

The role of the Jews in revitalizing trade in the central Maghreb between (7-9 AH/ 13-15 AD)

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Abstract:

This research examines the economic role of Jews in central Maghreb during the Zayyanid rule, a period that saw the growth of Jewish influence within Zayyanid society and in the corridors of power. Economics, finance, and trade were areas in which Jews excelled and through which they extended their influence until they became powerful in central Maghreb in general and in Tlemcen, the capital of the Zayyanids, in particular. Their influence even extended to southern central Maghreb, specifically the region of Tuat, where they established what resembled commercial garrisons. The importance of this research lies in several points, most notably the emergence of Jews as an influential group in society and the highlighting of their economic role, in addition to the influence they attained during the specified period. As for the problem, it revolves around the extent of Jewish penetration into central Maghreb society and their economic role.

Keywords: central Maghreb; Jews ; The Zayyanid state ; Economic transactions

Introduction:

Unlike others, Muslims were unique in their policy of tolerance and coexistence, based on the noble Sharia, which opened the door wide for those known as the People of the Covenant, who are the followers of other religions besides Islam. Under Islamic legislation, these people were subject to paying the jizya in exchange for preserving their beliefs and rituals. Perhaps the most important group that coexisted with Muslims were the Jews, whom Muslims allowed throughout the ages and in different places to have absolute freedom in all areas of life, and they had an active role in Islamic society.

The Jews sought opportunities to emerge and gain power in various parts of the Islamic world. The Islamic West was one of the stations where the Jews practiced their activities freely and without harassment. From Andalusia to the Islamic Maghreb, we find the economic, social and political imprint of the Jews prominent. Wherever they were present, they had an impact. There are questions raised about their presence in the Islamic Maghreb, the roles they played and the purpose of their presence in these lands. Based on this, the problem revolves around how they reached these regions, their penetration into Zayyan society and their economic role? This problem is interspersed with a set of sub-questions about the history of the Jews in the Islamic Maghreb and their economic role.

This research aims to shed light on the Jews of central Maghreb, their history, and their role in the region. It also seeks to demonstrate the extent of their integration into Zayyanid society and the reach of their influence into southern central Maghreb, specifically the Tuat region.

This research employs a historical methodology. After defining the research problem, the researcher gathered and analyzed relevant scholarly material on the subject of Jews, adhering to the principles of this approach.

1. Jewish presence and settlement in the Islamic Maghreb:

Sources differ on the precise period of Jewish presence in the Islamic Maghreb, but they agree that these migrations occurred in stages, spanning the various eras that Maghreb witnessed from antiquity until the advent of Islam. Several political and economic factors influenced these migrations.

The Jewish presence in the Maghreb dates back to ancient times. Some trace it back to the Phoenician era, characterized by its trade activities. Their numbers increased during the Roman period (Filali, 2002, p. 193), where they concentrated in coastal and inland regions despite facing various forms of persecution. Christianity was imposed upon them, and this situation persisted until the arrival of the Vandals, who employed them against the Romans.

The spread of Islam in the Islamic Maghreb was a turning point for the various segments of society, especially the People of the Covenant, who were included in the policy of tolerance of the Muslims and lived under the protection of the Islamic state, subject to the law of paying the *jizya*, and they had their religious rights and practiced their rituals without harassment (samira, 2021, p. 438).

More focus can be placed on the migrations that came to Maghreb in the Islamic era, as the Jews migrated twice. The first was with the Islamic conquest because of the Jews' suffering from Catholic oppression, so they looked for a safe place for themselves, and their destination was Maghreb. The second was after the fall of Andalusia (897 AH/1492 AD) into the hands of the Christians, who persecuted the Jews and Muslims, which prompted many of them to migrate towards Islamic Maghreb, where they enjoyed a better life and practiced their beliefs freely and built synagogues and churches (Rih, 1999, pp. 30-31).

