

**MASTER EXHIBIT SERIES**

**SYRIA**

**PERSECUTION OF SYRIAN JEWS**

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## DOCUMENTATION PACKET ON SYRIA:

### PERSECUTION OF SYRIAN JEWS

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##### ITEM CITATION/DESCRIPTION

- 1** Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Comments on Documentation Packet, November 1992.

The following Master Exhibit of articles and reports is in chronological order to demonstrate the vagaries of repression against the Jewish community in Syria. Since 1948, Syria, having officially declared itself at war with the State of Israel, has used its Jewish population as pawns in its own geopolitical conflicts as well as on behalf of the interests of the broader Middle Eastern world. Jews have virtually been held hostage by an authoritarian Syrian regime and, have been denied basic human rights such as freedom of travel for years. Under the guise of a "state of emergency," Syria justifies its violations against the Jewish community as a means of protecting its sovereign interests. The Master Exhibit concludes with the most recent use of the Jewish community by the Syrian Government.
- 2** "Jewish Citizens in Syria Freed From Restrictions," New York Times, 4 May 1949.

Restrictions on travelling freely, operating businesses and transferring properties that were imposed in 1948 on the Syrian Jewish Community were lifted, according to a high Government official (of Premier Husni Zayim). All citizens regardless of creed were to be of "complete equality in rights and liabilities."
- 3** John L. Hess, "Three Arab Lands Said to Oppress Jews," New York Times, 26 January 1970.

At a conference with delegates from 26 countries the situation of Jews in Syria, Iraq and the United Arab Republic was discussed. Cablegrams appealing for the right of emigration of Jews were addressed to these countries and to the United Nations Secretary General Thant. The Syrian Jewish Community is forbidden to emigrate and their liberties are severely curbed. They cannot leave their cities, are subjected to frequent curfews, are barred from employment in government enterprises and some professions, denied bank credit or the collection of debts. Troops were ordered not to trade with Jewish merchants.
- 4** Statement of Committee of Concern on Jews in Syria, 28 October 1971, Congressional Record.

Appeal to Congress to act against the persecution of the Jewish minority as a result of reported harassments and cruelties inflicted upon Syrian Jews.
- 5** "Young Jewish Escapee Charges Syria with Terror," New York Times, 19 November 1971

A report by a 17 year old Jew who escaped from Syria. He reports that Jews live under constant terror, and that every night at 9 P.M. each Jewish household must report the absence of any person to the authorities. In the event of a missing person, the families are subjected to questioning as possible accomplices.

- 6 "Jews Still in Syria Aren't Persecuted, President Asserts," New York Times, 8 December 1971.  
President Assad asserts that the claims of his regime persecuting the Jewish Community are "Zionist propaganda." He claims that the Arab right was with Israel and "not with the Jews as people, a religious sect or race." He rebutted the recent allegations of maltreatment of Syrian Jews.
- 7 "The Plight of Jews in Syria," Hon. John Buchanan, 11 December 1971, Congressional Record.  
Appeal to Congress to act against the persecution of the Jewish minority in Syria.
- 8 Henry Giniger, "Group Says Syria Persecutes Jews," New York Times, 2 January 1972.  
The American Jewish Committee says Syria is the only Middle East country still persecuting and harassing its Jewish minority and forbidding its emigration. Eleven Jewish men are in prison after their relatives' attempts to flee the country. Women are also in prison for attempting to leave. Those arrested for attempting to leave are subjected to torture and get four to six year prison terms. The police have cracked down on those whose relatives have succeeded in fleeing. Syria is one of three countries with the harshest policies toward their Jewish nationals. The other two, Egypt and Iraq, have since greatly reduced the pressure on their Jewish communities. The Committee accused Syria of "conscious policy measures" against Jews.
- 9 Marvin Howe, "Leader of Damascus Jews Hopeful, Says Plight is Exaggerated," New York Times, 4 February 1972.  
The head of the Syrian Jewish Community, Selim Totah, said while in the presence of officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Information, that there is much exaggeration in the press reports of the Syrian Jewish situation. The regime has been accused by United States, French and Israeli press of persecuting Jews.  
  
The Jewish community urged the President to grant clemency to the dozen Jews arrested recently for having tried to leave without passports. The community has no contact with the prisoners. Jews must obtain travel permits to move from one district to another, the reason given to protect the Jews "from a deeply anti-Zionist population." There is a ban on travel abroad and one Jew said that they are like hostages. The Deputy Foreign Minister Abdallah Khani said "Syria is at war with Israel. We cannot let our citizens go to swell the ranks of the Israeli Army."
- 10 "On the Persecution By Syria and Iraq of its Jewish Minorities," Hon. Edward I Koch, 14 June 1973, Congressional Record In the House of Representatives  
Appeal to Congress to act against the injustice towards Jews by the Nazi-like tactics of the Syrian police.
- 11 Kathleen Teltsch, "U.N. Gets Appeal for Syrian Jews," The New York Times, 31 March 1974.  
Secretary General Waldheim has been asked to intercede on behalf of the Syrian Jews to persuade the Government to ease the ban on emigration and to condemn

the slaying of four Jewish women and two Jewish men.

