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⇒ Diplomacy, Propaganda, and Humanitarian Gestures: Francoist Spain and Egyptian Jews, 1956-1968

Abstract: Historians still debate over the help extended by Francoist Spain to European Jews during the Holocaust. The Spanish dictatorship always exaggerated the extent of this assistance. This propagandist effort on the part of the Spanish regime to portray itself as the savior of Jews in distress, especially Jews of Sephardic origin, was put to the test during the 1950s and 1960s, when Madrid was asked to help Egyptian Jews following the 1956 and 1967 wars in the Middle East.

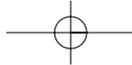
Based on research in Spanish and Israeli archives, this article argues that: a) Spain could have done more to help Egyptian Jews. Its policy was unclear and inconsistent. Moreover, the assistance that was finally given was intended mainly to improve the dictatorship's image in the eyes of Western democratic public opinion; b) the Francoist dictatorship did its best to prevent the settlement of Jews in Spain; c) the help extended to Egyptian Jews owed more to the initiatives of individual Spanish diplomats than to the policy adopted by the Spanish government; d) all this notwithstanding, the help given by Spain to Egyptian Jews should be appreciated and considered within the context of its overall effort to save Jews in distress in other Arab countries in the post-World War II period.

Keywords: Franco Regime; Egyptian Jewry; History; Spain; 20th Century.

Sixty years after the end of World War II, scholars are still vigorously debating the extent of the help given by Francoist Spain to save Jews during the Holocaust.¹ How many Jews were saved thanks to Spain's assistance? Did the Franco regime adopt a clear and consistent policy towards the Jewish plight? What were the motives behind the frequent mutations and reversals in the decisions made by the government of the dictatorship when it had to deal with this issue? With the conclusion of the world conflict, Spain found itself isolated in the international arena. General Francisco Franco, although formally neutral during the war, was perceived as having collaborated with Nazi Germany

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¹ For the various positions in this field of research, see Avni (1982); Rother (2002) and (2005); Marquina Barrio (1997); Lisbona (1993: chap. 6); Marquina/Ospina (1987: chaps. 4-5).



and Fascist Italy, and denounced accordingly on all sides. In an effort to change its image in Western public opinion, the Francoist regime embarked on a propaganda campaign, emphasizing its unique character –“which had nothing to do with fascism”– and the differences between itself and the defeated Axis powers.²

A special effort was made to exaggerate the magnitude of Spain’s contribution to saving Jewish life during the Holocaust as a contrast to Nazi racism. A noteworthy example of these efforts was the fifty page booklet published by the Spanish Foreign Ministry: *España y los judíos*. The booklet was disseminated in many countries in Spanish, English, and French, and it claimed that Spain had done much more to rescue the Jews of Europe than Western democracies (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores 1949).

This propaganda campaign was put to the test during the 1950s and 1960s when Madrid was asked to extend a helping hand to the Jews of Egypt and Morocco, who were experiencing growing pressure and hardship in the context of the escalating Arab-Israeli conflict and their identification with Zionism and the State of Israel. This article seeks to analyze Spain’s reaction to this challenge, with special reference to the plight of Egyptian Jews during the years 1956-1957, following the Suez crisis and Sinai campaign, as well as during their exodus from Egypt after the Six-Day War.

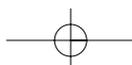
Before I discuss each of these important episodes in detail, I would like to clarify my main arguments. An analysis of Spain’s policies in these two cases leads me to similar conclusions to those drawn by several scholars who have studied Spain’s contribution to saving Jewish life during the Second World War. First, with a firm and decisive policy, Spain could have done much more than it did to help Sephardic Jews in need; that is, its potential for saving Jews was not fully realized. This is especially true in the case of Egypt in the years 1956-1957, and even more so in Libya during the same period. Spanish policy experienced frequent changes and lacked coherence and consistency. In the Francoist leadership, there were constant debates as to the policy that should be adopted. In fact, the help that was actually extended should be seen, first and foremost, in the context of Spain’s efforts to create a more liberal image for the dictatorship and to strengthen its ties with Western countries.

