

# THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PATTERNS OF IRAQI JEWRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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*The majority of the Jews of Iraq in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lived in three major cities: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. In the first half of the nineteenth century a process of modernization began in the Jewish community, paralleling the policy of Westernization and modernization in the Ottoman Empire, as reflected in the Tanzimat. The Jewish community was declared a millet, a religious community enjoying internal autonomy in religion and education. Like other minorities within the empire, the Jewish community was granted equal rights and security of life and property.*

*The recognition of the Jewish community as a millet affected its reorganization. The hakham bashi, elected by the 80-member General Council, served as the head of the community, though actually, absolute control was in the hands of a narrow class of merchants, bankers, and rich landowners. Economically, the Jews engaged in foreign and domestic trade and in banking, two areas which they came to dominate.*

*The mid-nineteenth century marked the beginning of development, progress, and prosperity within the Jewish community, which was reflected both in growing economic affluence and the modernization of education. The introduction of modern education, in which the Jews preceded the Muslim society around them, inaugurated a new era of far-reaching change in the community life. The Jews of Iraq were not characterized by any significant rifts, splits, or polarization. They succeeded in maintaining their religious framework and their collective and communal uniqueness.*

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In a report on Iraqi Jewry prepared in 1910 by Harun Da'ud Shohet, translator in the British Consulate in Baghdad, Shohet wrote:<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish community at Baghdad is, after that of Salonica, the most numerous, important, and prosperous in Turkey....The Jews are particularly interested in trade. They have literally monopolized the local trade, and neither Muhammadans nor Christians can compete with them. Even the few leading Muhammadan merchants owe their prosperity to the capable and industrious Jews whom they have for years employed as clerks. The Jews are very ambitious, hard-working, capable, and economical. They are also very cunning, timid, and tactful....They are becoming richer day by day....The Jews on the whole are practical people; their ideal is to work hard and make money.

The report was written several decades after the Jewish community had embarked on a process of modernization and awakening, a process which was to come to an end exactly four decades later, with the dissolution of the Iraqi diaspora community in the 1950s. The report describes a community which, after a long period of physical and spiritual decline, had become one of the wealthiest and economically powerful of the Jewish communities in the Arab world. It portrays a dynamic and active community, which enjoyed prosperity and extensive contacts with the outside world, a community which played a dominant role in Iraqi trade and commercial life.

The economic awakening of the Jewish community was accompanied by a spiritual awakening, which began in the 1830s. Until then, the children of the community had studied in private *heders*, where learning was quite limited and children of different ages all studied together. In 1840, Yeshivat Bet Zilcha — the first yeshiva in Iraq since the thirteenth century — was established by Yehezkel ben Reuben Menashe, a wealthy Jew. He appointed Hakham Abdallah Somech, a leading Baghdad rabbi, as head of the yeshiva. In 1908 another yeshiva was established by Meir Eliahu. These two institutions trained rabbis who were to serve not only the Jewish communities in Iraq, but also in Iran, India and the Far East.<sup>2</sup>

The report prepared by Harun Da'ud Shohet focused solely on the Jewish community in Baghdad. He noted that according to an adjusted census conducted by the authorities two years previously (1908), the Jewish community numbered some 35,000 persons. Another estimate cites a figure of 50,000. Reports by the Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Anglo-Jewish Association cite a figure of 45,000. No record remains of a census conducted in Iraq in 1908.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there were various estimates of the number of Jews living in Baghdad. These estimates — whether by such travelers as Benjamin the Second or Kastilman, or by people who lived or sojourned in Iraq — were not always in agreement.<sup>3</sup> However, we can assume that the Jewish community of Baghdad on the eve of World War I numbered between 40,000 and 50,000.

These assessments refer, of course, to Baghdad alone. We have no figures on other areas in Iraq where Jews lived. The historian Haim Cohen estimates that on the eve of World War I there were some 80,000 Jews living in Iraq — 50,000 in Baghdad and an additional 30,000 scattered in dozens of small communities. We find Jewish communities in southern Iraq in such cities as Basra, Hilla, Amara and Kalat Salih; in the center of the country, in Baghdad and the surrounding area; and in the north, in Mosul — the largest northern city — Arbil and Kirkuk. What was unique about the Jews in northern Iraq, as opposed to the south and center, was that many lived in towns and rural villages and engaged primarily in agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish population in Iraq was not static. Jews migrated from the north to the center and the south, and vice versa. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, after the opening of the Suez Canal and the shift of international trade from Haleb-Mosul to Basra, the Jewish population in the latter city began to grow. Jews also began to settle in Amara, founded in 1861, in Kalat Salih, founded in 1870, and in other communities in southern Iraq where Jews had not lived previously.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, to characterize the Jewish community in Iraq, it can be said that most of the Jews lived in three major cities: Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra in the south. Of these three cities, throughout the history of Iraqi Jewry, Baghdad had the largest Jewish population. Two censuses conducted at a 30-year interval confirm this.

