



UNITED NATIONS
SECURITY
COUNCIL



Distr.
GENERAL

S/10698
14 June 1972

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

LETTER DATED 13 JUNE 1972 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE
PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to bring to your attention the well-planned campaign of escalation which Israel is mounting to justify a military action against the Arab States. Having waged a vicious campaign against Egypt and Lebanon, and faithfully following the pattern of Israeli diversionary tactics, Israel is now concentrating on Syria, looking for flimsy excuses to cover up for the militarism of her leaders.

On 12 June 1972, Minister of State Israel Galilee gave the following statement to the Knesset: "Israel will not stand arms folded vis-à-vis the persecution of the Jews in Syria. We will act in an organized and bold manner to save them." He added that "Israel will refrain from any action that might expose their life to danger". He said that "there is no justification to violate the human rights of the Jews in Syria, and to keep them as hostages because of the Middle East crisis. Israel feels that she must act in a very efficient and decisive manner in order to prevent the persecution of Jews anywhere in the world". He welcomed the Jews of Syria to Israel to emigrate and said addressing them: "Israel considers you as an inseparable part of her own people". He alleged "that Jews in Syria are confined to quarters for them only and that they must carry special identification cards". "There are", he said, "four Jews in prison in Syria" and added that "Syrian authority had released 18 others who were jailed without trial" and that "Syria did so under the pressure of world public opinion".

It is to be noticed, first, that this vicious campaign against Syria, which started two years ago, is part and parcel of the world-wide Zionist campaign to have Jews from all over the world leave their countries of origin and emigrate to Israel. This is proved by the fact that, during the twenty-eighth Zionist Congress, held in Jerusalem between 18 January and 28 January 1972, the call for immigration of the Jews from all over the world to Israel emerged as the basic issue. Different reasons were given to justify such an immigration. The Jews of the Arab world, more especially Syria now, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe must emigrate because of alleged persecution and anti-Semitism. The Jews of the United States and Western Europe because of "the wave of assimilation, which is eroding total Jewish communities". ... "South American Jewry must leave to Israel before it is too late, noting that in the current social and economic upheaval on the South American continent, no far-seeing Jew can deny that the Zionist solution is the only answer for the 800,000 Jews living there." (Israel Digest, 28 January 1972, p. 2).

Addressing the Congress, Mr. Ben Gurion, the "Armed Prophet", himself an illegal immigrant by his own confession, (see The Jews in Their Own Land, p. 315) declared emphatically: "The majority of the Jewish People must come to live in Israel. We need another five or six million Jews." It thus becomes clear that although various reasons are given to urge immigration of all Jews of the world, the result is the same: a world-wide campaign for Jewish immigration to Israel, which, in fact, is, as it has always been from the inception of the notorious Zionist doctrine, a military mobilization whose aims cannot but be achieved by settlement of conquered Arab territory and further expansion. Briefly, it is the continuation of conquest through immigration.

The Congress adopted a number of resolutions, including aliya (immigration) and absorption. Following are some of the provisions:

"1. Aliya as the Centre of Activities of the Zionist Movement

In view of the fact that Aliya is the quintessence of the Zionist Movement, the Congress declares that the task of creating an aliya consciousness among the Jewish masses in the Diaspora must be the centre of Zionist activities.

"...

"3. Fostering of Immigration

- a. The members and leaders of the Zionist Movement are called upon to use all the means at their disposal to encourage the present and future flow of aliya in their communities, especially through the intensification and the expansion of Jewish education."

With regard to the groundless accusations against the situation of the Jews in Syria, it is clear that Israel Galilee, a desperate, neurotic Zionist, gives himself the right to interfere in the internal affairs of any State and gives himself the right to speak on behalf of any Jewish community anywhere in the world - a right that is denied to him by the realities of life and law. All people of Syria are basically defined by their citizenship and allegiance to their country and not by allegiance to this or that religion.

It is a lie to say that there are special identification cards for the Jews in Syria. For civil purposes, i.e., having personal matters decided by communal courts, all Syrian citizens carry identification cards which show their religious affiliation. The Arabs in Israel, who constitute third-class citizens, after Oriental Jews, and who live under military rule, carry special numbers on their identification cards to identify them as Arabs in Israel.

Furthermore, Galilee spoke of a Jewish quarter in Damascus, while he knows very well that there is a Magarbeh (North African Moslem) quarter such as the Magarbeh quarter in Jerusalem that was bulldozed by the Zionist occupiers. For instance, Damascus, the oldest inhabited city in the world, has been, from time

/...

immemorial, a centre where national groups from many parts of the world have settled and lived peacefully and amicably. Ironically, terrorist Galilee, one of the planners of the massacre of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, where "more than 200 people were killed or injured", including "the 15 Jewish civilians" (emphasis added) (Menachem Begin, The Revolt, Story of the Irgun, p. 220), spoke of four Syrian Jews jailed in Syria but forgot the 4,000 Arabs who rot in Israeli jails, as is now recorded in many international documents in the possession of the United Nations. And is Mr. Galilee not aware of resolution 3 (XXVIII), adopted by the Commission on Human Rights on 22 March 1972, which, after enumerating the atrocities committed by Israel in the occupied Territories, stated in paragraph 7:

"Considers that grave breaches of the fourth Geneva Convention committed by Israel in the occupied Arab territories constitute war crimes and an affront to humanity" (emphasis added)?

