Moroccan Jewish Emigration to Latin America:  
The State of Research and New Directions*  
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These days, only a few thousand Jewish inhabitants remain in Morocco, which had been the largest center of Jewish life in the Arab World in 1948 when it was home to more than a quarter-million Jews. This historical transition took shape within the context of the departure of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries during the latter half of the twentieth century.1 While most Moroccan Jews relocated to Israel at the time, other Moroccan Jews chose different destinations in Europe and the Americas.2 In Latin America, a preferred immigration destination among Moroccan Jews already in the nineteenth century, they would become a prominent political and cultural element within the local Jewish societies, mostly in Venezuela, northern Brazil and Argentina.3

The scholarship encompassing these Moroccan migrations to Latin America focuses largely on the early developments—in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century—and they may be divided into two main categories: a) Studies that highlight the push factors generated in Morocco prior to emigration. These were conducted by and large by historians specializing in the history of the Spanish-dominated zone in northern Morocco,

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the wellspring of these particular Jewish emigrations. b) Studies focusing on the absorption of Moroccan Jews in Latin American countries. The latter came about mostly in light of growing scholarly and local-popular interest in the singular identity of Judeo-Moroccan émigrés in Latin America and the history of their resettlement in that region, mostly in their communities in Argentina, northern Brazil, Venezuela and Peru.

The emergence of the first group of studies may be explained against the backdrop of an evolving scholarly concern regarding the historical links between Spain and North Africa, already from the late nineteenth century but more apparently throughout the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco (1912-1956). This interest encompassed a curiosity about the Spanish-speaking Jewish communities in that region and their relationship with the Hispanic world. However, a stronger basis for the formation of both types of studies

4. A prime example of the emergence of this group includes the several works by Juan Bautista Vilar Ramírez and Sara Leibovici. See e.g.: Juan Bautista Vilar, “Jewish Moroccan Immigration to Latin America,” The Alliance Review 25 (45) (1973): 3-22; Sarah Leibovici, “La emigración a América de los sefardíes de Marruecos,” in Diáspora Sefardi, ed. Maria Antonia Bel Bravo (Madrid: Mapfre, 1992), 241-249.


9. See e.g.: Rodolfo Gil Bemuneya, Marruecos andaluza (Madrid: Ediciones de la Vicesecretaría de Educación Popular, 1942).

10. The aforementioned studies by Juan Bautista Vilar are only a segment of his wider scholarship encompassing these links. His outstanding early-career works include: Emigración española en Argelia (1830-1900). Colonización hispánica de la Argelia francesa, published in 1975; and his book Tetuan: en el Resurgimiento Judío Contemporáneo (1850-1870) from 1985, which included chapters on the emigration of Jews from Tetuan to Latin America. Another article that focused on emigration within a broader discussion about the history of Jews in this region is: Juan Bautista Vilar, “Evolución de la Población Israelita en Marruecos Español (1940-1955),” Estudios Sefardíes 1 (1978): 117-119. Earlier=
cameabout against the backdrop of the late stages of the mass emigration of Jews from Arab-Muslim lands, with the birth and renewal of communal infrastructures in their destination countries. Some of these infrastructures were world organizations including, primarily: the American Sephardi Federation, established in 1973, and the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC), founded in 1975. In Latin America, this transition was symbolically marked by the founding, in 1973, of La Federación Sefaradí Latino americana (FeSeLa).

These shifts began to set the base, beginning in the early 1980s, for the establishment of a few local research centers and designated journals. Most prominently, in the specific Judeo-Moroccan context is El Centro de Estudios Sefaradies de Caracas (CESC; The Center for Sephardic Studies in Caracas) founded in 1982, primarily by Jews from Tangier and the ex-Spanish Protectorate in Morocco. Since its establishment, the CESC has issued the Revista Maguén-Escudo (the Maguén-Escudo Review) in association with the Asociación Israelita de Venezuela (AIV; The Israelite Association of Venezuela), the principal association of Sephardic communities in Venezuela, also dominated by local Moroccan Jews. The AIV and CESC became a major source of publications about emigration and assimilation, mostly via Maguén-Escudo that had already started publishing in 1970. A less abundant source was the Centro de Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura Sefardi in

11. Within WOJAC, the population of Jews from Morocco was represented by Shaul Ben-Simhon, a deputy of the Association of Moroccan Immigrant. See: Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, Between Baghdad and Ramat-Gan: Iraqi Jews in Israel (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Publishers, 2009) [Hebrew], 355.


