Jews & Others in Iraq

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The current image of Iraq in the media and public discourse is of a country sharply divided by communal boundaries and conflicts of religion, ethnicity, and community. This image goes right against any notion of "cosmopolitanism." Yet, research into the history of the country in the twentieth century would show that, while communal boundaries and conflicts did exist, these were socially permeable, allowing much close interaction between individuals, families, and neighbourhoods across the boundaries.

The history of the Jewish presence in Iraq is often forgotten, erased by mutually hostile nationalisms, Arabist and Zionist. A consideration of that history and of the embeddedness of the Jews in Iraqi society and culture presents an interesting reminder of the everyday cosmopolitanism that pervaded Iraqi urban (and some rural) society for much of the twentieth century. This everyday cosmopolitanism is here traced in various spheres and fields of general social life as well as professional activities. These relations across communal boundaries were subject to the impacts of the political and ideological episodes of the century: WWII, pan-Arab nationalism and pro-Nazi movements, the Communist movement and Jewish participation, and Zionism and the ultimate foundation of Israel.

Social mingling

With the foundation of the modern Iraqi state (British Mandate 1920; Independence 1932) Christian and Jewish individuals were well placed to participate in the emerging public life in government services, the professions, the arts, journalism, and business. Missionary schools and the Alliance Israelite Universelle established schools in Baghdad and other main cities in the course of the nineteenth century, educating their pupils in European languages and modern curricula. This participation led to the fostering of organic relations between individuals and families from different communities, in business and professional relations, friendships, and social mingling. Even in rural areas, Jewish doctors assumed vital roles in community life and service, and Jewish landlords, acquiring land after the Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century, assumed paternal relations to their tenants and employees, to the extent of organizing Husseiniya ceremonies in the Shia mourning month of Muharram.

Women were often the most active and curious in social interactions of neighbourhood and female society. In oral accounts and written memoirs, the theme recurs of women moving easily between houses in mixed neighbourhoods, exchanging gossip and cooking recipes, as well as telling and commiserating over the many common matrimonial and domestic problems. They also participated in each other's festivities and occasions, exchanging greetings and items of food on their respective religious festivals of Eid, Purim, and Christmas. Jewish women in Shia neighbourhoods would sometimes join their neighbours on balconies and doorways to watch the mourning processions for the martyrs in Muharram. Women were also more receptive to religious intercession from whatever source to solve personal problems of fertility, health, wealth, and happiness. One such is the shrine of Shaykh Abdel-Qadir al-Gailani in Baghdad, known for its efficacy in solving problems of fertility, which was frequented by Jewish and Christian women.

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Food constituted an interesting cultural field of interaction between individuals of different communities. The barriers of food taboos were transcended among friends, either by non-observance or by special provisions. From personal recollections, Muslim hosts would insure that their table included fish and vegetables for their Jewish guests who may observe Casher (Kosher) prohibitions, and Shia diners would ignore the taboo on commensality with non-Muslims observed in many Shia communities but ignored in mixed urban contexts. While most of the cuisine of each community represented variations on common themes of Middle East cooking, there were dishes specific to each, such as the Jewish Sabbath dish. In Baghdad this was a special chicken and rice dish cooked slowly overnight, known as *tebit*. Neighbours, attracted by the aromas, had their curiosity satisfied with sample plates being sent between houses, often reciprocated by the recipient's typical food, or some sweets.

Music constituted another sphere of inter-communal mixing. Jews were particularly prominent in the musical arts from the nineteenth century, as instrumentalist, singers, composers, and cafe and cabaret owners. The Iraqi delegation to the Arab Music Congress in Cairo in 1932 consisted of Jewish instrumentalists and one Muslim singer. The first orchestra of Iraqi national broadcasting in 1936 was predominantly Jewish. One of the most famous divas of the middle decades of the century was Salima Murad, a Jewess who converted to Islam to marry another famous singer, Nazim al-Ghazzali. Iraqi Jews in Israel have maintained their devotion to Iraqi music into the second and third generations, and Iraqi Jews in London import those musicians for their weddings and celebrations. I recall an occasion some years ago when a group of Iraqi Jewish musicians from Israel arriving in London to perform at a wedding were invited to the home of another Iraqi Jew for an evening with a prominent Muslim Iraqi musician who then lived in London. They were all friends in Baghdad in the old days, and it was an emotional reunion. They played and sang together well into the night.