According to an official 1920 census, the Jewish population numbered 87,488 out of a total population of 2,849,283, or 3.1 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> In southern Iraq — in Basra, Diwaniya, Amara and elsewhere — there were close to 17,700 Jews, of whom 5,928 lived in Basra alone. In northern Iraq — in Arbil, Kirkuk, Mosul and elsewhere — there were 13,835 — 7,635 in Mosul alone. The rest of the Jews lived in central Iraq — the majority of them, close to 50,000, almost 57 percent of Iraqi Jews, in Baghdad. Thus, some 65,000 Jews — close to 74 percent of the Jews in Iraq — were at this time living in the three major cities — Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. This was a

phenomenon characteristic of Jewish communities throughout the Middle East.

Three decades later, no significant changes had occurred in the distribution of the Jewish population. According to the 1947 census, the Jewish community numbered 118,000 out of a total population of 4.5 million, or 2.6 percent of the population. Most of the Jews still lived in the three major cities. The Jewish population in these cities numbered some 98,000, or 83 percent of the Jews in Iraq. The number of Jews in Baghdad had increased by over 50 percent to 77,542. In Basra the number of Jews had risen to 10,537, and in Mosul to 10,345. Looking at the increase by region, in the north there had been an increase of about 50 percent in the Jewish population, from 13,835 to 19,755. In contrast, the number of Jews living in the south had decreased, despite an increase of 4,000 in the Jewish population of Basra. The number of Jews in southern Iraq in 1947 was 16,000 as opposed to 17,700 in 1920. The decline in the Jewish population in the south was recorded primarily in such places as Amara, Hilla, and Diwaniya. Of the 10,750 Jews living in the south in 1920, excluding Basra, only 5,473 remained in 1947, the result of negative migration.<sup>7</sup>

On the eve of the mass emigration to Israel, in mid-1950, the Jewish population numbered roughly 125,000. Two years later, only 6,000 remained, most of them in two major cities, Baghdad and Basra, with small communities in Amara and Diwaniya. Even these communities did not last long, and by the late 1960s or early 1970s most of the Jews had left Iraq. At the beginning of the 1990s, barely 200 Jews remained.

All historians agree that the process of modernization within the Jewish community began in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> This process paralleled the policy of Westernization and modernization in the Ottoman Empire, reflected in the Tanzimat. In two decrees — Hatt-i Serif Gulhane issued in 1839, and Hatt-i Serif Humayun in 1856 — the Ottoman Sultan established the principles of security of life and property and equal rights for all subjects of the empire, regardless of religion. Religious minorities, including the Jews, were declared *millets*, namely religious communities enjoying internal autonomy in the areas of religion and education. The poll tax was abolished, but in return for the exemption of religious minorities from conscription into the Ottoman army, an exemption tax known as *bedel-i askeri* was levied.<sup>9</sup> Any Jew who was ready to serve in the army could do so, and indeed a number served as officers in the medical corps. Following the “Young Turks” Revolution in 1908, religious freedom was declared and the Jews were obligated to serve in the army like other subjects of the empire.

Exemption was granted to rabbis, rabbinical court judges, students in rabbinical seminaries and in universities.

The recognition of the Jewish community as a *millet* also affected its reorganization. Until then, the community had been headed by a *nasi*, usually a wealthy Jew who also served as the community treasurer. The religious authority was a rabbi, or *hakham*, who was appointed by the *nasi* and was subject to him. In 1849, these two posts, political and religious, were combined in the position of the *hakham bashi*. The *hakham bashi* was appointed by the Iraqi authorities, on the recommendation of the *hakham bashi* of the Ottoman Empire. He served as head of the entire Jewish community and was responsible before the law and the government. He represented the affairs of the Jewish community before the Iraqi government, and informed the community of government decrees. Two councils operated alongside the *hakham bashi*:

a. the spiritual council (*al-majlis al-ruhani*), numbering seven rabbis, which dealt with all religious matters, such as synagogues, matrimonial matters, etc.;

b. the secular council (*al-majlis al-jismani*), comprising a chairman and eight notables, which was responsible for all organizational and financial matters, as well as the communal institutions — education, tax collection, social welfare, etc.

