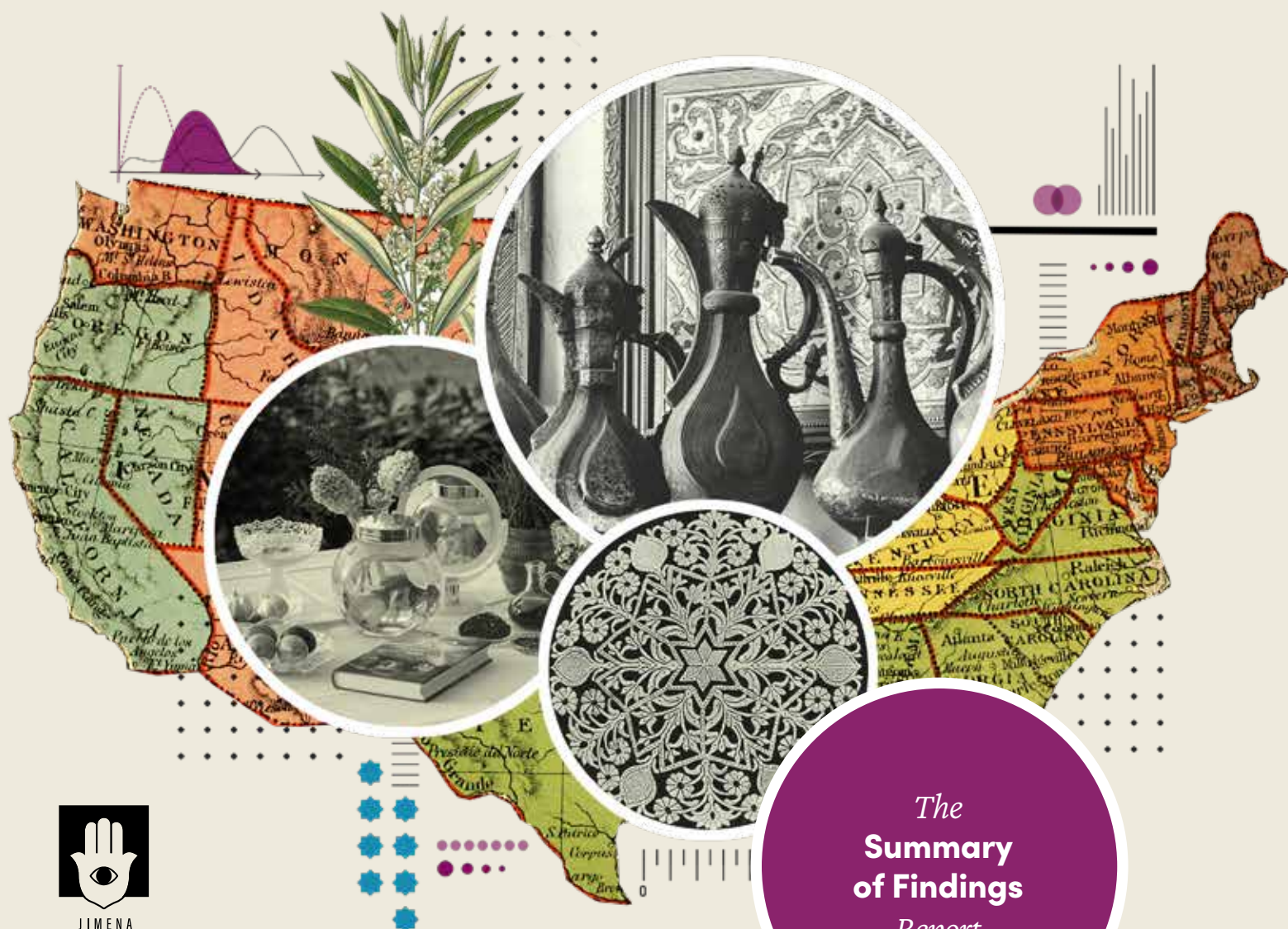


# Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

**IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES**



JIMENA

Commissioned by  
**JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS  
TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND  
NORTH AFRICA**

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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE



**NYU**

**BRONFMAN**

**AUGUST 2025**

THE  
**Summary of Findings**  
REPORT

## Table of Contents

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PREFACE .....	03
INTRODUCTION .....	05
SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES .....	07
POPULATION SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS .....	10
COMMUNITY PORTRAITS .....	11
CONCLUSIONS .....	14
NOTES .....	15

# About This Study

**THIS REPORT IS ONE OF SEVERAL** produced from a multi-year research project focused on understanding the identities, experiences, and communal life of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States. The study was conducted by an academic research team based at New York University, under the direction of Dr. Mijal Bitton, and was commissioned by JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. It was made possible with the generous support of a range of philanthropic and institutional partners committed to advancing Sephardic and Mizrahi inclusion in Jewish communal life.

