

BROTHERS AND OTHERS

Iraqi Identity and Arab Jewishness

Though I take my faith from the religion of Moses,
 I live under the protection of Muhammad's religion,
 I take refuge in the tolerance of Islam,
 And my inspiration is the sublime language of the Qur'an,
 I love of the nation of Muhammad,
 Although I worship Moses,
 I shall remain as loyal as al-Samaw'al,
 Whether miserable or blissful in my beloved Baghdad.¹

This poem, written in Arabic by Jewish Iraqi poet Anwar Sha'ul (b. 1904), references al-Samaw'al ibn 'Adiya, a celebrated pre-Islamic Jewish poet. The modern Jewish poet evoked the memory of the medieval Arab Jewish bard in order to highlight his own loyalty to Arab culture, his admiration of the Arabic language, and his desire to be part of this culture. This poem, I believe, reflects many of the cultural and political choices adopted by Iraqi Jews in the twentieth century. Following Sha'ul's contemplations on the nature of Arab, Iraqi, and Jewish identities, I explore the writings of modern Iraqi Jews, including their perceptions of patriotism, secularism, and

communism. The story I shall tell ends with the tragic departure of some 100,000 Jews from Iraq in the years 1949–51, a country they had considered a homeland for many years. This story, however, will also focus on Jewish hopes for a democratic Iraqi state and a pluralistic Arab Jewish culture.

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Iraq, the political entity we know today, was officially formed as a state in 1921. Its king, Faysal I, played a dominant role in the formation of a constitutional monarchy, as Great Britain, based on a mandate from the League of Nations, oversaw Iraq's process toward independence. After gaining official independence in 1932, Iraq witnessed a wave of radicalization, marked by intense anticolonial and nationalist activities in the public sphere, and two military coups, in 1936 and 1941. During the 1940s, a new, radical intelligentsia emerged that was more accepting toward socialist and communist organizations. All these processes—namely, state building, the anticolonial struggle, and the opposition to the state—shaped the ways in which Iraqi Jews defined their identities and their approaches to the Iraqi state and the Arab nation.

During the monarchic period, some Iraqi Jewish intellectuals began calling themselves Arab Jews. This is a rather extraordinary case, as Jews not only considered themselves citizens of the new nation of Iraq, but also adopted a new Arab ethnicity. This term, however, could be employed to describe many Jews who spoke Arabic, lived in an Arab country (Iraq), and saw this country as their homeland. Thus, when using the term *Arab Jews* in this book I mean not only the writers who referred to themselves as such, but also the Jews who, while not identifying themselves as Arab Jews, practiced what I call Arab Jewishness, in that they wrote in Arabic, read Arabic texts, interacted with fellow Muslim and Christian Arabs, and enjoyed Arab cinema, music, and theater.

Rogers Brubaker, who has studied the processes by which heterogeneous individuals come to think of themselves as ethnic groups and nations, argues that these categories are relational and dynamic. To Brubaker, *nation* and *ethnicity* are practical categories, cultural idioms, institutional forms, and political projects which are understood within social, political, cultural, and psychological contexts. He thus suggests that scholars consider the process of ethnicization rather than utilize the fixed category of ethnicity.² In the Jewish

Iraqi context, a minority community sought to forge a relationship with the cultural and historical framework of the Arab majority community by claiming Arab ethnicity as its own. In fact, three interrelated processes of ethnicization were at work. The first form took place at the level of the state, as Arab Muslim elites debated the categories of Arabness and Iraqi-ness; the second involved Iraqi Jews themselves and their conceptualizations of the Arab nation and the Iraqi homeland; and the third was the ethnicization of Iraqi Jews by Iraqi national elites (Sunnis, Shi'is, and Christians). Iraqi Jews were thus represented as "Iraqis," "citizens," "Iraqis of the Jewish faith," "Arab Jews," "Zionists," and "people of the book," depending on the socio-political and sociocultural orientation of those who described them.