There were two types of Jews in the Maghreb. The first type were known as the indigenous or oldest Jews in the country, and they called themselves the "Tochabim", meaning the indigenous Jews, who represented the social basis of the Jews in the Maghreb since ancient times. The second type were the Jews of Andalusia, who were expelled "Megorashim" from the Christian countries after the decline of Muslim rule in Spain and the issuance of mass expulsion orders by the Catholic kings, so they settled in various parts of the Zayyanid state (Hamza, p. 2).

1.2 Jewish settlement in the central Maghreb:

It is known that the Jews always sought their own benefit, so they carefully chose the places where they settled, and it was not by chance. They concentrated their presence on cities, specifically on commercial centers. Tlemcen, the capital of the Zayyanids and the base of the central Maghreb, was their destination because of its political and economic advantages. Politically, it was the center of the Zayyanid rule and the capital of their state, and commercially, it was located as a link between various trade routes, which made it a destination for merchants, especially the Jews, who formed a close link with the notables of Tlemcen and gained great favor with the Zayyanid rulers until their power grew and their wealth increased. Leo Africanus mentions in this regard that he found about five hundred Jewish houses, all of them rich (AL-Wazzan, 1983, p. 39). They also took the city of Ténès as their center because it is a strategic

city with a distinctive economic character and is on the Mediterranean coast, so they settled there and practiced their favorite activity, which is trade (Bakri, p. 61).

The Jews also settled in the fortress of Beni Hammad due to the economic prosperity that the fortress was experiencing, and because the Jews were looking for their interests, the distance did not bother them, especially when we find them settling in places very far from the coastal cities. Their presence in the south of the central Maghreb is evidence of this, especially the city of Ouargla, which is called Warjlan or Warklan (see comment No. 1), which is located on the most important trade route linking the Islamic Maghreb and the lands of Sudan (Al-Himyari, 1984, p. 600).

The Jews took the Tuat region (see comment No. 2) in the south of central Maghreb as a place to settle and extend their commercial influence. They formed a very strong community there that had great influence and controlled the region's trade, exploiting their wealth in this, which angered the scholars, headed by Imam Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abdul Karim al-Maghili (909 AH) (see comment No. 3). He took a firm stance against them and issued a fatwa ordering the demolition of their churches and places of worship and their expulsion. This is what is historically known as the incident of the Jews of Tuat. Their influence extended as far as the city of Koukou, which is 18 farsakhs from Mazghana and was founded in the 9th century AH/15th century AD and has 1600 Berber inhabitants with a Jewish minority (Bouamama, 2011, p. 129).

1.2 The status of Jews in central Maghreb:

Undoubtedly, trade has been a fundamental resource for the economy of countries since ancient times. Rulers throughout the ages have shown great interest in it because of its benefit to the income of the country. These rulers must have worked to attract everyone who had a connection to this sector. Because the policy of tolerance adopted by Muslims in all the countries that were subject to them attracted a large number of merchants from different religions, especially Jews, who moved around the Muslim countries, taking advantage of their enormous wealth and superiority in the field of trade. The Zayyanid era (633-962 AH / 1235-1554 AD) is considered the era in which Jews were most prominent in various fields of life, especially trade. In this section, I will try to show the commercial role of Jews in the Zayyanid era and the penetration of Jews in Zayyanid society.

It is likely that the Jewish presence in Tlemcen before the Islamic conquest and the increase in their number during the Almohad era (515-667 AH / 1121-1269 AD) was due to the Spanish Christian persecution of them, especially the pressure they were subjected to at the hands of the Castilians and Catalans in 794 AH / 1391 AD, which led a group of them to migrate to Tlemcen where they settled, and their number doubled after the fall of Granada in 897 AH / 1492 AD. Among them were scholars and doctors, such as the chief scholar physician Moshe bin Samuel bin Yehuda al-Malaqi al-Andalusi, known as Ibn al-Ashqar, who became famous as a doctor and professor in the city of Tlemcen. Merchants and craftsmen also migrated and worked to develop and grow the Tlemcen industry and support the trade movement and entered into strong economic relations that reached even European regions and worked to support small merchants by granting them loans to manage their projects (Filali, 2002, p. 193).