The project was carried out by a strong team of interdisciplinary researchers and benefitted from the guidance of an international academic advisory committee. In addition to academic input, we actively engaged practitioners and community leaders—both as interview participants and as advisors—to ensure the research reflected lived realities and communal perspectives.

The study aims to support a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that reflects the richness, diversity, and complexity of Sephardic life. It is designed as a comprehensive resource: offering new data, field-based insights, historical context, and practical guidance to help scholars, educators, and communal professionals better understand and engage Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the American context.

This work brings together two complementary forms of research:

- **Secondary analysis** of existing literature reviews, historical material, and quantitative data—including national and local Jewish population surveys—organized through our guiding questions and reinterpreted through a Sephardic and Mizrahi lens.

- **Original fieldwork**, including interviews, site visits, and ethnographic observations across four key Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration.

Although the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi have distinct origins and meanings, this study reflects how they are used—and contested—by participants. In line with community usage, we primarily use “Sephardic” as a broad social identity while noting when “Mizrahi” is relevant. Across the study, we prioritized self-identification and recognized the limitations of existing categories—religious, racial, and ethnic—in capturing these communities’ realities.

The study was conducted during a time of shifting communal and political context for Jews in America—including the brutal October 7th attacks by Hamas in Israel, the subsequent rise in antisemitism across the US, and intensifying public debate around race, identity, and inclusion in American Jewish life. These broader dynamics shaped both the narratives we heard and the urgency of this work.

This project is offered as a first step, not a final word. It is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, and we hope it serves as a foundation for future research. For further directions, see the “Recommendations” section of this report.

We invite you to explore the full report or delve into any of its focused sub-sections. Below is the full table of contents.

# List of Reports:



THE  
**Who We Are**  
REPORT



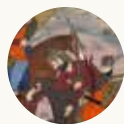
THE  
**Research Approach**  
REPORT



THE  
**Summary of Findings**  
REPORT



THE  
**Recommendations**  
REPORT



THE  
**Understanding Sephardic & Mizrahi Identity**  
REPORT



THE  
**National Demographic Profile**  
REPORT



THE  
**Community Portraits**  
REPORT



THE  
**Syrian Jews in Brooklyn**  
REPORT



THE  
**Persian Jews in Los Angeles**  
REPORT



THE  
**Bukharian Jews in Queens**  
REPORT



THE  
**Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida**  
REPORT



THE  
**Methodology**  
REPORT



THE  
**Full Report**



# Introduction



## A Note on Terminology:

In our primary research and literature review, we found that “Sephardic” is the more widely used term in the US over the term “Mizrahi” and remains the more common form of self-identification. Accordingly, the body of this report primarily uses “Sephardic,” though not exclusively. At times we refer to Sephardic and Mizrahi as an aggregate category due to the data sources we use.

## THIS STUDY AIMS TO:



**Propose new frameworks** for understanding Sephardic and Mizrahi identities and experiences in the United States by reviewing, synthesizing, and building on the existing literature.



**Provide population estimates** and demographic characteristics of US Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews through a reanalysis of existing national and local community survey data.



**Present four in-depth portraits** of contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration—specifically, the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, NY, and the Latin Sephardic community of South Florida—based on interviews, site visits, and public space observations.



**Offer practical recommendations** developed in facilitated collaboration with communal practitioners and researchers for professionals and educators seeking deeper engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

In conducting our research, we were guided by three research principles:

1. Distinguishing between scholarly findings produced by the study’s researchers and the narratives employed by community insiders and shared with us.
2. Prioritizing the way our research participants identify themselves rather than imposing categories on them.
3. Conducting our work honestly and with humility, being open to critique, and welcoming dialogue.