The appropriation of Arab nationalism by Iraqi Jewish intellectuals meant that Jews were orienting themselves to new spatial forms (the nation), and that Iraqi Jews came to think differently about time, since Jewish writers were affected by Arab national periodizations and narratives of decline and revival. They hailed, for example, the religious harmony between Jews and Muslims under the golden ages of the Abbasid and the Ottoman empires, and bemoaned the decline of Iraq after the Mongol conquest (1258). Jewish intellectuals, moreover, were fascinated by Arab history and Arab culture and advanced the thesis that Arab and Islamic history testified to their cultural affiliations with the Arab community. Subsequently, Iraqi Jews sought to affect Arab national discourses from within by accepting certain key components of Arab nationalism, imbuing them with tolerant and inclusive meanings, and working in tandem with other Iraqis who held similar views. Furthermore, when Jewish intellectuals addressed matters such as the status of Jewish women and the need to reform Jewish tradition as well as to alter the structure of the Iraq's rabbinical leadership, they turned to Arab Muslim reformers who were grappling with similar dilemmas in their own communities. Jewish intellectuals thus stimulated an ongoing dialogue between Muslims and Jews and bolstered the understanding that they had shared concerns in the face of Western modernity, as both Muslims and Jews wondered what it meant to be modern and non-European and tried to come to terms with European Christian dominance.

The Arab component in Iraqi Jewish identity encompassed linguistic and literary elements. In her essay "Nationalism and the Imagination," liter-

ary critic Gayatri Spivak attempts to locate the moment when love of the mother tongue becomes integrated into exclusionist nationalism. She asks:

Why is the first learned language so important? Because it teaches every human infant to negotiate the public and the private outside of the public-private divide as we have inherited it from the legacy of European history. Language has a history; it is public before our births and will continue so after our deaths. Yet every infant invents it and makes it the most private thing, touching the very interiority of the heart. On a more superficial level it is this underived private that nationalism appropriates.³

To Spivak, the promotion of multilingualism (“recognizing that there are many first languages”) democracy, comparative criticism, and pluralism means undoing this nationalist appropriation. Similarly, Iraqi Jews grew up speaking and reading in Arabic. Iraqi Jewish nationalists have certainly appropriated the Arabic language in order to show that they were an integral part of the Arab nation. But their love of Arabic should not be conceptualized only within a historical moment when their Arabic mother tongue became the business of the nation-state; it should be reconstructed in relation to daily speech, reading practices, neighborly relations, and friendships with Arab Muslims and Christians, which have shaped the lives of many of Jews and affected their hopes and dreams.

Arab Jewishness was not the only relevant form of identity for Iraqi Jews. During the nineteenth century, they had come to identify themselves as Ottoman subjects; their elites were eager to learn Turkish, and some Iraqi Jews were tapped for high-ranking posts created in the new imperial order.⁴ With the establishment of the state, many Jewish writers identified themselves as Iraqi patriots, underlining the fact that Iraq, and not the entire Arab nation, was their homeland. Iraq, a land whose history dated back to the glorious days of ancient Babylon, and whose unique culture and geography molded a specific form of nationalism, was therefore at the core of many Jewish national narratives. The recognition that Iraqi Jewry belonged to the East was likewise of extreme importance. On the one hand, the tensions that Iraqi Jewish intellectuals grappled with regarding the need to modernize the community within the framework of the nation-state, the genres with which they expressed their concerns (the newspaper article, the short story, the modernist poem), and the places in which they discussed such

concerns (the café, the literary salon, the communist cell, and the school), all constitute profound parallels between European Jews and Iraqi Jews.⁵ The Jews of Iraq themselves attempted to accommodate their histories, and their ideas about nationhood, subjectivity, and selfhood, into a universal narrative that evoked the concepts of civilization, progress, and sovereignty, modeled after European ideals. On the other hand, Iraqi Jewish intellectuals emphasized the differences between themselves and Western Jewry. They contended that Iraqi Jews and Iraqi Muslims and Christians shared an internal domain of Eastern authenticity which included motifs from Semitic, Islamic, and Arab cultures.⁶ This shared Eastern domain was located outside, and often constructed in opposition to, European colonialism.

