁸ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/05/09/israeli-government-issues-severe-warning-against-djerba-pilgrimage/>

¹⁹ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/05/30/a-carnival-of-coexistence-tunisia/>

the main Jewish communities on the island. During the year, even other times than during La Ghriba, military presence is strong outside the Jewish areas on the island. Tunisia, a country that depends so greatly on the tourism industry for their economy, has been in distress since the recent attacks in the city of Sousse, the main tourist hub of the country, and at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis. Both attacks were clearly targeted to harm tourists, which stoked fears that the Jewish community could become a target of extremists.²⁰

Despite security concerns, spirits were high during the event this year. While many expressed sadness at the small participation relative to earlier years, the Jews of Djerba made sure to take the opportunity to celebrate their community. Under the sweltering sun, reaching over 100°F, and dressed in their finest clothes, Djerbian Jews socialized well into the night, many continuing the festivities at the hotel hosting the majority of the visitors into the early hours of the morning. These celebrations were quite intense, with people beginning to drink around noon and eating, smoking, and talking in large groups around the synagogue and in the adjoining building. Once the sky got dark, around 9 p.m., most of the reporters and outsiders had left and the men began singing. This was a very loud and lively event with men singing songs that have been sung on the island for generations, in Arabic and Hebrew. Much of the music was specific to Djerba and could be found almost nowhere else, except the small communities of Djerbian expats in France and Israel.

The celebrations began Wednesday, May 25, with a few hundred people gathering to take in the beauty of the oldest synagogue in Africa (though much of the current building only dates back to the 1800s). Eggs were for sale in an area of the synagogue, on which people wrote the

²⁰ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/05/26/jews-pilgrimage-festival-lag-b-omer/84969278/>

names of loved ones, or themselves, and wrote wishes for happiness, good health, fertility, and other good wishes. Once completed, the eggs were placed in a hot chamber in the back of the synagogue. After a period of about 15 – 20 minutes, the eggs were collected and, now cooked from the heat of the cave, eaten to solidify the wishes. Along with the eating of the eggs, there are many foods served at La Ghriba that are only found in Tunisian Jewish communities, all being made and sold in small areas around the buildings. Many of the foods that would be typically unique to the Jewish communities in Tunisia are also popular amongst Muslims on Djerba, as a result of their shared history. Food and drink are a very important component of Jewish celebrations, and La Ghriba is no exception. Two examples are *boukha*, a Tunisian liquor served in small glasses and passed around after prayers, particularly on Shabbat, and *brik*, a deep fried pastry typically filled with tuna and potatoes, a historically Jewish food that is now enjoyed by Tunisians everywhere.

The synagogue itself sits on one side of a small cobbled street, and on the other, the old residence of Jewish students with a large gathering space in a courtyard in the middle. Though no longer in use, the building with the gathering space is opened once yearly for La Ghriba and the space is filled with benches from which spectators can watch the flower bouquet auctions (with prices reaching 700€) and listen to live traditional Maghrebi music. The musicians brought in to perform for the celebrations were mostly Muslim Tunisians, although the singer was a well-known Tunisian Jew, of whom many in the crowd were very proud. The music was mostly Tunisian but included many Egyptian songs as well. The music by these professionals was quite different from the music sung by the Jews themselves at night; the former was typically popular music, and the latter traditional Djerbian music. The celebrations continued as the reporters

began to depart at night, leaving mostly Djerbian Jews to sing and eat in the same way, they say, that they have for generations.

The media presence at La Ghriba was overwhelming, to the point that many times there were more reporters than participants in the synagogue. La Ghriba is such a well-known event, in both the Jewish and Tunisian communities. The celebration also provides the Tunisian government a chance to demonstrate the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Jews in the country, in stark contrast with many other Arab countries. Most reporters also brought photographers and recorders, creating small swarms drifting around the synagogue from interview to interview. While many active participants welcomed their presence, giving interviews and having their photos taken, there were many who were clearly not at ease. A few men and women standing at the door and walking around in the synagogue were adamant about the women covering their hair and men wearing the *kippah*, the typical Jewish head covering for men, according to the orthodox orientation of the community on Djerba.