The Organizational Regulations of the Rabbinate in the Ottoman Empire were issued in 1864. These regulations determined that the *hakham bashi* would be elected by a "general committee" (*majlis umumi*) — a kind of communal "house of representatives" numbering 80 members. His election would take effect after the Sultan's approval. It was also determined that the general committee would elect the spiritual and secular councils.

The current expenses of the Jewish community were not financed by the central government. Rather, the heads of the community were responsible for raising the necessary funds. Expenses included the salaries of the *hakham bashi*, judges and ritual slaughterers, the maintenance of charitable institutions, assistance to the poor who could not pay the exemption tax, and later also the upkeep of hospitals. The major source of income was the tax on kosher meat (*gabelle*), first imposed in 1830.<sup>10</sup> Other sources of income were philanthropic donations by members of the local Jewish community or by Iraqi Jews who had migrated to other countries, and the payment of various fees. The community also owned property — houses, stores and land — donated as a religious trust.<sup>11</sup>

The organizational structure of the community was ostensibly democratic, and, in fact, the general council selected the *hakham bashi* and the two executive committees. But ordinary members of the

community had no impact whatsoever on public life and on the election of their representatives. Absolute control of communal affairs was in the hands of the wealthy — a narrow class of merchants, bankers, and rich landowners. All decisions were made by them. They were the real leaders of the community, and the *hakham bashi* was subject to them. Harum Da'ud Shohet notes in his report, without exaggeration, that the *hakham bashi* was "a mere puppet in their hands." At a later period, they would be joined by the upper middle class, which was to exert decisive influence in the community.<sup>12</sup> This organizational structure persisted for 83 years, until 1932, when the Iraqi monarchy enacted a new law, redefining the organization of the Jewish community.

The wealthy and influential class of the Jewish community was small in size. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the traders and bankers constituted 5 percent of the Jewish population. Under them were several other strata: a middle class, composed of small tradesman, both wholesale and retail, constituting 30 percent; a poor class, constituting 60 percent; and beggars, constituting 5 percent. This last class came mostly from the northern cities, such as Kirkuk and Mosul. Although we find this same class structure throughout the history of Iraqi Jewry, until the dissolution of the diaspora community, upward mobility increased.

Economically, the upper class engaged in foreign and domestic trade and in banking, two areas which in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to be dominated by Jews. Jewish commercial activity did not originate in the nineteenth century. Already at the end of the eighteenth century, Jews were involved in the transit trade between Europe and the Far East. However, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the development of the Basra port transformed Iraq into an important country in international trade.<sup>13</sup> Postal and telegraph offices were established simultaneously in Iraq, contributing to the flourishing of the import and export of textiles, precious stone, foodstuffs, household items, medicines and more, in which the Jews played an important part. Two factors helped them to expand and achieve a monopoly on trade: their knowledge of European languages, and the establishment of communities of Jews of Iraqi origin in the countries with which they traded. Such communities were found in Bombay and Calcutta in India, Manchester and London in England, Rangoon in Burma, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. Wealthy merchants in fact encouraged their relatives to emigrate to these countries.<sup>14</sup> A prime example is the Sassoon family, which had branches in India and England, as well as the Kedoori and Gabbai families. At the begin-

ning of the twentieth century almost every Jewish merchant in Baghdad owned shops in India, England and Iran.

From the mid-nineteenth century until World War I, the Jews controlled Iraqi trade, at the expense of Muslim and Christian, and even European merchants, including the British. On the eve of the war, at the close of the Ottoman era, the Jews enjoyed complete domination of Iraqi trade, foreign as well as domestic. According to accounts by nineteenth century travelers, Jews had shops in every market, and on the Sabbath all commerce in Baghdad would cease, as the Jews held a total monopoly.<sup>15</sup> This situation was to remain virtually unchanged for many years, until the 1940s.