Iraqi Jews debated not only their identities as Iraqis and Arabs, but also the very meaning of being Jewish within an increasingly secularizing milieu. They saw the shift from a religious to a nonreligious society as a step toward the goal of achieving modernity, which Talal Asad defined as the undertaking of projects aimed at institutionalizing several principles (constitutionalism, democracy, human rights, and civil equality), and the employing of technologies of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, and medicine to generate new experiences of space and time.⁷ Partha Chatterjee has shown that secularization was not simply the onward march of rationality, untainted of coercion and power struggles, but rather an effort carried out unilaterally by national elites in order to define and classify the identity of religious minorities.⁸ Similarly, in Iraq, secularism was often seen by the state's Arab Sunni elites as a means to combat sectarianism. Secularism was tied to political stability, national unity, and Westernization, although the very same elites that promoted secularization took great care not to upend the political hegemony of the Arab Sunnis and their supporters (landed and tribal elites in particular). In Iraq, then, liberty was practiced without equality, as the state permitted freedom of consciousness and religious practice (the idea of liberty), yet rejected the idea of equality in that it privileged one ethno-religious group over all others. For Jewish intellectuals, moreover, the discussions about secularism related not only to a vision of a secular democratic state but to the community's internal concerns regarding gender and family relationships, communal worship, morality, and privacy.

Zionism did not play a major role in the debates about Iraqi Jewish

identity before 1947. What determined the differences between the many kinds of Arab Jews who lived in Iraq was not how they felt about Zionism—most rejected it—but rather how they defined their relationship to the Iraqi state. In the early 1920s a generation of educated Jews hoped that the newly established Iraqi state would materialize their hopes for integration and citizenship rights. Because of their excellent bilingual education, Jewish urban elites were able to gain employment in the bureaucracy, while others benefited from the economy that emerged in the interwar period, working as lawyers, administrators, bankers, and merchants. These Jews very much supported the state, and felt that citizenship and democratic rights could, and should, be achieved by working within the state apparatus. In the 1940s, with the radicalization of the entire Iraqi public sphere, many young Jews turned toward the left. They critiqued the state for failing to provide social justice to most of its subjects and championed socialist, Marxist, and communist visions. They were also willing to take risks that the previous generation had shunned, namely, to join prohibited radical cells and engage in illegal activities. Significantly, liberal and capitalist Iraqi Jews, as well as radical Jewish leftists, all employed the term *Arab Jew* in their writings, yet each group excoriated the actions of the other faction as detrimental to the Iraqi Jewish community and the possibility of its integration into Iraqi Arab society. To understand these Jewish groups and the historical narratives they proposed, we should, to paraphrase Dipesh Chakrabarty's famous title, provincialize Zionism, and look into the many meanings the term Arab Jew entailed.⁹

The central approach accorded to Zionism in Jewish Iraqi history, however, colored much of its historiography. Some Arab nationalist historians identified Jewish cultural phenomena such as educational activities in Jewish schools and synagogues as a mere veneer for Zionist propaganda. Zionist historians, for their part, underlined the longing of Iraqi Jews to return to their Jewish homeland and dwelt on the violence perpetrated against the Jews, and on the subsequent activities of the Iraqi Zionist underground in the 1940s. Both types of analysis, however, decontextualized the realities of the Jewish community by projecting the realities created during and after 1948 onto the previous years.¹⁰ Historian Nissim Kazzaz advanced the discussion of Arab Jewish relations in Iraq, arguing that Iraqi Jews had indeed desired to be fully integrated into Iraqi society, and yet the Arab nationalism

of the 1930s, which integrated chauvinist and militant elements, could not countenance their vision of Iraq. The combination of support for totalitarian European regimes, sympathy for the Palestinian cause, and a nationalist discourse that privileged Arab ethnicity over a shared Arab culture, fanned the flames of anti-Jewish sentiments. In June 1941 a wave of urban riots against Baghdadi Jews, known as the Farhud, left over 170 Jews dead and turned the attention of young Iraqi Jews to Zionism. Kazzaz thus labeled the attempts at creating new modes of Iraqi Jewish nationalism as “the failure of the Iraqi orientation.”¹¹ Nonetheless, in recent years, historians, sociologists, and literary critics have highlighted the degree of acceptance of Iraqi Jews in Iraqi society, as evidenced by their involvement in the political, cultural, and economic life of modern Iraq, and rejected the notion of “failure,” which was central to Kazzaz’s analysis.¹² Reuven Snir in particular has perceptively illustrated the degree to which Iraqi Jewish culture shaped, and was shaped by, literary and cultural discourses current in the Arab public sphere.¹³