Another outside presence at the event was the large participation by Muslims from around Tunisia. Walking through the main gathering area of the synagogue were groups of women, some veiled in the Muslim fashion, taking photos, eating food, and enjoying conversation with their Jewish counterparts at La Ghriba. Several Tunisian political figures, all Muslim, also showed up to express their respect and friendship to the Jewish community. The Tunisian Minister of Tourism, Salma Rekik, opened the event and, later, Mohsen Marzouk, leader of En-Nahdha, one of Tunisia's main opposition parties, appeared unannounced and made

several remarks about the state of Jewish-Muslim relations in Tunisia and the strength the country derives from the different cultures.²¹

PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES²²

Marc Ghribi

Marc Ghribi is currently the rabbi at the only active synagogue at La Goulette, once the largest Jewish community in Tunis. Every Saturday morning Ghribi and about a dozen more practicing men gather along with their sons to celebrate Shabbat in the synagogue at La Goulette. Sometimes the wives and daughters of participants join them, but women do not participate in Orthodox Jewish services and so sit in a separate section to talk with the other women and observe while the men worship. Ghribi is the father of 10 children, the eldest of whom is 18, all currently living in La Goulette. Ghribi grew up on Djerba with three brothers and three sisters. He has one brother and one sister who now live in Israel, one brother and two sisters still on Djerba, and one sister in Tunis. Ghribi attended the Torah and Hinuch school on Djerba, the school offered by the Jewish community on Djerba that teaches Jewish studies and Hebrew. He also attended the public primary school on Djerba along with the larger Muslim community on Djerba. However, once he reached the sixth grade, the age at which he would pass on to *collège*, middle school, Ghribi was unable to continue. The test required to pass the final year of primary school fell on a Saturday, and, being a practicing Orthodox Jew, Ghribi was unable to work on Shabbat and therefore unable to participate in an exam. He repeated his final year of primary school, only to fall into the same situation the next year. After the second year of being unable to

²¹ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/05/30/a-carnival-of-coexistence-tunisia/>

²² For the purpose of privacy, all participants have been given pseudonyms

take the exam, Ghribi decided to drop out of Tunisian public school completely and attend solely the schools offered by the Jewish community on Djerba. Once finished with his own studies on Djerba, he began teaching Hebrew in the school he had once attended. When Ghribi was 32 the Jewish school in Lafayette (once one of the largest Jewish communities in Tunis) asked him to come to Tunis to teach Hebrew in their school. In 2002, Ghribi moved to Tunis with his wife and has taught at this school since. While he likes living in Tunis, he finds his life as a Jew different in Tunis than on Djerba. The Jews in Tunis, he claims, have a completely different mentality and dynamics from those on Djerba. The community on Djerba identifies as Orthodox and is very young. After the attack of 1985, Ghribi describes a decrease in the community to around 400 people. Today they are around 1,000, not because of a return of previous inhabitants, but because the young people who enjoy living on Djerba have stayed and, as is usual in the Jewish community on Djerba, had lots of children. This is why he says that the community on Djerba will continue to live on and prosper, as opposed to the older community in Tunis. The young people are happy and comfortable in their lives. "Airplanes exist, airports exist, if we wanted to leave, we have that choice. But no, we are good here."

Aviv Hadad

Aviv Hadad is currently the rabbi of the Grand Synagogue of Lafayette, a neighborhood in central Tunis. Hadad is Tunisian, born and raised in Medenine, a city in the south of Tunisia, close to Djerba. In 1972 he and his family moved to Tunis when the majority of the Jewish community in his town left. This departure followed the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, a period which most Jews perceive as the start of a clear rise of hatred towards Israel and, consequently,

