



**Jews of Arab Countries: Between
Identity Politics and
Historiography**

Aline Schlaepfer *

The issue of Jews who left Arab countries after the creation of the State of Israel, keeps resurfacing in international media. In 2012, a vast campaign was initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Israel, in order to recognize the hundreds of thousands of Jews who left Arab countries between the 1950s and the 1970s as refugees. Partly as a result of these repeated campaigns, the Knesset passed a Law in June 2014, intending to remember through an annual commemoration, the coming of Jews to the State of Israel, from Iran and the Arab countries. The date of November 30th was consequently selected as a national “Jewish Refugee Day”.ⁱ The Ministry of Senior Citizens, the Ministry of Education, and that of Foreign Affairs are all encouraged to promote the commemoration by organizing events, in schools, embassies and through public ceremonies.

Every time the issue is raised in the public space, a similar debate – but in different shapes – takes place.ⁱⁱ In substance, the debate queries if Jews came from Arab lands as *olim*, Jewish “ascendants” who came to Israel by choice (in other words, as Zionists), or if they were expelled from their countries of origin under direct compulsion and could therefore be considered refugees. In this paper, I examine one of the most emblematic Jewish communities living in Arab lands, that of Baghdad, before their departure between 1950 and 1951, when a denaturalization Law was passed in March 1950.ⁱⁱⁱ By locating two moments of the last phase of their history – 1908 and 1946 – through a micro-historical approach, I will examine factors of both inclusion and of exclusion, in order to bring new questions and perspective to the debate.

The history of Baghdadi Jews is not one of numbers, as those we have access to, are very few and mostly unsatisfactory. However, we know from a report sent by a British official in Baghdad that in 1910, between 35'000 and 50'000 Jews lived in the city for a total number of 150'000^{iv}. The historian Stephen Longrigg estimates that the Jews in Baghdad were almost numerically superior to the Sunnis^v. However, these estimates should be used with caution, first because Longrigg did not have access to accurate data, and second because the numbers did not include the suburbs. Be that as it may, Jews were visible. Under Ottoman rule, some of them where high-ranking *sarrafs* and bankers, many were shopkeepers in the old city and in the souks. Moreover, when they were massively hired by the British officials at the



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

establishment of the mandate in 1920, many became clerks and State employees. From then on, the fast growing Jewish middle class moved out of the old city and built a new residential quarter outside of the South Gate, called *al-Battawin*. Jews spoke Arabic, and used a specific dialect among themselves, notably recognizable by the use of the vocal “q”, instead of the “g” that was used by other Baghdadis.^{vi} Until the Arabization of the educational structures in Iraq after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Judeo-Arabic was the most commonly used language along with Turkish, but both progressively disappeared and were replaced by Arabic.

1908

The Ottoman 19th century came with a series of reforms - or *Tanzimat* in Ottoman Turkish - many of which concerned non-Muslim communities. Together with the Armenians, Greeks and other Christian communities, Ottoman Jews went through major structural changes. The Ottoman Chief Rabbinate (*Hahambashi*) was founded in Istanbul in 1835. Imperial edicts of 1839 and 1856, as well as the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 all regulated and reaffirmed the rights of religious communities living in the Ottoman Empire, to practice their religion freely. In the early *Tanzimat* era, as Julia Cohen rightly points out, Jews “remained little more than an afterthought in imperial politics”, as the sultan was much more concerned with the threatening relation between Western powers and their Christian *protégés* on Ottoman soil. But by the end of the 19th century, Jews became a “model (non-Muslim) community” for the Ottomans, zealously adopting the reforms and endorsing the idea of an Ottoman citizenship.^{vii}

Parallel to that, however, the authority of Sultan Abulhamid II was strongly questioned throughout the Empire. A movement of opposition, composed of heterogeneous groups of individuals - who came to be known as the Young Turks - tried to force him to resign. In 1908, under the pressure of his powerful opponents, the sultan restored the Constitution that had been suspended for several decades. Along with it, came more political freedom for “non-dominant groups”^{viii} and more opportunities for an independent press. Consequently, among the constitutionalists many were Christians and Jews on the one hand, and professionals in the print industry (journalists, writers, etc.), on the other hand. Many of them almost immediately called it a revolution (*inqilab* in Ottoman Arabic) in different provinces of the Empire. Bedros der Matossian provides the salient example of the Armenian Apostolic community celebrating the Young Turk Revolution in Cairo, together with important Muslim and Christian figures. The Islamic thinker Muhammad Rashid Rida, considered to be the father of the *salafiyya* movement in Egypt, was enthusiastically lifted onto the audience’s shoulders and brought to the Armenian bishop, who embraced him.