New scholarly evaluation of Iraqi Arab nationalism has likewise affected the ways in which Arab Jewish nationalism is conceptualized. Iraqi Arab nationalism was typically described as being Pan-Arab and Sunni-centered, and aimed at stifling Shi’i and Kurdish protests of the political hegemony of the Sunni Arab elites (although the participation of Shi’is in Arab nationalist discourses was also recognized).¹⁴ More recent scholarship on Iraqi nationalism, however, while acknowledging militaristic and ultranationalist elements in Iraqi political culture, has argued that liberal, democratic, and leftist voices were not drowned out. Intellectuals in the monarchic period included actors who collaborated with the state as well as artists, writers, poets, and painters who worked more independently in what was a lively public realm. Most significantly, as established by Sami Zubaida and Eric Davis, at any given moment of the period, there was not a single national narrative or a single memory of the nation, but rather competing visions advanced by the state and opposition forces. Furthermore, despite Iraq’s sectarian and ethnically diverse makeup, a unique Iraqi, nonsectarian nationalism marked a sense of nationalism that differentiated the denizens of Iraq from their Arab brethren.¹⁵ Finally, scholars of the Levant, Syria in particular, have noted the function of the urban middle classes, the *ef-fendia*, in transmitting and popularizing national ideology. These Western-

educated middle-class professionals have not only defined the nature of the national discourse and the anticolonial struggle, but also, and more crucially, they have delineated the meaning of Middle Eastern modernity itself.¹⁶ However, the creation of this national civil order was not simply the outcome of their efforts; it also originated from the endeavors of subaltern and semi-subaltern groups, such as women and popular nationalists, to appropriate the national discourse and to alter its exclusionist nature.¹⁷ In Iraq, the *effendia* negotiated the significations of nationalism, urbanism, and modernity and shaped the nation's historical memory by the development of memory sites and commemoration ceremonies.¹⁸

This new historiography on Iraqi state and society bears immense relevance to Iraqi Jewish history. While ultranationalist Iraqi elements identified Judaism with Zionism, or evoked antidemocratic and exclusionary views, the democratic elements in Iraqi society were receptive to a public Jewish presence. The vision of Iraq as a territorial unit whose history, geography, and culture united Jews and Muslims (much as it brought together Arabs and Kurds) was very attractive to Jews, and thus Jews were active in social democratic and communist circles that embraced this Iraqi ideology. The Iraqi Jews who propagated these national visions belonged mostly to the educated middle classes. By the 1920s a network of Jewish schools had substantially increased the number of educated individuals in the community. In the 1940s, with the expansion of the Iraqi educational system, Jews from the lower middle classes were able to obtain primary and secondary educations, often in schools in which the majority of the students were Muslim.¹⁹ These processes created what might be termed as "a Jewish *effendia*," that is, an urban middle class that identified with, and actively propagated, the goals of Iraqi Arab nationalism.

Another important historiographical discourse concerns the responses of Arab nationalists to Nazism and fascism. A great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to the military and intellectual elites who supported the Nazi and fascist regimes. These Arab elites saw the fascist and Nazi modernization efforts as acceptable and even worth-emulating, and felt that a strategic alliance with Germany, Italy, and Japan might help challenge the dominance of British colonialism in the region. However, as Israel Gershoni, James Jankowski, Götz Nordbruch, and Gilbert Achcar have illustrated,

major segments within the Arab intelligentsia challenged their peers who espoused fascist views. Be they Egyptian liberals educated in France and bemoaning its fall in 1941; Arab nationalists troubled by the potential threat of Italian colonialism, particularly after the occupation of Ethiopia; social democrats; or communists, the profascist and pro-Nazi camp, albeit very significant, was met with meaningful resistance.²⁰