Jews. Most of those from Medenine moved to Djerba, including most of Hadad's extended family, but Hadad and his immediate family chose to move to Lafayette. Raised in the south of Tunisia, where French is far less prevalent, Hadad spoke Tunisian Arabic at home and in school and so considers Arabic his first language.²³ Hadad has more reason than most to fear the persecution felt by Jewish communities around the world, more reason for which he might want to leave Tunisia. In the attack of 1985, Hadad's sister was shot and killed. In January 2015, one of Hadad's sons was one of five people killed in a terrorist attack in a kosher supermarket in Paris. The supermarket siege and murders occurred only a week after the deadly attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical newspaper. The supermarket attack was a clear show of the rise of anti-Semitism in France since 2014. While these losses would be expected to evoke anger and fear, Hadad shows no such negativity; instead he continues to pronounce his love for Tunisia and express confusion at the Jews who have emigrated from the country in the last half century.²⁴ Hadad now has eight children, six of whom still live in Tunisia. The other two are currently finishing their studies in France with plans to return to Tunisia after. Hadad has worked in the Jewish school in Lafayette since 1960 and became its director 16 years ago. Hadad and Ghribi work together in this school, which accepts only Jewish students and has 32 students currently enrolled. Students start in primary school and can continue until they reach *terminale* (final year of high school). In his description of the relationship between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Lafayette (Tunis), Hadad refers to his school where "about 80% of the teachers are Muslim,"²⁵ showing the acceptance the communities have for each other. The large number

²³ Hadad, Aviv. Interview with author. May 3, 2016, 7:30 (Author's translation, all following quotes from this interview are translations)

²⁴ Ibid, 10:45

²⁵ Ibid, 25:05

of Muslim teachers in the school reflects a lack of enough qualified Jews available to work in the school.

Jean Mahmoud

Jean Mahmoud grew up on Djerba as one of 13 children. He was raised in the Hara Kebira and attended school in the Torah and Hinuch of David Kedoshim School on Djerba. At home, he and his family spoke Arabic and he learned Hebrew in school, so he considers both Arabic and Hebrew his first languages. He has family on Djerba and in Israel, the majority of his brothers live in Israel. Mahmoud is very concerned with the economic situation on Djerba and the economic necessities of those who live there. Most of the inhabitants on Djerba have little money and depend greatly on the tourism industry. He explains that, in his opinion, the relationship between Muslims and Jews on Djerba is completely dependent on economics, that if Jews and Muslims feel economically stable, the relationship can be wonderful. However, he describes times of difficulty during which the Jewish community feels economically vulnerable, when the relationship becomes tense and uncomfortable. Today, with the difficulties Tunisia feels from the lack of tourism after the recent terrorist attacks, the economic situation on Djerba has become more difficult. The economy on Djerba is almost completely dependent on tourism, and the majority of the male Jews working as shopkeepers in Homad Souk, selling jewelry. However, like many Tunisians he believes the situation will soon improve when the air settles around the country. Mahmoud also mentioned the poor educational system that the Jews have on Djerba, “there is no academic future on Djerba.”²⁶ The fact that neither he, nor his siblings, nor his fellow Jews were able to continue state sanctioned education past primary school severely

²⁶ Mahmoud interview

limits their ability to leave the island and have a job other than the few typically held by Djerbian Jews. While he grew up on Djerba and considers Djerba his home, Mahmoud is currently saving his money to make *Aliyah*²⁷ to Israel, where he hopes to rejoin his siblings and live for the foreseeable future.

Samuel Memoun

Samuel Memoun currently lives in Paris along with his brothers, while his parents and sisters live on Djerba, where he grew up. Memoun studied in the state-run middle school as well as the Hebrew school in Hara Saghira. In contrast to the other participants, who grew up in the Hara Kebira, Memoun grew up in the Hara Saghira. The Hara Saghira is significantly smaller and is where La Ghriba synagogue is located. Memoun emphasized that, although he and his brothers live in Paris, the family prefers Djerba. He and his brothers are all prominent members of the committee that organizes La Ghriba each year. He believes the community at Djerba is happier now than they were even 20 years ago, that the Jews still on Djerba do not want to leave, unlike those who have left over the past several decades. Much of this positivity is due to the good relationship between the Jews and Muslims at the moment, in his opinion. Things were not so good, he describes, when he was 18 and decided to leave Tunisia to move to France. In the 1980s a discomfort between Arabs and Jews had arisen on Djerba following clashes between the Israelis and Palestinians. Because of this tension Memoun experienced discrimination and bullying from his Muslim peers at school. Memoun believes these events mark the beginning of the true emigration of Jews from Djerba. 1967, he claims, was the year the Djerbians began to feel really scared, with the third Arab-Israeli War, but many on Djerba wanted to stay despite the