In addition, we both relied on and in turn emphasized four important empirical frameworks in writing this report:

- **Diversity Within Diversity:** Sephardic Jews represent diversity in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority in the United States while also exhibiting significant internal diversity across geographic, cultural, and religious lines.<sup>1</sup>
- **Sephardic Jews as a Migration Story:** The experience of Sephardic Jews in the US has been profoundly shaped by countries of origin, migration timing, push-and-pull migration factors, and settlement patterns.
- **Rethinking “East” and Modernity:** The paths of Sephardic Jews (particularly those from Muslim-majority societies) in relation to modernity, post-modernity, and American life should be analyzed as distinct historical and social developments rather than portraying them as lagging behind Western progress.<sup>2</sup>
- **The Need for Appropriate Scholarly Categories:** Scholarly categories designed to study the Ashkenazi majority in the US need to be revised and refashioned for analyzing Sephardic Jews.

## 4 LENSES FOR UNDERSTANDING SEPHARDIC JEWS IN THE US

This study draws on four key frameworks to better capture the experiences of Sephardic Jews in the United States



### 1. DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

Sephardic Jews both enrich the diversity of American Jewish life and contain rich internal variation shaped by geography, language, religious practice, and migration histories



### 2. SEPHARDIC JEWS AS A MIGRATION STORY

Their experiences in the US are deeply shaped by layered migration journeys, from the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, each with distinct timelines, drivers, and settlement patterns



### 3. RETHINKING “EAST” AND MODERNITY

Rather than viewing Sephardic communities through a Western-centric lens, their paths to modernity and adaptation to American life should be seen as complex and distinct in their own right.



### 4. THE NEED FOR APPROPRIATE SCHOLARLY CATEGORIES

Scholarly frameworks built around Ashkenazi norms often fall short in capturing Sephardic realities, highlighting the need for new categories that reflect their specific histories and identities.

# Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States

## MEANINGS, IDENTITIES, AND EXPERIENCES

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the Sephardic experience in the US, both in academic circles and Jewish communal organizations. This interest—catalyzed in part by the country’s broader reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation in recent years—has brought to the surface important questions about the terms “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi.” Where did these terms originate, and what do they mean today? Who do they refer to, and what do they signify for those who claim these identities and heritages? What is the background and timing of Sephardic and Mizrahi immigration to the United States? And what is the relationship between Sephardic and Mizrahi as categories and the common categories of race and ethnicity in the United States?

The term Sephardic—originating in the biblical book of Obadiah—has come to refer to ancestry, religion, and/or identity. As ancestry, it references Jews of Iberian or Spanish descent, whose various migrations over

centuries took them to many regions including England, the Netherlands, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Americas.

As religious practice, *Sephardic* refers to one of two main traditions—alongside *Ashkenazi*—within a largely shared system of *Halakha* (Jewish law) and *minhag* (custom), each offering its own distinct yet complementary practices.

Sephardic religious practice often correlates with *masortiyut*, a religious traditionalism that combines reverence for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities, especially in the communities’ public spaces, with flexibility in personal and family religious observance. Sephardic can also refer to a social identity, adopted by those populations influenced by the migration of Sephardic Jews and standing in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. Over time in the United States, Sephardic came to signify a pan-ethnic identity shared by and across many non-Ashkenazi Jews who found

## TIMELINE OF SEPHARDIC IMMIGRATION TO THE US



### Colonial and Early National Period (1600s – 1800s)

Jews of **Iberian descent** establish small but cohesive Sephardic communities in cities like **Savannah, Georgia** and **Newport, Rhode Island**



### Late 19th and Early 20th Century

Sephardic Jews from the **Ottoman Empire**, particularly **Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey**, and **Syrian Jews**, begin immigrating to the US



### 1924

**Restrictive Immigration Act of 1924** establishes national origins quotas favoring Northern and Western Europeans. The law **severely limits immigration** from the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe—shaping US Sephardic migration patterns for decades



