Over the last ten years, a topic that had been previously skirted in the public sphere of Arab countries has been broached, namely, the expulsion and departure of the Jewish population from these countries. When writers had addressed this phenomenon in the past, they did so only in the context of the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict. The history of the Jews living in Arab countries (Arab Jews)² has been dominated by an official nationalistic discourse that has rarely been questioned (Abdulhaq 2016, 7–48). This discourse consists of two parts, one Arab and the other Zionist. Both reject considering Jews as an organic component of the society in which they live. Arab discourse connects Jewish life to Israel and hence to the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict.

A new generation of authors and film makers is questioning this discourse, through novels mainly and, to a lesser degree, through non-fiction works, with consequences extending beyond the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict. The central figures in these works are the Jew who used to live in Egypt, Iraq, Syria or Tunisia, but had been driven from their countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Only in the last decade a change has taken place, and a heightened interest in Jewish history in Arab countries arose that transcended the official nationalistic thought. This literary trend creates a new space where individual stories about Jews are discussed. This change has not yet brought about a shift in the official line, but literature is clearly questioning its discourse, creating a beginning of the emergence of a post-nationalistic discourse.

This interest in Jewish history is not limited to one Arab country. Between 2004 and the end of 2017, more than 23 novels and works of non-fiction that centered around an Arab Jew were published in Arab countries. These Arab-Jewish figures move beyond the stereotypical disloyal, greedy, selfish Jew so often found in modern Arab literature.

¹ Elimelekh (2013).
² For discussion of the term “Arab Jew”, see Abdulhaq 2016, 31.
As an example, we can take the novels of Ihsan Abdel Quddous (1919–1990). Quddous was a famous Egyptian journalist, an editor of the popular magazine *Rose Al Youssef* and later the editor in chief of the daily newspaper *Al-Ahram*. He wrote sixty novels and collections of short stories, many of which were dramatized and filmed. His works were often described as unconventional and emancipatory but they are faithful to the Arab nationalist discourse. Quddous’ novel *Don’t Leave Me Alone* employs negative stereotypes of Jews. The figure of the Arab Jew has been at the margin of history, politics, and religion. In the past decade, however, writers and filmmakers have created subversive works that challenge the norms of the previous generation and hegemonic nationalistic discourse. As this essay intends to show, this confrontation—born out of an awareness of liminality and thresholds—evokes a sense of dissent.

This essay analyzes Egyptian films and fictional as well as non-fictional narratives. While circumstances in Arab countries vary, the Egyptian case tells us a great deal about how official nationalistic discourses dominated the scene until a recent change. While about one hundred thousand Jews lived in Egypt by the end of the 1940s, about eight hundred thousand to one million Jews were a major component of the societies from Morocco to Bahrain (Abdulhaq 2016, 82). The war that broke out in Palestine in 1947, followed by the proclamation of Israeli independence in 1948 and the conflicts that arose between Israel and its neighbors, resulted in most of the Jews in Egypt and other Arab nations leaving their countries. In addition, the emergence of nationalism and economic changes had a deep influence on minorities in Arab countries, including the Jews.

In the late 1970s, early 1980s, two discourses started to evolve.³ While the dominant discourse was nationalistic in character, the other challenges and criticizes a nationalistic framework, and includes works by Western and Egyptian authors who reviewed the social, economic, and political history of Egyptian Jews (Abdulhaq 2016, 36–37).