Is Galilee aware of at least 16 condemnations by the General Assembly and some of its principal organs and commissions, between 1967 and today, for flagrant violations by Israel of Arab human rights?

Syria is an open country and has been visited by foreign correspondents. They came from the United States, France, England, Belgium and have published scores of articles about the situation of the Jews in Syria which destroy all the vicious accusations of Israel Galilee and company in and outside Israel. As samples of such articles, I refer specifically to the following:

(1) La Tribune des Nations, (Paris), 7 May 1971, "Les Juifs de Damas, Pierre Démeron.

(2) The Christian Science Monitor, (Boston), 27 November 1971, "How Do Jews Fare in Syria?", John Cooley.

(3) La Libre Belgique, (Brussels), 27 December 1971, "Chez les Juifs de Damas", Robert Vandussen.

(4) The New York Times, (New York), 4 February 1972, "Leader of Damascus Jews Hopeful, Says Plight is Exaggerated".

These articles, which are annexed to my letter, have already been circulated to the Commission on Human Rights on 28 February 1972.

It is my duty, Mr. President, to warn that Israel and its leaders bent on continued aggression are trying nothing else but to find a pretext to justify warfare.

Upon instructions from my Government, I request that this letter and its annex be circulated as an official document of the Security Council.

(Signed) George J. TOMEH
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

THE JEWS OF DAMASCUS

By Pierre Démeron

The Jews of Damascus make up the major part of the Jewish community of Syria. There are 2,700 of them in the capital as against 1,300 in Aleppo, and 450 in El Qamishliye in the north-east of the country. They live in what was once known as "Haret el Yahud", the "Jewish quarter", which is adjacent to the "Christian" or "Kurdish" quarter of Damascus, and the population there is mixed. I was shown a house the first floor of which was occupied by a Christian family, the second floor by a Moslem family and the third floor by a Jewish family, and this was no exception. The term "Jewish quarter" is a historical one which has become outdated because of the decline in the number of Jews in the quarter and the influx of other groups, particularly Palestinians. My taxi driver did not even know where the Jewish quarter was, and I had to explain that it was "near Bab Sharqi". "Those of us who choose to live in this quarter", Selim Totah, head of the Jewish community, explained to me, "do so because we have our synagogues here - a dozen of them - not to mention our private chapels, our schools, and especially our kosher food shops; but some of us live in other parts of the city, where many of us have our businesses."

In the rest of the city, it is easy to tell which stores are Jewish, which are Christian and which are Moslem. The Jewish stores are closed on Saturday, the Sabbath, the Christian stores on Sunday, and the Moslem stores on Friday, the official day of rest. I saw many Jewish shops in the modern downtown area, particularly near the Hotel Omayyad, and they were among the most elegant: haberdasheries, tailors, goldsmiths, jewellers, perfume shops, pharmacies. "We have a better reputation than the others because we pay our bills faithfully", Selim Totah, himself a merchant in the Hamadiye Souq, told me proudly. But there are also Jewish lawyers (five), doctors (twenty), dentists (eight), and pharmacists (fifteen) who practise without hindrance.

Community Council

The Jewish community of Damascus is administered by a seven-member community council presided over by Selim Totah, who lives in one of those old, elegant Damascus villas with a patio and courtyards graced with fountains and orange trees, of which there are still so many in the Syrian capital. Among the members of the Council are Ibrahim Hamra, a young rabbi with a melancholy smile, who is head of the Ben Maimoun School, several dry goods merchants, a doctor, Dr. Nessim Hasbani, and a tailor. The Community Council runs the clinic on Amin St., a welfare programme, and, most notably, the two schools, which are community schools but, like all Syrian schools since the nationalization of education in 1967, teach the official curriculum. Each school has two directors who share the same office, one appointed by the Community Council, the other by the Ministry. The Alliance School, run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle of Paris, is located in a building that has been designated a historical monument, formerly the home of a very rich Jewish

/...

family, the Lisbannes, its splendour now somewhat faded. It would be hard to find a more delightful setting for a school. Attending the school are 445 children, of whom only 360 are Jewish, the others being Moslem and Christian (about 30 of the latter are of Palestinian origin). Most of them wear little cream-coloured smocks, and the girls have a white collar and a bow in their hair. One of the girls, with her straight nose, her pulled-back hair and her freckles, is astonishingly like a girl in a Vermeer painting.