Buenos Aires that issued Revista Sefardica. In Brazil, given the lack of a well-built communal infrastructure that was dominated by Moroccans at the time, the first comprehensive works on this topic saw the light mostly with the initiative of pro-active Moroccan descendants.

The tendency to explore this emigration as part of “communal revitalization” projects persisted through the late twentieth century and up to today. For instance, Jacobo I. Garzón, the president of the Jewish community of Madrid (from 2001 to 2008), a Moroccan immigrant himself, dedicated part of his recent book Los Judíos Hispano-Marroquíes (1492-1973), issued in 2008, to the group’s emigration to Latin America. Maguén-Escudo and Sefardica also dealt with this topic not long ago. The topic also triggered the curiosity of students, descendants of Moroccan immigrants to Latin America, who would investigate historical cases related to this migration in their doctoral research.

Finally, the attention to the resettlement of Moroccan Jews in Latin America should not be seen as the exclusive asset of Moroccan communities. Editors of several academic Journals, mostly for Latin American studies, and of a few books about Sephardic Jewish history, allocated some space for studies concerning the emigration of Moroccan-Jews to Latin America; they were probably seen by them as an “appealing” anecdote within their series or journal that focus on Latin American histories or about Sephardic Jews.

In the 1970s, in light of the 1971 local “Black Panthers” ethnic protest, the scholarly focus on the Jewish populations from Arab lands, and mostly on their

16. See e.g. studies mentioned in footnote 6.
resettlement in Israel, witnessed a major change in Israel’s academic arena. The “Moroccans,” as Jewish immigrants from Morocco were commonly referred to, evoked much interest among local scholars and intellectuals, due to their view as a symbol of the erupting ethnic clashes between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. However, the extensive focus among scholarly work on this local conflict, as well as on its roots within the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, seems to have led to the neglect of some earlier and parallel developments outside of Israel: among Moroccan, as well as among other Sephardic populations in Latin America. Thus far, Margalit Bejarano is one of the only Israeli scholars, whose research encompasses a relatively large focus on Moroccan Jews in the Americas. Her extensive scholarship on Sephardic Jews in Latin America and the Caribbean included several studies in Spanish and English; however, she made only a few references to the Moroccan Jewries in that region in her Hebrew publications. Prominent scholars who dealt with the broader North African Jewish migration have neglected this topic altogether.

Not only studies in the Hebrew Language are conspicuously lacking but also writing on the topic in Arabic. A unique example is ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Shahbar’s book Dirāsāt Ḥawla Yahūd Titāwīn (Studies regarding the Jews of Tetuan), in which he dedicated a section to emigration of the Jews from Tetuan from the nineteenth century until 1948.

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23. For instance, Pe’amim, a quarterly journal in the Hebrew language published by the Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East. It dealt extensively with North African Jewries; however its references to Moroccan communities in Latin America are still conspicuously lacking.
27. ‘Abdal-‘Azīz Shahbar, Dirāsāt Ḥawla Yahūd Titāwīn (Titāwīn: Jam’iyat Titāwīn Asmīr, 2000), 48-91.
Most scholars, who focus on the emigration of Moroccan Jews to Latin America are not affiliated with the “hardcore” of MENA studies; they are by large Luso-Hispanophones, specializing in Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula, who study their relations with North Africa and the Islamic World.  

MENA and Islamic studies institutions that allocated space for studies on the emigration of Jews to Latin America were and still are, by and large, Hispanic-oriented and their publications appear in Spanish. This specific scholarship is well anchored in the aforementioned broader interest in Hispano-Arab relations. Some attempts to include this Moroccan migration within wide-ranging studies on Middle Eastern migrations were undertaken recently in two books edited by Raanan Rein, but again within the scope of Latin American studies.