In Iraq, militarist and ultranationalist groups affiliated with the state did look into cooperation with Germany and some of their voices were heard loudly and clearly in the 1941 coup.²¹ However, revisionist scholarship has recently shown that the profascist contingent was sharply criticized by pro-British politicians, and by social democrats, the nascent communist party, and religious intellectuals who objected to what they saw as the deification of the state under fascism. Although the latter groups were small, they were influential in the public sphere.²² The Jews, then, were not an isolated minority with nothing in common with their fellow Iraqis, politically speaking, and potential alliances between anti-Nazi Jews and anti-Nazi Iraqis could be formed. The media is key here, since BBC radio, the newspapers of the social-democrats, communist pamphlets, the Jewish press, and the larger Arab print market, especially in Egypt, helped to reassure Iraqi Jews that they were not alone in their abhorrence of Nazism and fascism, despite the popularity of these systems in nationalist circles.²³

The historiography of Iraqi Jews also relates to ways in which the history of Jews in Muslim lands has been written and analyzed. This history is typically told in one of two ways: either as a model of a harmonious of coexistence, or, conversely, as a tale of perpetual persecution. Nonetheless, many scholars of Jewish Islamic history have concurred that writing the histories of Jewish communities in Muslim societies requires looking into particular contexts and unique historical circumstances. These scholars have also acknowledged that Islamic law protected Jews from the kinds of persecutions to which they were subjected in medieval Europe, and that Jewish culture—namely, theology, grammar, philosophy, and literature—thrived and was transformed in the medieval and early modern periods, as a result of its fruitful interactions with Muslim and Arab cultures. Yet alongside these ideas, an orientalist interpretation emerged, asserting that while in the premodern era Jews and Muslims enjoyed a coexistence marked by cultural

reciprocity, this tradition ceased to exist in the modern period because of the inability of Arab societies to absorb democratic principles and grant citizenship rights to ethnic and religious minorities.²⁴

While there is no doubt that the toxic mixture of colonialism and ethnic nationalism had devastating consequences for the Middle East's ethnic and religious minorities, it is important to note that during the first half of the twentieth century, for Iraqi Jews, as well as other non-Jewish Iraqis, the modern world symbolized a promising new beginning, and not a fatal end, to the Arab Jewish cultures of their ancestors. Thus, liberal Iraqi Jews hailed the universal significance of democracy and human rights, and praised the great achievements of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, while radical Jewish communists argued that a class-based revolution would unavoidably integrate Jews into the state. More broadly, Jews in the modern Arab societies did not necessarily consider their religious and cultural identity to be problematic. In the Ottoman world, Jews were only one minority among many, in a multiethnic and multireligious empire. The national narratives that emerged in the newly established Arab states spoke of the emancipation of the Arab peoples from Ottoman rule and expressed their hopes for liberation from colonialism. There was therefore no point in talking about separate Jewish emancipation because the perception implicit in the dominant national narrative was that the entire Arab community was to be liberated from the bonds of the Ottoman past and the colonial present, and that Arab statehood, independence, and sovereignty would emancipate all former subjects of the empire.²⁵

Furthermore, Jews in Arab lands expressed great excitement concerning the process of the Arab revival, and wished to be active participants in this process. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, the Arabic literary and cultural renewal, or the *Nahda* (a term usually translated as “renaissance” or “revival”), was typified by the attempts of Muslim and Christian Arabs to reassess the relationship between Europe and the Arab world, to redefine the place of Islam within modern society, and to consider Western genres as vehicles of literary and cultural expression.²⁶ Jews internalized the modernist discourses typical of the *nahdawi* print culture.²⁷ Concurrently, Muslim and Christian Arab intellectuals had come to treat Jews not as “others” but rather