Second, throughout its existence, the Francoist dictatorship was determined not to adopt any measure that might lead to a Jewish resettlement in Spain, even in small numbers. During the 1930s and 1940s Spanish nationalists were still glorifying the Catholic Kings, Isabella and Ferdinand, for their clairvoyance which had made possible “the solution of the Jewish problem in Spain” in the late fifteenth century.

Third, efforts made to rescue Jews, both during World War II and in Arab countries in the post-war period, were often the result of initiatives by Spanish diplomats in various places and not of a clear policy shaped by the Palace of Santa Cruz, where the Foreign Ministry was located, nor by the Palace of El Pardo, where Generalísimo Franco lived. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are the initiatives taken by the Spanish ambassador in Cairo, Ángel Sagaz.

All these reservations notwithstanding, Spain is still deserving of appreciation for what it did for Jews, especially for Sephardic Jews in Arab countries during the 1950s and 1960s.

² On Spain’s international status in the post-war period, see, among others, Martínez Lillo (2000); Pardo Sanz (2000); Balfour/Preston (1999); Espadas Burgos (1988).





However little it did, it was often more than what Western democracies did at the time. Moreover, although the dictatorship's propaganda greatly exaggerated Spain's contribution to the rescue of Jews during the Second World War, it did contribute to the creation of a tradition and a feeling of commitment among Spanish diplomats, who often gave assistance to persecuted Jews, both in the period discussed in this article as well as in later years.

Extending a Helping Hand During and After the Suez Crisis

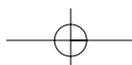
During the Suez crisis and the Sinai war, Spain generally showed sympathy towards Egypt, a position that allowed it to appear as a friend of the Arabs, in contrast to 'imperialistic' Britain, France, and Israel.³ On 26 July 1956, the president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal Corporation, which, under British and French control, administered the canal. In an interview with the newspaper *Arriba*, Franco eagerly voiced support for Egypt's position and criticism of Britain's policy in the Middle East (Shneidman 1973: 166). Nasser's move, however, endangered the Constantinople convention of 1888, which all European maritime nations had signed, and which declared that the canal must remain 'open to vessels of all nations' and 'free from blockade', a right which was suspended only during the two world wars.

Nasser nationalized the canal largely in response to the refusal of the US, Britain, and the World Bank to assist him in building the Aswan Dam – they were concerned about the economic risk, as well as about growing Soviet influence in Egypt. The Egyptian ruler wanted, among other things, to use the revenue from the canal to finance the ambitious Aswan project. The international crisis that had just broken out was compounded, of course, by other factors: the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli commando raids on Egyptian territory; British fear of the threat that Nasser and his aspirations to leadership of the Arab world posed to Britain's position in the Middle East; Britain and France's concern about their oil supply; and the Paris government's anger over Nasser's support for the rebels in Algeria. Prime Minister Anthony Eden saw Nasser as a 'megalomaniacal dictator,' and cited the ruinous consequences of the appeasement policy that Britain had followed during the 1930s as grounds for a firm stand against Egypt.

The major media in Madrid greeted the nationalization of the canal with enthusiasm. *Arriba*, *Madrid*, *Pueblo*, and *Ya* all devoted editorials to Nasser's 'daring step' and the challenge he had set the imperialist powers, using terms that were almost identical to those employed by the Soviet papers during the period. At the mid-August conference in London of the principal countries that used the canal, the Spanish delegation, led by foreign minister Alberto Martín Artajo, tried to defend Egypt's interests and to mediate between Egypt and the Western powers. This diplomatic activity, however, did not satisfy Egypt, which expected more vigorous support from Spain given their friendship over the past decade; and it certainly provoked annoyance in the foreign ministries of London, Paris, and Washington.⁴

³ On Spain's relations with Arab countries in those years, see Rein (1999).

⁴ Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid (hereafter AMAE), Leg. R. 4294/14, R. 4294/15; Suárez Fernández (1984: Vol. 5, 295-300); González García (2001: chap. 6).



In the meantime, the tension around the Suez Canal was growing. The canal pilots stopped work, and Egypt tried to recruit others to take their place. Several dozen Spaniards were hired to help in the operation of the canal. At the beginning of September, some sixty Spaniards announced their willingness to go 'to defend Egypt from foreign aggression,' and observers in London were already evoking the 'Blue Division' that had been sent by Franco to assist the Wehrmacht in its war against the Soviet Union. Just before the fighting broke out, General Franco told a reporter from the Associated Press news agency that the events in Egypt, like those in Algeria and Morocco, reflected changes in the international sphere and represented a protest against imperialism and colonial oppression.