³ For a detailed discussion of these discourses, see Abdulhaq 2016, 7–48.
1 The winds of change

By 2006, a new interest in “Arab Jews” was starting to become evident in literature, in non-fiction,⁴ and in a number of translations of books taking up this theme, mainly from English and French.⁵

This new interest in the history of Arab Jews is not limited to writers. Documentary film makers have been in the vanguard in this regard. This trend started with Forget Baghdad (2002), a film about Iraqi Jews, in which, Samir Naqqash, among other things, declares that he is an Arab Jew and that he will never write in any other language but Arabic. In the film as well, Ella Shohat talks


⁵ In addition to novels and nonfiction works written by Arabs about Arab Jews, a number of books by Arab Jews themselves or their children enjoyed popularity in Egypt and other Arab countries. The most famous is the autobiography of Lucette Lagnado: The Man with the White Sharkskin Suit, an Arabic edition of which was published under the title Dar al tanani in Cairo in 2010. Note also the following translations: Adieu, Babyloine (Qattan 1986), in Arabic: [wadaʾān Bābil]; Farida, (Qattan 1991), in Arabic: [farīdā]. The Moroccan novelist Edmond Amran el-Maleh also wrote on this theme in three works that were translated into Arabic: Aïlen, ou, la nuit du récit (el-Maleh 1983), in Arabic: [Ilān ʿaw layl al-ḥakī]; Mille ans, un jour (el-Maleh 1986), in Arabic: [ʿalī ʾam bi -yaum]; Le retour d’Abou el Haki (el-Maleh 1990) in Arabic: [ʿawdat abū al-ḥakī]. See also Eli S. Malka’s study Jacob’s Children in the Land of the Mahdi: Jews of the Sudan (Malka 1997), translated into Arabic by Maci Abu Qarja; [al-yahūd fil-sūdān: qirāʾa fī kitāb il-yahūd salāmun malkā : ʿatfāl ʿaḥ qīb fī buq’at al-mahdī].
about what it means to be an Iraqi Jewish child in Israel, speaking Arabic and living the Iraqi culture at home. The film discusses a question that had not been raised before.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Forget Baghdad} was a film in English, made for the non-Arab audience. Despite being the first of its kind, it did not have much of an impact.

\textit{Salata Baladi} (2007) is the first documentary of this group, made in Arabic for the Arab audience with English subtitles. The film maker Nadia Kamel documents the story of her mother Mary Rosenthal alias Naila Kamel and her Egyptian Jewish-Catholic-Muslim family. Some family members left the country for Italy and Israel, while Mary Rosenthal stayed in Egypt and participated actively in the political life of the country. Mary was imprisoned for five years for being a communist, during the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser.\textsuperscript{7} She shares her story with her grandson and with the audience that didn’t know that the journalist and columnist Naila Kamel is Mary Rosenthal. The film unveils an Egyptian story that had been ignored for decades. A heated debate broke out after screening \textit{Salata Baladi} in Cairo in 2007, not only because the film unfolds a taboo and portrays a part of Egyptian history in a non-conventional way. Nadia faced harsh criticism and was threatened to have her membership in the Cinema Syndicate suspended because the film follows her parents to Israel to visit the mother’s relatives whom she had not seen for more than 50 years. This was considered an act of compromise with Israel that did not conform to the official understanding of how to deal with Israel. Rejecting Israel means boycotting it on all levels. Any visit – whatever the reason – is considered as breaking this boycott. The filmmaker and her family stated clearly on different occasions that their visit does not mean that they support Israel. On the contrary, they are loud critics of the Israeli occupation and supporters of the rights of the Palestinian people. Nonetheless, this is part of the family’s story that Kamel believed had to be told. The film is still screened worldwide. The last screening took place in Cairo in May 2018.

