

THE JEWS OF IRAQ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:

A Case Study of Social Harmony

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It has become a popular notion in Western literature to point out the Jewish communities in the Arab countries as an example of an alienated minority, suffering both socially and economically. A careful study of the historical record shows, however, that the situation was totally different from what the Zionist information media has put out during the past four decades. And, as this case study of the Iraqi Jewish community indicates, the conditions and standards, as well as the progress of the local community was similar to that of the other segments of society, and if it were not for the propaganda agitation of the Zionists during the first half of the twentieth century, the Jewish community of Iraq would have evolved in a pattern similar to that of other social groups in the country.

B a c k g r o u n d

To study social communities in Iraq prior to the rise of the modern state it is necessary to understand both the inner dynamics of those groupings, and also their relationship to Islam, to the Ottoman ruling authorities, and to inter-group dynamics existent at the time.

The basic legal premise underlying the relationship of an Islamic government to its non-Muslim communities, dhimmis, is that Muslim laws are concerned with the affairs of Muslims, while relationships among the dhimmis are governed separately within each community according to its own canon and institutions. The religious head of a group is responsible to the Muslim caliph, and the individual dhimmi's status is derived from his membership in a protected community. This system came into existence during the Muslim empires, survived them, and continued throughout the Ottoman period.

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As part of the contractual relationship between the Muslim caliph and the dhimmis, the latter were granted freedom of worship, travel, residence and education. Their obligation was to pay a special tax for the protection they received and not to assist the enemies of the state. Certain social restrictions were imposed, but they were often left unimplemented and were freely violated. An example of this from the 'Abbasid Empire was the violation of the rule that no new non-Muslim houses of worship were to be built. Rabbi Benjamim ben Tudela, who visited Baghdad in 1168, stated that there were twenty-eight synagogues at that time. None of these could have been built before the beginning of Muslim rule, as Baghdad was founded by the Caliph al-Mansur in 762. Similarly, evidence of legal laxity in other cities is abundant.

At the zenith of 'Abbasid rule in Baghdad, philosophers, scholars and scientists of all faiths contributed to a flourishing civilization. Jewish merchants, especially the Radhaniya group played a key role in the international trade of the Empire. When Arab rule declined and tribal-military invasions destroyed the bases of agriculture, commerce, and public administration, all communities without exception suffered.

Ottoman rule (1534-1914) was punctuated by foreign invasions and local armed conflicts. Chronic instability resulted in stagnation: no public social programs were introduced until the nineteenth century, and Istanbul followed a policy of sheer neglect toward the Iraqi provinces. For example, the reforms, Tanzimat of the mid-nineteenth century were applied in Iraq several decades after being introduced in Istanbul.

However, the Ottoman Empire recognized the protected status of the dhimmis. As early as 1326, the Jewish community, millet, was granted firmans permitting Jews to build synagogues and schools and granting them freedom of travel, occupation and residence. At a time when Jews suffered social and religious persecution in Europe, many in the Ottoman Empire were diplomats, wealthy merchants and craftsmen.¹ Nevertheless, despite the legal and institutional reforms of the late nineteenth century, social and economic processes remained backward in the Empire as a whole, and in Iraq in particular. A few Iraqis in the major cities and towns lived prosperous lives, but the majority of the population, regardless of creed, continued to suffer as a result of centuries of economic decadence, exploitation, and poor administration. Most Ottoman administrators were ignorant of the language and conditions of the territory. Modern education

was limited to the sons of notables, while others received only traditional religious education. The Ottoman governors controlled the local population through a combination of military force and by coopting the notables and the religious elites into their entourage. Natural disasters contributed to the general backwardness of the area; some sixty per cent of the inhabitants of Baghdad were killed in the spring of 1831, when both a flood and a plague befell the city during the same week.

S o c i a l C o n d i t i o n s

The history of the Jews of Iraq is ancient, dating from 586 B.C., if not earlier. From thence onward and throughout the Islamic Empire, Jews played a significant intellectual, religious and commercial role. Well-known accomplishments during this period and before the advent of the Ottomans in the fourteenth century include the academies at Sura, Nehadra and Pumbaditha, the Babylonian Talmud, the offices of the Exilarch and the Geonim, the works of the Responsa, and religious missions to Egypt, North Africa, South Asia and the Far East.