as “brothers.”²⁸ The pioneers of the Arab Nahda were attentive to Jewish affairs and defended the rights of European Jews. Leading Arab journals protested the persecution of Jews in Europe; they reported on pogroms and anti-Jewish activities, especially in Russia and the Balkans, and evoked the image of the Jew as an individual forced to exist under perpetual persecution. Arab intellectuals, moreover, supported Jewish emancipation in Europe, and noted favorably that Jews were granted certain citizenship rights in Britain and Germany. Yet they also recognized the domains in which this emancipation had fallen well short. In addition, many journals celebrated the harmony between Muslims, Jews, and Christians under Islamic rule, while cultural magazines like *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Muqtataf* published essays on Jewish history ancient and modern, the Jewish religion, and Hebrew and Semitic linguistics.²⁹

These egalitarian positions should be seen as an attempt to expose European doublespeak, since such Arab intellectuals underlined the fact that Europe, seeking to represent itself as the beacon of justice, democracy, and modernity, was treating its own minorities in an appalling fashion. During the nineteenth century portions of the Balkans were gaining independence from Ottoman rule, and it was therefore important to position a just Ottoman-Muslim polity in pointed contrast to the case in Europe. Some of these accounts were responding to a Pan-Islamic discourse of which one element was a concern for the welfare of Muslims throughout the world, and in Europe (most notably, Russia) in particular. Calling attention to discrimination against Jews, in the very same lands where Muslims were persecuted, fitted well into this general critique of Europe. In addition, the interest in Semitic cultures, especially in the philological realm, was important to prominent Arab intellectuals. To deepen their understanding of their own cultural heritage, Arabs needed to know more about Hebrew, ancient Israel, and the connections between Semitic cultures and languages. Finally, many of the Christian intellectuals writing in these journals favored citizenship rights which were not based on religion. The critique of the mistreatment of the Jews outside the Ottoman empire thus dovetailed with the campaign to promote secularism, equality, and new notions of empire and state within the Ottoman realm.³⁰

This interest in Semitic cultures was certainly not limited to the late nineteenth century. The identification of Arabs as Semites served Arab na-

tionalism during the interwar period, and colored the writings of many nationalists. Arab nationalists took to heart the European binary opposition of Aryans and Semites, and turned it on its head. The Semites—that is, the Arabs as well as many ancient nations of the Near East—came to represent an ethnic group whose cultures formed the foundation for civilization, whose glorious leaders had ruled great empires, like Assyria and Babylon, and whose spirituality had given rise to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.³¹ This narrative counted many adherents in the Levant and in Iraq. Importantly, it allowed Jews to claim a role in the formation of the new national language, as having a great deal in common with their non-Jewish Arab brethren. Iraqi Jewish intellectuals thus made use of the Aryan-Semite dichotomy as a difference between a model of cultural integration (in the world of the Semites and the Arabs) and a one of persecution and victimization (in the non-Semitic world).

Tragically, these shared Jewish Arab and Iraq visions were silenced in the years 1948–52, when Zionism, Arab nationalism, and communism each played their part in making Iraqi Jewish identity into a “question” or a “problem.” Zionist activities in Iraq had commenced in the early 1920s, but did not receive a great deal of support until the late 1940s. A minor phenomenon, Zionism attracted some adherents from among the Iraqi Jewish youth; the majority of intellectuals did not become partisans, viewing it with great suspicion. In fact, Zionist emissaries sent to Iraq in the wake of the Farhud complained bitterly that their movement received little in the way of support. After 1948, however, Zionism became a meaningful force in Jewish Iraqi life. There were more Zionist emissaries and local activists in Iraq who were able to organize small groups of young people, and became bolder in their illegal operations.³²

In the 1920s, some bourgeois Jews had thought that Jewish settlement in Palestine could actually lead to Jewish Arab cooperation, and projected their hopes for coexistence in Iraq onto the Palestinian situation. By 1929, when it became clear that the Zionist and Palestinian national movements were headed for a drawn-out bloody conflict, Iraqi Jews were forced to choose a side. The intellectual elites came down in favor of the Palestinians, a position made crystal clear by their petitions in support of the Arab national revolt in Palestine (1936–39). The anti-Zionist outlook persisted into the 1940s.