The debate that was sparked by \textit{Salata Baladi} paved the path that Amir Ramses followed, encountering much less criticism and rejection for his two documentaries titled \textit{Egypt’s Jews}.\textsuperscript{8} The films are based on interviews with Egyptian Jews in Egypt and France. Despite censorship, Ramses’ films reached cinemas in Cairo and Alexandria in 2013 and 2014 and gained much interest and success.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Forget Baghdad}. Dir. Samir (2002).
\textsuperscript{9} In 2016 the Arab Film Festival Berlin (ALFILM) dedicated part of its program to the question of Arab Jews in films. The resulting program, \textit{Cousins: Jewish-Arab Identities in Postcolonial Cultural Discourse}, comprised the screening and discussion of ten films, a panel discussion, and a pub-
Other films such as the 2012 documentary *El Gusto* by the Algerian-Irish Safinez Bousbia tell the story of an Algerian music orchestra where Algerian Jews and Muslims sang the popular chaâbi music which flourished in the mid-twentieth century, but then faded into the background. Bousbia’s film attempts to bring together the members of this orchestra; men who are now in their seventies. Their personal stories paint a picture of the country’s turbulent history, with the war of independence proving to be a turning point. Some joined the struggle, while others had to flee after independence to France where there was no warm welcome in store for these *pieds noirs*. Bousbia managed to track down many of the former musicians and bring them together for a reunion concert in Marseilles which forms the stirring climax to this sentimental journey into Algeria’s cultural history.¹⁰ The Moroccan-Canadian film maker Kathy Wazana, made the film *They Were Promised the Sea* which tells the story of a people whose identity as Arab Jews challenges the very notion of an enemy. Informed by the director’s family history, the film investigates the exodus that virtually emptied Morocco of its Jewish population, many believing they were no longer safe in their Arab homeland. Intimate interviews, poetry, recordings of Judeo-Andalusian music performed in Arabic, Hebrew, and Ladino thread the subjects’ storylines and reveal a little-known history of a land and a people that resisted the separation of Arabs and Jews and a country that sees itself as reincarnating the spirit of Andalusia.¹¹ The two latest films of this group are *From Brooklyn to Beirut* (2016) and *At Titi’s Balcony* (2017). *From Brooklyn to Beirut* by the Lebanese filmmaker Rola Khayyat tells the story of Lebanese Jews who left Beirut to New York and are returning to visit their home city and to renovate one of the old synagogues.¹² *At Titi’s Balcony* by the French Egyptian film maker Yasmina Benari deals with the life of the Egyptian Communist Jew Albert Arie.¹³

The above-mentioned films subversively challenge the official nationalistic discourse. Documentary films and novels shifted the whole discussion forward and opened a new space that enables to rethink the concept of the nation and facilitates a more critical and differentiated discussion in the public sphere. Here, I argue, we are observing the emergence of a new, post-nationalistic dis-

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¹³ *At Titi’s Balcony*. Dir. Yasmina Benari. 2017.
course. This rethinking did not find a broad acceptance in the academia in the Arab world, despite the work of a few historians and social scientists who work on this topic.¹⁴

2 Beyond stereotyping

In the literary discourse two novels The Tobacco Keeper by the Iraqi writer Ali Badr¹⁵, The Book of Travel by the Egyptian writer Fatma Oreid¹⁶, and the non-fiction work of Ali Jallawi on the Jews of Bahrain.¹⁷ These literary works are exceptional in that they were not written by the Jews who lived in these countries and left them in the last decades, their children, or even those who have known Jews living among them. The writers represent a new generation of authors, the majority of them in their thirties, a cohort without the experience of encountering Jews in their daily life. Theses, novels, and non-fictional works share common aspects, despite differences in details. All of them try to reconstruct the lives of Jews, whether historical or contemporary. Most of the fictional accounts are based on real biographies, or real stories, that have been changed for literary purposes.

Badr is an Iraqi author who published more than 14 novels and plays some of which were translated into several languages. His novel The Tobacco Keeper was nominated for the Arab Bookers Prize in 2009. The novel tells the story of the musician Yousef Saleh, an Iraqi Jew who was forced to leave Baghdad for Israel in the 1950s. Determined to return to his home country, he succeeded only after assuming the identity of Kamal Midhat, an Iranian-Iraqi. He gained fame as a concert violinist while hiding his real personality and background. His wife and son, whom he left behind in Israel, learned the details of his life through letters that reached Jerusalem by way of Prague and Moscow. All did not end well. Saleh was kidnapped and killed in Baghdad in 2006 after a visit from an American marine. That marine, it turns out, was his son, who had migrated to the United States at an early age and had decided to visit him. The price of this fateful visit is his father’s life. The Tobacco Keeper hence explores the com-