Records concerning the conditions of Iraqi society between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries are sparse. However, accounts by travelers as early as the seventeenth century describe Baghdad as a town of 20,000 to 30,000 houses, 200 to 300 of them inhabited by Jews. More reliable figures are supplied by travelers in the late nineteenth century, who estimate the total Jewish community of Baghdad at 50,000. This figure corresponds to the census carried out by the British occupation authorities in 1920. The total population of Iraq was estimated then at 2,849,282, including 87,484 Jews. Of the latter, 50,000 lived in Baghdad, 15,000 in the North and 7,000 in Basra.²

The Jews of Iraq formed an integral part of society. Their cultural and social practices were those of the population at large:

It was a completely Arabized community... (The Jews) spoke Arabic among themselves, introduced Arabic into their religious services, and wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters for their correspondence. Their social life was that of Arabs, their cuisine... superstitions, even... harem.³

In comparison to Jews living in other societies in the East, they fared well economically. Rabbi Israel Benjamin, who traveled the area extensive-

ly during the middle of the nineteenth century, found the Baghdadi Jewish community well established: "In no other place in the East have I found my Israelith brethren in such perfectly happy circumstances, and so worthy of their condition."⁴ As with other social groups the majority of moderate income Jews lived in their own sector of Baghdad while their richer counterparts lived in elaborate houses by the Tigris alongside Muslim and Christian notables and Turkish officials. Thus, the socio-economic conditions of Iraqi Jews differed from one city quarter to another as well as from one area of the country to another, and were closely correlated to their choice of profession. In general they were more frequently engaged in trade, less frequently in agriculture.

Trade was concentrated in central and southern Iraq, particularly in Baghdad and Basra, where a large portion of the Jewish community participated in commerce. Quite a few families engaged in international trade and opened commercial houses in Persia, India, and England. The majority were small retail merchants in major cities, and also throughout the rural areas, except for certain districts of the Middle Euphrates.

In the North, there were a few Jewish tradesmen, among the Kurdish tribes and serving as advisers to aghas and princes. Most however, were in agriculture. There were also some landlords, whose peasants were themselves Jewish, but the majority lived in the isolated mountains at the same socio-economic level as other peasants in Iraq. They were heavily armed, paid an annual sum to stronger tribes for protection, and rendered services, such as digging canals and building houses, to their landlords. Jewish landlords existed elsewhere in Iraq, especially in Basra, Hilla and Diyala, where they owned date groves, grain farms and fruit gardens. In smaller towns, such as Anna and Hit, some Jews were both merchants and landlords.

Members of the Jewish community were also engaged in the primitive industries that existed at the time: textile, silk and leather manufacturing. Except for the silk exports from the North, their products were consumed locally.

Political Leadership

Throughout this period, when the central administration was weak or non-existent, communal groups in Baghdad were under the direct political and religious influence of certain families, who retained their power

through ancestry, respect for their scholarship, and wealth. Because of their small numbers and special privileges, such as exemption from taxes and military service, these families competed with one another and intrigued among themselves. Often a family was connected with a particular governor and as his fortunes fluctuated, so did theirs. Their relationship to the communities they represented was despotic and much corruption and injustice occurred. Becoming part of a governor's entourage, they fulfilled his wishes and shared in the wealth he distributed.

The contributions of these families to religious and scientific scholarship were insignificant. The schools they operated graduated religious functionaries, reactionaries in their outlook toward both the spiritual and the secular worlds.

The hakham bashi was the leading religious representative of the Jewish community. The hakham bashi of Istanbul was the representative of all Jews in the Empire in the Council of State. He was responsible for apportioning and collecting taxes from the community and for confirming the appointment of lower hakhamim. In Baghdad, the hakham bashi was selected by representatives of the local community, and confirmed by the governor as well as by the hakham bashi of Istanbul. However, in time, he became isolated from the community and served as the governor's lackey rather than as the community's representative. This led to a major conflict within the Jewish community of Baghdad in 1879. The hakham bashi at the time, Sassoon bin Elijah Smoocha, had held his office for thirty-five years and enjoyed the support of the local governors and the hakham bashi of Istanbul. One of the community's grievances against him was embezzlement of the military tax. A majority of the Jewish community, including the leading lower hakhamim, addressed a petition to the governor requesting his removal. The Governor felt forced to comply, despite his friendship with Smoocha, but the hakham bashi of Istanbul reversed the decision. However, Smoocha's return to his office was brief. His behaviour caused the community to cable Istanbul and finally, the Sultan himself intervened and forced Smoocha's dismissal. By this time the conflict had left a major division within the Baghdadi Jewish community.⁵

In addition to the hakham bashi, the power structure within the Jewish community included a Beth-Din, which adjudicated disputes within the community, while the hakham bashi determined punishments. The Beth-

Din was usually made up of members of wealthy mercantile Jewish families. A single family would often, in effect, inherit all these positions for centuries.