Communal boundaries

The picture so far may appear a rosy one of friendly inter-communal interaction and cosmopolitanism. In fact most people, especially the poorer classes, were enveloped in their family and community lives, and the ritual calendar of their religion. Communal identities were never forgotten, and the boundaries may have been lowered for some, but never eliminated. Intermarriage across religious boundaries was strictly taboo, and on the rare occasion on which it occurred (always the non-Muslim partner converting to Islam) was considered a great disaster for the families concerned. Boundaries are not necessarily locations of conflict, but they can become so when politicized, as they were in the course of the twentieth century. Arab nationalism, even when secular, drew heavily upon religious-communal sentiments. In this perspective Jews (and Christians) were associated with hostile colonial powers, and for Jews, the Zionist movement and Israel.

Iraqi politics under the Monarchy (displaced in 1958) consisted of various fronts of accommodation and opposition to a government close to British interests, and to the West in the Cold War. The ideological opposition was divided between the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and Arab nationalist groups. The Arab nationalists (in various parties, culminating in the Baath) tended to be recruited predominantly (though not exclusively) from Sunni Arabs. The ICP, which had solid popular constituencies, appealed to the whole spectrum of the Iraqi population: Arabs and Kurds, Sunna and Shia, Christians and Jews. Quite apart from its ideology and pro-Soviet allegiance, it was an "Iraqist" and cosmopolitan party. Jews, for the most part, avoided open involvement in politics where they were particularly vulnerable. But many young people, intelligentsia, but also artisans, were attracted by the prospect of participation in a secular, universalist, and liberationist movement. Communist Jews, some of whom attained leadership positions, were to share in the sacrifices and persecutions of their comrades, and the political prisons became another arena of everyday cosmopolitanism.

Arab nationalist and Islamic sentiments and movements assumed markedly anti-Jewish positions and actions during the 1930s and 1940s, reinforced with the foundation of Israel in 1948. The 1936 Arab revolt in Palestine and the continuing confrontations with Jewish settlers there, led Arab nationalists to see all Jews as complicit. The Rashid Ali coup d'état in 1941 was anti-British and pro-Nazi, and though short-lived, presided over an intensification of anti-Jewish aggression, culminating in a "pogrom," known as the Farhud, targeting the Jews of Baghdad and some other cities, during which some 200 Jews were killed

and many injured and raped; a traumatic event in collective Jewish memory. British forces soon re-occupied Baghdad and restored the Monarchy. During this episode many Jews were protected by their Muslim neighbours and friends, especially in the provinces, where a traditional sense of mutual obligations was particularly strong.

At the level of everyday relations ideological antipathies did not always inhibit friendships and associations. Nazi propaganda was prevalent in schools, especially espoused by Palestinian and Syrian teachers. A Jewish informant, who was at school in the late 1930s, relates walking hand in hand with his Muslim classmate in the street, the latter using the other hand to write on the wall with a piece of chalk "kill the Jews"! This same informant was in a political prison in the 1940s, as a communist, when a visiting high level medical inspector astonished the guards by stopping to greet him since they had been at school together.

Iraqi Jews had an ambivalent and shifting attitude to Zionism. Zionist emissaries sent into Iraq with the British forces during WW2 were disappointed with the apathy and even hostility of the local Jews, whom they decried in their reports as not proper Jews, integrated into "oriental" society, immersed in the pastimes and vices of their milieu: sitting around in cafes, drinking Arak, gossip, and gambling. Yet, as the Jews felt the increasing pressure and discrimination in the later 1940s, Israel and Zionism acquired greater attraction. For some, mostly young, the pull was ideological and attraction to the prospect of a western lifestyle and full citizenship. For others it was the push of persecution, loss of jobs, and arbitrary rule. In the end these pressures and attractions culminated in the emigration of the great majority of Jews, some 120,000, mostly to Israel in 1951, in accordance with a secret agreement between Iraqi leaders and the Jewish Agency which allowed Jews to leave without their possessions, on condition that they renounce their Iraqi nationality. A few thousands remained in Iraq, and some enjoyed a period of calm and prosperity in the years of the Qasim regime (1958–63), only to be subjected to further pressure under the Arabist and Baathist regimes of the 1960s, culminating in a wave of persecution and terror following the 1967 Arab defeat, then the Baathist coup of 1968 which brought Saddam and a bloodier regime to power. The bulk of the remaining Jews left as soon as they could after that.