¹⁴ Aomar Boum is a Moroccan socio-anthropologist who works on the Jews of Morocco at the University of California, Los Angeles. Among his publications: Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco. (Boum 2013) and “Partners Against Anti-Semitism: Muslims and Jews Respond to Nazism in French North African Colonies, 1936–1940” (Boum 2014).
¹⁵ Badr, ḥaris al-tabgh (Badr 2008).
¹⁶ Oreid, ṣifr al-tirḥāl (Oreid 2013).
¹⁷ Jallawi, yahīd al-Baḥraīn (Jallawi 2008).
plexity of the refusal of displacement and uprooting and deals with the psychological impact of arriving in an alien land.

In her first novel, *The Book of Travel* (2013), the Egyptian short story writer, novelist and lawyer Fatma Oreid tells the story of an old woman named Sarah who travels for medical treatment from Cairo to Paris where her granddaughter Amina lives. Sarah’s illness brings them both closer, as Amina learns something of the life of her grandmother, who is one of the last Jews living in Egypt. Stories of Sarah’s love for her Muslim husband unveil a world of which Amina knew nothing. The novel is structured as an intergenerational dialogue where family secrets are brought to light. The reader is led through the streets of cosmopolitan Alexandria, passing the shops, the apartment towers, and the synagogues. The joy of the Jewish high holidays fades as the city loses its faithfuls, and Sarah grows accustomed to a unique loneliness. Like Badr, Oreid relegates the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the margins of her novel. The story is not about the national cause, or the political enemy. Hence, *The Book of Travel* offers a dissenting discourse.

*The Jews of Bahrain*, published in 2008, is a study by the Bahraini Ali Jallawi. The study documents the social and economic history of Bahrain’s Jews. Prior to the book’s appearance this history had been ignored. Jallawi is a writer, poet, artist, and dissident who sought asylum in Germany in 2011. With his work he hoped to fill a gap in Bahrain’s history. Writing and publishing the book was subversive, a refusal to be complicit with the official discourse.

These three books are representatives of the numerous works on Arab Jews published over the course of the last decade. These works leave the narrow circle of nationalistic narratives, deconstructing it to understand the story of the individuals behind historical events.¹⁸ This is the beginning of a discourse that is at odds with the official one. The films and literary works discussed here moved the debate forward and opened a new space that enables a rethinking and a more critical and differentiated discussion.

In the Arab context, literature and documentary films are spheres in which unconventional questions can be raised and discussed. This rethinking is taking place in distinct intellectual spheres that allow free expression of thought. The rise of this new discourse is part of a wider process of questioning the official discourse of Arab states on the history of the Jews in Arab countries and implies questioning authoritarian regimes. It is part of a broad emancipation process, reflected in the Arab Spring that filled the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, and Sana’a, culminating in the eighteen days of protests in Cairo’s Midan al-Tahrir.

¹⁸ There is an exception to this generalization: Moustafa Nasr’s *The Jews of Alexandria* remained faithful to the nationalistic discourse.
These processes are not unconnected. A vivid example is the change that took place in Tunis, celebrating the *al-Ghariba* feast, a Tunisian-Jewish feast on Jerba island. Prior to 2012, this feast was not public and took place secretly. After 2012 it returned to be a public event in which Tunisians, Jewish and non-Jewish, participate. The government adopted this celebration and its representatives attend the official part of it.¹⁹ Keenly aware that questioning the history of the Jews was a threat, other states imposed systematic censorship, banning any publication that might raise questions about and challenge them. The novel by the Syrian author Ibrahim Aljabeeen titled *Diary of a Jew from Damascus* (2006) was censored and banned.²⁰

### 3 A step forward, a step backward: the role of television and mass culture

In Egypt, television drama series, known as *musalsalat*, have their share in this phenomenon. The first to present an Arab Jew in a sympathetic light was a 2009 Egyptian series, ‘*Anā qalbī dallī* (My heart is my guide).²¹ It portrays the life of the famous Egyptian Jewish singer Laila Murad. Since the series was broadcast during Ramadan via satellite TV, it reached an audience beyond Egypt in all Arab countries. Laila Murad’s Jewishness was a topic but not the focus of the show.