On the one hand, the vast field of research into contemporary Moroccan migrations tended to neglect this historical odyssey, which may in fact be observed as the preliminary, nineteenth century, base of these contemporary migrations. On the other hand, perhaps in adherence to the disciplinary borders of Latin American studies, references to emigration against the backdrop of Israeli and Moroccan statehood in the mid-twentieth century are conspicuously lacking. Only very recently have we seen a budding

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interest in comparative studies of the post-1948 emigration of Moroccan Jews to Latin America and their parallel emigration to the more dominant diasporas, mainly to Israel. This work includes a dissertation by the author of the present essay, research that began in 2009 and was concluded in 2014; and a dissertation still in progress by Angy Cohen.33 These two projects have yielded a forthcoming jointly-authored article and others that are still being written.34

The current scholarship on the topic depicts a rather monolithic, ethnic-oriented story of emigration. A general idea deduced from the existing literature about the modern settlement of Jews from Morocco in Latin America is that their Judeo-Spanish background was an innate stimulus of their departure to that specific destination; that their choice was based on an exclusive primordial cultural link with the Hispanic world. For instance, the Brazilian scholar Samuel Benchimol recounted the emigration of Jewish-Moroccan laborers to Brazil during the nineteenth century, starting with their collective ancestry in the Iberian Peninsula as early as the fifteenth century.35 This approach led to the undermining of other push factors within the broader context of global change in migratory trends. It included the unprecedented emigration from MENA countries to Latin America, in which Muslims, Druze, Christians, as well as various groups of Jews participated; in other words, many groups other than Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews.36

Even by simply re-analyzing some available historical information previously used by the aforementioned scholars, Jewish emigration to Latin America may be put into a more globally-minded context that would go beyond the common disciplinary boundaries and the politically-oriented view of Jewish migration and of the MENA region. Notably, as pointed out by Vilar, until 1912, Moroccan Jews traveling overseas did not, in fact, declare their Moroccan Jewish origins.37 Individuals from northern Morocco entered Brazil throughout the nineteenth century on European passports, principally

33. See footnote 19.
This historiographical approach is also marked by the sub-title of his book’s second edition in Hebrew: “The Journey of the Jews from Spain and Portugal to Morocco and to the Brazilian Amazon.”
Spanish, English or French. Moreover, it must be pointed out that these transatlantic journeys of Jews came against the backdrop of a budding migration trends among Moroccan Muslims.

In their destination lands, while being scattered throughout the interior, many of the pioneer Jewish immigrants found the maintenance of practices, such as endogamy, eating kosher food, or observing the Sabbath laws, nearly unmanageable. In fact, only by the end of the nineteenth century were Jewish immigrants from Morocco numerous and powerful enough to organize their own communal institutions in the Argentinean capital. Similar developments took shape in Venezuela. In Brazil, “church-like” Moroccan synagogues were built as early as the 1820s, but only in 1889, after ratification of the new Constitution of the First Republic of Brazil that legalized the practice of non-Catholic rites, Moroccan immigrants could establish a steady community.

Besides the focus on their unique Sephardic ethnic background as a motive for emigration, scholars highlighted the persecution of Jewish minorities in Morocco in an attempt to explain the prominence of Moroccan Jews in this departure. Victor A. Mirelman wrote:

The local Jews [in northern Morocco], who had suffered from pillage and massacres at the hand of their Muslim neighbors on the eve of the Spanish conquest, welcomed the Spaniards as saviors…With their [Spaniards’] departure on May 2, 1862, the Moroccan reaction led many of the city’s [Tetuan] Jews to emigrate.

Within this context, some pointed at the atmosphere of ethnic segregation, embodied by the daily lives of Jews within the *mellah*, the Moroccan Jewish quarter that was perceived by these scholars, and others, as a local *ghetto*,

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41. On November 5, 1891, La Sociedad Israelita según Ritual Sefardita, the Israelite Society by Sephardic Rite, was founded. See, Mirelman, “Sephardic immigration” 17-19.
designed to force the isolation of Jews. European intervention was therefore presented as an “emancipator,” providing relief through emigration for an oppressed Jewish minority. The Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), a Franco-Jewish schooling system, that established schools in northern Morocco in the mid-nineteenth century, was a major stimulus of emigration.