For many non-dominant groups, such as the Armenians and Arabic speaking populations of the Empire, the enthusiasm was short-lived. The heavy backlash of the turkification of the structures of power against local autonomies was soon taken as a major threat and in some cases eventually led to dramatic endings, as was the case with the Armenians. For Jews throughout the Empire, however, the situation was



N°5 | May 2016

different. The “model community” continued to successfully show loyalty to the Turks. At times, their open displays of support were even taken as signs of betrayal by the Christians and strongly condemned in the international press. For instance, Jews were accused in the columns of *The Times* in London in summer 1911, of being partly responsible for the Adana Massacres against the Armenians of Cilicia in 1909^{ix}.

The situation of Jews in Baghdad echoes that of the Porte and nearby cities. Among the many enthusiastic responses to the Young Turk Revolution, some can be found in testimonies produced by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*'s employees in Baghdad^x. The Jewish press flourished in Baghdad: *al-Sharq*, *al-Zuhur*, and others were founded between 1908 and 1909. Nisim Yusuf Somekh (1888-1928) a Jewish intellectual originally from Baghdad but based in Beirut, came back in the aftermath of the revolution, and founded a journal. In fact, Baghdadi Jews were so openly enthusiastic that they had to pay the price for it. When a delegation of Young Turks visited Baghdad from Salonica in October 1908, important Muslim personalities from the *salafiyya* movement read speeches in favour of the Young Turks in a central mosque in Baghdad. Rumors of Jews also entering the part of the mosque they were usually forbidden to enter in order to hear the speeches, spread like wildfire. Consequently, Jewish quarters were attacked and looted, by forces hostile to the Young Turk regime^{xi}. This, however, did not seem to have stopped the Jews from showing enthusiasm for the Turks for several years, as another Alliance report from 1911 clearly shows^{xii}.

The Young Turk episode in Baghdad shows signs of both inclusion and exclusion. Because the 1908 Revolution was seen as a milestone in defining equality between imperial subjects, the feeling of victory among Baghdadi Jews comes as no surprise. In fact, for many Jews and other non-dominant groups such as the Armenians, 1908 constituted an inclusive “micro-revolution”^{xiii}. The loyalty towards the Turks also shows that there were no natural bonds that strictly tied the Jews to the British when they occupied Baghdad in 1917, contrary to what is commonly remembered in Iraqi Jewish collective memory. In fact, their relationship was long characterized by mutual mistrust on the one hand, and competition in matters of trade, on the other.^{xiv} However, the enthusiasm they showed also brought its share of exclusive expressions of hostilities.

1946

In his memoirs entitled *On My Way to Prison*, the Jewish journalist Meir Mu'allim (d. 1978), recalls the moment right after he was arrested in Baghdad and sent to exile in Northern Iraq. His non Jewish inmate - knowing he was a Jew - started to ask questions about his political allegiances. When asked if he was a Communist, Meir Mu'allim answered that he was neither a Communist, nor a Zionist. “We are mere journalists”, he said.^{xv} Who was he then? In order to understand this, one has to return to the context of the end of the Second World War, and the beginning of a new era in Iraq.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

The country was ruled by Faysal II, son of Ghazi who died in a car crash in 1939^{xvi}. A Regent was designated to rule on his behalf, until he would become of age (he was three years old when he became king). In the early 1940s, Iraq experienced a time of intense tensions between the pro-British and the pro-Germans among the Iraqi political elites. Following a failed coup d'Etat led by ultranationalist forces in April 1941, the Jewish quarters of Baghdad became the target of violent attacks and lootings. During the pogrom, the *Farhud* as it was later referred to, based on the Iraqi word "violent dispossession" – left about 150-200 Jewish victims, as well as many non-Jews. Despite the collective trauma, Jews seemed to have nourished new hopes with the end of the war and seized new opportunities^{xvii}.