In one class, a young teacher with a moustache, a Moslem - he rolls his r's - is explaining a French text describing the efforts of a large ant to lift more than its own weight. "Selma, what's the opposite of heavy?" Selma, who is shy, mumbles "light" barely audibly.... At the Alliance School students go from the first to the sixth years (equivalent to the twelfth to the sixth in France). Then they continue on to the Ben Maimoun School, the intermediate school with a white and gold synagogue where the children, three times a day, pray and receive religious instruction; the non-Jews, of course, are excused from these activities.

Besides the usual subjects, Hebrew, which is necessary for a reading of the sacred books, is taught. Only two of the 22 teachers are Moslems, and they teach Arabic literature to 388 boys and girls, of whom about 10 are Christians and Moslems, again, sometimes of Palestinian origin. I asked the young Rabbi Ibrahim Hamra whether children of different backgrounds sometimes had fights as they did in schools all over the world. "There have never been fights between Christians, Moslems and Jews as such, but naturally there might have been a fight between two children, one a Moslem or a Christian and the other a Jew."

At the moment, screaming with delight, they were shoving each other so as not to be missed by the camera. They were happy, well dressed and well fed, and did not resemble their little compatriots, the refugees from the Golan Heights whom we also filmed, looking nervous and thin as they played in the dust of the refugee camp.... Soon, obediently lined up and standing more or less at attention, they would, as they did every day, salute the hoisting of the flag - which is black, white and red with three green stars - shouting the motto of Baath Syria, "Liberty, unity, socialism" while a worn record of the national anthem was played....

Studying in peace

At Ben Maimoun, the students complete their seventh, eighth and ninth years and receive their brevet. They then go on to the lycée to prepare their baccalaureat. There are now about 50 Jewish students in Damascus lycées. Afterward, they go on to the university, where about 30 Jewish students are enrolled: four in pharmacology, 14 in medicine, one in Arabic, three in French, two at the School of Agriculture, four at the School of Dentistry, and two in science. Incidentally, the Alliance School and Ben Maimoun, both receive outside support, the first from the Alliance Israélite Universelle of Paris, which sends 70,000 Syrian pounds per month, the second by the Syrian Jewish community of

New York, which sends \$1,400 to the school and \$2,250 for community projects. These are not the only two Jewish schools in Syria. In Aleppo there is another, the Samawal School, which goes as far as the brevet and in Qamishliye, a fourth, a primary and secondary school.

Although I was accompanied by an official on my first trip, during subsequent visits I was able to contact a great many people with complete freedom. I was invited to a circumcision and to a wedding. I attended Sabbath services in various synagogues, without advance notice. I paid a call on the Grand Rabbi Nassim Andbo, who has the beard of a prophet and is said to be a hundred years old. He is very happy with the younger generation; and the only thing he deplores is their interest in conquering the moon.... I had a long talk with Selim Totah of the Community Council, who has the profile of a bald eagle. I met many students: Cily Ftaiha, holder of a licence en droit, who is studying French while she teaches at the Ben Maimoun School, her brother Zaki, a third-year medical student, David Kabarity, a second-year business student.

A month and a half ago, to thank me for having exhibited the film which I made in the school, the Community Council invited me to be its guest in discovering Jewish cooking, in the visiting room of the Ben Maimoun School. During that leisurely visit I was able to see that they led a peaceful life, that their physical and material situation was as good as it could be in a country that is at war and occupied, and that "they are infinitely better off, mentally and physically, than the refugees from the Golan Heights, or the Palestinians", as a high official familiar with their problems put it to me. "No harm has been done to their persons or property. They have never known the constant and interminable curfews, the brutal searches, the dynamiting of houses, the expulsions, the looting, as have the Arabs of Gaza, Jerusalem and the other occupied territories. These are Syrians like any other Syrians, and they are suffering infinitely less than many others from the war which we are obliged to wage against imperialism and zionism."

The Palestine Question

"Of the more than six million Syrians, 100,000 are refugees from the Golan Heights and 250,000 are Palestine refugees. Children died of cold during the winter of 1970 at the Barzé Camp. But the only ones the West has been concerned about are the 4,000 Jews who, as you see, live as peacefully as possible!" The speaker was indignant. "The first mistake made in discussing this problem, unless it reflects dishonesty or racism (is the life of the Jews more important than that of other groups of the population?) is to make a distinction between the fate of Syrian Jews and that of the other groups in this area which have suffered from the war since Israel's take-over of Palestine. The Syrians of the Jewish faith are victims of zionism like all of us, but their lives have been upset by the attacks much less than the lives of many of us."

/...

"Syrians like any other Syrians?" General Hafez el Assad, President of the Republic, also told me so. You hear this from everyone in Syria, the Jews included. This constantly repeated assertion is more a reflection of nostalgia for the recent past and hope for the future than of present realities. "'Syrians like any other Syrians' was what the Syrian Jews were and what they will be, and it is what they are today in principle but no longer altogether what they are in fact, but that is only because of the existence of the State of Israel, which is the fault of zionism." This was how a prominent citizen of Damascus explained it to me. "It is the zionists' ambition to turn all the Jews of the world, and particularly the Jews of the Arab countries, into potential Israelis. While they wait for that to happen, they are making them suspect just about everywhere in the world, and especially in a country like ours which is at war and occupied by Israelis with their tanks 50 kilometres from Damascus. Name me a country which is at war with Israel where the Jews are not, because of zionism, suspected of having dual allegiance?"