The question of Egypt’s Jews started to gain public attention after decades of being neglected. At the end of 2012, during an interview, Issam al-Aryan, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, offered displaced Egyptian Jews an invitation to return.²² This invitation boosted a public debate taking place mainly on television and in social media. On 4 January 2013, for the first time an Egyptian Jew, Magda Haroun,²³ was interviewed on television by the famous moderator Hafiz Almiran-

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¹⁹ The author attended this feast on 2–3 May 2017 and 2–3 May 2018.
²⁰ Aljabeeen, yaumiyāt yahūdī min Dimashq.
²³ Magda Haroun is the daughter of the famous lawyer Shehata Haroun (1920 – 2001). A Jewish communist, he refused to leave and emigrate from Egypt. He later published memoirs entitled *A Jew from Cairo*. Magda Haroun grew up in Cairo. On March 2013 she was chosen by the Jews who still live in the country to be the head of the Egyptian Jewish Community. The Egyptian Jewish community represents the 10 Jews who still live in Egypt and is responsible for the Synagogues and other community ownership in the country.
Besides Haroun, who subsequently became the head of the Egyptian Jewish community, other Jews were interviewed by telephone during the program, including Albert Arie and Nadia Haroun. Other interviews followed, one of the most famous being Professor Khaled Fahmy’s conversation with Liliane Dawood on 14 January 2013.

Since these individuals were getting the chance for the first time to speak for themselves about their own history, this marked a turning point. Other television and newspaper interviews followed. One of these was the appearance of Magda Haroun on one of Egypt’s most popular television shows sāhibat al-saʿāda (Her Excellency), which is a hybrid between a talk show and an interview in which the famous Egyptian actress Isaad Younis interviews prominent figures of cinema, art and society. They featured Magda Haroun on 16 September 2014, the BBC broadcasted an interview with Giselle Khoury on 14.09.2015. Television programmers and journalists hence ended years of complicity with the official narrative, offering a competing version of events.

In 2015, however, the official discourse regained ground. During Ramadan, at prime time, the Egyptian satellite channel CBC broadcast a drama entitled

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24 Bi-tawqit al-qāhira (Cairo Time), talk show of Hafiz al-Mirazi on the Egyptian Channel Dream, on 04.01.2013, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOrf35rPJbs (14 January 2018). This video does not exist online any more due to the changes in the media system in Egypt and the security service taking over media houses. As a result of this, the open online archives have been deleted. I did not manage to find any downloads. More on the Egyptian State taking over media production, please see: https://madamasr.com/en/2017/12/12/feature/politics/looking-into-the-latest-acquisition-of-egyptian-media-companies-by-general-intelligence/ (05 July 2020) and https://madamasr.com/en/2017/04/12/feature/politics/egypts-media-in-a-state-of-emergency/ (05 July 2020).

25 Interview with Professor Khaled Fahmy by Liliane Dawood in her talk show al-sūra al-kāmila (Full Picture) on the Egyptian ON-TV channel, on 13.01.2013, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bgquxxr1brY (1 January 2018). The historian Prof. Khaled Fahmy and the presenter Liliane Dawood have been banned from the TV. See: https://madamasr.com/en/2016/06/27/news/u/update-tv-host-liliane-dauboud-deported-to-beirut/ (05 July 2020) and https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36649781 (05 July 2020). Notice that the Egyptian authorities banned the talk show of Liliane Dawood and she was deported from Egypt. All her shows are banned from youtube since March 2018.