²⁷ Immigration of Jews to Israel

encroaching fear. Most fled after the attack of 1985, an event which provoked fear amongst the Jews on Djerba that more violent discrimination would come in retaliation for Israel's attacks in Palestine and Tunisia. However (and he is very insistent on this point) La Ghriba will continue to exist and take place each year until the day the last Djerbian Jew dies. The festival, he claims, reinforces the strength of the Jewish community on Djerba, and everyone who has grown up with this event, though they may have left Djerba, will continue to fight for its continuation and survival.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The interviews, both formal and informal, provided great insight into the mentalities of Djerbians and their perceptions of the future of their community. Through interviews, the contrast becomes clearer between the main-stream media and the thoughts of those who live on and come from Djerba. While many news outlets point to the 2002 attack and 2011 revolution as the causes of the decrease in Jewish population on Djerba, most interviewees responded to the contrary. "The attack in 2002 was against the tourists, not against us," Ghribi claims, saying that this attack is similar to the more recent attacks in Sousse and the Bardo Museum, both clearly directed towards tourists. However, these two events were both very influential on the decrease in participation in the La Ghriba event, participants agreed. They claim that, though the recent attacks did not scare the Tunisian Jews, foreigners who once made up the vast majority of La Ghriba participants have become afraid and stayed away. Even the Tunisian immigrants to France and Israel who are from Tunis are unlikely to return for La Ghriba, while those from Djerba are far more likely to return.

The Djerbian mentality has always been distinct from that of Tunis, the other large Jewish community in Tunisia. This difference is very clear today, in the very makeup of the communities. The community in Tunis is very old and very French, with most of the young Jews from Tunis moving to France to study in high school or university. The Jewish community in Tunis is also largely non-practicing, many moving to Muslim majority neighborhoods, going to Tunisian public schools, and not attending synagogue on Shabbat. This is in stark contrast to Djerba, where nearly all Jews reside in the two *haras*. They practice Orthodox Judaism and so do not work on Shabbat (between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday) which separates them further from their Muslim neighbors in ways the more liberal communities in Tunis do not experience. The Jewish children on Djerba are easily singled out in school because most leave class before the end of the school day on Friday, causing them to feel more comfortable in the schools for Jewish children.

Most Jewish children on Djerba attend both the public and Torah primary schools, but later leave the public school to continue on solely in Torah school. This was the choice of the majority of the study participants, so the effects are visible in their lives and testimonies. This lack of higher education gives the Jews an education that is almost completely religious with a fairly weak base in subjects taught in the state-sanctioned schools.²⁸ This track means a higher education is impossible for the Jews on Djerba, giving them relatively few career options after school. Along with a lack of formal education, most families on Djerba are financially unstable so most children begin working around the age of 12 or 13. This homogeneity in education and career leads to a population that is very similar with relatively little individuality.

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Most Jewish men who still live on Djerba (all of whom refused to participate in a formal interview) work in jewelry shops in the same small area of Homad Souk,²⁹ the largest town on Djerba. They sell silver and gold in adjoining stalls, each receiving only a few potential customers a day. There is no feeling of competition in the area, even though there are so few clients. Almost no Muslims work in this area of the *souk* and almost all of the Jewish salesmen live in the Hara Kebira. While most of the Jewish men described their lives in a positive way, saying they are happy to be part of such a tight-knit community, the limitations of educational and career opportunities for Jews here makes alternative paths extremely difficult. For those who leave the island, get a different education, or pursue a different career path, they are seen as “outside” or “other” from the community in which they grew up. Many Djerbians mentioned those who leave in negative tones, pointing to a great tension between those who remain and those who move away.