A nasi (noble) was the secular representative of the community and was often the wealthiest of the merchants. He was also the treasurer or financial adviser of the governor. Community financial matters, mainly tax collection, were administered by a milletcha'ush. He was elected by the community, as was a body of ten notables who supervised the educational and social programs of the community.

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, the nasi of Baghdad, rather than the hakham bashi, held effective political power over the community. The Sassoon family inherited this post generation after generation. They had close ties with Istanbul. When Daud Pasha, the last of the Mamluk governors, attained power in Baghdad in 1817, he had to rely on the Sassoons in order to receive a firman from the Sultan. However, this particular intervention created enemies for the Sassoons within the Governor's entourage, which ultimately led to the migration of a branch of the family to India and later to England. In the decades that followed the Tanzimat, the office of nasi continued to be held by the wealthiest merchant in town, but political power reverted to the hakham bashi.⁶

Religion

The Jews of Iraq were all rabbinical and adhered completely to the Talmud. With the decline of scholarship within their community and the country in general during the Ottoman period, religious practice became heavily concerned with ritual, especially in the rural areas.

Certain contacts with foreign Jews were maintained and influenced the religious practices and beliefs of Iraqi Jews. Kabbalism and mysticism were particularly widespread in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, Turkey and Safed, Palestine. It was with these groups that Iraqi Jewish contacts were especially strong, and their religious publications were familiar in Baghdad. Furthermore, Hakham Yusif Hayim, one of the chief spiritual leaders in Baghdad from 1859 to 1909, encouraged the spread of these practices. As a learned and wealthy man, a great speaker, and the author of thirty-two books of homilies, commentaries, kabbalistic prayers, poems, liturgy and responsa, the hakham had a large following.⁷

Changes in the Nineteenth Century

The introduction of the Tanzimat in the nineteenth century transformed the official status of the dhimmis. The Hatti-Humayun of 1856, and to a lesser extent the Hatti-Sherif of 1839, granted equal citizenship and rights to all the people of the Empire, including assurances of security for life and property, admission to civil and military systems, equal taxation, freedom of worship, special and mixed courts, and equality on the witness stand. The communal system was retained only in that religious authorities continued to control civil matters such as marriage and inheritance.

The Constitution of 1876 granted representation to property holders in local, regional, and imperial administrative councils and legislatures. These new institutions had great symbolic importance, even if those elected were hand-picked by the authorities and their functions limited in scope. Jewish representatives included Minahayim Danyal, one of three Baghdad representatives to the first parliament of 1877; Sassoon Hisqail, who held that seat in the parliament of 1909; Yusif Kurgi, a member of the Administrative Council of Baghdad in 1873; and Yusif Shantub, a member of that Council in 1888. All these men were wealthy merchants, except for Sassoon Hisqail, who was an official at the Ministry of Commerce. He was later to become the first Finance Minister of Iraq and hold that post for a number of years.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish education began to benefit from foreign assistance, not only from the wealthy Iraqi-Jewish communities in India, but also through direct establishment of modern primary and secondary schools by the Alliance Israelite Universelle de Paris and the Anglo-Jewish Association of London. These schools preceded both the military and civilian public systems which began in 1870, and graduated some sixty per cent of all the secondary students in Iraq before the turn of the century.