### Post-1965

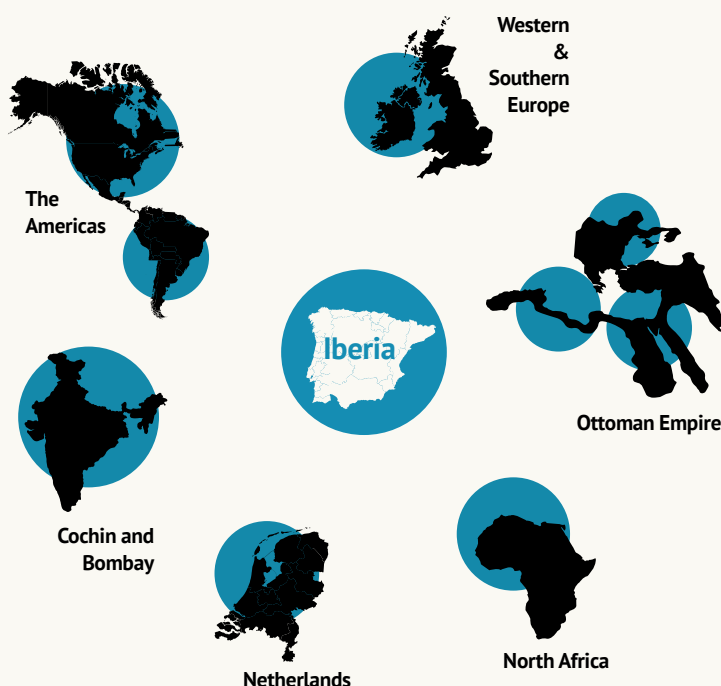
Immigration policy liberalization allows a **new wave of Sephardic immigration**, with distinct communities reshaping the Sephardic Jewish experience in the US

themselves a minority in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority.

The Sephardic Jewish experience in the United States is chronologically long, geographically diverse, and thematically multifaceted. In the colonial and early national period, Western European Jews of Iberian descent established small but cohesive Sephardic communities from Savannah, Georgia to Newport, Rhode Island. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire—in particular Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey, and Syrian Jews—began immigrating to the United States. The restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 and the decimation of Balkan and Greek Sephardic communities during the Holocaust limited Sephardic immigration for much of the succeeding 40 years, but the liberalization of immigration policy in 1965 opened the door once again. Since then, distinct Sephardic communities have immigrated to the US and reshaped the story of Sephardic Jews in this country.

#### SEPHARDIC MIGRATION FROM IBERIA

Key destinations where Iberian Jews settled—across continents and through multi-step journeys



“

**Over time in the United States, Sephardic came to signify a pan-ethnic identity shared by and across many non-Ashkenazi Jews who found themselves a minority in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority.**

Like the term Sephardic, Mizrahi can refer to ancestry, religion, and identity. However, unlike the term Sephardic, Mizrahi is a relatively new term. It emerged in Israel in the mid-to-late 20th century to refer to Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Although initially promoted by Ashkenazim first as *edot Hamizrah* (communities of the “East”), the term was reclaimed over time and appropriated by Mizrahi Jews. Today, about half of all Israeli Jews have some Mizrahi ancestry. Mizrahim in Israel generally align with Sephardic Jewish law and customs, and many with its traditionalist orientation to religious practice. Mizrahi can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. Mizrahim in Israel have faced systemic inequalities, including state-sponsored discrimination, cultural marginalization, and economic bias. Socio-economic gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Israel have narrowed but remain evident.

In our interviews, *Sephardic* was by far the preferred term over *Mizrahi*, reflecting what we are confident is, at present, the norm among Jews of MENA background in the US, where the term *Mizrahi* is less commonly used given its development, history, and usage in Israel. The term Mizrahi appears to have entered Jewish discourse in the United States in the early 2000s, introduced by those seeking to connect Sephardic Jews in the US to Mizrahi identity and/or the Mizrahi struggle in Israel. As a form of personal and social identity, it has also been adopted by a small group of US Jews with Middle Eastern or North African roots who feel uncomfortable with the term Sephardic due to their lack of Spanish or



Iberian ancestry. For them, it serves as a way to distinguish themselves from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi counterparts. Meanwhile, others have combined Mizrahi with Sephardic, usually in the form Sephardic/Mizrahi, a hybrid identity that collectively stands in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. The adoption of these identifiers varies across communities, age groups, and political affiliations.

## SEPHARDIC JEWS AND US RACIAL AND ETHNIC CATEGORIES

The growing interest in Sephardic Jews has emerged alongside the broader national reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation across America and inside American Jewish communities. Yet efforts to understand Sephardic experiences within US race and ethnic frameworks are insufficient and often misdirected. It is important not to assume that the experiences of Jews who identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi and Jews who identify with US racial and ethnic categories—such as black, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern—are parallel. These cases can have structural similarities in the sense of exclusion from or unequal

representation in majority group spaces. Still, the minority status of Sephardic Jews within majority-Ashkenazi spaces is distinct from the minority status of Jews with minority racial and ethnic identities within majority-white Jewish spaces. Conflating them risks oversimplifying how identity, history, and contemporary perspectives may differ among and between these communities.

