

Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 270.

by *Esther Meir-Glitzenstein*

The Iraqi Jews' way of life is an Arab way of life... The language of every Jew in Iraq is Arabic... Alongside this linguistic assimilation, which does not allow for any difference between Jews and Arabs, there is cultural assimilation... This Jew walks along the Tigris River, goes sailing on a boat, bathes in the Tigris just like an Arab; he lives in this place; he built a home in this place; he curses in Arabic, speaks in Arabic, sings in Arabic, has an Arab way of life; he is rooted in this place and it would be hard for him to go elsewhere; he is tied to the place.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks on the identity of Iraqi Jews formed part of a presentation to the Zionist leadership in Palestine. The speaker was Enzo Sereni, a Zionist emissary sent in the spring of 1942 to Baghdad, where he soon established a vast Zionist network that operated for a decade, until most of Iraq's Jewry immigrated to Israel.

The “Arabness” described by Sereni had negative connotations in the State of Israel, not only because it was perceived as embodying the language and culture of the enemy, but also because it was ascribed a range of negative characteristics, including lack of modern education, lack of modern culture, a poor sense of hygiene, ignorance, backwardness, superstition, and prejudice, all of which derived from condescending Orientalist perceptions. The manifestations of these perceptions were offensive and hurtful, as young immigrants who came from Iraq in the pursuit of Zionist ideals reported, with pain and disappointment: “Arabs, ignoramuses, blacks, have you ever seen a movie in your lives? Eaten with a fork?” “Have you had a shower? You look like Arabs,” and the like.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Enzo Sereni, Remarks before the Aliyah Bet Committee, 2 July 1942, Haganah Archives, Tel Aviv.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, “‘Here They Eat with a Knife and a Fork’ – East and West in the Intercultural Encounter in the State of Israel,” in *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel: Society and Economy in Israel: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. A. Barely, D. Gutwein and T. Friling (Shed Boker: The Ben-Gurion Research Institute - Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), 615-644 [Hebrew].

At the same time, the Zionist outlook did not regard these Jews' Arabness as an inherent quality, but as an acquired identity, the product of 1,300 years of life under the auspices of Islam and Arab culture. To "purify" Jews of their Arab qualities, the Zionist movement disparaged the preservation of these qualities and rejected any expression of Arab culture or longing for the "Arab" past, with food and folklore the only exceptions to these prohibitions. The pressure bore fruit and its repercussions are starkly evident today, as the descendants of immigrants from Islamic countries do not speak Arabic and know almost nothing about their families' past. Notably, this cultural erasure is not solely an Israeli phenomenon. Even in other destination countries, where Jewish immigrants from Iraq did not experience such an intense "cultural steamroller," the local language, usually English, and the local culture still took over, while the unique characteristics from their country of origin steadily diminished and sometimes even disappeared. The Arab identity of Jews from Islamic countries, which only became a field of academic research in recent decades, addresses both the cultural implications and the ethnic and national implications of Jewish-Arab identity. The characteristics of Iraqi Jews have a central place in the discussion of this complex identity.

### **A Look at the History and Identity of Baghdad's Jews**

Shortly after immigrating to Israel, Iraqi Jews began documenting the final decades of their community's history in Iraq. The first writers appeared in the 1960s, producing studies that portrayed a minority community with cultural autonomy that had preserved its unique Jewish identity over the course of its long history, and whose ties with the Muslim world were confined to the economic sphere, while ties with the government were managed by its religious and economic elite. These writers placed special emphasis on the Jews' modernity, which in their view stemmed from the influence of European education and constituted a central factor in the life of Iraqi Jews. A substantial portion of the research was devoted to biographies of prominent figures in the community and individuals who had emigrated to India, China and Europe, where they

flourished.<sup>3</sup> Of particular note are the studies by Avraham Ben-Yaakov, who compiled a vast amount of records and papers documenting the history of Iraqi Jews in recent generations.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s there began to appear historical studies focused on distinct groups within Iraqi-Jewish society in various political contexts. The first of these address the economic and political elite of the Jewish community and its ideological outlook, dubbed “the Iraqi orientation.”<sup>5</sup> Other studies focused on Zionist activities during the 1920s and subsequently in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