Following the coordinated attack on Egypt, "the [Spanish] press and radio were clearly biased, and even aggressive" towards Israel, France, and Britain, as the president of the Jewish community in Madrid, Louis Blitz, wrote.⁵ At the beginning of November, the Falange organ *Arriba* claimed that, according to the criteria established at the Nuremberg trials, Anthony Eden, Guy Mollet, and David Ben-Gurion could be tried as war criminals.⁶ The Falange was very sympathetic to Nasser's regime; the fall of Argentine president Juan Perón had dampened the enthusiasm it had shown for Peronism at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, and the Falange was now ready for another object of admiration. Now it was enamored of Nasserism, which it saw as the model of a nationalist regime aspiring to social justice.⁷

Before long, however, the Spanish media moderated their support for Nasser. The regime was concerned about its image in the West, and certain circles, particularly in the military, were worried about the Soviet Union's growing influence in Egypt and the possibility that Egypt's brand of Arab nationalism might encourage calls for the eradication of the Spanish presence in North Africa, beginning with Río de Oro. The newspaper *ABC* published a number of articles which, although expressing disapproval of the manner and timing of the Anglo-French intervention, nevertheless claimed that the operation would further the interests of the Western bloc, since it had caused the destruction of a great deal of military equipment that the Soviets had sent to Egypt. Some articles also maintained that the Russians wanted to take over Egypt and make Nasser their puppet. Particularly prominent among these articles was one by the retired general Alfredo Kindelán, one of the founders of the Spanish air force at the time of Alfonso XIII and commander of Franco's air force during the Spanish Civil War. The decision in favour of military intervention was not made by irresponsible fools or bloodthirsty sadists but by talented politicians, wrote Kindelán, reproaching the Falangist organ *Arriba*. In mid-December, Franco met with both the US ambassador in Madrid and the army minister, Agustín Muñoz Grandes, in quick succession; within two days, the attacks on 'western imperialism' disappeared from the papers.⁸

⁵ Louis Blitz to Ya'acov Tsur, 25 Nov. 1956, Documents of the Ministry of Foreign Relations in Israel State Archive (hereafter ISA), 2520/7.

⁶ *Arriba*, 4 Nov. 1956; *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1956. Two days later, on 6 Nov., the Egyptian ambassador to the U.N. was about to quote the *Arriba* article in his speech before the General Assembly. His Spanish counterpart, José Félix de Lequerica, managed to convince him not to include it in the speech.

⁷ Trythall (1970: 247); Fleming (1980: 134); Arrese (1977: 54-55, 122-123); Payne (1967: 443-444).

⁸ *The Times*, 21 Nov. 1956; Shneidman (1973: 167).



From 1956 onward, the distinction that the Franco regime made between the state of Israel and Sephardic Jews, particularly those with Spanish citizenship, was clearer than ever. While rejecting any Israeli initiative to establish diplomatic ties between the two countries, Franco gradually showed a more tolerant attitude towards the small Jewish community in his country and towards Jews, especially Sephardic Jews, in other countries.⁹ Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, triggered a chain of events in Egypt that worsened the situation of Westerners in Egypt in general, and of the local Jewish community in particular. Spain's ambassador to Cairo, José del Castaño, asked the Madrid foreign ministry to authorize him, on humanitarian grounds, to provide asylum in the embassy to anyone in mortal danger who requested it. Martín Artajo, after consulting with Franco, gave him the requested authorization, on condition that asylum be offered only to those who were indeed in imminent danger. In this respect it should be mentioned that, in the fall of 1950, King Farouk had paid a private visit to Madrid, and during a talk with the former Spanish ambassador to Cairo, Carlos Miranda, he said that his government was considering expelling some twenty thousand Jews from Egypt in retaliation for Israel's expulsion of thousands of Arabs from Palestine. As a result of this talk, the Spanish foreign ministry sent instructions to its representatives in Cairo to protect Jewish subjects of Spain if necessary. By the end of 1956 some thirty Sephardic families had arrived in Barcelona from Egypt. Most of them left for other countries after a few months, with the aid of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the rest settled in the Catalonian capital.¹⁰