Sephardic Jews themselves have varied perspectives on US racial and ethnic categories. When asked, some Sephardic Jews identify as white, others as Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern, but many reject US racial and ethnic categories altogether because these classifications do not reflect their experiences in their countries of origin nor represent their self-understanding.

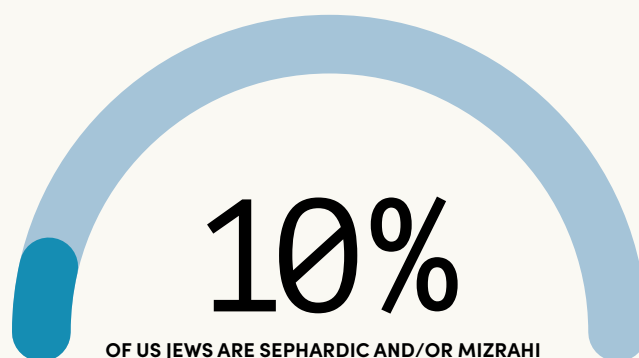
The overwhelming majority of our interviewees—Syrian, Bukharian, Hispanic, Persian, and other Jews from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region—told us they do not identify with the category of Jews of color. However, a minority of Sephardic Jews do identify as Jews of color and/or have built alliances with organizations representing Jews of color, citing shared experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and underrepresentation within the broader Jewish community.



# The Population Size and Characteristics of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States

Because the US government does not collect information on religious groups and does not count Jews among its official racial and ethnic groups, estimates of the size and characteristics of the Jewish population rely on non-governmental surveys. While surveys of the US Jewish population go back many decades, it is only in relatively recent years that surveys of Jewish populations have begun asking about Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

In an analysis conducted explicitly for this study, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University utilized the Pew Research Center's 2020 national survey of US Jews and eight local Jewish community studies—in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Greater MetroWest (NJ), Kansas City,



Long Beach (CA), Louisville, and Delaware—to generate estimates about the size of the adult Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the US and provide selected socio-demographic and Jewish characteristics about them.

The varying estimates of the size of the population take into account the different ways survey questions asked about Sephardic and Mizrahi identity and the different response options they offered. Based on many factors discussed in our quantitative section, we estimate that 10% of US Jews are Sephardic and/or Mizrahi.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Compared to Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews report higher rates of communal participation, a stronger connection to Israel, and a higher share of respondents for whom being Jewish is “somewhat” or “very much” a part of their daily life,<sup>3</sup> while showing lower intermarriage rates. Sephardic Jews and Mizrahi Jews are more likely than Ashkenazi Jews to be born and/or raised outside the United States, to be politically moderate or conservative, and to be economically vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> Ashkenazi Jews, in turn, are more likely to have a graduate degree.

## NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS

- ➔ In the US, “Sephardic” is more commonly used than “Mizrahi” among Jews of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent
- ➔ Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews trace their ancestry to a wide range of countries, including Spain, Morocco, Iran, Yemen, Turkey, and Iraq, etc

# Community Portraits

Starting in 1965, changes to US immigration policy opened doors for immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. These immigration reforms played a significant role in shaping the Sephardic landscape in the United States. The four communities profiled in the report illustrate these dynamics, reinforcing the usage of the term Sephardic as a pan-ethnic identity in the US.

## Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, NY

Already established by previous waves of immigration, the Syrian community became a hub for Jews fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability, including Jews who fled or were expelled from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Jews escaping the civil war in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who were finally allowed to leave Syria in the 1990s after enduring decades of anti-Jewish state persecution, including restrictions on emigration. These successive waves of immigration helped shape what is now known as the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

## Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles

Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the country had a large and established Jewish population, primarily concentrated in cities like Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. The revolution, which ushered in an Islamist theocracy with strict religious laws and hostility toward the State of Israel, created what most Jews felt was a hostile and even dangerous environment. These conditions propelled the majority of the Persian Jewish community to flee or leave the country, seeking safety and stability in countries like the United States, Israel, and Europe. Many Persian Jews settled in Los Angeles, forming one of the largest Persian Jewish diasporas outside Iran.