Soon thereafter the scholarship on Iraqi Jews shifted its focus from the political to the cultural, with the Arab identity of Jews at the centre of discourse. It was cultural researcher Ella Shohat who first discussed the term “Arab-Jew” and its implications, in the aftermath of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>7</sup> She raised the issue in a formative 1988 article titled “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims.”<sup>8</sup> Her article positioned Zionism within the framework of the European colonial project and presented Jews as native Arabs in Arab countries and in Israel. Viewing this approach from a historical perspective, I will note that Shohat detached the history of the Jews of Arab countries from its historical and geographical context, subordinating it to the Palestinian narrative of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. Yet despite the problematic aspect of this approach, the “Arab-Jew” became, henceforth, a matter of debate and a charged issue for both proponents and opponents, who focused on the significance of this identity not only in the past, in Iraq, but also in the present, even though Iraq has

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Twena, *Dispersion and Liberation: Jewish Autonomy in Iraq* (Ramla: Geula Synagogue Committee, 1979), 9-14 [Hebrew]; Nir Shohet, *The story of a Diaspora: Chapters in the history of Babylonian Jewry through the ages* (Jerusalem: Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, 1981) [Hebrew]; Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Avraham Ben-Ya’akov, *The Jews of Babylon: From the End of the Geonim’s Period to the Present, 1038-1960* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1965) [Hebrew].

<sup>5</sup> Nissim Kazzaz, *The Jews in Iraq in the Twentieth Century* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1991) [Hebrew].

<sup>6</sup> Hayyim Cohen, *The Zionist Activity in Iraq*, Jerusalem, 1969 [Hebrew]; Esther Meir-Glitzstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s* (London - New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books - Random House, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1-35.

been cleared of its Jews and most of their descendants reside in Israel today, with a minority in England and North America.

In addition to the issue's cultural context, analyses have addressed its ethnic and national context as well. From this point forward one would be hard-pressed to find a study on the Jews of Islamic countries that does not address the issue of the Arab-Jew. As a consequence, research on the modern literature of Iraqi Jews has flourished. Reuven Snir studied the intellectuals who identified with the Iraqi state and operated alongside the community's leadership. Delving deeper, he also explored the literature they produced, with attention to this elite's identity and the transformations it underwent over the years.<sup>9</sup> As part of her research on the Iraqi intelligentsia under the Hashemite kingdom, and as an extension of what she termed the "other Iraq," Orit Bashkin expanded the research on Jewish intellectuals and the political activities of Jewish communists.<sup>10</sup> Lital Levy focused her research on the phenomenon of the Arab-Jew in literature and the press,<sup>11</sup> and Jonathan Sciarcon examined the issue in the context of the modern education system provided by the Alliance Israélite Universelle through its girls' schools in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> *Baghdad, Yesterday*, an autobiography by Arab literature scholar Sasson Somekh, who was born in Baghdad and immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, made a significant and formative contribution to research on Jewish-Arab identity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Reuven Snir, *Who needs Arab-Jewish identity? Interpellation, exclusion, and inessential solidarities* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Lital Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (2008): 452-469.

<sup>12</sup> Yehuda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Jonathan Sciarcon, *Educational Oases in the Desert: The Alliance Israelite Universelle's Girls Schools in Ottoman Iraq, 1895-1915* (Albany: SUNY, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007).

### **A Comprehensive Look at the Transnational Networks of Iraqi Jews**

All the above studies, and the range of topics, issues, and questions they raise, provide a foundation for Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah’s fascinating and innovative study, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism*. In this study she presents another layer of this history, on the one hand expanding our knowledge of the Jewish community in Iraq, while on the other hand shedding new light on what we know about the processes this community underwent during the last two centuries of its existence. The study is unique in that its heroes are not prominent figures, cultural associations, or political ideologies, but rather transnational networks that Iraqi Jews established or integrated into, which had a decisive impact on shaping their character and identity. These networks emerge from historical documents housed in various archives of the “Baghdadis”—Iraqi Jews who emigrated to Southeast Asia—and the archives of Jewish philanthropies founded in Western countries that operated in Iraq.

Methodologically, the author draws on transnational theories, using them to highlight new perspectives and insights derived from studies on global migration processes. Employing these theories, she examines migration processes and transformations among Baghdad’s Jews during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout the book she describes networks of contacts across vast geographic areas and diverse cultures, thereby linking “Europe” and the “other” world while positioning the “other” at the centre of the discussion. By revealing global economic and cultural connections and examining their implications for the culture and identity of Iraqi Jews, this new layer of research expands our knowledge base and facilitates deeper and better-founded analysis of the processes and changes that Iraqi Jews have undergone in modern times.