Following the joint offensive by Israel, France and Britain, the Jews of Egypt, a community numbering some fifty thousand whom the nationalist regime identified with Israel and Zionism, suffered persecution of every kind: mass imprisonment, denial of citizenship, expulsion, property confiscation, loss of employment, and more.¹¹ A decree published on 22 November amended the 1950 citizenship law to state that Zionists and those who were not loyal to the state could not receive Egyptian citizenship, and people in this category who already had citizenship were to be divested of it. The law did not define who was to be considered a Zionist of course; this was left to the whims of the authorities. The print media and the radio pursued a campaign of incitement and threats against Jews, and the latter were exposed to various insults in the street. On this occasion, however, no serious incidents of violence against Jews – of the sort seen in 1948 and 1952 – were recorded. The Alexandria harbor and Cairo airport were full of Jews seeking to leave the country. Jews who left during those months were forced to leave their property behind and to give up their Egyptian citizenship. More than one family left with only the clothes on their backs. All community activity was paralyzed, as were most of the community's health, education, and social welfare institutions.¹²

⁹ On this topic, see Rein (1997); Lisbona (2002); González García (2001).

¹⁰ Nota para Su Excelencia el Generalísimo, 13 Sept. 1950 (AMAE, R.2631/19); Lisbona (1993: 173).

¹¹ On the Sinai/Suez war, see Louis/Owen (1989); Lucas (1991); Oren (1992). On the situation of the Jews in Egypt at the time, see Bat-Yeor (1974: 134-136); *American Jewish Year Book* (hereafter *AJYB*), Vol. 58 (1957): 398-403; *AJYB*, Vol. 59 (1958): 395-398; Laskier (1992: 252-264); Schechtman (1961: 196-202).

¹² Although the Nasser regime's policy towards Jews was severe indeed, it is a considerable exaggeration to liken it to the policy of persecuting Jews in Nazi Germany, as the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Congress have done. See World Jewish Congress (1957); and American Jewish Congress (1957).



While Nasser declared that the reports of Jews being persecuted in Egypt were baseless propaganda and that Jews suffered no discrimination whatsoever, the Spanish consul in Alexandria, Carlos de Urgoiti, spoke of a 'campaign of terror' conducted by the police and military authorities and the national militia of Egypt:

Hebrews [Jews], English, French, and stateless people suffered house searches, confiscation of their property or dismissal from their employment without compensation... Very many of them were arrested, beaten and mistreated in all kinds of ways which recall the methods of the Cheka during the era of Red terror in Madrid.¹³

The ambassador in Cairo also refuted the official press's declarations concerning the fraternal relations between Jews and Moslems in Egypt, and the claims of the interior minister, Zakaria Mohieddine, to the same effect:

These declarations... do not correspond to the reality of what is happening here; there is no doubt that instructions have been given to force the greatest number of Jews to evacuate this country, a campaign stimulated by the greedy desire to take over their businesses, companies, and enterprises and to give their jobs to Moslem Egyptians.¹⁴

Among the Jews arrested – whose total number must have exceeded nine hundred – were four with Spanish citizenship: León J. Israel Modiano, businessman; Jaime Simhon Bouso, clerk; Ester Yahiel Treves, nurse and director of a Jewish charity association; and León G. Carasso, commercial agent in Alexandria for a shipping firm, Naviera de Exportación Agrícola S.A. of Valencia. Among the many hundreds whose property was impounded (businesses, companies and private houses were seized), another six were Spanish subjects: Mauricio Benzakein Hakun, Darío Israel Modiano, Bondi M. Saporta, Saúl Coronel Saragossi, and Máximo and Roberto Braunstein Zaccai. Spanish embassy officials visited the Jews with Spanish citizenship in prison, about twenty kilometers away from Cairo, and took care of their needs.¹⁵ The Spanish ambassador's energetic actions prevented additional arrests of Jews with Spanish citizenship, though many of them were harassed on various pretexts and were occasionally summoned to the police station. The ambassador informed the Egyptian authorities of:

the bad impression that the measures taken against the persons and goods of the aforementioned Spanish subjects had made on the Spanish Government... and that the way they had been treated [was] contrary to the excellent relations existing between our countries and to the proofs of friendship recently afforded in relation to the present events.¹⁶

Despite Spain's involvement in international talks to resolve the Suez crisis, and although it supplied significant quantities of arms to Egypt during the years 1952-1956, it was not until March 1957, when the authorities began to soften their attitude towards Jews, that confiscated assets were restored to the Jews mentioned above, with the excep-

¹³ Urgoiti to Artajo, 24 Nov. 1956 (AMAE, R.5571/46).