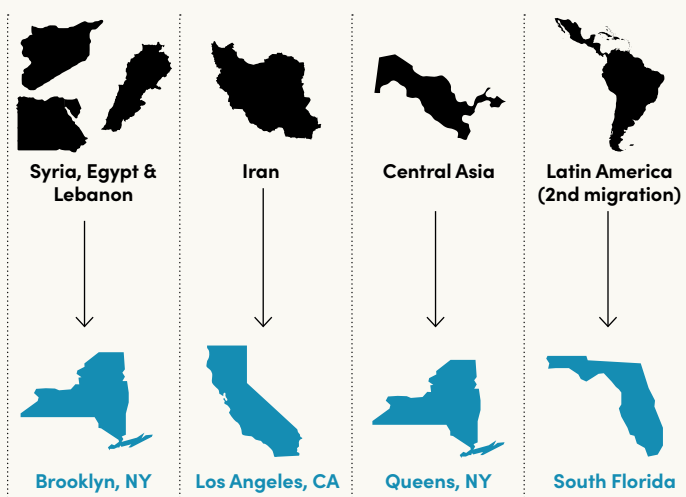
## Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, NY

Bukharian Jews, whose roots stretch back hundreds of years to Central Asia, came under Russian control in the late 19th century, though their region did not face the same Soviet restrictions on Jewish practice as those in European and other more Russified areas of the Soviet Union. Immigration to the United States occurred in two waves: a small one in the 1970s and a larger one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as economic instability and rising antisemitism following the Soviet Union's collapse prompted many Jews to seek new opportunities. Bukharian Jews dispersed globally, with significant populations settling in Israel and Queens, NY.

## Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

Beginning in the early 20th century, Jewish immigrants from the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa settled in countries across Latin America, where they established small yet vibrant communities. Most sought better economic prospects and/or fled rising anti-Jewish sentiment in their home countries, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In recent decades, political and economic instability across Latin America has driven many of these Jews—who combine Sephardic and Hispanic identities—to migrate to the United States, with a significant number settling in South Florida.

### 4 SEPHARDIC JOURNIES TO THE US



## Community commonalities

These communities share a set of commonalities. Family as an institution is core to all of them. Deep and abiding family relationships, family responsibilities, and consistent family gatherings for Shabbat, holidays, and other celebrations all mark the central role of family in these Sephardic communities.

Sephardic religious practice in the four communities reflects a strong sense of traditionalism, combining respect for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities with more flexible personal and family religious observance. For some, traditionalism stands apart from denominational labels—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—that characterize much of Ashkenazi US Jewry. For others, traditionalism has become aligned with Ashkenazi-denominational labels. We saw a strong trend toward growing adoption of and alignment with Orthodoxy among those we interviewed.

The communities are engaged in a constant negotiation of change and continuity. In America, they tend

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**Traditionalism  
often transcends  
denominational  
lines.**

to maintain strong ethnic connections, particularly through marriage within their own communities and the preservation of distinct cultural traditions. They also retain deep ties to their Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African heritage.

Most community members exhibit a notable resistance to language that frames race as their primary identity, categorizes them as Jews of color, or positions them as a minority group in need of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

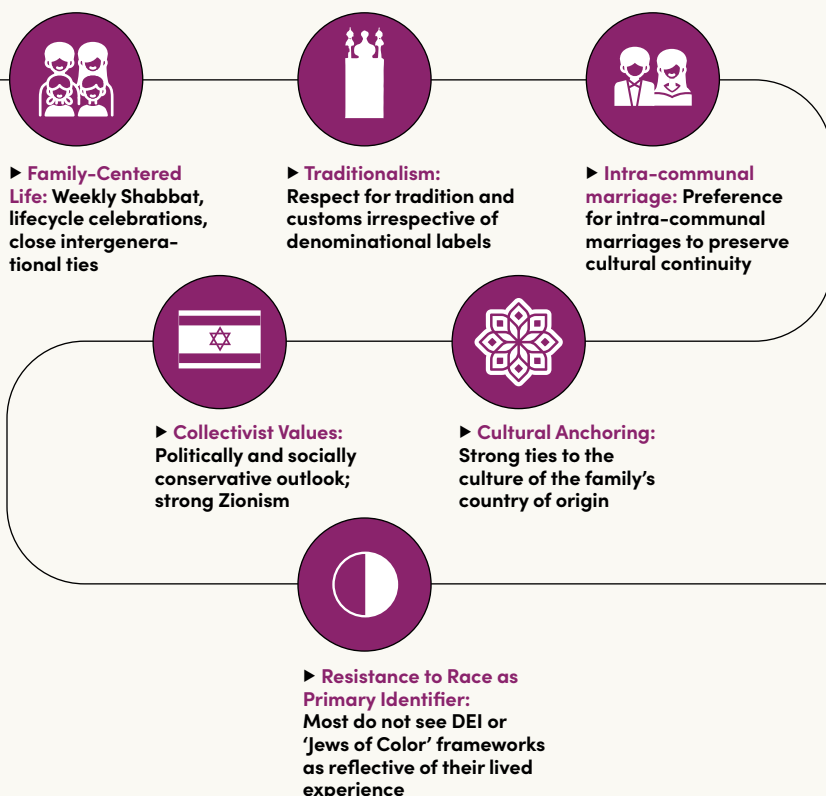
Community members are generally socially and politically conservative. This conservatism applies to US domestic issues, their strongly-held connections to Israel and Zionism, and their vigorous sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