The women face an even greater challenge in separating themselves from their communities. There are even fewer educational opportunities for girls than that of the men. Women are expected to live at home until marry and then to take care of the home and children. The conservative environment on Djerba makes it difficult for women to leave the house, so most women would not make the choice to leave Djerba unless their male relatives make that decision first. Very recently a school run by women has opened in the Jewish community to teach basic skills that are lacking in the Jewish middle and upper schools. However, most teachers in this school have completed only a year or two of high school themselves. While this school has given a new sense of independence to some Jewish women on Djerba, most disclose

²⁹ *souk* can also mean an area of shops in Arabic

they still would not consider leaving the island without the approval of their families, besides to study or visit family abroad. Another difficult

ly for women is the cultural norm of having children, which prevents most women on Djerba from holding jobs.

In the Djerba Jewish community today, though few have a truly viable option to leave, most claim and seem to be very happy in their lives on the island. While most of the participants in the formal interviews live outside the island, they all describe their families who remain on Djerba to be as happy and living peacefully alongside their Muslim counterparts. Mahmoud disagrees, however, claiming that the economic situation on the island has led to a tension between the two communities that has led to his desire to emigrate from Djerba. However, he concedes that in the everyday life Muslims and Jews on Djerba are more peaceful side-by-side than one would expect anywhere else.³⁰ Because they attend the same schools in their early childhood and speak the same language and eat the same foods, the Muslims and Jews have an exceptionally good relationship on Djerba, Ghribi claims. This shared sense of culture leads to a peace between the Jews and Muslims that Jews elsewhere in Tunisia did not feel during the periods of emigration. “As long as we identify with and get along with the other communities on the island, why should we want to leave?” Hadad asks.

CONCLUSION

The responses from the interview participants, comments from La Ghriba participants, and my experience in La Ghriba itself provided insights into the current state of the Jewish

³⁰ Mahmoud Interview

community on Djerba and the changes it has experienced since the last thorough research was conducted in the area. The community on Djerba stands out for its historical importance in North Africa and its continued existence into the 21st century, as the vast majority of Jewish communities in the Arab world have dispersed since the creation of the State of Israel. Having been collected through personal accounts and testimonies, the data reflects the direct feelings and beliefs of many Djerbian Jews. While the answers to most simple questions tend to be fairly similar across all participants, the more complex questions had vastly varying answers from the interviewees. The most widely shared and more emphasized sentiment expressed by the participants in both formal and informal interviews was the happiness of the current community and lack of desire to leave. Even those who have left said that their reasoning was not for lack of wanting to live on Djerba but instead for need of opportunities that are not available on the island.

Many participants were expressive about the needs the island has, despite their comfort with their lifestyle there; for example, they need a better education system via which residents could get jobs outside of the jewelry industry. The homogeneity of the current population leads to an environment in which many feel closed in. Many recognize this issue and believe that by creating new opportunities, such as the opening of the school for girls a few years ago, they can achieve a more open community. Though there may be a population who want to leave but cannot, the vast majority I interviewed appeared quite proud of their Djerbian roots and firm in their desire to stay to carry on their traditions, such as La Ghriba.

With the recent rise in violence around the world, many pointed out that it is becoming much more difficult to live without fear, especially as a minority in a community that has experienced such violence in the past. However, many of those who live on Djerba are adamant about the open rapport between Jews and Muslims on the island currently and have faith that the positive relationship will continue. This, they claim, means that they have no reason to want to leave their home, the place where they have so much history.

La Ghriba is also a source of pride for any Jew from Djerba, many returning to visit the synagogue and take part in the celebrations. Some return for the entire month in order to help out with the event as much as possible. “As long as there are Jews who come from Djerba, La Ghriba will continue to exist and thrive,” Memoun states. This response is one of the most common explanations as to why there is, and always will be, a Jewish community on Djerba. While there may be difficulties for the Jewish communities on Djerba, the population size continues to trend upwards. The tenacity of this community in the face of recent adversity leads me to believe the future prospects for the community and La Ghriba are strong.