In December 1945, the Regent announced his intention to promote the formation of political parties and more freedom for the press. In February 1946, a new government was formed accordingly. Five political parties were consequently officially recognized: a government's party, a nationalist party, and three leftist parties, often referred to as the "moderate left" (National Unity Party, the People's Party and the National Democratic Party). Finally, a sixth party called the Anti-Zionist League was also tolerated – although for a very short period – almost entirely composed of Jewish Communists. All parties had their own newspapers, and the press flourished exceptionally in 1946. The National Democratic Party offered both a protective structure for the Jews and numerous possibilities of work. In particular, it represented a unique opportunity for Iraqi Jews who were trained as journalists, editors, translators and, more generally, for the printing industry, especially for those who were trained at *al-Hasid*, an Arabic weekly directed by an editorial team composed entirely of Jews, published between 1929 and 1938. One of the most emblematic Jewish members of the National Democratic Party (NDP) was the Jewish novelist Shalom Darwish (1913-1997). He joined the party in 1946 and publically expressed his support to Kamil al-Chadirchi, a leading figure of the NDP in an electoral campaign. As he became a powerful public and leading member of the Party, Shalom Darwish offered his support to his allies, in other leftist parties. A British report relates that the members of the Iraqi Communist Party were arrested in 1947 at the house of a Jewish member and sentenced to death (among them its leader, Yusuf Salman Yusuf, known as "Fahd"). According to the report, Shalom Darwish was accused of trying to bribe members of the Court of Cassation in order to commute the sentence^{xviii}.

In the historiography on Iraqi Jews, the 1940's are often considered a period of polarization towards new – underground – allegiances. Some joined the Iraqi Communist Party, while others joined the newly founded Zionist movement^{xix}. However, the division between a new active generation, on the one hand, and a passive old one, on the other hand, tends to neglect a whole group of Iraqi Jewish journalists who had acquired a favourable position in the Iraqi public sphere and did not wish to jeopardize it by going underground (either Communist or Zionist). They consequently strove to maintain their old allegiances, and were by no means passive. Here, again, factors of inclusion transpire from the Jews' capacity to easily integrate groups based on social and professional sociabilities, rather than on



N°5 | May 2016

communal or religious solidarities. At the same time, the very need for the protection these groups offered them is in itself a clear sign of exclusion.

Towards a depolarization of the debate

Moments of inclusion and exclusion like 1908 and 1946 are plenty. And had Israel not presented itself as an alternative solution for Iraqi Jews, they would have most likely continued to experience such ambivalent moments^{xx}, as did other non-dominant groups in Iraq (Kurds, Shi'is, Christian populations, Yezidis, etc.) What happened after the mass emigration is another story to tell. But by focusing all our attention on trying to define their status as refugees or Zionists, and by reducing their bimillenary histories to their final journey to Israel, we forget to ask: Who were they before that? What roles did they play in their society? What were their contributions to local cultures, like music? How did they respond to changes of regime throughout history? How did they react to colonialism, Nazism and fascism? The same goes for other Arab countries like Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Morocco and others, where Jews experienced life under Arab, Persian, Mameluk, Safavid, Turkish dynasties, among others.

These questions still need to find answers, in order to produce a new body of scholarship. In Middle Eastern modern history, the contribution of Christians in the Levant to modern thinking and identity politics is common knowledge. Thanks to their Western-oriented education, they became aware of the necessity to create a collective identity based on cultural and linguistic categories, in which they were included as arabophones, rather than on religion, a factor of exclusion. The contribution of Jews, however, has been somewhat neglected by Middle Eastern historians. Their histories are often considered as extensions of that of Christians, as *the other non-Muslims*, so to speak. But Jews in Arab lands did not benefit from the exact same attention paid by the European powers to Christian communities. The tie they shared with the Alliance israélite universelle school system for instance, was based on a private charity organization independent from the *Consistoire israélite de France*. Consequently, because of its fragile link with Europe, Jews from Arab lands were profoundly imbued with local debates on identity politics. However, in Middle Eastern historiography, Jews are often considered a silent minority. Or their voices have been silenced by the pan-Arab historical narrative. In order to build a better understanding of modern ideologies in Middle Eastern history, the field still needs to relocate the Jews, from the periphery to the center of scholarly attention. And in order to do so, Jewish studies need to be integrated in the process.