## Community differences

The four communities also differ in key ways. The factors that brought them to the United States vary. Early Syrian Jews in Brooklyn migrated primarily in search of better economic opportunities, while later Syrian Jews (and Egyptian and Lebanese Jews who joined their community) and most Persian Jews in Los Angeles fled anti-Jewish regimes. Bukharians in Queens emigrated from Central Asia as the Soviet Union collapsed and the emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable living conditions for Jews. Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida who conducted a second migration (e.g., Morocco to Venezuela and then

### UNIFYING THREADS

#### Sephardic & Mizrahi Community Commonalities





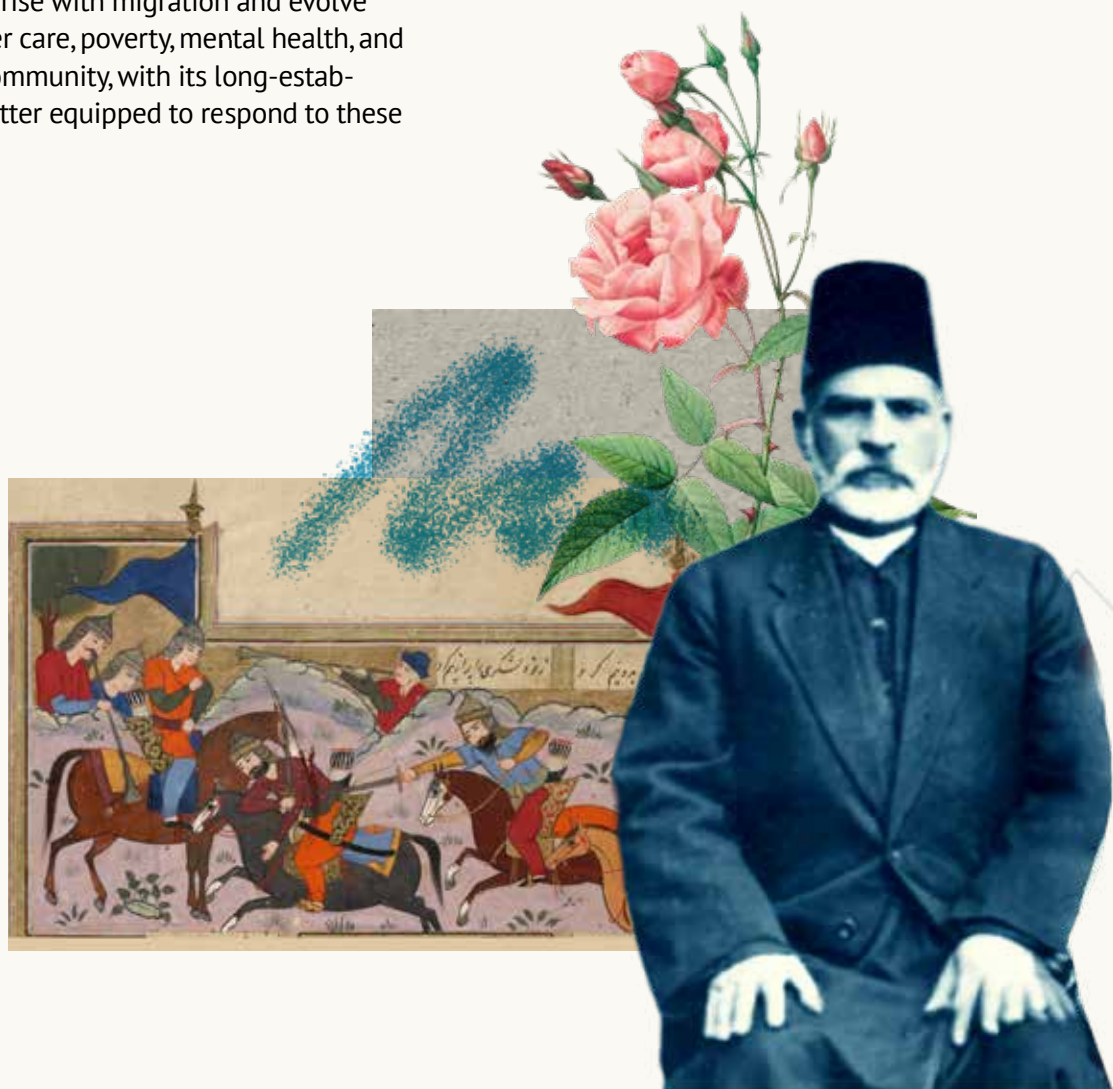
to Florida) left to escape broader social upheavals and severe economic disruptions where they were living.