The first boys' school was established by the Alliance and the Anglo-Jewish Association in 1865. A girls' school, the first in Iraq, was established in 1897. Among non-Jewish Iraqis, only the sons of notables and a few military cadets were able to receive modern education during the same period. An educational census, taken for Baghdad in 1913, revealed the following figures.⁸

No. of Schools	T y p e	No. of Students	
		Male	Female
38	Official primary schools	1525	300
13	Official secondary schools (both military and civilian)	2705	—
6	Ja'fariya private schools	860	—
12	Christian private schools	995	918
39	Jewish private schools	4791	1095

Despite the influence of Western Europe on the Iraqi Jewish educational system, the intellectual work of the community continued to be limited to religious subjects. Books and newspapers available during the nineteenth century were mainly from Poland and Russia. The first Jewish printing house, established in 1855, published mainly books on religious topics, particularly kabbalism and the zohar. Exceptions included an Arabic translation of Rabbi Benjamin bin Tudela's twelfth century travels and some works by Maimonides. Two journals appeared: ha-Dober (1868-1870) in Hebrew and Jeshurun (1910) in Arabic and Hebrew. They dealt with affairs of the local community.

Throughout this period, very few instances of tension between the Jewish community and other groups have been recorded. The few incidents that did occur were minor. For example, in 1860 a conflict arose when the authorities, for an undetermined reason, stopped the pilgrimage of Jews to the tomb of Ezekiel, located a short distance from Baghdad. Upon the intervention of the Anglo-Jewish Association with the Sultan, the matter was settled. In 1889, a shrine outside Baghdad called Nabi Yusha, one of the burial grounds of the Baghdad rabbis was sold to a Muslim in the course of a dispute between the former hakham bashi, Sassoon Smootha, and the millet cha'ush. Later that year one of the rabbis died and a conflict arose as to the ownership of the grounds. The hakham bashi and a few other persons were imprisoned. Contacts were again established with the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Jewish Board of Deputies in London, who in turn contacted the British Ambassador in Istanbul. This resulted in a return of the grounds to the community, despite the original sale; the hakham bashi and his followers were released and the Governor of Baghdad was dismissed by the Sultan.⁹

The social and economic conditions of Iraqi Jewry continued to improve throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Education flourished among its young. The number of students multiplied. They attended public institutions as well as private Jewish schools. In the latter, their number increased from 5886 male and female students in 1913 to 11,435 in 1935. 10 The number of synagogues in Baghdad increased from 20 in 1915 to 41 in 1936. 11

The community prospered economically as well, especially with the advent of the new state and the increase in commercial activity. According to a report published by Joseph Schechterman of the Jewish Agency, the Jewish commercial activity in Iraq before World War Two was estimated as follows.12

- Imports 95 percent in Jewish hands
- Contracts 90 percent in Jewish hands
- Exports 10 percent in Jewish hands

The basic disturbing element took place, however, with the Zionisation of Palestine and the infiltration of the Jewish Agency into the ranks of the Iraqi Jewish community during the 1940's. Their agents organized Zionist cells and laid the grounds for the immigration at the latter part of the decade, after meeting stiff opposition from the community itself at the beginning of the decade. In addition they planned sabotage operations and internal disturbances. Tension was deliberately created among the members of the community and between them and the rest of the population, as well as the authorities, in order to create an appropriate domestic and international atmosphere for an immigration campaign. This was clearly demonstrated in the following concluding paragraph of a Jewish Agency report, submitted by one of their agents upon his return from Iraq.13

“... there could be no substantial immigration from Iraq in the foreseeable future (early forties) and that our main efforts should be directed to the expansion and training of the defense cadres we had set up there and their appropriate training. These cadres would at the same time continue educational work and prepare for immigration into Palestine at all costs and by any means.”

The aforementioned brief record of the history of Iraqi Jewry leads to the following conclusions:

1. The Iraqi Jewish community, when studied within the developmental process of Iraqi society during the nineteenth century and the overall social conditions that prevailed then, fared well in comparison to the rest of the population. Despite the despotic and corrupt practices prevailing in the country at large during that century, there was freedom of religion, residence, work and travel. Moreover, during the tumultuous political changes that took place within Iraq during the same period, there was little, if any, tension between the Jewish community and other social groups. This situation, was, of course, completely the opposite in Europe at the time.
2. The people of Iraq took advantage of the period of Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and began educating their young, at a much larger and wider scale than ever before. This expansion of the educational system, along with the gradual expansion of trade and rapid economic development, created new social and economic opportunities for the population at large. The Jews of Iraq figure prominently in these two developments.
3. The disturbing element in modern Iraqi Jewish history, and what has led to their abrupt and sudden immigration, after centuries of social harmony and cohesion, and at a critical period of social integration, was the agitation and propaganda directed at them, as well as the rest of Arab Jewry, by the Jewish Agency and the Zionist organizations. This, coupled with the occupation of Palestine in 1948 and the continuous threats to the security of the Arab people, are major factors in the analysis of the current history of the Middle East.