From the viewpoint of Jewish studies, still a few years back scholars working on Jews in Arab lands argued that Jewish history was perceived exclusively through the lens of Ashkenazi historiography. But this is no longer true. First, the reinforcement of modern Sephardic studies - such as the seminal work of Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (1991), and more recently the important contribution by Sara Stein and Julia Cohen, *Sephardi Lives : A Documentary History, 1700-1950* (2014), to name a few - have contributed to shaping a new



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

perspective on identity politics among Jews in Muslim lands. By doing so, they prepared the ground for a field more concerned with Jews in Arab lands. However, partly due to the omnipresence of Arab countries in contemporary social sciences, it is often forgotten that until the early 20th century, Arab lands were mere peripheries of the Ottoman Empire. And so were their Jews. So, in order to get a full picture of Middle Eastern Jewry, the specific field of Jews in Arab lands still needs to be reinforced.^{xxi}

The emergence of what came to be known as *Mizrahi studies* (*mizrahi* means “oriental” in Hebrew) in the 1980s, partly came to fill the gap. Seminal works by Reuven Snir and Ammiel Alcalay – again to name a few – first explored the field. The *Journal for the Study of Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies* (2005) indicates the visibility of Mizrahim in both scholarship, and the public sphere. But in many cases, inside and outside academia, *Mizrahi Studies* function as a forum for heated political debates about Israel, and the history of Jews in Arab Lands serves the purpose of current political arguments, such as the one about the Jewish Refugee Day. The debate, as Mark Cohen puts it, is too often polarized between “the neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history”, and its apologetic counterpart.^{xxii} In 2012, the Israeli historian Esther Meir-Glitzenstein responded in the columns of *Haaretz* to a political campaign concerning Jews from Arab lands. She concludes her article by saying: “Maybe the time has come for the story to be studied, its events examined outside of any campaign, and the voices of the Jews (from Arab lands) to be considered.”^{xxiii} Let it be a performative statement.

* Aline Schlaepfer, Université de Genève-American University of Beirut



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

References

- Armstrong, B. (2007). China... from the Sea: The Importance of Chinese Naval History. *Strategic Insights*. Vol. 6, Issue. 6, pp. 1-9. (Accessed online 10th October 2015 at: <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a519989.pdf>).
- BBC (2015) China to 'complete' South China Sea land reclamation. (Accessed online 10th October 2015 at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-33144751>).
- Chen, C-C. (2010). The Analysis of Geo-political Code in Zheng's Dynasty. *East-Asia Review*. No. 268, pp.103-114.
- Cole, B. (2010). *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press.
- Communist Party of China's Ministry of Defence White Paper (2015). *China's Military Strategy*. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (Accessed online 10th October 2015 at: <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>).
- Communist Party of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2011). *China's Peaceful Development*. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (Accessed online 10th October 2015 at http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7126562.htm).
- Communist Party of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2005). *China's Peaceful Development Road*. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (Accessed online 10th October 2015 at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/152684.htm>).
- Dooley, H. (2012). [The Great Leap Outwards: China's Maritime Renaissance](#). *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*. Vol. 26, Issue. 1, pp. 53-76.
- Dreyer, F. (1974). The Poyang Campaign, 1363. In F. Kierman and J. Fairbank (Eds) *Chinese Ways in Warfare*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Elleman, B. (2009). The Neglect and Nadir of Chinese Maritime Policy under the Qing. In A. Erickson, L. Goldstein, and C. Lord (Eds) *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press.
- Eldridge, F. (1948). *The Background of Eastern Sea Power*. London: Phoenix House.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

Fairbank, J. (1969). China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective. *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 47, Issue. 3, pp. 449-463.

Huang, Y-Q. (2013). *Zhongguo Dalu de Bianjiang yu Anquan: Cong Luquan Maixiang Haiquan de Zhanlue Xuanze (Frontiers and Security of Mainland China: The Strategic Choice of Shifting from Land Power to Sea Power)*. Taipei: Showwe Information Co. Ltd.

Juvelier, B. (2013). China Looks to the Sea: A Historical Analysis of Geopolitical Strategy. *Vanderbilt Undergraduate research Journal*. Vol. 9, Issue. 2, pp. 1-12.

Lo, J. (2012) (Ed. B. Elleman). *China as a Sea Power, 1127-1368. A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Scobell, A. (2003). *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shi, Z. (2009). China's Overseas Trade Policy and its Historical Result: 1522-1840. In J. Latham and H. Kawakatsu (Eds.) *Intra-Asian Trade and the World Market*. London: Routledge.