Relationships with the majority-Ashkenazi population and institutions vary across communities. The Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn has built robust internal infrastructure, allowing it to remain largely independent. Persian Jews in Los Angeles combine strong family networks with significant reliance on Ashkenazi-led institutions. Bukharian Jews in Queens have developed their own synagogues while still primarily turning to Ashkenazi-led organizations for services like health-care and social support. In contrast, the Latin Sephardic population in South Florida is more dispersed and less organized as a single ethnic enclave. Instead, it functions as a dynamic hub for individuals, family networks and smaller groups connected by shared cultural backgrounds. Traditional, Orthodox and Chabad synagogues often serve as the gravitational centers of communal life.

These communities also differ in how they address social challenges that arise with migration and evolve over time—such as elder care, poverty, mental health, and addiction. The Syrian community, with its long-established institutions, is better equipped to respond to these

needs. Among Persian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews, institutional responses are still developing. Cultural norms can also make it difficult to address issues like addiction and mental health openly.

Each community has distinct internal dynamics as well. The Persian community, while broadly socially and politically conservative, includes a sizable secular segment and a small but notable progressive wing, especially among younger members. The Latin Sephardic presence in South Florida stands out for its geographic spread and fluidity, shaped more by overlapping cultural ties than by formal institutions.





# Conclusions

The findings in this report mark an exciting and significant step forward in understanding the diversity, complexity, and evolving nature of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish identities and experiences in the United States. While historically underrepresented in mainstream US Jewish institutional life, many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have built strong, vibrant communities that maintain deep familial, religious, and cultural traditions. Their experiences—shaped by unique migration histories, geopolitical contexts, and communal structures—offer invaluable perspectives that enrich the broader Jewish landscape. As interest in these communities grows, this study contributes to the development of a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Jewish life in America.

Our research focused on neighborhood-based Sephardic communities characterized by dense, multiplex networks—where family, religious, and social ties overlap—creating strong communal bonds that reinforce continuity and tradition. Social network theory suggests that such tight-knit structures strengthen communal norms and values, a pattern that remains evident across the communities studied. Alongside this cohesion, many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews demonstrate strong commitments to traditional family structures, religious values, and support for Israel, often aligning them with more conservative political and social positions than the broader American Jewish population.

Jewish communal organizations, educators, and researchers have an important opportunity to build on this momentum and deepen engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Expanding frameworks of Jewish diversity beyond US racial and ethnic categories, recognizing both the strengths and institutional barriers faced by these communities, and increasing support for Sephardic-led and Sephardic-serving initiatives will help create a more representative and inclusive Jewish communal future. While no single approach can fully capture the range of Sephardic and Mizrahi experiences, this growing field of study signals meaningful progress toward integrating their voices, histories, and leadership into Jewish communal and scholarly spaces.

## NOTES

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- 1 For the sake of describing Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, this report often refers to Ashkenazi Jewry as a singular majority group. Of course, Ashkenazi Jewry is also highly diverse, but that diversity has been extensively explored elsewhere and is not our focus here.
- 2 Throughout this report, “America” and “American” refer specifically to the United States of America. The terms “America,” “United States,” and “US” are used interchangeably.
- 3 As opposed to “a little” or “not at all.”
- 4 Economically vulnerable defined as answering “can’t make ends meet” or “just managing to make ends meet” on a question asking for self-assessment of current financial situation, as opposed to answering “have enough money,” “have some extra money,” or “well off.”