Three transnational networks occupy centre stage in this study: the trade network that linked Iraqi Jews with the Baghdadi diaspora in India and its satellite communities in Southeast Asia and England; the media network that linked Iraqi Jews, by way of the Jewish press, with the modern Jewish culture that emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century; and the network of contacts with Jewish philanthropies in Europe and the United States, which operated transnationally and not only provided political and material aid but also brought a modern Jewish education system, a new set of values, and secular ideas to Islamic countries.

The first transnational network that Goldstein-Sabbah describes is the trade diaspora that Jewish emigrants from Baghdad established in the major cities of colonial India: Bombay (Mumbai today), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Pune, with outposts in the major trade cities of the Far East, including Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon, among others. These ties were not limited to the Far East, as the network was linked to industrial and trade centres in the metropole, and migrants also established smaller outposts in major cities in England, particularly Manchester and London. In terms of trade, this network linked three geographical areas: England in the West, Baghdad and surrounding areas, including Persia and the Persian Gulf; and Far Eastern countries, including India, China, and Burma, among others.

The Baghdadi diaspora in the East developed by means of a gradual and continuous migration, beginning in the early nineteenth century. In most cases the migration was driven by economic motives, as people sought new opportunities created by Britain's expanding spheres of influence in the Far East. In this sense it differed from other waves of Jewish migration at the time, particularly the mass migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the Americas, which was driven by economic hardship and political persecution. That difference also manifested in the characteristics of this migration: whereas entire families emigrated from Eastern Europe and only a few returned, the migration from Iraq primarily comprised individuals, usually men, who travelled back and forth and eventually resettled in Iraq while maintaining trade relations with Baghdadis in the Far East. Only a few relocated their families and settled permanently in India. This migration gave rise to a transnational Baghdadi elite headed by a number of wealthy families, the most prominent of whom included the Sassoon, Kadoorie, Ezra, Elias, Yehuda and Gabay families. These families numbered among the economic and political elite of the Jewish community in Baghdad, and after emigrating they maintained close ties with their original communities through relatives and commerce agents in Baghdad. They encouraged young, educated members of the middle class to emigrate so as to integrate them into commerce, and they brought teachers, cantors, scholars, and butchers to serve the new small Baghdadi communities. From these migrants' perspective, India was a "diaspora of hope." In time the magnate David Sassoon established a school in Bombay where young members of the Baghdadi community studied Torah, Hebrew,

English, and Hindi, and a significant portion of the graduates integrated into the Jewish capitalists' financial networks.

The small communities that formed around the wealthy Baghdadi families included not only the emigrants from Baghdad but also Jewish emigrants from Syria and Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Persia, and Afghanistan. This social milieu gave rise to a fluid cultural mix that preserved common or closely related cultural values and religious rituals, while blurring the original geographic identity and embracing all the emigrants who constituted the community of “Baghdadis.” By the mid-twentieth century members of the community numbered 13-15,000—the equivalent in size of about one-tenth of the community in Iraq, which numbered 130,000 Jews at that time.

Although the Baghdadis in India formed an economic and social elite based on trade and transnational ties, and despite their direct ties with the British colonial centres in India and Britain, as a diaspora they remained intimately connected to their original community in Baghdad, which served as a religious authority, issuing rulings and decisions on matters of religion and custom. Baghdad was their “second Jerusalem”—symbolizing a glorious past but also serving an important function with respect to their particular status as Jewish emigrants in the East. Because the colonial value system classified population groups by racial criteria, the European settlers refrained from mixing with the Baghdadis, viewing them as akin to natives, whereas the Baghdadis looked down on India's local Jews, the Jews of Cochin and Bene Israel, regarding them as dark-skinned natives. Thus, they could not integrate into the European settler community and did not want to integrate into local Jewish communities. Given these sensitivities, their connection with Baghdad played an important role because it preserved them as a separate, non-black and non-native, community. A cornerstone of the Baghdadis' unique identity was their Jewish past in Iraq, and as such they maintained a religious lifestyle, religious rituals, ancient traditions, and community cohesiveness. Baghdad remained their homeland, and Baghdad's rabbis remained their primary religious authority. Accordingly, during the nineteenth century Baghdad's foremost rabbis, Rabbi Abdallah Somekh and Rabbi Yosef Hayyim, were called upon to provide solutions under Halachah (Jewish law) to problems that modernity posed to Baghdadis in India, decades before these problems became relevant to Jews in Iraq. Questions related to observing the Sabbath in light of the