Thompson, T. (2015). China (Re)Turns to the Sea: the persistence of the past. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 69, Issue. 4, pp. 357-362.

Walton, T. and McGrath, B. (2014). China's Surface Fleet Trajectory: Implications for the US Navy. In P. Dutton, A. Erickson and R. Martinson (Eds) *China's Near Seas Combat Capabilities*. Rhode Island: Naval War College Press.

Wang, Z. (2012). *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Willett, L. (2012). Pirates and Power Politics: Naval Presence and Grand Strategy in the Horn of Africa. *Royal United Services Institute Journal*. Vol. 156, Issue. 6, pp. 20-25.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°5 | May 2016

ⁱ Press release from the Knesset, 14 June 2014 (www.knesset.gov.il).

ⁱⁱ For a few examples, see Ben White, "A New Hasbara Campaign: Countering the 'Arab Narrative'", *Al-Jazeera*, 14 September 2012, (www.aljazeera.com) and Lyn Julius, "'Jewish Refugee Day' is a historic breakthrough", *Jerusalem Post*, 26 June 2014, (www.jpost.com). Consulted on 7 April 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Art. 1: The Council of Ministers is empowered to divest any Iraqi Jew who, of his own free will and choice, desires to leave Iraq for good of his Iraqi nationality after he has signed a special form in the presence of an official appointed by the Minister of the Interior." Law No. 1 of 1950.

^{iv} H.D.S., « Account of the Jewish community at Baghdad », Baghdad, 17 février 1910 ; retranscription in Elie KEDOURIE, « The Jews of Baghdad in 1910 », *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 7, n° 3, 1971, p. 357-358.

^v Stephen Hemsley LONGRIGG, *Iraq (1900 to 1950) : A Political, Social and Economic History*, Londres et New York, Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 10.

^{vi} For more on the specificities of the Iraqi Jewish dialect, see Haim Blanc, *Communal Dialects in Baghdad*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964.

^{vii} Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. xii.

^{viii} I borrow the concept of "non-dominant groups" to Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014, who proposes a comparatist approach between three populations of the late Ottoman Empire: Jews, Armenians and Arabs.

^{ix} *The Times*, between 12 July and 19 August 1911.

^x The *Société de l'Alliance israélite universelle* was founded in Paris 1860, in order to establish schools for Jews in different parts of the world. (For testimonies, see for example IRAK VI E 048, AAIU).

^{xi} FO 371/560, PRO.

^{xii} IRAK VIII E 090, AAIU.

^{xiii} Again, I borrow the notion of "micro-revolution" to Bedros der Matossian, "Formation of Public Sphere(s) in the Aftermath of the 1908 Revolution among Armenians, Arabs, and Jews", in Georgeon, F. (ed.), *L'Ivresse de La Liberté. La révolution de 1908 dans l'Empire ottoman*, Louvain, Peeters, 2011, p. 189-219.

^{xiv} Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq : A study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* [1978], Londres, Saqi, 2004, p. 248-249.

^{xv} Meir Mu'allim, *On My Way to Prison* (Arabic), Jerusalem: [s.n.], 1983, p. 73-74.

^{xvi} For a detailed analysis of the circumstances of Ghazi's death, see Aline Schlaepfer, "The King is Dead. Long Live the King ! Jewish Funerary Performances in the Iraqi Public Space", in Heleen Murre and Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah (ed.), *Common ground ? Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Middle East*, Brill (LUCIS Series), Leiden, 2016 (forthcoming).

^{xvii} See Meir Basri's (1911-2006) testimony on the period immediately following the war. Meir Basri, *A Life's Journey* (Arabic), Jerusalem, Manshurat, 1991, p. 60.

^{xviii} FO 624/116, 30/19/47, PRO.

^{xix} Nissim Rejwan *The Jews of Iraq : 3 000 Years of History and Culture*, Londres, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; Abbas Shiblak, *Iraqi Jews : A History of Mass Exodus*, London, Saqi, 2005 (1986) and Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012.

^{xx} It was in fact the case for those who stayed after 1951.

^{xxi} For a discussion on Middle Eastern Jewry in scholarship, see the introduction to Behar & Benite xxiv, 2013

^{xxii} Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994.

^{xxiii} Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "'The Truth About the Expulsion'", *Haaretz*, 9 October 2012.