"And our Jews have émigré relatives, some living in Israel, some who are soldiers in the Israeli army, and they keep in contact with them through complicated and indirect channels." The fact is that letters arriving from Mexico or the United States actually come from Israel. Trusted friends act as mail-drops. The reply can be given to a trusted friend or to a foreigner who will mail it from Beirut or elsewhere. Not to mention the Israeli radio, which they can listen to and which certainly cannot fail to influence them.

Hence the discreet surveillance by the intelligence service of strangers seen walking in the Jewish quarter.

Hence the special measures applied to the Jews, inevitable in view of the war, and really very mild if one remembers the fate of the Palestinians, the refugees from the Golan Heights, or even just the Israeli Arabs. "Because the Israeli Arabs, too, just because they are Arabs, are suspect in the eyes of the Israelis in Palestine and in the other occupied territories", a Palestinian told me. "Read the book by Sabri Gerjes, an Israeli Arab, on the situation of the Israeli Arabs. You will read all about the special laws, some dating from the British mandate, which allow the Israelis to rob them legally, arrest them, hold them in prison arbitrarily, and which makes them third-class citizens, the second-class citizens being the Jews from the Arab countries."

The most important of these measures is the requirement that Syrian Jews should request a permit to travel across the country from one district (mohafaza) to another. The Jews of Damascus, for example, cannot go any further on the road to Beirut than the little rustic taverns several kilometres from the city, where it is so pleasant to sit and sip arag, the national drink.

"As soon as we request a permit, we get it," Selim Totah, head of the community, explained to me. "This measure is not intended to harass us, but to protect us."

/...

"It is true that in a country where there are several hundred thousand victims of zionism, many of whom are armed and are fighting in resistance groups, some people are likely not to make the distinction between Jews and zionists, which is such a necessary and difficult distinction to make", I was told by one of the directors of the Centre of Palestine Studies in Damascus. "For western public opinion, which allowed six million Jews to be massacred during the war, the blood of a Jew has become much more precious than that of an Arab. We are too aware of this not to take necessary measures to protect our compatriots of the Jewish faith. Because we have taken those measures, there have never been serious incidents, not in June 1967 or during any other crisis. At the time of the attack on the El Aqsa mosque, for example, there was no move to reprisals, as there was in Jerusalem against the Arabs after certain attacks by the resistance. In Israel, as in the other occupied territories, the Arabs are subjected, among other things, to restrictions on freedom of movement, not to mention the constant curfews." I had heard that the identity cards of Syrian Jews had the word "Jew" stamped across them in red, a statement which might well remind Europeans of the time of the yellow stars.

I asked several Syrian Jewish friends and a Syrian Greek Orthodox friend to show me their identity cards. They were the same: along with other information, they all indicated the bearer's religion - Christian, Moslem Jewish. That was how it was even at the time of the Mandate. On one of the cards that I saw, the religion - Jewish - unlike on the other cards, was written in red ink. "Police authorities all over the world use red ink so that officials can tell at a glance that the bearer is subject to surveillance or special protection. We are at war. And we are watching a certain number of our Jewish, Christian and Moslem compatriots whom we have good reason to suspect. In the struggle which we are waging against underdevelopment and imperialism we have many enemies, who are not always outside the country... however, as long as they don't do anything, we don't bother them. The Kohen incident was a lesson to us, but we have no camps in the desert like those in occupied Sinai..."

Another measure: Syrian Jews eligible for the army are exempt from military service, not by law but in fact. The authorities simply forget to call them up... this really seems to satisfy everyone, and to save them from the unhappy position of having to shoot at a cousin or a brother. For all the young Jews of Damascus surely do not agree with Albert Nasiri, the young pharmacist, son of the owner of the largest bazaar in Damascus, the "Omayyad", who says, "It is not my cousin or my brother who wish to invade my country, but those who live in the neighbourhood where I spent my childhood. Relations between people today can no longer be based on religion or blood ties. Vietnamese revolutionaries are obliged to kill other Vietnamese who are in the pay of the United States. We are in the same situation."

The policy of Hafez el Assad

On my first trip, I remember a long conversation with a Jewish student. After complaining about the measures to which I have referred without dramatizing them, he wound up his list of woes by bemoaning the fact that "they've put Palestinians in our neighbourhood..."

/...

I was disconcerted for a moment, then I said that the Palestinians would no doubt prefer to be at home rather than in "his" neighbourhood, and that, besides, they were better off there than in the tent camps, or holed up in concrete blocks with corrugated tin roofs, roasting in summer and freezing in winter. And that compared to the small complaints he had just enumerated, the suffering of the displaced persons who were victims of the war seemed to me a great deal more serious.