PHOTO BY AWAD AWAD / © AFP, 2003

Jewish man outside Baghdad synagogue

Nation-state formation

Iraq is now seen as the epitome of violent sectarianism. A common assumption is that this state of affairs is in the nature of the country, being an "artificial" creation, forcing together diverse communities who cannot coalesce into a "nation." Most modern nations, however, started as artificial mixes, and it is the process of nation-state formation itself which creates various forms of the "national" at the socio-economic and cultural levels. Iraq was no exception. The account of "everyday cosmopolitanism" given here shows elements of this national formation and the lowering of communal barriers for much of the twentieth century, especially with regard to the ambiguous position of the Jews in relation to this "national." The present situation is the product of the disruptive processes unleashed by the Saddam regime, its extraordinary repressions and disastrous wars, and exacerbated by the American invasion of 2003.

It may be argued that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Iraq was not unambiguously an "Arab country." Quite apart from the sizeable Kurdish population, the "Arab" component participated in a highly hybrid culture with echoes of the Turko-Iranic world. Nowruz, the spring festival of the Iranic world, was widely celebrated in many communities. Iraqi Arabic was, and remains to a certain extent, imbued with Persian and Turkish vocabulary. In the 1970s Saddam Hussein found it necessary to issue an order banning "foreign" words and expressions in Iraqi songs. It was the national state, Arab nationalist for the most part, which made Iraq into an "Arab country" in the course of the twentieth century. This project was also part of the mass national education, then government bureaucracy, all in standard Arabic. Yet, all these policies and processes never fully succeeded in eliminating the pervasive hybridity of Iraqi culture.

At the same time, the national state and its fields spawned orientations, spaces, and institutions for the flourishing of a different kind of cosmopolitanism, that of the intelligentsia and the educated middle classes. In these milieus, communal boundaries were lowered, and common mixing, friendships and partnerships flourished for much of the twentieth century. Yet, it was those cosmopolitan middle classes who fell victim to repeated campaigns of repression and expulsion. First, the Jews, who constituted a considerable tranche of the educated, professional, and business classes, were forced to leave. Then, during the 1970s and 80s, many Shia communities were subject to dis-appropriation and expulsion by the Saddam regime. Waves of political repression and persecution decimated the ranks of the intelligentsia, many killed and others in prison and exile. Repeated wars and devastation, followed by the UN sanctions, led to the impoverishment and humiliation of those classes and heightened pressures which drove many into exile.

The violence and disorder which followed the 2003 invasion included campaigns of assassination and kidnapping targeting professionals, including doctors, scientists, and professors, leading to a mass flight of these classes into exile. Iraq, then, has been largely denuded of the main carriers of everyday, as well as cultural, cosmopolitanism. The raging communal violence has also led to the ethnic cleansing of neighbourhoods, leading to greater homogeneity, and the erection of communal barriers, sometimes physically in the form of walls of separation. Christians, and other religious minorities have been particularly targeted and many driven into exile or internal displacement. What remains of Iraqi cosmopolitanism may now be found in London or Paris, and possibly Amman.

As for the cosmopolitanism of the Middle East more generally, can we see a waning of the ethnic and communal interactions of the earlier twentieth century? Certainly, the convergence of nationalism with Islamism which seems to prevail increasingly in many countries has led to a homogenization of populations and regions, and accelerated migrations of religious minorities to the West, after the almost complete ending of the Jewish presence in the region outside of Israel. What of globalization: does it lead to a new cosmopolitanism, or to added barriers generated by sharpened transnational nativist and religious ideologies?

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