26 Her Excellency [sāhibat al-saʿāda], talk show by Isaad Younis, on the Egyptian CBC channel, interview with Magda Haroun on 16.09.2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNm9ZFRgVgk (14 January 2018).


28 The Scene [al-mashhad], long interview format -mainly political- by Gisele Khoury BBC Arabic, on 14.09.2015, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnEuKYvLJA (14 January 2018).
Haret al-Yahud (The Jewish Quarter), about the Jewish quarter in Cairo. Not only were Egyptians watching; millions in other Arab countries swelled the broadcast audience. This television drama consolidated the nationalist discourse tremendously due to the very high number of viewers throughout the Arab world and beyond. In her study, Dramas of Nationhood, Lila Abu-Lughod analyzed the politics of television in Egypt. Reaching all social strata, television and other mass media in Egypt have enormous power: “Television drama is a key institution for the production of national culture in Egypt.”

Going beyond Abu-Lughod’s contention that television drama produced cliched versions of Egyptian personalities, the concept of a “culture industry” developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno is a model that can shed light on the role of TV Series and soap operas in influencing public awareness. Along with “mass culture,” this term was fundamental to the Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, a cultural industry exists when culture and art become functional instruments (technologies) to create a mass culture that aims to shape popular awareness (Horkheimer and Adorno 1979, 161). “Criticism and respect,” they explained, “disappear in the cultural industry; the former becomes a mechanical expertise, the latter is succeeded by a shallow cult of leading personalities.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1979, 161)

Besides the technical aspect of the culture industry, the production company Al-Adl group is one of the most powerful production companies in Egypt and they are allies of the political system in Egypt. The images of the Jewish quarter in Haret al-Yahud, with its expensive apartments, fancy clothing, and snatches of French conversation reflect the lives of the middle and upper middle class. Contradicting reality, one never catches a glimpse of the narrow alleys of the quarter that was inhabited by the Jewish and non-Jewish Egyptian working class. Most of the Jews depicted in the show are either Zionists who want to emigrate to Israel or followers of the king who dislike the Free Officers. If one had to assign a cause for Jewish emigration, based on the show, one would point to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose faithful are shown burning the stores of good Jewish neighbors and undermining any harmony between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Neither the title of the soap opera nor the story itself reflects the reality of the quarter as it existed in the second half of the 1940s. One could say, in an Adorno/Horkheimerian mode, that the show becomes a “technology” to manifest the official and

nationalist narrative about Egyptian Jews which brought success to the production company. Departing from Abu-Lughod’s statement and Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of cultural industry, the series presents normative images of good and bad along the lines of religious affiliations.

*Haret al-Yahud* received significant media attention. Over seventy articles and reports discussed the series, among them the main media outlets of the Arab world and foreign newspapers and television channels. Most of the coverage was positive, though some accused General Sisi of flirting with Israel and

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others criticized the show’s lack of historical accuracy. At no point, however, the
narrative departs from the official nationalistic discourse on Egypt’s Jews. De-
spite the fact that such a broadcasting event was unimaginable a decade ago,
the series constitutes a step backward because it reinforced the official national-
istic discourse. The producers hijacked the figure of the Arab Jew and the Jewish
quarter, putting them to the use the cultural industry mandated, in an act of
complicity with the official nationalist discourse. The contrast between the de-
piction of Jews in *Haret al-Yahud* and the work of young authors and filmmakers
highlights the zone of dissent opened by the latter.

This essay argues that despite setbacks a post-nationalistic discourse is
being born. This post-nationalistic discourse may not yet be systematically im-
plemented across the range of genres in the culture industry of Egypt. However,
its occupies a narrow margin that rejects any form of complicity with the official
narrative and represents a movement toward dissent, to a more differentiated
and a more critical perception of history.

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