¹⁴ José del Castaño to MAE, 10 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4667/18).

¹⁵ Testimony of Gladys, wife of Jaime Simhon Bouso, Ramat Gan, Jan. 2004.

¹⁶ José del Castaño to MAE, 10 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4667/18).

tion of those belonging to Bondi Saporta, which were not returned to their lawful owner until a year later.¹⁷

The leaders of the Jewish community in Madrid (Louis A. Blitz, Max Mazín, and José Benmaman) sent a letter to Franco in December 1956, asking him to intervene on behalf of their persecuted brothers in Egypt. They requested Spanish aid for all Sephardic Jews, not just those with Spanish citizenship, and for the rest of the Jews, too, if possible, as well as asylum in Spain for those Sephardic Jews obliged to leave Egypt.¹⁸ Naturally, the harassment they suffered made many Egyptian Jews opt for emigration, and the Nasser regime encouraged them to do so. In their letter to the Caudillo, the leaders of the Madrid community recalled Spain's efforts to save Jews during World War II. Franco passed the letter to his minister of foreign affairs, who replied that Spain could not give Sephardic Jews the same rights as Jews who were Spanish subjects.

Eliahu Eliachar, vice-president of the World Federation of Sephardic Communities, approached the Spanish consul general in Jerusalem, Mariano Madrazo, and asked if Spain would agree to serve as a transit station for Sephardic Jews leaving Egypt, who would later continue on to other destinations. Similar requests to the Spanish government were submitted by the Anglo-Jewish Association through the Spanish ambassador in London, Miguel Primo de Rivera, and by the World Federation of Sephardic Communities through the Spanish ambassador in Washington, José María de Areilza.¹⁹ Areilza recommended acceding to these requests, since "only a few hundred of those having to leave Egypt would go to Spain," yet "Spain's gesture in opening its doors publicly to these former members of our nation would be highly appreciated, and would have an incalculably favorable impact" on US public opinion.²⁰ All along, Spain's decision-makers tended to overestimate the influence that Jews had on Western public opinion in general, and on the United States in particular.

At the same time, the foreign ministry in Madrid thought that the arrival in Spain of a crowd of Jewish refugees might cause a number of political and economic problems; it was also concerned that some of the refugees might choose to remain in Spain permanently. Foreign ministry officials also pointed out that in December 1924, Spain had given the Sephardic Jews in Egypt an opportunity to apply for Spanish citizenship, and many had not bothered to exercise this right. The ministry therefore instructed its representatives to make a strict distinction between Jews with Spanish citizenship, who were to be protected like any Spanish citizen, and other Sephardic Jews, to whom Spain was willing to provide humanitarian assistance in coordination with the UN and other powers. In fact, in February 1957, the Spanish government decided that only Spanish citizens would be eligible for humanitarian assistance.²¹

¹⁷ See reports from Cairo by José del Castaño (AMAE, R.4491/94, R.4667/18, R.5571/46).

¹⁸ Carta de la Comunidad Israelita de Madrid a Franco, 19 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4665/49).

¹⁹ Madrazo to MAE, 8 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4667/18); Primo de Rivera to Artajo, 2 Jan. 1957, and Areilza to Artajo, 30 Jan. 1957 (AMAE, R.4667/18); Eliachar (1980: 354-355). Among the Jewish leaders who approached Areilza, according to Spanish documents, were Vitalis Nachmias, Jaques M. Habib, and Simon Nessim. Prominent figures in the State Department also expressed to Areilza their concern for the fate of Sephardic Jews in Egypt.

²⁰ Areilza to Artajo, 30 Jan. 1957 (AMAE, R.4667/18).