- 12** Henry Kamm, "Syrian Jews Suffering Under Harsh Curbs," The New York Times, 14 April 1974.  
1,000 Jews from Damascus demonstrated outside the Jewish Quarter against the slaying of 4 Jewish women as well as for the right to emigrate. The demonstration was the second of its kind as Jews are confined by the government to the Jewish Quarter. It was also reported that during the Yom Kippur war in October 1973, the Jews did not leave their homes for fear of harsh reprisals. The Jews of Damascus were being blamed for the deaths of the Palestinians and Syrians during the war.
- 13** Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Plans to Give Syria \$25-million," The New York Times, 1 February 1975.  
The State Department informed Congress that it intends to grant \$25 million to Syria. The aid would be cancelled if both houses of Congress voted against it in the 30-day layover period due to concern for the fate of the Syrian Jews. State Department officials have been urging Congress not to raise the issue of Syrian Jews for fear that it might worsen their condition. They stress that more could be done for the Jews by "quiet diplomacy".
- 14** "Syria is Reported to End Restrictions on Jews," The New York Times, 29 December 1976.  
In a move to coordinate the Syrian-Egyptian peace offensive for a settlement with Israel, the Syrian Government has announced a lift on travel, employment, property and other restrictions for the Jewish community.
- 15** Bernard Gwertzman, "Syria Said to Promise it Will Ease Restrictions on Jewish Community," New York Times, 6 January 1977.  
Syrian authorities promised a significant relaxation of discriminatory restrictions against their Jewish community. Stephen Solarz, whose district contains almost all of the Syrian Jews in the United States and is an authority on Syrian Jews, had been told by officials in Damascus that some of the more onerous anti-Jewish measures would be lifted. These internal restrictions include carrying special identity papers, limitations on travel within the country, limitation of disposing of proceeds of sales of personal property. Solarz said that there is no change in the adamant refusal to allow Jews to emigrate to the United States or Israel. Those who go abroad for tourist visits or for health reasons must post a \$6,000 bond and leave behind relatives to insure their return.
- 16** "'Proxy' Syrian Brides Meet Their Grooms in New York," The New York Times, 12 August 1977.  
President Assad insisted that in order for the Syrian single Jewish women to be permitted to emigrate, they must first find husbands in the United States. Therefore these women were married in proxy ceremonies and meet their American Syrian Jewish husbands for the first time in New York. In Syria, the single Jewish men have either fled or will not marry because they want to be able to leave on short notice, unencumbered by a family. The women were brought to the States as a result of Washington's diplomacy and efforts of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

- 17 George E. Gruen, "A Foreign Affairs Background Memorandum," 22 January 1979.  
Reports on increase in violence and brutal treatment by the Muhabarat (secret police) against the Jews trying to flee Syria. Restrictions on internal travel and transfer of property which were previously lifted have been reimposed.
- 18 Judith Cummings, "Repression of Jews in Syria is Charged," The New York Times, 3 February 1979.  
A Jew who recently escaped from Syria stated that a new wave of repression had been imposed on the Jewish community, signaling a retreat from human rights gains of the last two years (1977-8). The man wore a black mask in order to protect his relatives still in Damascus. He said the Jewish community was subjected to harassment, detention, and torture since several successful escapes by Jews to Israel. Members of his family were jailed and brutally beaten after the escape of two of his brothers. Syrian Jews have restrictions on internal travel and transfer of property. The word Musawi (follower of Moses) is stamped in bright ink on the identity card.
- 19 World News Briefs, "Israeli Reports New Curbs Imposed by Syria on Jews," The New York Times, 2 March 1979.  
Syria has reportedly imposed new restrictions on its Jewish community, depriving them of freedom of movement. Syrian Jews can no longer travel abroad for any reason, and their travel within the country is limited. There are very few Jews in the Universities, and no Jews employed by the Government or the banks. The Jewish schools are staffed with Moslems.
- 20 George E. Green, "Jews in Moslem Lands, Living a Precarious Existence," The American Jewish Committee-Institute of Human Relations, Nov-Dec 1988.  
The Jews in Syria are constantly under the watchful eye of the Muhabarat. They are banned from government and bank jobs, are restricted from the sale or inheritance of property, and cannot emigrate. Those who do leave must first pay a monetary deposit and have a family member remain in Syria as a guarantor. Those caught or suspected of planning to travel illegally are held in prison by the Muhabarat. In 1987, nine Jewish men were arrested and imprisoned and subjected to torture, denied legal counsel and visiting privileges. These are methods used to deter other Jews from trying to leave Syria. The Jewish community has lived as hostages in a police state. However, they fear even more the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood waiting to overthrow Assad.
- 21 Saul S. Friedman, Without Future: The Plight of Syrian Jewry (Praeger Publishing, 1989), pp. 51-58, 81-85.  
Accounts of individual arrests, torture, imprisonment, and denial of basic human rights; myth of religious tolerance, by the Syrian government; use of Jews as bargaining chips against Israel; general fear by the Syrian Government that every Jew is a spy for Israel.
- 22 Stephen J. Solarz (D-NY), et al, Washington, D.C., to The Honorable George Bush, Washington, D.C., 23 January 1990.  
A Congressional sign-on letter urging President Bush to persuade the Syrian Government to accord human rights to the Jewish Community in Syria. A