"Maybe", he replied, "but when you suffer you do not think about the suffering of others." There lies the whole problem.

So is the solution to let those who wish to leave do so, like the 20,379 Syrians of Jewish origin who left Syria between independence and the eve of the war of 1967? "You forget that we are at war and occupied", said Colonel Ghazi Abou Akel. "A country at war can hardly encourage travel by its nationals abroad except for valid reasons. No Syrian citizen, whatever his religion, leaves the country without good reason. Here again our Jewish compatriots are subject to the same law as everyone else. Besides, some of them, for reasons of health, for example, have been able to go abroad". (Selim Totah, among others, confirmed this.) "Moreover, we know how much pressure zionism is exerting on the diaspora and how much help the zionists get from it. Surely, you would not want us to contribute to the human and financial resources of zionism - our enemy is already strong enough and rich enough as it is - or to provide them with men so that they can consolidate their occupation of Arab lands and houses! Besides," the Colonel added, "judging from the way the Jews of Arab origin are treated in Israel, they are much better off here, despite the restrictions of the war. No doubt the zionists go to so much trouble to persuade the world that the Jews in the Arab countries are martyrs and that they think only about moving to Israel in order to make us forget that the millions of Jews in the United States and Western Europe who are free to move to Israel prefer to stay where they are. And to make us forget, too, the way they treat the Oriental Jews, who are at the point where they have become the 'Black Panthers' of Israel! Incidentally, isn't there an 'Association for the Deliverance of Israeli Jews from the Arab countries' in your country?"

Like all Syrians, the Jews have pinned a great deal of hope on a change in the group in power. They have participated in demonstrations in support of General Hafez el Assad. Banners proclaiming their support for the General were shown on television, and when he took power they sent him a telegram of congratulations and support. Selim Totah also told me that the Community Council had requested an audience with the General but had not yet received a reply. "I must admit that in four months General Hafez el Assad has not wasted his time." A few days later, moreover, the new head of State told me: "I will soon receive a delegation of Jewish citizens to hear their complaints, just as I have heard those from other groups of citizens. The struggle which we are waging is for the liberation of all the Arabs of Palestine, whether Moslems, Christians or Jews."

/...

This should serve as yet another reminder to those who would like to forget about it that in the Middle East, which for 20 years has been torn by war, no group of people can be privileged as compared to others, that the fate of one group is inseparable from that of others and that there will be no just peace in the Middle East until the rights of all are respected, starting with those who have been the most neglected and scorned, the Arab people of Palestine.

The following dispatch was sent to AFP on 19 October 1971:

"Following a communication from the International Conference for the Deliverance of Middle Eastern Jews indicating that 12 young Syrians of Jewish origin were being held in Syria for having expressed the wish to leave their country, the Mouvement international de lutte antiraciste (16, rue Augereau, Paris 7^e) requested Mr. Alain Pöher to send it the names of the persons concerned as well as details on other Jews who have reportedly been arrested in the country. The Mouvement international de lutte antiraciste will make an investigation and, if necessary, send a delegation from its Damascus bureau to get to the facts about these reports, which appear to be chiefly propaganda directed against the Arab States."

HOW DO JEWS FARE IN SYRIA?

By John K. Cooley

Staff correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

Damascus, Syria

"As you can see," said Selim Totah, president of the Damascus Jewish community, "Syrian Jews are living better lives than many other people in this country."

The Damascus Jewish quarter, near the "street called straight" of Biblical tradition, is indistinguishable from the rest of the larger area in the old part of Damascus called the "Christian quarter". A visitor needs a guide to find it.

Mr. Totah was interviewed in the office of one of the community's two Jewish schools, an elementary school supported by the Alliance Israélite Universelle of Paris. The other is the Ben Maimoun secondary school, supported by Syrian Jews in New York City.

A bachelor and a former merchant of the Hamadiye Souq, or covered market, Mr. Totah lives in one of the old garden villas once famous here. He is a genial, kindly man with a keen sense of humour.

/...

"No one," he said, however, "is more militant than I am when it comes to knocking on some Syrian minister's door and standing up for my community's rights."

Travel restrictions

Mr. Totah and Rabbi Ibrahim Hamra, a young man whom this reporter first mistook for a Syrian foreign-ministry official because of his stylish Western haircut and American-looking suit and topcoat, both acknowledged that Syrian Jews are subject to travel restrictions.

But they are not, as charged by Israeli and Zionist groups abroad, confined to a radius of a few miles from their homes.

Like some Moslem and Christian Syrians, however, they need permits to travel from one district to another outside the Damascus district.

"These are often given at once, and almost never longer than 24 to 48 hours later," said Mr. Totah. "This is not a measure to restrict us but rather to protect us. After all, Syria is at war, and part of our territory is occupied by an enemy."

