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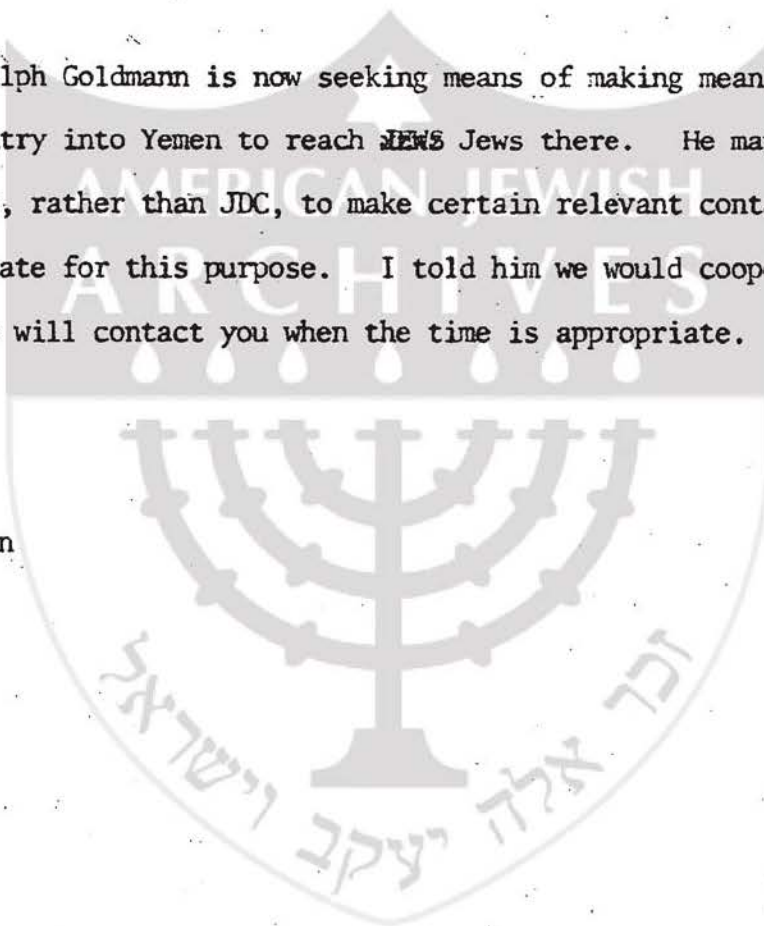
G. Truen

A. Karlikow

Jews of Yemen

Ralph Goldmann is now seeking means of making meaningful entry into Yemen to reach ~~Jews~~ Jews there. He may make us, rather than JDC, to make certain relevant contacts with State for this purpose. I told him we would cooperate. He will contact you when the time is appropriate.

cc: D. Feldstein



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date April 29, 1983

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

to FAD File

from George Gruen

subject Status of Yemeni Jews

Mr. R. Bruce Ehrman of the Office of Arabian Peninsula Affairs in the State Department called me this morning to share the contents of a telegram he had received from the Embassy in Sanaa in response to the list of alleged "restrictions on Jews," contained in a January 1983 confidential report, which I had left with him during my meeting on April 14, 1983. (See my memo of April 19, 1983 for details.)

Mr. Ehrman urged that we keep the source of this information strictly confidential and in no way publicly identify the U. S. Embassy or the State Department.

The following is the essence of the U. S. Embassy's comments on the alleged restrictions, in the order they are presented in the January 1983 report:

1. Religious services are freely exercised in places where the Jewish community resides. A foreign Jewish visitor said he had attended a Jewish wedding, and Americans working in the country had also attended.

2. Many synagogues were destroyed in the 17th and 18th centuries and those that remained may have in fact been taken over after the Jews left. The Jews who remain today mainly conduct their services in private homes. In 1931 there were still 39 synagogues in Sanaa, but even most of these were small one-room affairs. The Embassy assumes that since the remaining Jewish population is scattered in small groups in small towns and villages, it would be financially difficult for them to maintain a large synagogue.

3. It is probably true that Hebrew inscriptions have been effaced. Other symbols, such as the Jewish star are still plainly visible. (I pointed out, and he agreed, that historically the six-pointed star was not particularly a Jewish symbol and the 8th century Grand Mosque in Damascus has a whole wall decorated with such stars.)

4. The charge that Jews are not allowed to own land is false. Jews have for centuries been allowed to own land and an officer of the U. S. Embassy in fact met a Jewish landowner in 1981. To the best of the Embassy's knowledge, there has been no recent restriction on Jewish landownership.

MEMORANDUM

5. With regard to the charge that "Jews are not allowed to study for a profession," the Embassy confirms that Jews are handicapped in the field of education. That is because each secondary and university student must pass a course in Islamic study. Mr. Ehrnman added that Islam is the official religion. The Jews have traditionally had their own schools with their own curricula oriented to their orthodox Jewish needs. (I interjected that since the community is now too scattered and small to maintain synagogue edifices, it certainly would not have the means to run its own school system without the help of outside Jewish organizations. I further added that this made it necessary both to allow teachers as well as study materials to be sent to Yemen as well as to allow Yemeni Jewish students to study abroad.)