reference was made to the attention paid to the Syrian Jewish Community by the two previous Administrations.

- 23** Middle East Watch, Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 50, 57, 89-92, 95-103.  
The relationship between the Muhabarat and the Jewish Community with attention to bribery and corruption, informants and surveillance, travel restrictions, intimidation and warnings, torture, and manipulation between the minorities; history of Jewish persecution in Syria through 1990.
- 24** Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Reports," The Nation, 20 January 1992, pp. 42.  
Hafez al Assad was reelected president of Syria for a fourth time, and many Jews in Syria support him because he protects them from Islamic fundamentalists. Jews will not actively voice their political dissent, however, because Syria's secret police, the Muhabarat, will imprison them or find a way to silence them.
- 25** United States Department of State, Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1991, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1992), pp. 1604, 1608-1610.  
General human rights in Syria; freedom to worship; other activities related to religion are tightly controlled under the Government; Restriction of Jewish emigration.
- 26** Richard Cohen, "The Politics of Hatred: Syria Revives the Blood Libel," The New Leader, 11-25 March 1992, pp. 5-6.  
Syria has renewed the notion that Jews killed Christ and used the blood for matzoh. The Syrian Defense Minister, Major General Mustafa Tlass, has written a preface to the book "The Matzoh of Zion" and asserts that the blood libel is true. In the past, this "blood libel" has proven to be fatal for Jews in Syria.
- 27** Thomas L. Friedman, "Syria Giving Jews Freedom to Leave," New York Times, 28 April 1992.  
Syria informed the U.S. that it was lifting a travel ban and restrictions on sale of property on its (4,500) Jewish citizens. This move appears to be President Assad's effort to make Syria more acceptable to the U.S. now that he lost his longtime Soviet patron. Syrian Jews are presumably free to travel for business or pleasure except to go to Israel. Syrian Jews suffer everything from arbitrary arrests and discrimination to limits on what jobs and businesses they can enter. Assad had previously said that if he lets Jews travel freely and emigrate they would all go to Israel. The demise of the Soviet Union has changed all that. Assad is reaching out to the West now. There are no plans by the State Department to take Syria off the list of countries supporting terrorism.
- 28** Jay Bushinsky, "An Isolated Community in the News," Jerusalem Post, 1 May 1992.  
Description of Jewish life in Syria and the notion that although from the outside life seems normal, it is in fact constantly surrounded by fear and intimidation.
- 29** George E. Gruen, "Syria, Syrian Jews, and the Peace Process," The American Jewish Committee-Institute of Human Relations, June 1992.  
Alleged lifting of travel restrictions against Jews remains to be seen as similar proposals have been made in the past and were unfulfilled; A review of the

unpredictability of Syrian policy; A Discussion about the "lesser evil" in Assad with the greater danger of the Fundamentalists waiting to assume power; lifting the ban on selling property is yet to be seen; The landslide electoral victory by Assad occurred through intimidation-he would not tolerate dissent; Fear of Muhabarat is greater than the promises made by Assad; Instruction for Modern Hebrew is strictly forbidden.

- 30** Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, "Syrian Jewry Fact Sheet," 1 July 1991. Profile, restrictions, and emigration of Syrian Jews.
- 31** Batsheva Tsur, "Some Families Forced to Split When Leaving Syria," Jerusalem Post International Edition, 15 August 1992.  
Despite the announcement by President Assad, some Jewish families are not permitted to leave as family units, reverting back to the original campaign of keeping Jewish family members hostage while others travel abroad.
- 32** Associated Press, "Syria Said to Halt Jews' Emigration," The New York Times, 15 December 1992.  
In the last eight weeks, Syria has refused to issue exit permits to Jews wishing to leave the country. A United States official said that President Hafez al-Assad appears to be holding back the visas so he will have leverage against the Clinton Administration. The primary issue is that Syria is on the State Department's list of countries supporting terrorism. If Syria were to be removed from that list, they would be granted Most-Favored-Nation trading status.