Disservice seen

Colonel Ghazi Abou Akel, Syrian Army information officer who appeared to be on excellent personal terms with Mr. Totah and Rabbi Hamra, said, "The foreign propaganda and pressure is doing these people a real disservice. There was no problem before the Israelis created it. In reality, they are trying to use the Jews in Arab countries as a political instrument and as a smokescreen to hide the bad treatment of Arabs in the occupied territories and the discrimination against Arabs and Oriental Jews in Israel itself."

Both Syrian Jews and government officials confirm that some Syrian Jews, as well as Syrian Moslems and Christians, have been arrested for illegal border crossing or for trying to leave the country without a passport.

"We have security problems, and there are constant efforts by enemy agents to enter and leave the country. Naturally we have to control this," said Colonel Abou Akel.

"Anyone detained," Mr. Totah asserted, "is held because he broke a law. It is as simple as that." Allegations of torture or mistreatment are denied by both sides.

/...

Identity cards

Syrian Jews carry identity cards noting their religion and other personal data. Christians and Moslems carry identical cards.

The latest Syrian census shows an increase in the Damascus Jewish community from 2,700 in 1967 to 4,000 at present. Over 20,000 Jews, the Government says, left the country from Israel's formation in 1948 until 1967.

Besides Mr. Totah and Rabbi Hamra, the Damascus Community Council includes a doctor, a tailor, and three merchants. It administers a dispensary, the two schools, and welfare projects.

The schools follow the official government curricula, prescribed for all schools including those run by Christian religious orders, since nationalization of schools in 1967, with the addition of instruction in Hebrew for prayer services.

Of a total of about 900 students in the two schools, about 100 are Moslem or Christian, Rabbi Hamra said. "And quite a few," he added, "are Palestinian Arab children. Their families consider them lucky to be here and not out freezing or hungry in the refugee camps."

Rabbinical court

A Rabbinical court handles marriage, divorce, and other civil affairs of the community. Mr. Totah denied any restrictions on freedom of worship or profession. At the latest count, he said, the faculty of Damascus University includes 12 Jewish professors of medicine and four more to graduate this year, nine of pharmacy, two of commerce, two of agriculture, two of French literature, one each of English literature and engineering.

At present there are five practising Jewish physicians in Damascus and four lawyers. Many Jews are merchants. They have shops, offices, and residences throughout the city, "though most people prefer to live close to our schools, synagogues, and kosher food shops," Mr. Totah said.

Theoretically Jews are eligible for military service. In practice they are not called up.

"We regret this," said Mr. Totah. "Military service is a national duty, not a privilege. If I had son, I would be perfectly willing for him to serve and to fight Israel or another enemy, if necessary."

/...

The following is the full text of an article published in the Belgian newspaper "La Libre Belgique", dated Monday, 27 December 1971, under the following headlines:

A VISIT WITH THE JEWS OF DAMASCUS

"Our situation is greatly exaggerated",
head of Jewish community declares

(From our special correspondent)

Several weeks ago, the "International Conference for the Deliverance of Middle Eastern Jews" made public some alarming reports about the fate of the Jews residing in Syria. A press conference was held in Paris at which two young Jews, an 18-year old boy and a 23-year old girl, stated that they had fled the country. They wished to remain anonymous because their families had stayed behind.

They said that the approximately 5 million Jews now living in Syria are all subjected to special laws, that they cannot travel more than five kilometres from their homes, that their identity card indicates that they are Jewish, that they are arrested arbitrarily and mistreated, that the two remaining Jewish schools are controlled by the army, and that they are allowed to hold only manual jobs. In short, they indicated that the Jews had virtually been held as hostages since the 1967 war.

One of our reporters recently visited the Jewish quarter of Damascus, where he met the head of the Jewish community of the Syrian capital. This is his report:

The narrow streets wind among the houses in a complex and inextricable maze. The old houses, all of the same sand colour, are often still very beautiful, with their wooden loggias where now, in the early afternoon, a few people can be seen as the siesta hour begins. These are people who do not stand out in any way, children, especially, who meet in quick huddles on the street corners then scatter suddenly like sparrows. A neighbourhood like many others in this sometimes bustling, sometimes drowsy city of Damascus: the Jewish quarter.

A narrow lane opens on to a square as big as a pocket handkerchief. Here there is an old sculpted doorway where Mr. Totah, head of the Jewish community of Damascus, who has been notified of our arrival by Syrian officials, awaits us. His office is dimly lighted by two windows from which we glimpse an extraordinary old courtyard in the purest Arab style. Mr. Totah, with his deeply lined face and fatherly smile, sitting behind his desk under a portrait of General Assad, chief of State, orders tea, takes out a packet of cigarettes, welcomes us in excellent French, asks us who we are and where we are from and then is silent, waiting for our questions.

/...

"We flirt a little"

"How are your relations with Syrians of other faiths?"

"They are friendly, and have never been affected by outside events. They are brotherly relations."

Pause. A broad smile.

"We flirt a little."

