Baghdadi Jewish networks in Hashemite Iraq : Jewish transnationalism in the age of nationalism

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Conclusion

Three young Jewish women from Baghdad were sent to Paris in 1938 to study at the AIU teacher's training school. Soon after their arrival, France was invaded and Paris was occupied by the Nazis. The women fled to Toulouse and spent the rest of the war in southern France using false papers provided by members of the French resistance. At the end of the war, their passports having expired, the women were unable to return to Iraq. With the assistance of the JDC they were sent, instead, to Palestine as Jewish War Refugees. Ibrahim Nahum, who happened to be in Palestine in 1945 arranged to have their Iraqi passports renewed and they were finally able to return to their families in Baghdad. These women, like most Iraqi Jews, would leave Iraq for Israel between 1949 and 1952.[1]

The lives of Iraqi Jews in the Hashemite period were influenced by a complex network of Jewish organizations, institutions, and ideologies.[2] I have explored ways in which Iraqi Jewry connected to Jewish groups outside Iraq, arguing that these connections had important ongoing consequences not only on the organization of the community, but in the identity of its members. In the first four chapters I examined the emergence of new types of Jewish networks, including the relationship between Baghdad and the Baghdadi diaspora, global Jewish solidarity and philanthropy movements, the global Jewish press and secular Jewish education. In the final chapter, I presented three case studies demonstrating the ways in which the aforementioned themes intertwined via these overlapping networks.

The Mandate is a crucial moment in Iraqi Jewish history, represented by the openness of the Iraqi state in the 1920s. This period afforded Iraqi Jews greater socio-economic mobility that resulted in strengthening formal and informal Jewish networks through commercial and intellectual exchange (i.e. Jewish periodicals). In the 1930s as anti-British and anti-Zionist sentiment grew in Iraq, these connections became more problematic, particularly, those which linked Iraqi Jews to Britain or Palestine. Some Jews in Iraq, as a consequence, became vocally anti-British or anti-Zionist and the relationships between the Jews in Iraq with the British and Jews in Palestine were publicly downplayed. The transnational Jewish networks, however,

1 Rachel Mahlad-Goren, "The Late Jacob Mahlab" *The Scribe* (No. 70), October 1998, 22.

2 Although the specific details of article are impossible to verify, the dates, institutions and individuals are consistent with documented events. Nahum was in Palestine in 1946 and the JDC was responsible for bringing many Jews located in Vichy France to Palestine.

remained active and relevant up until the dismantling of the Iraqi Jewish community that coincided with the creation of the state of Israel.

1. English and French as Transnational Jewish Languages

Multilingualism determined how Baghdadis participated in the global Jewish public sphere. Although Arabic was the dominant language of communication in Iraq and Baghdadis overwhelmingly spoke Judeo-Baghdadi in family settings, multilingualism was essential for Baghdadi participation in transnational Jewish networks. The structural foreign relationships of the communal leadership, which brought the AIU, AJA, and JDC to Iraq, encouraged a multilingual Baghdadi community. This can be seen most clearly through the development of secular schools in which the majority of students studied three or four languages. Another important, and connected, driver of this multilingualism was the ever-present role of the Baghdadi Diaspora. English was not only used for communication with other Jewish sub-groups but also as an internal language for Baghdadis. English, and to a lesser extent French, became the dominant transnational languages of communication for Baghdadi Jews as they were the languages of communication with foreign philanthropic groups, the satellite communities and a large portion of the foreign Jewish press.

This linguistic shift is indicative of a larger transition in the main languages of transnational Jewish communication in the 20th century. In the pre-modern world—when communal languages such as Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, or Yiddish were not universally viable—Hebrew was the *lingua franca* of transnational Jewish communication. This was also the case for a brief period of time at the height of the *Haskala*. By the early 20th century, however, English and French had become the dominant languages of transnational Jewish communication largely due to Jewish philanthropic networks connected to the success of French and British imperial networks and the migration of Ashkenazi Jews to North American between 1881–1924. The Baghdadis were one small part of this linguistic transition due to their own migration and their participation in transnational Jewish networks.

To this day, as the importance of the AIU and French imperial networks has receded, English remains the dominant language of transnational Jewish communication. The main poles of the Jewish world, Israel and the United States, differ greatly from the more geographically and linguistically diverse distribution a century earlier. Although the state of Israel would like to present Hebrew as the unifying language of the Jewish people, English continues to dominate as the language of transnational

Jewish communication. This is unsurprising as the overwhelming majority of world Jewry studies English as either their first or second language. It should not be overlooked, however, that this trend began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to the emergence of Jewish internationalism, imperialism and mass Jewish migration.