1. For a discussion of the rights, duties and roles of the non-Muslim communities during the Islamic and Ottoman periods, see:
H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, vol. I, part II. London: Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 207-261. and, Majid Khadduri, "International Law", in Majid Khadduri and Herbert J. Liebesny, eds., *Law in the Middle East*, vol. I, Washington, D.C. : The Middle East Institute, 1955, pp. 349-373.
2. Yusi Rizq-Allah Ghanimah. *A History of the Jews of Iraq* (Arabic) Baghdad: al-Furat Press, 1924, p. 184.
3. Cecil Roth. *The Sassoon Dynasty*. London: Robert Hale, Ltd., 1941, pp. 20-21.
4. Israel Joseph Benjamin II. *Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1946 to 1855*. Hanover: Published by the author, 1859, p. 110.
5. David Solomon Sassoon. *A History of the Jews in Baghdad*. Letchworth: Published by his son, Solomon D. Sassoon, 1949, pp. 157-161.
6. Ghanimah, p. 170 and Sassoon, pp. 124-125.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-152. Also, Ghanimah, pp. 168-169.
8. Abd al-Razzaq al-Hillali. *History of Education in Iraq During the Ottoman Regime, 1638-1917*. (Arabic) Baghdad, 1959. pp. 249-252.
9. M. Franco, "Baghdad" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. N.Y. : Funk and Wagnalls, vol. 2, 1912. p. 438. Also, Ghanimah, p. 179 and Sassoon, p. 161.
10. *The Iraq Directory*, 1936. Baghdad: The Times Press, 1936, pp. 462-463.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
12. Joseph Schechtman, *On Wings or Eagles: The Plight, Exodus, and Homecoming of Oriental Jewry*. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961, p. 104.
13. Munya M. Mardor. *Haganah*. New York: The New American Library, 1964, p. 100.

يهود العراق في القرن التاسع عشر

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تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تنفيذ النظرة الصهيونية القائلة بأن اوضاع اليهود في الوطن العربي قبل عام ١٩٤٨ كانت في حالة سيئة . ولغرض البحث العلمي ، فقد ركزت الدراسة على قطر واحد ، وهو العراق ، وفي الفترة التي سبقت دخول الحركة الصهيونية الى اسرائيل والشرق الاوسط - القرن التاسع عشر وبداية القرن العشرين . واعتمد البحث كذلك على مصادر اولية ، معظمها يهودية في الاصل . وهي اما مذكرا ترحالة يهود اوروبيين كانوا قد زاروا العراق خلال هذه الفترة او كتابات ومؤلفات لزعماء سابقين للجالية اليهودية العراقية او مصادر صهيونية اولية ، وذلك اضافة الى المصادر العراقية والاجنبية .

والاستنتاج الرئيسي الذي يتوصل اليه هذا البحث هو أن الاوضاع العامة لمجمل الشعب العراقي خلال تلك الفترة كانت سيئة وذلك نظرا للتخلف الاقتصادي والاجتماعي من جهة وللسيطرة العثمانية من جهة أخرى ، وان اوضاع الجالية اليهودية كانت في مستوى مشابه لبقية فئات الشعب . لذا فان الحجة القائلة بأن اليهود كانوا في وضع متخلف هو امر صحيح ، ولكن الامر لم ينطبق عليهم فقط ، بل شمل جميع الشعب العراقي ، وبالعكس فان مستواهم الاقتصادي والثقافي كان احسن من بقية فئات الشعب . المهم في الامر هو أن الحملات المضادة والشعور المعادي لهم الذي كان متفشيا في اوروبا لقرون عديدة واخذ في النمو بصورة كبيرة في اوائل القرن العشرين ، هذه التيارات لم يكن لها اي اثر بتاتا في العراق او في المنطقة العربية ، بل بالعكس ، فان التاريخ العربي لتلك الفترة يشير الى العكس من ذلك تماما ، كما يشير الى أن مسيرته الاجتماعية لم تمت بصلة الى ما كان جاريا في اوروبا في القرن التاسع عشر واوائل القرن العشرين .