²¹ Director Gral. de Política Exterior to consul in Jerusalem, 22 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4491/94). This view was shared by the Spanish consul general in Jerusalem. See Madrazo to MAE, 8 Dec. 1956 (AMAE, R.4491/94).

Ambassador Castaño's activity on behalf of Jews with Spanish citizenship was praiseworthy but to be expected, since these Jews were, after all, citizens of his country. The importance of this activity should therefore not be exaggerated, as it has been in a number of recent studies. At any rate, Israel's ambassador to Paris, Ya'akov Tsur, conveyed to his Spanish colleague, José Rojas y Moreno, Israel's gratitude to the Spanish embassy in Cairo for their efforts to protect the Jews there – "not only the Sephardic Jews, but in general all those whose race or nationality made them the object of severe persecution." Since Egypt's lack of diplomatic ties with Britain and France had left no British or French representatives in Cairo, and the US was afraid to compromise its relations with the Arabs, the Spanish embassy, according to Tsur, was "the only one that, with a sense of humanity and great courage, had protected and defended the persecuted Jews."²²

Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, I have found no evidence that Spain's efforts were as widespread as the Israeli ambassador's words suggest. The Spanish government's less generous side is reflected in a more or less contemporaneous decision concerning Sephardic Jews in Libya made by Luis Carrero Blanco, Franco's closest assistant and a blatant anti-Semite. Worried by a series of events that followed Libya's declaration of complete independence in 1952, events which included the Israeli-Arab conflict and the development of relations between Tripoli and the Arab League, the Jews still in Libya (most of them had emigrated to Israel by the mid-1950s) feared that the government would not protect them in times of danger, nor renew their passports so that they could leave the country. Some Libyan-born Sephardic Jews, afraid that the situation in Libya would worsen, approached the *chargé d'affaires* in the Spanish embassy in Tripoli, Ángel Díaz de Tuesta, with a request for Spanish citizenship. This request was soundly rejected by the foreign ministry upon the instructions of Carrero Blanco.²³

Spain's Help during the Exodus of Egyptian Jewry

In contrast to Spain's limited efforts on behalf of Jews with Spanish citizenship in Egypt in 1956 and 1957, in the years that followed the Franco regime made a much more important contribution to helping Jews in distress in the Arab countries. It assisted the clandestine mass exodus of Jews from Morocco at the end of the 1950s and, within the framework of 'Operation Yakhin' at the beginning of the 1960s, it allowed the organizations that were helping these Jews emigrate to Israel to use Spanish territory as a transit station. The regime also helped Jews to leave Egypt after the Six-Day War.²⁴

A few days after the Six-Day War broke out, the Jewish community in Madrid asked General Franco to take action to protect Jews in the Arab countries, who were again being singled out as collaborators and agents in Israel's service, and were suffering a

²² Rojas y Moreno to Artajo, 8 Jan. 1957 (AMAE, R.4540/19).

²³ Legation in Tripoli to Artajo, 7 Nov. 1956; Carrero to legation in Tripoli, 19 Nov. 1956; and Director Gral. de Política Exterior to minister in Tripoli, 23 Nov. 1956 (AMAE, R.6170/34). On the situation of the Jews of Libya in the 1950s and the problem of passports, see Felice (1980: 293-304); Schechtman (1961: 126-147).

²⁴ For a recent study of the 1967 War, see Oren (2002).



new wave of persecution in the name of 'state security.' The letter was signed by the president and vice-president of the Madrid community, Max Mazin and Samuel Toledano respectively. Similar requests reached the Spanish government from various Jewish organizations such as the World Jewish Congress, the Sephardic Community of Chicago, and the American Jewish Committee by way of the ambassador in Washington, Alfonso Merry del Val, and the Spanish delegation to the UN. At the time the Spanish government was publishing declarations of support for the Arab position, while its spokesmen called for the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes and the establishment of peace in the Middle East on the basis of the 1947 UN partition resolution.