As mentioned earlier, the Jews enjoyed a dignified life thanks to the tolerance established by Islam, and they attained a high status. They had the right to own property and the freedom

to dispose of their possessions; they could buy and sell land and houses, construct buildings, own slaves, and practice their rituals and ceremonies in their own places of worship.

The Jews lived in a closed quarter separate from the Muslims. They had their own cemetery and a leader who managed their affairs, known as the Sheikh of the Jews, who served as a liaison between them and the Zayyanid authorities (Filali, 2002, p. 195).

2 . Jewish business activity:

The roles of Jews in the society of the Islamic West were multifaceted, and their presence was not limited to any one activity. They persevered tirelessly in their pursuit of their goals. Perhaps the lack of a homeland to which they could retreat led them to pursue other objectives, particularly the acquisition of wealth and control over commercial activity, which they used as leverage against the authorities.

Trade was the most important sector in which Jews excelled and which they preferred over all other sectors, whether in the central Maghreb or elsewhere. For them, trade was a sacred principle, and they described it as the civilization of the market and the creed of the merchant. Through their commercial activity, Jews were among the most prominent social groups in the society of the central Maghreb. This is evident in the arrival of those from Andalusia in 793 AH/1391 CE, who contributed to stimulating both domestic and international trade (Kouati, 1991, p. 122).

There are several reasons why Jews stood out particularly in the commercial field, but this does not mean that their activity was limited to trade only. Rather, there were manufacturers, craftsmen, and farmers among them. However, trade was a vital lifeline for them, through which they accumulated huge sums of money and with which they controlled commercial centers and roads. They also used it to exert pressure on both the authorities and the public. The reasons for their commercial power can be summarized in many points, the most important of which are:

- Diaspora and alienation, as Jews do not have a stable homeland in which they feel safe. They were keen to accumulate money in order to ensure their survival, and they formed commercial groups in various parts of the world that were united by a strong bond. There also emerged families that can be described as multinational with a fixed identity, and it is difficult to determine their geographical affiliation and identity (Bachir, 2001, p. 99) .
- The role of the policy of tolerance established by Islam in the rise of non-Muslims under Islamic rule in general, and Jews in particular. Islam guaranteed their religious rights and permitted them to enter into commercial contracts and agreements, allowing Jews to feel free to live, earn a living, and subsequently prosper (Abdullah, 2013, p. 99).
- One of the reasons Jews became merchants was their place of residence and settlement. They chose strategic locations, especially coastal areas and cities situated on major trade routes, thus forming a commercial network with extensions and branches throughout the Jewish lands.
- The Jews' involvement and prominence in banking, goldsmithing, and the gold and silver trade enabled them to dominate this type of commerce, amassing considerable wealth and gaining a prestigious position in the Islamic state.

Their linguistic proficiency and mastery of several languages had both positive and negative impacts on the society of central Maghreb. They served as intermediaries in economic transactions with European countries through treaties with Christians (samira, 2021, p. 443).

1.3 Internal Trade: Internal trade in central Maghreb witnessed a significant Jewish presence, particularly from the third century AH until the Zayyanid period. They controlled various branches of trade, including the trade in money, retail, slaves, gold, silver, weapons, and other commodities. It is noted that they were the financially dominant group and controlled overland trade. They carefully chose their settlements to remain close to strategic trade routes, settling along the coast and in the desert (Rachid Bourouiba and others, 1993, p. 479).

Jews were accustomed to congregating in designated areas in various cities. Among these places were the markets, where they were widespread in major cities, towns, and rural areas. Their name was often associated with these markets, which were frequently called "Jewish markets" due to their large numbers and the flourishing of their commercial activity as merchants and itinerant vendors in the markets and within cities and villages (Kouati, 1991, p. 150).