Then, becoming serious again:

"We are able to exercise our religious, social and economic rights. Of course, there are security measures, but they are the same for everyone because the country has been through difficult periods. But we have never been singled out. The Government protects us more than the others. There are prohibited military zones and we have to obtain a permit to travel, but this applies to other Syrians as well."

"What about for travel abroad?"

"There, we are subject to more severe restrictions for security reasons. But we can go to Beirut for health reasons, for example."

"What about education?"

"Where you are now is one of the two schools of the Jewish quarter of Damascus. It has 480 students, 100 of them non-Jews. There is another school, not far from here, with 400 students. We teach the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education."

"And the university?"

"The universities are completely open to us."

Mr. Totah takes out a small notebook.

"We now have twelve students in medicine, nine in pharmacology, three in dentistry, two in business, two in agriculture, three in French, three in English and one at the polytechnical school."

"Can they find jobs?"

"We work freely. We have some very well known doctors here. We have merchants. And I can assure you that the other merchants prefer to do business with us because we are more honest in our dealings."

/...

"Have many Syrian Jews left the country?"

"Yes, many of us have emigrated. As you know, we are the wandering Jews. But events have not particularly increased this trend. We have emigrated at all times, especially to the United States. And we receive financial support from New York, sent by Jews who came from Damascus and Aleppo.

"I was received by the President"

"You don't do military service?"

"No, we don't. Personally, I think this is wrong, and I have said so. Besides you know, I make demands. I am intransigent, I have responsibilities, I protest. The doors are open to us, in all ministries. Recently I was received by President Assad.

"What about your synagogues?"

"We have 14 of them in Damascus. They are all open for worship. But there are not many worshippers."

"What about the reports on your life here?"

"Our situation is greatly exaggerated. There are many misconceptions. We have no fear of the Moslems because of political circumstances. We are protected. And I have Christian and Moslem friends, as many as, or even more than, Jewish friends. Also, there are Moslems living in the Jewish quarter. And Jews who do not live in the Jewish quarter. The owner of one of the largest clothing stores in Damascus, for example."

Later, we were to visit this store, located in the main shopping street of Damascus. Now, in the late afternoon, there would be many customers and the owner would be very busy. He proudly shows us some English-made sweaters which he has just received.

"How is business?"

"Fine. Much improved in the past year."

We were also to visit a synagogue adjoining the other school in the Jewish quarter, which is run by a young rabbi of the community. It is a tiny but attractively decorated synagogue and, we are shown, with respect, a sacred scroll.

"Written on gazelle hide," Mr. Totah says proudly.

As a souvenir, we are given a small tablecloth, awkwardly embroidered by a young girl student. It shows animals and flowers of all colours crowded together.

/...

We were also to talk about the Jews with several residents of Damascus some of whom are not always fully in agreement with the present régime. They all tell us that the reports of mistreatment are false.

"Don't forget that we are at war"

And the officials do not shrug off the accusations.

"Of course, there are restrictions. For the Jews, but also for the Moslems. Don't forget that we are a country at war. Besides, we also want to protect the Jews. In some parts of the country, in the countryside, people sometimes tend to be fanatical about them. So we have to protect them. Otherwise, they are free: free to practise their religion, to study, to hold a job. There are only two things which they cannot do, work for the Government or serve in the army."

"Still, there have been arrests."

"Of course there have, but they were not aimed specifically at the Jews. Last July a currency smuggling ring was discovered. Twenty persons were arrested, four of them Jews. The Jews were brought to court like the others, with the others. The verdict has not yet been handed down. They will no doubt be sentenced to prison like the others. But, you know, when we are accused of torturing them, of dousing them with honey, for example, and having them stung by wasps, it's incredible!

"What about travel abroad?"

"There, of course, there are restrictions. But once again, we are at war with Israel and we do not want young Syrian Jews to swell the ranks of the enemy army. That's natural, isn't it? Apart from that, when there is a good reason, Jews can go abroad. Recently, one of them received permission to go to Beirut for medical treatment."

"Does the identity card of Jews indicate their religion?"

"Yes, it did. All identity cards indicated the religion of the bearer: Moslem, Christian or Jewish. Recently, new cards were issued which omit the reference to religion for everyone."

"They are never mentioned"

"The Jews in Damascus, or at least those whom we saw, seem to be free within the limits of the inescapable military and political situation. There is nothing about the Jewish quarter to justify speaking of a ghetto: no soldiers, no policemen, no barriers. Nothing in their expressions indicates that they are afraid. And if a European is stared at here, it is with the same curiosity as in the souks or in any other place in the city at this time, when tourists are so rare.

/...

Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, the speaker ~~will~~ raise his voice a bit:

"It's amazing. When a Jew is arrested here because he has committed some crime or other, you, in Europe, always play it up. But how many Arabs are there in Israeli prisons? Fifteen hundred? Two thousand? Who, in Europe, is concerned about them? They are never mentioned."

Robert VERDUSSEN

LEADER OF DAMASCUS JEWS HOPEFUL,
SAYS PLIGHT IS EXAGGERATED

By Marvine Howe

Special to The New York Times

DAMASCUS, Syria - Leaders of Syria's Jewish minority hope that the new liberalization of the Syrian régime will bring them greater freedom.