The notion that the mellah was a spatial manifestation of a “pariah” condition of Jews in Morocco of the nineteenth century has been a subject for scholarly debate (a debate that exceeds the scope of this short essay). However, a thought-provoking fact is that in one of the most significant points of departure from Morocco to Latin America, the city of Tangier, a mellah was never officially established. Jews could and, indeed many of them did, dwell and own property throughout this city. This reality lies in contrast to the conventional idea that the isolation of Jews within the mellah became a major trigger of their emigration as a persecuted ethnic minority.

Moreover, as opposed to the general pro-colonial view about the nature of “European influence” in most studies, it would seem that contacts with European immigrants in fact generated new perceptions that increased poverty in the country of origin. For instance, AIU graduates often rejected their fathers’ crafts—shoemaking or tailoring, for example—because they were associated with the lower classes. Most of these AIU graduates sought clerical posts in Tangier’s commercial houses, but as such posts were few due to waves of European labor immigration into Morocco, Jews with European education and languages came up against a glass ceiling. Even those willing to ply a craft met with obstacles in the context of local European-led modernization.

Finally, towards the statehoods of Israel and Morocco in the mid-twentieth century, new waves of emigration of Moroccan Jews to Latin America evolved. According to Juan Bautista Vilar, in 1946 Argentina became the most popular destination among Moroccan Jews, but in 1950, Venezuela became more popular. Jews from Morocco also immigrated to Brazil at the time in search for better economic opportunities. As in the past, this post-1945 popular migration movement from northern Morocco to Latin America was fed by interpersonal and communal networks.

49. For instance, the 1890s building boom that grew out of rapid urbanization, generated positions that were monopolized by Spanish workers. See, Miller, “Kippur on the Amazon,” 193-194.
51. Israel Garzón, Los judíos de Tétuán, 221.
The daily periodicals España and El Día, commonly consumed by the Spanish-speaking Jews and non-Jews in northern Morocco during the mid-twentieth century, mentioned political and cultural developments in Latin America, bringing them to their readers’ awareness.\(^5\) They also advertised travel information from northern Morocco to Latin America.\(^4\)

![Advertisement](image)

“Fly to Venezuela,” an Advertisement  
*Source: España, October 24 (1950): 5*

Obviously, at the time, Jews in Morocco would generally experience international migration, mostly to Latin America, differently than most of their Muslim neighbors who had not established communities in that region. The “century-old” connections to family members and communal infrastructures in Latin America and beyond fostered ethnic migration infrastructure among Jews. It also created a sense of a shared historic migration saga, coupled with feelings of belonging to a transnational ethnic community. This came at a time when other migration options to Israel, France, Canada and other modern destination appeared. It also came at the crossroad of global change that fostered the beginning of mass emigration waves among Muslims from Morocco.

Despite a large number of significant studies on the emigration of Jews from MENA countries, including Morocco, the common mind-set

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dominating this broad field of study seems to provide a rather restrictive frame of analysis. This frame confines itself to analyzing the influence of geo-political developments on the emigration of Jews, against the backdrop of Israeli statehood in 1948 and the evolving Arab-Israeli conflict. The events often encompass perceived cultural and political alienation among Jews from the surrounding Muslim societies, in the context of local nationalism.  

The case of Jewish emigration from Morocco to Latin America, beginning in the early nineteenth century is one of several cases of Jewish emigration from Arab-Muslim countries whose exploration may contribute to our disaggregation from monolithic narratives, and lead to the construction of new views regarding the motivations for mass emigration of Jews from Morocco and beyond. The case may entail the analysis of this exodus, mostly to the State of Israel, within a longer-term, geographically broader context of global migrations among Moroccan Jews, as well as non-Jews. Through this lens we may even “de-politicize” to some extent the commonly-held view on Jewish-Muslim relations in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

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Moroccan Jewish Emigration to Latin America: The State of Research and New Directions

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Résumé: L’émigration juive marocaine vers l’Amérique latine: état de la recherche et nouvelles orientations

Près d’un siècle avant l’émigration de masse des Juifs du Maroc au milieu du XXème siècle, vers Israël et des destinations en Occident, les Juifs marocains s’étaient engagés dans des émigrations de longue durée, typiquement de la partie septentrionale occupée par les Espagnols en direction de l’Amérique latine. Ces émigrations ont eu une influence durable sur la culture juive marocaine et ont persisté jusqu’à nos jours. Cette recherche examine l’état actuel de la recherche sur cette question et explore de nouvelles orientations.