Many goods were in high demand in central Maghreb, and Jews played a significant role in this. They traveled throughout central Maghreb, laden with various goods from north to south and from east to west. Their trade extended beyond this region to other parts of the Islamic Maghreb and Europe, where they acted as commercial intermediaries, contributing to the flow of imports and exports. We can list some of the most important goods traded by Jews:

2.3 The slave trade:

This trade represented the head of Jewish commercial activity, especially since their religion does not prohibit the trade in human beings and makes them slaves to the Jews. The central Maghreb is one of the regions that witnessed an increase in the number of slaves due to the need for them to carry out many tasks, until these slaves became a class of society located at the bottom of the social pyramid. The vast area of the central Maghreb, which extended to the lands of Sudan, helped in bringing this category and supplying the market. The sources of slavery diversified to include castration, as Jewish traders worked on castrating boys to strengthen their numbers (Ibn Hawqal, 1993, p. 112).

The Jews monopolized the slave trade at the end of the ninth century AH/fifteenth century AD by reselling captives, who were marketed in several cities in the Islamic Maghreb, including the central Maghreb, despite the hardships that Jewish merchants endured in this trade, such as transportation costs, redemption procedures, and other expenses (Bouamama, 2011, p. 54).

Ouargla was a center of the slave trade, from which slaves were brought and sold to various regions. This type of trade flourished there due to its location on caravan trade routes, in addition to the decline of other leading cities such as Nafusa and Ghadames. Its connection with major cities like Qalaat Hamad, Tlemcen, and Constantine, which were famous for the slave trade, also contributed to this. They would exchange oil, silk, and textiles with the desert inhabitants for dates and slaves (AL-Wazzan, 1983, p. 56).

3. The most important commercial centers in central Maghreb

The Jewish community was actively engaged in trade, not only within central Maghreb but also across various markets, centers, and trade routes known at the time, particularly from the third to the fifth century AH. They established trading posts and spread throughout the markets of major cities, towns, and rural areas. The Jewish market became known for its high concentration of Jewish businesses, and these markets included shops where they practiced various crafts and sold their products. Among the cities in central Maghreb famous for their markets were:

1.4 Tahert: Tahert is considered the capital of the Rustamid state (160-296 AH/ 777-909 AD) and represented a destination for merchants due to the conditions provided by the Rustamids. Its cities became prosperous and flourishing, such as the city of Jadu with its many markets and the settlement of the Jewish community there (Ibrahim, 1993, p. 176), Tahert contained shops and markets bearing the name of the Jews, and due to the fame of the merchants of the Rahadna (see comment No. 4) in the city, one of its roads was named after this name (Rahadna). The merchants of Tahert had a great role that was not limited to internal trade only, but extended beyond the walls of Tahert, and even beyond to the East and Andalusia (Kouati, 1991, p. 141).

Among these was a group known as the Radhaniya, who had extensive commercial activity. They traveled from the East to the West and from the West to the East by land and sea, bringing from the West servants, slave girls, boys, brocade, silk skins, furs, sables, and swords. They rode from the Franks in the Western Sea, carrying their trade on their backs, and they continued to move with it from one market to another in the East, West, North, and South until they returned to the West (Bouamama, 2011, p. 202).

2.4 Tlemcen: Tlemcen, the capital of the Zayyanid dynasty and a major center of Islamic Maghreb, enjoyed a strategically important location. It served as a link between the Maghreb al-Aqsa (the far west) and the Maghreb al-Adna (the near west), and became a commercial hub for merchants from all over, including Jews. Its location at the center of a maritime and land network connecting it to ports in other parts of Mghreb, and its role as a link between Europe and the Sudan, were significant. Geographers praised Tlemcen's location; al-Bakri considered it a key asset in the central Maghreb and a meeting point for trade caravans coming from the east, west, and the Sahara. Al-Idrisi described it as the key to West Africa and a passage for travelers and merchants (Al-Idrisi, 1983, p. 101). This made it a destination for merchants and wealthy individuals, especially Jews, who were encouraged by the Zayyanid authorities.