Selim Totah, head of the Jewish community in Damascus, says he has appealed to the Government to lift restrictions on travel by Jews inside the country and to release the Jews arrested for trying to leave Syria illegally.

While Syrian Jews are looking to an improvement in their situation, a widespread campaign has been under way abroad to alert world opinion to their plight. The Damascus régime has been accused of persecuting Jews, particularly by the Israeli, French and United States press.

"There is much exaggeration in the press reports of our situation," Mr. Totah declared in an interview. He said that the current campaign against Syria "is a question of international interest." Asked about allegations of oppression, he said, "We don't know of any incidents of gravity."

Mr. Totah, an import-exporter in his sixties, welcomed visitors to his modest office next to a synagogue in Haret el Yahud, the ancient Jewish quarter. He showed no sign of uneasiness in the presence of officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Information, responding readily to newsmen's questions in fluent French and Arabic.

He emphasized that "the most friendly, even brotherly relations" existed between Jews and Arabs here but openly acknowledged that there were problems.

"We have civil and religious liberty," Mr. Totah said, adding "We want absolute liberty."

/...

Meeting with President

He said that Jewish community leaders brought up the question of travel restrictions at a meeting with the President, Lieut. Gen. Hafez al-Assad, during celebrations for the first anniversary of the régime - General Assad seized power in November 1970.

"President Assad told us that all the laws not applied to other Syrian citizens will not be applied to us," Mr. Totah said, interpreting this to mean that travel restrictions would be lifted. At present Jews must obtain travel permits to move from one district to another.

The official reason given for this measure is "the protection of Jews from the deeply anti-Zionist population."

At the meeting with the President, the community leaders urged him to grant clemency to the dozen Jews arrested recently for having tried to leave the country without passports. The community has not had contacts with the prisoners and does not know how they have been treated, according to Mr. Totah.

"The President said he would take up the matter," Mr. Totah said. "We hope they will be released from one day to the next."

The principal problem facing Syrian Jews, he said, is the ban on their travel abroad. One Jewish intellectual who cannot be identified, said: "We are like hostages. Things are all right now but there's no telling what will happen if Israel attacks Syria."

Syrian rulers are adamant on this point: Jews cannot be allowed to emigrate. "Syria is at war with Israel," Abdallah Khani, Deputy Foreign Minister, declared. "We cannot let our citizens go to swell the ranks of the Israeli Army."

Israeli Attack Expected

Mr. Khani declared in an interview that he believed that the current international campaign against Syria was aimed at "preparing the atmosphere for an Israeli attack against Syria." Several other high officials expressed the same opinion that the focus on the Jewish issue was intended to stir up world hostility against Syria.

"There are more than 100,000 Syrian refugees from the Golan Heights, and 250,000 Palestinian refugees here, but the Western press cares only for the fate of 4,000 Jews," an Information Ministry official said bitterly.

Mr. Totah, however, explained the publicity given to Syrian Jews otherwise. "It's quite natural - now that there are no Jews left in Jordan, few in Iraq and Lebanon - only in Syria is there a sizeable Jewish community," he said. "We have weight, they think we're important."

/...

Despite travel bans, the Syrian Jewish community is shrinking steadily. There are now 3,000 Jews in Damascus, 1,000 in Aleppo and 300 in El Qamishliye, according to Mr. Totah. Over 20,000 left the country between 1948 and 1967.

Two Schools in Quarter

To the outsider, the Jews of Damascus appear to be making the best of their delicate situation. There is no special state of alert or police guard in the Jewish quarter, where many Christians and Moslems, including Palestinians, live peacefully with the Jews. Jewish merchants watch strangers to the quarter with curiosity but without signs of fear.

The Jewish community runs two schools in the quarter, with a total of 900 pupils. One is financed by the Alliance Israélite Universelle of Paris, and the nearby Ben Maimoun school is supported by Jews in the United States, who send \$1,400 a month for the school and \$2,200 more to the community for such things as the clinic, court, scholarships and doweries.

The schools teach the regular Government curriculum as well as Hebrew for prayers, Mr. Totah said. "We speak Arabic at home because we are Arabic citizens by the grace of God," he said.

There are 34 Jewish students in Damascus University - 13 studying medicine, 9 pharmacy, 4 dentistry, 2 trade, 2 agriculture, 3 literature and 1 engineering - and they have no trouble finding jobs, Mr. Totah said.

There are 14 synagogues in Damascus, all open but with "very few practicing Jews," he said. The Grand Rabbi is 95 years old and ailing. There are two other rabbis and 12 currently undergoing training.

A number of Jewish businessmen have left the old city and set up jewellery, perfume and dry-goods stores and pharmacies in the new quarter. Several merchants have taken advantage of the recent economic liberalizations to open shops for imported goods, which were virtually non-existent before General Assad came to power.