6. It was probably true that Jews were as a practical matter limited to certain professions. The urban Jews have been traditionally craftsmen, while most remaining Jews in Yemen today are farmers. In many of the villages, there are no high schools for anyone. The illiteracy rate in the country as a whole is probably 90%.

7. To the best of the Embassy's knowledge, Jews are allowed to trade in all areas. They have been seen by Embassy personnel in both Rayda and Saada, the latter being near a major concentration of the Jewish population.

8. It is true that Quranic elementary schools run by the mullahs would not accept Jews and Jews would also not want to go there.

9. While it is true that prior to the 1962 Yemeni revolution Jews were not permitted to bear arms, since then they have done so and continue to be permitted to do so.

10. With regard to restrictions on mail service, it was pointed out that all mail has to be inspected and may be opened. Any "suspicious" mail is held by the security services. Obviously any mail addressed to or from Israel would automatically be confiscated. To the best of his knowledge, Jews do get some international mail.

Finally, the Embassy is unaware of any decision by the government to impose any systematic restrictions on the Jewish community. Some local sheikhs may be anti-Jewish, but this is not so among the several dozen sheikhs known to the Embassy. The most prominent ones take their obligation to protect the local Jews very seriously, since they would lose face if the Jews were harmed.

While it is true that government propaganda, which echoes the general Arab opposition to "aggressive Israeli actions" in Lebanon and the occupied territories, has had an effect on public opinion, this has not been translated into hostility toward the local Jews.

In fact, Mr. Ehrnman said that the general image of the Jews was that they were "good people." In private conversations Yemenis

may tell you that the Jews are "better than the Moslems who have taken over" and that "all of us are descended from Jews since Yemen was once a Jewish state."

Essentially, the life of the Jews is no better or worse than others. Indeed, the lot of all is hard in this traditional Islamic society. The only distinctive feature of the Jews is their long sidecurls.

It is not true that Yemeni Jews cannot have contacts with foreigners. Americans who are working in Yemen either on contract or as Peace Corps volunteers have been in frequent contact with Yemeni Jews. However, the security services are suspicious of any foreign diplomat who goes around asking questions of local Jews or others.

Mr. Ehrnman repeated that the *Neturei Karta* have distributed literature among the Jewish community. In view of the expressed interest of the JDC and the AJC, he would continue his efforts to find out what further the government of Yemen was prepared to do. He personally favored a visit by Mr. Hibshush and another member of his congregation to go and meet with the Ministry of Religious Affairs to build contacts. He reiterated that the Ministry of Religious Affairs had told the U. S. Embassy that they would be happy to distribute Jewish materials that were not printed in Israel or Zionist in character.

I suggested that Yemen might wish to follow the example of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is now itself subsidizing the cost of Jewish schools as well as the printing and distribution of Jewish religious textbooks.

I also pointed out that it should be possible to broaden the organizational contacts of Yemeni Jews to include the other mainstream orthodox institutions, such as the Otzar Hatorah network and Aguda and Lubavitch networks, which are not "Zionist," but which are also not ideologically anti-Zionist.

GEG/EL

THE SITUATION OF THE JEWS IN NORTH YEMEN

January 1983

The Jewish community of North Yemen is believed to number today about 1,200. The main centers of concentration are in Wadi Al-Amlah - several hours' ride east of Saada, and Kufr-Al-Athr - several hours' ride southwest of Saada. The rest are dispersed throughout the countryside.

Restrictions on Jews

- 1) The observance of religious rites and communal activities is banned.
- 2) Synagogues have been turned into mosques.
- 3) On the few remaining synagogues all Hebrew inscriptions on outside walls have been erased.
- 4) Jews are not allowed to own land.
- 5) Jews are not allowed to study for a profession.
- 6) Jews are allowed to practice only certain occupations.
- 7) Jews are not allowed to trade in certain markets.
- 8) In certain areas Jews are not allowed into the schools.
- 9) In the northern part of the country Jews are not allowed to carry weapons, though most of the population in this region is armed.
- 10) Jews are not allowed to send letters abroad or to receive mail from abroad.

The restrictions imposed on the Jews are decided on by the central government and local sheikhs. Some of the Jews live in the northern part of the country outside the central government's control, and affairs are in the hands of the sheikhs.

The institutions and the population are influenced by the anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist propaganda broadcasts on television and by events in the Middle East.

The local population is hostile towards the Jews and constantly harasses and humiliates them, even in the presence of foreigners.

Foreigners are not permitted to have any contact with Jews and are questioned as to such contacts.

Certain security personnel are allocated the duty of reporting on contacts between Jews and foreigners. Such contacts are regarded as espionage.

It seems fairly clear that the situation of the Jews has changed for the worse in the recent past.

This may be the result of events in the Middle East, and their expression in media propaganda in North Yemen.