3.4 Tuat Region: The matter was not limited to the northern and coastal regions, but we find that the centers extended to the south of the central Maghreb, especially the strategically important Tuat region. This region witnessed remarkable economic and social activity, to the point that it was considered one of the centers of the central Maghreb in the medieval period and a gateway to West Africa. The region attracted traders, especially Jews, who established a large commercial base there that enabled them to collect huge sums of money, in addition to political and social influence. Sources even mention approximately three hundred and sixty Jews in the field of gold and silver crafting in the Tamentit region alone (Jaafari, 2011, p. 389).

Many crafts and industries became famous, and the markets witnessed the popularity of various goods and merchandise such as burnouses, weaving, tobacco, henna, barley, and others. What distinguished Tuat most was its location on the trade caravan routes heading from the north towards Western Sudan and from Tuat to the north towards Algeria, Tunisia, and even Tripoli (Belalem, p. 45).

5. Jewish financial transactions:

Studies indicate a notable Jewish presence in the central Maghreb's financial market, where they established relationships with merchants. Some held important positions, while others managed financial transactions such as loans with interest, participation in Murabaha (cost-plus financing) with control over capital, the formation of banking companies, and the monopolization of precious goods that were easy to transport and smuggle. The attitude towards

money changers was cautious because most of them were non-Muslims and due to suspicions of their involvement in usury. (Bouamama, 2011, pp. 129- 130).

1.5 Money Changing:

It is one of the economic transactions that involves trading in currency and is linked to markets and related to gold, which became widespread in central Maghreb and was famous for by the Jews. The majority of money changers were Jews who controlled this type of transaction because of the profits it generated, and they were known by the term “experts.” Moroccan merchants were forced to deal with Jewish merchants because of their control over this field (Bouamama, 2011, p. 226).

In Tlemcen, for example, there were special shops for exchanging the currencies that people needed in their transactions, especially since during this era trade grew and developed thanks to the rulers of the Zayyanid state, especially gold coming across the Sahara. This paved the way for the Jews to emerge in this field, as they took up banking in most of the Islamic Maghreb countries, which brought them huge sums of money.

The merchants used to deposit their money with the money changers and in return take slips or papers with the money changer’s stamp or seal, on which the maximum amount that the merchant could deal with was recorded. With these slips, he would buy what he wanted and give the seller the equivalent of its value and leave. People used to do this in order to avoid carrying too much merchandise while they were in the markets and to avoid being exposed to thieves in the crowded markets. At the end of the market period, the merchant would settle his account with the money changer and take what was left for him or pay the excess over it. This is similar to “letters of guarantee.” However, transferring money to money changers was a method of dealing that was disliked by the jurists of the time because they considered it a usurious transaction.

Most money changers were Jewish, and it is quite possible that they were lenders to merchants at exorbitant interest rates, sometimes reaching 100%, with repayment periods of up to 10 years. Scholars were strict in their dealings with Jews regarding such transactions, as they were only approached by the corrupt or those in dire need (AL-Wansharisi, 1981, p. 498).

Undoubtedly, Tlemcen had specialized currency exchange shops, and Jews played a significant role in this economic activity. They were widely engaged in money exchange throughout the Islamic Maghreb, particularly in the Zayyanid dynasty, which was a hub for gold traders from the Sahara.

2.5 Bills of Exchange:

The people of Maghreb and Andalusia used bills of exchange as a guarantee to complete and facilitate commercial transactions. They are considered one of the most important means of guaranteeing against theft and loss and were used in commercial transactions. Bills of exchange are considered financial instruments that must be collected at a known time and are binding between the two parties when they are issued. The Jews excelled in this type of transaction by transferring bills of exchange to others through signing by power of attorney and transferring on the back of the paper. The technique of direct correspondence since the fourth century AH developed the system on two bases: payment in cash and the letter of guarantee (bill of exchange). The importance of this transaction is due to reducing the difficulty of transporting money from one place to another and avoiding the dangers of the road.