ملخص: الهجرة اليهودية المغربية إلى أمريكا اللاتينية: أوضاع البحوث والاتجاهات الجديدة

قراءة قرن قبل "الهجرة الجماعية" للمجتمع اليهودي المغربي خلال منتصف القرن العشرين إلى إسرائيل ووجهات أخرى في الغرب، انخرط المجتمعي في الهجرة لمجالات طويلة، ومعظمهم من الجزء الشمالي من البلاد الذي كان يهيمن عليه الإسبان إلى أمريكا اللاتينية. وترك هؤلاء الرواد الأوائل بصمات على الثقافات اليهودية المغربية الدائمة في هذا المحتوى، حتى في الأيام الحالية. وتفحص هذه المقالة وضع البحوث المتعلقة بهذه الهجرة طويلة الأمد. وهنا أود الإشارة إلى الاهتمام الكبير بين الباحثين الناطقين بالإسبانية والبرتغالية من حقول الدراسات الأمريكية والإيبيرية اللاتينية، من جهة؛ وإلى غياب واضح لهذه الدراسات في العالم العربي وإسرائيل من جهة أخرى، وهذا فضلا عن الباحثين الذين يركزون على الهجرة الغربية المعاصرة. كما أن تاريخ الهجرة المحلي لديه إسهامات محتملة في مجالات الاهتمام المذكورة أعلاه، وأنه يمكن أن يتعمل على تفكيك الروايات الشائعة عن رحلات اليهود الموجه سياسيا من الأراضي المسلمة العربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستوغرافية، الهجرة، اليهود، أمريكا اللاتينية، البرازيل، الأرجنتين، فنزويلا، المغرب، طنجة، تطوان، إسرائيل.
de l’Amérique latine. Cet article examine l’état des recherches relatives à cet épisode migratoire de longue durée. Je souligne le manque d’intérêt manifeste des spécialistes des études au MENA et Israël pour le sujet et conclut en suggérant que cet épisode migratoire peut contribuer au développement des études susmentionnés.

Mots clés: Historiographie, Migration, Juifs, Amérique latine, Brésil, Argentine, Venezuela, Maroc, Tanger, Tétouan, Israël.

Abstract: Moroccan Jewish Emigration to Latin America: Research State and New Directions

Almost a century before the “mass emigration” of Jews from Morocco during the mid-twentieth century, to Israel and to destinations in the West, Moroccan Jews had been engaging in long-distance emigrations, typically from the Spanish-dominated northern part of that country to Latin America. This article surveys the state of research pertaining to this long-lasting migratory episode. I point at the conspicuous lack of interest among MENA-and Israel-Studies scholars in the topic, and conclude by suggesting that this migration episode has potential contribution to the aforementioned areas of study.

Key words: Historiography, Migration, Jews, Latin America, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Morocco, Tangier, Tetouan, Israel.

Resumen: Emigración judía marroquí a América Latina: Estado de investigación y nuevas direcciones

Casi un siglo antes de la “emigración masiva” de judíos de Marruecos a mediados del siglo XX, hacia Israel y hacia destinos en Occidente, los judíos marroquíes habían participado en emigraciones de larga distancia, típicamente de la parte norte de España dominada por los españoles País a América Latina. Este artículo examina el estado de la investigación relacionada con este episodio migratorio de larga duración. Señalo la evidente falta de interés entre los estudiosos de los estudios MENA e Israel en el tema y concluyo sugiriendo que este episodio de migración tiene una contribución potencial a las áreas de estudio antes mencionadas.

Palabras clave: Historiografía, migración, Judíos, América Latina, Brasil, Argentina, Venezuela, Marruecos, Tánger, Tetuán, Israel.