need to travel by train or carry objects within or beyond the Sabbath domain, the need to exchange money on the Sabbath for international trade purposes, and other questions of this nature necessitated answers from the rabbis of Baghdad. In most cases the Baghdadis received lenient rulings, indicating that Baghdad's rabbis were acquainted with the global economic reality rather than disconnected from it. In fact, Baghdad's rabbis themselves participated in family trade businesses and had ties to Baghdadi trade networks in the East. Their rulings reveal a unique religious approach to modernity, one that did not fear assimilation and was willing to accommodate changes in light of economic changes and social sensitivities.

Thus, in addition to providing an attractive emigration destination, India paved the way to modernity for the Jews of Iraq. Relations with the Baghdadis contributed significantly to transformations in Iraq's Jewish community. Some of these relations were of a personal nature: Jewish pilgrims travelled from the East to Babylon to visit tombs of the holy prophets in their country of origin, and many came in order to find wives, while young Jews from Baghdad who had received a modern education and were having trouble finding suitable employment made their way to the East. Their success turned them into role models. The main impact, however, stemmed from philanthropic relations. Wealthy Baghdadis provided an important source of funding for the establishment of modern educational institutions, religious institutions, and hospitals, as well as relief and welfare programs for poor members of Iraq's Jewish communities. The Menashi Yeshiva, which provided the foundation for the renowned Bet Zilkha Yeshiva, was founded in Baghdad in the 1840s with the assistance and financial backing of wealthy members of the satellite community in India; many of the Alliance schools' permanent structures were built with donations from the Sassoon and Kadoorie families (the Albert Sassoon Boys' School, the Laura Kadoorie Girls' School), and it was they who funded a significant portion of the school budgets. Likewise, the Reema Kadoorie Eye Clinic, within the Meir Elias Hospital, was established through a donation from Elly Kadoorie. The Baghdadis provided funds for the absorption of impoverished Jewish immigrants who flowed into Baghdad from Kurdistan and Persia throughout the nineteenth century, and in addition to financial support they remained involved in the life of their community of origin, voicing opinions on matters of religion, education, society, and organization. Thanks to them, the Jews of Baghdad were exposed to



modernization trends even before those trends had a real impact on Baghdad itself, and in time it would become evident that this gave the Jewish community a significant advantage over their surrounding environment.

Another transnational network that had an impact on the Jews of Baghdad was the Jewish press of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), which produced newspapers in Europe and Palestine that also reached Jewish subscribers in Baghdad: *HaMagid*, *HaTzfirah*, and *HaHavatzlet*, among others. Iraqi Jews could read them because Hebrew, as the holy tongue, was familiar to them.

Goldstein-Sabbah describes the influence this network had on Iraqi Jews, through the dissemination of ideas from the European Enlightenment and the revival of Hebrew culture. Thanks to the ties between Baghdad and the Baghdadi diaspora, press operations expanded as India offered more convenient opportunities to establish printing presses, and it soon became the centre of the Baghdadi press, linking Baghdadis across the Indian Ocean. Between the years 1856 and 1960, fourteen newspapers were published in Bombay, Calcutta, Shanghai, and Singapore collectively. These were weeklies and monthlies, mainly in Judeo-Arabic, with a minority in Hebrew and English. Some produced only a few issues while others were published over the course of many years. The best-known publishers were Shlomo Bekhor Hutsin and Shlomo Twena, who, in addition to newspapers, also published religious and secular literature. In addition, European and Baghdadi media networks maintained reciprocal relations, guided by Jewish intellectuals in Baghdad and India: Baghdadi writers published articles about events in Baghdad and its surroundings in the Jewish press, while gathering news items about European Jews from that press and publishing them in their own newspapers.