The scholars of the central Maghreb condemned the practice of safataja due to the suspicion of falling into usury and uncertainty. Al-Wansharisi was asked about the issue: “Two men, one of whom has crops in the Arabs and the other has crops in the mountains, is it permissible for them to transfer the aforementioned crops so that each of them takes the other’s crops to avoid the hardship of transport, or not?” The answer was as follows: The answer to the second issue is to prohibit the transfer according to the well-known opinion, and this is the issue called safataja in the school of thought, and the well-known opinion in the school of thought is to prohibit it (al-Karim, 2017- 2018, pp. 174-175) .

There is no doubt that the Jews contributed to stimulating the commercial movement within the central Maghreb. The markets witnessed an abundance of materials that the Jews brought even from outside the Maghreb. The trade routes also witnessed movement thanks to the caravans that roamed the parts of the Maghreb. The matter did not stop at the coastal areas or the major cities, but extended to the Sahara and then the West Africans in general. The Jews had a role in this, and naturally the economic activity was affected by the transactions carried out by the Jews. There appeared as workers who received strong denial among the jurists. For example, Al-Uqbani (d. 871 AH) stressed on the necessity of severely rebuking and disciplining those who deal in usury, and he considered usury to be one of the most serious evils in the markets, as he pointed out its frequent occurrence in the markets of the central Maghreb. “I said, and this evil, which is the most heinous of evils, has become widespread and occurs openly among the people, such that no one hides it, whether he knows it or is ignorant of it” (al-Karim, 2017-2018, p. 355).

One of the negative repercussions resulting from Jewish activity in central Maghreb was the spread of the phenomenon of time loan (promissory note) or bill of exchange, which Muslims used to retrieve prisoners from Christian lands by referring to Jewish bankers, especially those who had a relationship with European countries. This system requires the presence of Jews to facilitate cooperation and dealings, and the Moroccan individual remains merely a party in achieving political and economic goals (Nimish, The Jewish Presence in Central Maghreb, page 442).

Conclusion:

This research addresses the Jewish dhimmis who lived in the Islamic Maghreb before the spread of Islam. With the arrival of Islam in the Islamic Maghreb, the rights of the dhimmis were preserved, making them one of the classes of society. They practiced their religious and economic lives under the Islamic state. After the fall of Andalusia in 1492 CE, the Islamic Maghreb in general witnessed a large migration, and the Jews were among those who migrated towards the Maghreb. They lived during the Zayyanid era and were able to establish their presence, especially in the commercial and financial sectors. They controlled financial transactions and managed foreign trade. In conclusion, the research has identified a number of points, which are as follows:

- Islam guaranteed the rights of non-Muslims living under Islamic rule and enabled them to live in peace within the Islamic state, which allowed them to integrate into society, where they became a link and component of this society.
- The Jewish presence in the Maghreb went through stages that controlled the political and economic conditions, so that it is not possible to determine an exact date for the Jewish

migrations, but rather they were associated with political events such as Christian persecution and their forced displacement.

- The tolerance of Muslims in the Maghreb made the Jews take it as a destination, as large numbers of them flocked to it and settled in different regions according to their needs.
- Jews excelled in commerce, though some believe they were initially opportunists in trade, their activity limited to itinerant merchants.
- Jews contributed to the revitalization of trade and the financial market through their work as money changers, gaining control over the currency exchange.
- The economic prominence of Jews stemmed from their role as commercial intermediaries between the Maghreb and Western European merchants, aided by their fluency in various languages in addition to Arabic.
- It cannot be overlooked that Jewish commercial activity led to their control of the market and the imposition of their commercial logic and usurious transactions.
- Scholars confronted the increasing Jewish activity, most notably Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Maghili, who recognized the Jewish project in southern central Maghreb.

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