An influential political organization, the *'Usbat mukafahat al-Sahayuniyya* (League for Combating Zionism), led by Iraqi communists and made up primarily of Jewish activists, enjoyed a fair measure of popular support at the time. Combating Zionism, however, meant grappling with its key terms—"the Jewish question," "exile," and "anti-Semitism"—and forced Iraqi Jews to position themselves vis-à-vis Jewish communities in other countries. For the communists, it also meant addressing the Jewish question with respect to the proletariat, and refuting labor-Zionism's claim that it resolved both the Jewish question and the question of the Jewish proletariat.³³

Zionism, however, did more than complicate the relationships between Iraqi Jews of various political inclinations. It also complicated the relationships between Jews and Iraqi Muslims and Christians, as Iraqi ultranationalist elements and the Iraqi state itself were unable or unwilling to draw a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. No matter how adamant Jews were in emphasizing their Iraqi identity or how vigorously their fellow Iraqis defended them in this regard, radical elements within the Iraqi nationalist elite dismissed their claims. Moreover, influential nationalist bureaucrats and intellectuals often spoke of "perilous" minority communities, ones not fully integrated into the nation, as "problems." These included, for example, Kurdish identity and tribalism, Shi'i tribalism, or independent Shi'i leaders.³⁴ Beginning in 1948 Jews were also singled out as a major problem, because of their suspected disloyalty to the state. To preserve national harmony and homogeneity, they had to leave. The creation of Israel as an internationally recognized, sovereign body that could negotiate with the Iraqi government about the departure of Iraqi Jews facilitated their emigration from Iraq.

The appeal of communism to Jews was the final reason that they came to be considered problematic from the standpoint of the state's elites. Prior to the end of World War II, the national elites affiliated with the state had rarely doubted the loyalty of Iraqi Jews. Even the most fanatic anti-Semites in the mid-1920s were forced to recognize that Iraqi Jews were different from their "devious" Russian and Eastern European brethren. Sherifian officers (officers who participated in the Arab Revolt) turned Iraqi politicians and other members of the political and cultural elites had welcomed Jewish involvement in the state's institutions and its nascent cultural revival. The authorities, with British encouragement, were willing to patrol Jewish neighborhoods

during the Arab revolt in Palestine in order to protect Jewish citizens. The turn of some radical Jews to communism in the 1940s had the effect of turning the state against the Jewish community as a whole. In 1948, many young Jews, including Jewish communists, participated in the Wathba, a name given to a series of demonstrations against the state's pro-British policies and Iraq's failure to provide social justice to its subjects. The Wathba demonstrated to the state's elites that the communists had become a force to be reckoned with, and the state reacted in a brutal fashion by arresting communists (actual or suspected), leftists, and other radicals. Communist Jews suffered as well, although this persecution was directed against all radical, antistate voices in Iraq. Thus, in 1948–49, under the banner of the fight against Zionism and communism, the long-serving Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Sa'id, and other Iraqi officials moved to enact laws that discriminated against Jews. Persecutions now became the lot of the not only the radical elements within the Jewish effendia but of the Jewish community as a whole.³⁵ Its members began to feel that they were strongly encouraged to leave.

The following pages, however, will detail neither the interactions between the Zionist movement (and later Israel) with the Iraqi state nor the involvement of Jews in the Iraqi economy and the effects of their departure on it. This is a book about intellectual, social, and cultural histories. It seeks to analyze texts produced by Iraqi Jews and reflect on their meanings and the historical contexts that shaped the world of their authors. It likewise reflects on the many types of Arab Jews who saw Iraq as their homeland, Arabic as their language, and a shared coexistence between Iraq's various communities as their political vision. It focuses on those Jews who both rejected and feared Zionism. It tries to respect the visions of Iraqi Arab Jews and situate them in an Iraqi and Arab context, rather than labeling them as mere "failures." Reading such texts without taking into account the contexts of Arab and Iraqi nationalism and the problems with which Iraqi intellectuals of all sects and ethnicities were grappling dehistoricizes Iraqi Jewish history and does a great injustice to its rich cultural productivity and creativity.