The third network on which Goldstein-Sabbah focuses is that of education. The first modern school to open in Baghdad was founded in 1864 by the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle. It was not a European initiative, but a response by this philanthropic organization to an initiative that originated within the community itself. Henceforth Baghdad's Jews had direct, ongoing, and binding relations with a transnational educational network that disseminated the culture of the European Enlightenment and expanded the circle of educated Jews in Baghdad. Yet while the press network operated in Hebrew, the educational network operated in French and, later, in English as well. Having European

languages taught by educators from abroad, in combination with a modern curriculum, enhanced young Jews' ability to develop trade relations with the Baghdadi diaspora, and this trend grew stronger after the British conquest of Iraq during World War I and the establishment of the Iraqi state under the auspices of a British mandate.

In the 1920s the community expanded its education system, admitting greater numbers of boys and girls, provided Jewish officials for the local administration, and experienced significant growth of the Jewish middle class. During those years Jews' status also underwent a substantial transformation after they were granted civil rights and included as individuals in the Iraqi national system. The Jewish community cooperated fully in this process. Its leadership took part in founding the new state, and Jewish intellectuals made an important contribution to the cultural bloom in Arabic. Literary Arabic, as Iraq's national language, became the language of instruction in Jewish schools, and the education provided by these institutions became a tool to instill a national ideology, while pushing French and Hebrew aside.

Things took a different course in the mid-1930s, with the rise of nationalists who questioned whether Jews were part of the national community. A review of the transnational networks and their influence reveals that, in the age of nationalism, Jews' ties with these networks, which had long benefited them economically and socially, now became a disadvantage. The national crisis eventually came to an end with the emigration of most Iraqi Jews in the early 1950s. Yet this process also revealed another aspect of the networks' impact: their modern education, knowledge of foreign languages, and ability to operate within a modern cultural and social system would help emigrating Iraqi Jews integrate quickly into their destination countries.

### **Transnational Networks and Identity**

The influence of transnational networks, which Goldstein-Sabbah describes and analyses so well, brings us back to the question of identity: What was the identity of Baghdad's Jews? The author chose to examine this issue by discussing the languages that Iraqi Jews used and the cultural spaces in which they operated,

within the context of the influence of transnational networks. The study shows that under Ottoman rule, during the final centuries in which they resided as a religious community within a Muslim space, the Jews of Baghdad preserved the Jewish-Arabic language, a dialect that enabled them to be part of the Arab world while remaining socially distinct from Muslims and Christians. Alongside Judeo-Arabic, the men maintained a knowledge of Hebrew as a language of prayer and religious study. Their transnational relations prompted Baghdad's Jews to study French and English, and thanks to these languages they began operating within the European cultural arena in the context of their transnational networks. Their knowledge of Hebrew also turned out to be a transnational factor, exposing Iraqi Jews to the European Jewish Enlightenment. The study finds that European languages and values, particularly Enlightenment values and secularization trends, reached Baghdad from the two directions of their transnational ties, East and West, and none of these influences were imposed on Baghdad's Jews. Rather, Jews adopted them selectively on the basis of deliberation, clarification, and informed choice. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did Iraqi Jews begin to adopt literary Arabic, which, after the establishment of the Iraqi state in the 1920s, became the common language of all Iraq's residents. For Iraqi Jews this period lasted about fifty years, until their emigration from Iraq. Interestingly, it was during these years that the Baghdad community and the Baghdadi diaspora separated linguistically: while literary Arabic became dominant in Baghdad, English became dominant in the Baghdadi diaspora. In both arenas, however, Judeo-Arabic remained the vernacular language within the community and the family and Hebrew was preserved as a sacred language.

In sum, Goldstein-Sabbah's study demonstrates the tremendous importance of re-examining and re-analysing information about the Jewish community in Iraq in light of new sources. Of particular importance is the insight that Iraqi Jewry was not a closed community within the Muslim arena whose brethren, the Jews of Western countries, introduced them to modernity. On the contrary, this was evidently a dynamic community that absorbed immigrants while also creating satellite communities in other countries; it had a mobile elite that took part in a transnational network spanning vast geographical regions, and this elite operated in colonial frameworks as well as the centre of the metropole in Western Europe. All these developments shaped a community with a unique identity that preserved

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its Jewish-Arabic language, assimilated linguistically diverse Jewish immigrants, and in its final decades in Iraq adopted classical Arabic as a language of study and creation. Yet even then it preserved its unique dialect—the Jewish-Arabic language. There is no doubt that these findings necessitate a re-examination of the history of Iraqi Jews and the question of Jewish identity in Iraq.

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