Following a cabinet meeting headed by General Franco, the Spanish government decided to accede to the Jewish petitions.²⁵ Some two weeks after the fighting began, instructions were sent to Spain's legations in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco stipulating that when Jews, "whether Sephardic or not," applied to them for assistance, "the possibility of exercising the available means of protection should be considered, always with the agreement of the local authorities." Spanish diplomats were told that should the Egyptian government be prepared to allow Jews to depart, they were to provide those Jews with whatever documents and help they needed to leave the country. These instructions stressed that Spain's motives were purely humanitarian, and that such actions were in no way at variance with Spain's support for the Arab cause.²⁶

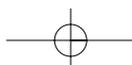
The remnants of the once thriving Jewish community in Egypt, which had dwindled from ninety thousand people on the eve of World War II to no more than a few thousand, were treated with rough cruelty. Not long after the war began, a few hundred Jews were arrested, including most of the men of the community. After two or three days they were transferred to the Abu-Zaabal prison near the capital. A hysterical, vengeful mob tried to attack them on their way there. In prison, the Jews were brutally mistreated by their guards. The Spanish ambassador in Cairo, Ángel Sagaz, petitioned the police, the interior ministry and President Nasser himself to obtain the release of Jews being held in severe conditions, and to obtain permission to leave the country for those Jews who desired it. Sagaz argued that there was no reason to doubt Spanish friendship for the Arab countries, the proof being that Spain had never recognized Israel. He emphasized that for many years Spain had been trying to protect the descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain. Spain understood that the Egyptian authorities had to take measures against certain people during wartime for reasons of security, but it knew – the Spanish diplomat added – that the Egyptian authorities had never discriminated against anyone 'for reasons of race or religion.'

Accordingly, Spain was willing to offer documents and travel tickets to Jews wishing to leave the country, if the police had no objection to their departure.²⁷ The ambassador promised that those Jews who left the country would not become propaganda tools against the Nasser regime, and would not emigrate to Israel, but to countries in Europe and to America. Indeed, every Jew who received a Spanish passport was asked not to

²⁵ Suárez Fernández (1984: Vol. 7, 406).

²⁶ Cited in Lisboa (1993: 199).

²⁷ Cited in Ysart (1973: 154-155). See also Lipschitz (1984: 186-189). On the arrest of Jews immediately following the outbreak of the Six-Day War, see Bat-Yeor (1974: 138-139); Laskier (1992: 290-294).



publicize the situation of the Jews in Egypt and not to emigrate to Israel immediately, in order not to endanger those of their brothers who remained behind. The Spanish passports issued to Jews were good for only two years, and could not be renewed.

In late August 1967, the president of Cairo's Jewish community, Meir Asher, came to the Spanish embassy to express the community's gratitude for Spain's humanitarian efforts on behalf of the local Jewry. Asher also suggested depositing a series of valuable medieval manuscripts and objects in the embassy, or even moving them to Spain, for fear they might be damaged in the old synagogues that had been closed down. Ambassador Ángel Sagaz said that valuable historical pieces that had been catalogued by the Egyptian authorities could not be brought to the embassy, as Spain did not want to enter into conflict with regard to objects that were considered Egyptian artistic patrimony. Still, several valuable objects from the local synagogues were sent to the Madrid Jewish community with the help of the Spanish embassy (González García 2001: 249-250).

During the years 1967-1969, a total of more than six hundred and fifteen families – more than one thousand five hundred Jews – left Egypt with the help of the Spanish government and the energetic efforts of the Spanish ambassador in Cairo, Ángel Sagaz. Several hundred of them were liberated from prisons and detention camps. Lists of all detained Jews were supplied by representatives of the American Jewish Committee in Washington to the leaders of the Madrid community, Mazin and Toledano, who passed them, in turn, to the Foreign Office, located in the Santa Cruz Palace. This assistance was given behind a veil of secrecy in order not to endanger its success and due to the close relations between Spain and the Arab countries. However, curiously enough, although they were revealed by the US press as early as 1968,²⁸ Spain's efforts are not mentioned at all in histories of the Jews of Egypt in the twentieth century.