2. A Transnational Identity: The Baghdadi Community

Iraqi Jews identified with a larger 'Baghdadi Jewish' community that in their minds extended beyond the borders of Iraq, in particular to the satellite communities of the Indian sub-continent and East Asia, but also the United Kingdom and other parts of MENA. Geographic delocalization engendered an identity that was fluid, transcending nationality and language, built on shared customs and traditions, linked to themes discussed throughout my thesis: intellectual exchange in Baghdadi periodicals; solidarity movements; and philanthropy. It was also enduring, having had relevance in the Ottoman Period, the Hashemite period, and after the exodus of Jews from Iraq. As early as the 1920s Jews in the satellite communities identified with Britain rather than the Iraqi State but continued to see themselves as Baghdadi Jews. Today, as Baghdadi Jews work to preserve their cultural identity in a multilingual and multicultural context, through cultural associations, synagogues, and publications. This trend can also be seen in other Jewish subgroups (such as Moroccan and Iranian Jewry) whose communities transcend language and nation.[3]

Preservation of communal identity in a transnational context has also, in the long-term, influenced how Baghdadis perceive themselves within global Jewry. In the Ottoman period there was little identification with Jewish groups beyond those in close proximity to Baghdad outside the sphere of religious law and practice.[4] This began to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in large part due to interaction with other Jewish groups in the satellite communities and foreign Jewish travelers in Baghdad. In Iraq, unlike much of the Jewish world, there were never separate Sephardic or Ashkenazi communal institutions. Instead, Baghdadi Jews integrated foreign Jews into their community.

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3 Leah R. Baer, "Diaspora—Iranian," EJIW; Ruth Fredman Cernea, "Diaspora—Iraqi," EJIW; Mikhael Elbaz, "Diaspora—Moroccan," EJIW.

4 Zohar, *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East*, 11–90.

The situation was different for Baghdadis outside Iraq as they were often confronted by separate defined Jewish groups which forced them to choose their associates, particularly in the racialized British colonial context. These interactions pushed Baghdadis as a whole to consider their position within the global Jewish landscape. Baghdadis overwhelmingly identified with Sephardim, understandable given the similarities in religious rituals and the importance of Baghdadi rabbis within Sephardic religious networks, but it was also a useful social strategy to position themselves as European with colonial authorities, without being associated with Eastern European Jewry.[5] This association with Sephardim eventually had consequences in Israel as it has brought Baghdadi Jewry, in many ways, under the aegis of Sephardic Jewry. In later periods this idea that has been reinforced with the centrality of Baghdad-born Ovadia Yosef and his roles as chief Sephardi Rabbi in Israel and the founder of Shas. Interestingly, the fusing of religious and political leadership in Israel has its antecedents in the connections between Sephardi and Baghdadi Jewry during the Hashemite period.

3. The Emergence of New Jewish Identities

I have endeavored to add another layer to our understanding of the complexity of Jewish life in Iraq by exploring how Iraqi Jews, during the Hashemite period, identified and interacted with world Jewry. I have also explored a new dimension in our understanding of transnational Jewish networks during the interwar period by demonstrating the diverse ways Baghdadis engaged with Jewish philanthropic organizations. Zionist activities, however, are largely absent from my analysis of Iraqi participation in transnational networks. Although the situation in Palestine was a constant stress on the Jewish community, Iraqi Jews viewed the Hashemite period as a time of optimism and prosperity in which the Jewish community felt they could overcome adversity and instability to ensure the continuity of Jewish life in Iraq. This faith in the secure position of Jews in Iraq in many ways parallels the aspirations of European Jewry a century earlier. For Iraqi Jews, the aid received from foreign groups and participation in the Jewish public sphere allowed them to be more productive Iraqi citizens, replicating the aspirations of Western European Jewry a century earlier and fulfilling the objectives of nineteenth century Jewish internationalism. In the

5 Ibid; Meyer, *From the Rivers of Babylon to Whangpoo*, 29–38.

twentieth century context of Jewish transnationalism this allowed Iraqi Jews to be active in global Jewish networks and local Iraqi civil society, nurturing a synergy between the two that allowed Iraqi Jews to identify as both Arab and Jew without any apparent contradiction. This twentieth century Jewish transnationalism and the secular Jewish identity it engendered is a logical continuation of nineteenth century Jewish internationalism.

In the Hashemite period Baghdadi Jews saw themselves as part of an international Jewish sphere, closely connected to Europe, an idea often missing in the historiography of Iraqi Jews. The examples provided throughout this thesis display Jews in Baghdad engaged in positive, constructive and respectful relationships with Jewish communities beyond the Baghdadi diaspora. Consider the reactions of Baghdadi Jews to the persecution of European Jewry leading up to and during World War II, which is in stark contrast to the experiences of the majority of Baghdadi Jews who, upon arrival in Israel, reported ill treatment and discrimination primarily at the hand of the Eastern European Jewish population.[6] Awareness of this post-migration shift in the collective memory of Iraqi Jews regarding intercommunal dialogue and cooperation between Baghdadi and non-Baghdadi Jews is thus central when trying to reconstruct the intersection between Baghdadi Jewry's participation in the Iraqi state and their participation in transnational Jewish networks prior to the trauma of their displacement.

In conclusion, Iraqi Jews were constantly embracing multiple identities as Baghdadis, Jews, Arabs, Iraqis and everything in between. These identities were fluid and rarely seen as contradictory. Furthermore, investigating the intersectionality between these multiple identities and their networks demonstrates the sophisticated ways Iraqi Jews were active participants in global Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century. It is my suspicion that more attention to the systemic cooperation of Jewish groups in MENA with transnational Jewish organizations and participation in the global Jewish public sphere will yield valuable knowledge of MENA Jewry's agency in these networks and provide greater understanding of how Jewish identity, religiosity, solidarity and belonging were transformed in the first half of the twentieth century.

6 Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Between Baghdad and Ramat Gan: Iraqi Immigrants in Israel* [In Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2009).