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date April 19, 1983

CONFIDENTIAL

to FAD File

from George E. Gruen

subject Meeting with R. Bruce Ehrnman of the State Department

On April 14, 1983 I met with R. Bruce Ehrnman of the Office of Arabian Peninsula Affairs in the State Department. The purpose of the visit was to sensitize him to our concern over the report that we have recently received that there has been a deterioration of the situation of the Jews in North Yemen and additional restrictions have been placed upon them.

Mr. Ehrnman has considerable experience in Yemen and his current post also involves overseeing Saudi-U. S. military matters. He previously served in Afghanistan. Mr. Ehrnman began by saying that the Yemeni people, including government officials, have frequently mentioned how much they regret the departure of the Yemeni Jews. In fact, he presumes that virtually all Yemenis were once Jewish and subsequently converted to Christianity and then Islam. He said that the Yemenis prided themselves on being religiously tolerant. (I asked him about the reports that Jews had to walk in the gutter when a Moslem passed them on the sidewalk.)

Non-Jewish Yemenis regret the departure of the Jews for two basic reasons: 1. The Jews formed the bulk of the skilled craftsmen in silver and other handicrafts; and 2. In the fragmented tribal society of Yemen there were many disputes and the Jewish elders, as God-fearing and judicially well-trained individuals, were also looked upon as impartial arbiters. They were trusted for their honesty in contrast to Moslem judges and officials, who were suspected of being susceptible to bribery.

He estimates that there are only 400 Jews in North Yemen. He was not aware of any restrictions. He pointed out, however, that Christians also cannot have public services, but he does not believe that this prevents services from being held quietly. He noted that in Afghanistan, where he witnessed the departure of the last Jewish families, the synagogues were also not prominently marked on the outside.

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In any case, he promised to transmit the list of alleged restrictions to the U. S. Embassy in Sanaa, to get their comments.

He volunteered the information that representatives of the *Neturei Karta* had visited the country and were permitted to distribute Jewish materials in the country. He said that the Yemeni government had resisted the request of the JDC to distribute books and other ritual items on the allegation that the JDC is a Zionist organization. (I had scrupulously avoided any mention of the JDC, since they did not wish to be in any way involved in our intervention.) When I demurred at this identification, he said he knew the JDC is not a Zionist organ, but it was hard to convince the Yemenis to that effect. He added that the Yemeni authorities said that they were prepared to have their Ministry of Religious Affairs accept the Jewish ritual objects and books and would give a guarantee that they would be properly distributed. However, Ehrnman said he understood that there was a problem of non-Jews touching Jewish ritual objects.

I mentioned that some years ago we had talked with officials at the Yemeni Embassy in Washington. They expressed agreement in principle to a Jewish delegation visiting the country, but claimed that the northern tribal area was not secure and would therefore be unsafe. Mr. Ehrnman said that he had recently been trying to arrange for Mr. Hibshush and others in his community to go in and he had suggested that they visit with officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs when they went. He added that he appreciated my call, since it reminded him that he had not followed up on this in recent weeks. His understanding was that private Jews without Zionist organizational ties would be permitted to visit the country.

Mr. Ehrnman also pointed out that since the Yemeni Jews were very traditional, any Jewish visitors should be strictly orthodox and understanding of their religious traditions.

As an indication of the extent to which the Yemenis are suspicious of any contacts with Israel, Mr. Ehrnman recalled the incident of the American black young man who had gone to a kibbutz in Israel where he had converted to Judaism and after studying Jewish history had become fascinated with Yemeni Jews and had come to visit carrying letters from relatives in Israel.

The upshot of this was that he spent nine months in a Yemeni jail and many Jews who received letters from Israel or had given him letters to Israel were also jailed, as was

an American Embassy employee who had been befriended by this American black man. They have all been released, but it illustrates the extent to which the Yemeni authorities are afraid of "Israeli spies." On the other hand, he hastened to add that North Yemen had no intention of engaging in war with Israel, but could not get ahead of the Arab consensus in recognizing Israel.

Mr. Ehrnman promised to get in touch with me as soon as he heard from the U. S. Embassy in Sanaa.

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Saudi attitudes

I asked Mr. Ehrnman of his assessment of where the Saudis stood with regard to the Reagan plan and the recent breakup of the Hussein-Arafat talks. He responded that Saudi Arabia is still a tribal society in which decision making is by consensus. They will not act until everyone is on board. He said that the Fez declaration meant that they in effect accept Israel. When I argued that one could make a case that this was an ambiguous formula and that in view of the U. N. resolution equating Zionism with racism, the Security Council guarantee of the right of all states in the region to live in peace could be interpreted as all legitimate states, excluding the pariah state of Israel, he agreed that the ambiguous formula was adopted to satisfy all elements in the Arab world, but he is convinced that the Saudis realize, especially after Lebanon, that there is no military solution--at least for 100 years.

I asked whether he thought the Saudis really want an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank. He said yes. The reason is that the Saudis do not want Jordan to be strong or to have a Palestinian state on the Saudi border. At the same time, they don't want homeless Palestinians running around the area making trouble.

/EL