In the initial stages, Spain paid all the expenses involved in issuing documents, transferring Jews from prison or from their homes to airports or seaports, and transporting them abroad. At this point, most of them left by ship to various Mediterranean destinations; only the old, the sick and the blind were evacuated on airplanes. At later stages, HIAS, an aid organization for Jewish emigrants and refugees, arranged for their evacuation and paid their airfare, on Air France planes, to Paris.²⁹ The Jews who left Egypt were allowed to take only a few possessions with them; they were forced to leave valuable items such as wedding rings, bracelets and watches behind. At Sagaz's suggestion, they were able to deposit such valuables at the Spanish embassy in Cairo for transport out of the country in the Spanish diplomatic bag, after which they could reclaim them abroad (Lipschitz 1984: 189).³⁰

Spain's action earned it the gratitude of Jewish organizations all over the world, as well as that of the Johnson administration. The Madrid government's anger was therefore all the greater when, in mid-December 1967, during a debate in one of the UN General Assembly committees on the decolonialization of Gibraltar, the Israeli delegate,

²⁸ See, for example, *New York Times*, 26 Jan. 1968, and 20 Dec. 1968. An article in the *Washington Post*, published on 5 Sep. 1968, revealed this evacuation operation in detail.

²⁹ For the testimony of one of the Jews rescued from Egypt with Spain's help, see Lipschitz (1984: 151-156).

³⁰ In 1970, the Spanish embassy, on the initiative of ambassador Sagaz, channeled economic and humanitarian aid to those Jews who stayed in Egypt.



Arye Ilan, made a speech against Spain, in an attempt to explain why Israel was abstaining from the vote of censure against British occupation of the disputed Rock. In his speech – delivered in the midst of the evacuation operation of Egyptian Jewry sponsored by Spain – Ilan mentioned the ‘Blue Division’ which Spain had sent to fight alongside the armies of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front during World War II, and ridiculed the notion that a representative of dictatorial Spain should pretend to teach the committee members the laws of freedom, democracy, and social justice. The Spanish delegate, Jaime de Piniés, responded harshly. He accused Israel of ‘Nazi behavior’ and ‘aggressive activity’ towards its Arab neighbors, and advised it to remember the help Spain had given the Jews during World War II.

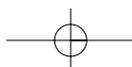
Protest and criticism were not restricted to the pages of the Spanish press. Max Mazín, president of the Madrid Jewish community, sent a telegram of complaint to the Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, in which he denounced the ‘wounding references’ to Spain in the Israeli delegate’s speech. Eliahu Eliachar, one of the leaders of the Sephardic community in Jerusalem, asked Abba Eban: “How did it happen, who needed this, who gave the instructions for an Israeli representative to come out with a sharp anti-Spanish speech?”³¹

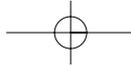
During the same period, similar efforts on behalf of Jews in distress were made by Spain’s ambassadors in Baghdad and Tripoli, but were unsuccessful owing to the opposition of the Iraqi and Libyan authorities. The government of Syria, too, took a stern line with what it saw as interference in its internal affairs. In 1972, however, following a request by the head of the Mossad, Tzvi Zamir, to his Spanish counterpart, a few dozen Syrian Jews left Syria through Lebanon with the aid of Spanish documents (Lisbona 1993: 206-210).

As we have seen, the Francoist regime’s propaganda about the help given to Jews during the Second World War created a certain commitment among decision-makers in Madrid, as well as Spanish diplomats in various countries, to assist persecuted Jews. Jewish organizations around the world could approach the Spanish government and its representatives and ask for their help, basing their requests on the precedent of World War II. Spanish diplomacy was pushed into actions that supposedly projected backwards to the 1940s and served as additional proof of Spain’s contribution to the salvation of Jews during the Holocaust.

Spain had no clear and coherent policy on this issue, both during the war years and in the 1950s and 1960s. The shaping of such a policy was not an easy task, due to internal debates in the Francoist leadership as to the measures to be adopted. Among the considerations discussed, the first and foremost was related to efforts to strengthen relations with the United States and improve the dictatorship’s image in Western public opinion, which in the Francoist world view was greatly influenced by Jewish interests. As a nationalist dictatorship with a monolithic concept of Spanish identity, it was hard for the Francoist regime to extend generous support to Jews in distress in the Arab countries, especially if such support might entail the resettlement of even small groups of Jews in Spain itself. Nevertheless, in view of the lack of action on the part of other countries, and even if Spain’s considerations were indeed motivated largely by the desire to project a

³¹ *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Dec. 1967; Eliachar (1980: 335); Lisbona (1993: 202).

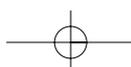




positive image of itself to the West, Francoist Spain's policy towards the plight of Jews in Arab countries is worthy of recognition.

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