Aside from the control over trade, the Jews also enjoyed a monopoly on money changing. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of the money changers (*sarrafim*) were Jews. They provided loans, converted currencies, and transferred funds. A similar situation prevailed in the area of banking. Until the end of World War II, the Jews had almost complete control over banking in Iraq. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Jews established banks bearing their names. The Zilcha Bank opened its doors in 1899, and within a short period of time became a thriving bank with branches in various countries. Sion Aboodi founded a bank bearing his name in 1900, and Edward Aboodi followed suit in 1938. In 1944, a Jewish-owned credit bank was established. The Iraqi government opened its first bank only in 1936. Aside from the Jews' control of banking, most of the bank employees, whether in foreign banks or others, were Jews as well.<sup>16</sup>

Those who controlled the domestic and foreign trade of Iraq and conducted its finances at the close of the nineteenth century were a very small minority within the Jewish community. A small number of Jews were landowners in southern Iraq — in Amara, Hilla and Diwaniya. A small minority was employed by the Ottoman government bureaucracy, and a few engaged in liberal professions. Until the end of Ottoman rule, the large majority of Iraqi Jews were small tradesmen, artisans and peddlars. The Jews living in northern Iraq, in towns and villages, engaged mostly in farming.

To sum up, in contrast to earlier centuries, the mid-nineteenth century marked the beginning of development, progress and prosperity within the Iraqi Jewish community. This was reflected both in growing economic affluence and in the modernization of education. Education and economy were closely interrelated areas in the life of the community.

The introduction of modern education undoubtedly contributed to the great economic transformation, one of the major changes in the life of Iraqi Jewry. One historian wrote that with the opening of the

first modern Jewish school, the renaissance of Iraqi Jewry began, inaugurating a new era of far-reaching change in community life.<sup>17</sup> The beginning of modern education in the Jewish community was not prompted by the Ottoman government, which in effect did nothing to advance or enhance the education of the Jews. The initiative came from the Jewish community itself. In this, they preceded the Muslim society around them, which as a rule lagged behind.

Modernization entered the Jewish community without shocks or crises. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rabbis displayed moderation and understanding of the desire for modernization, and were open to innovations. Rabbi Abdallah Somech (1813-1889), for example, was notable for his pragmatic approach to Western education. He was flexible in his rulings regarding the adoption of a Western lifestyle and integration into the developing commercial-technological system.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it can be said that in spite of Western education, the Jews of Iraq succeeded in maintaining their religious framework and their collective and communal uniqueness. They were not swept into the mainstream of society around them. While their lifestyles did undergo change, they did not try to imitate Iraqi society, to enter into it or to gain acceptance on a new basis.<sup>19</sup> In this context, a comparison with European Jewry is enlightening. When the Jews of Europe opted for progress and assimilation, society around them was more advanced and cultivated. For them, progress posed a threat to Jewish survival. The Jews of Iraq awoke to the modern era before their immediate surroundings, and continued to advance while the society around them remained relatively backward.<sup>20</sup>

The opening of the Alliance School by the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1864 is generally seen as a cornerstone in the modern education of Iraqi Jewry. This was in effect the first school established in Iraq. The Ottoman government opened its first modern school in Baghdad four years later. In addition to Hebrew and Arabic, the Alliance School taught both English and French, languages which were of use to the Jews in commerce.<sup>21</sup> The Alliance later opened additional schools throughout Iraq — in Basra, Hilla, Amara, Diwaniya, Kirkuk, and other locations. These schools produced those intellectuals who would later become officials of the British mandatory government and the Iraqi monarchy.

Education contributed to Jewish prosperity and development. The heads and wealthy members of the community recognized the importance of education, and therefore made personal donations for the expansion of the school system. Thus, the economic changes within the community contributed to the establishment of a broad

network of schools. The continuing enhancement of education, in turn, fostered greater prosperity and well-being among the Jewish population. The Meir Elias School for General Diseases was established in 1910, and the Rima Kedoorei School for Eye Diseases in 1926. In addition, a children's clinic operated adjacent to every school.

The British occupation of Iraq from 1914-1918 opened a new chapter in the history of Iraqi Jewry.<sup>22</sup> Not only did this not halt the process of modernization, but the British presence gave the Jews a tremendous boost. The Jewish community enjoyed growing economic prosperity, marked by a significant expansion of trade and banking. In the wake of the departure of the Ottoman clerks, the occupation government had an urgent need for educated, progressive manpower in order to run the necessary administrative services. The Jews filled this need perfectly. The Jews became an integral part of the British administration, whether in the post office, the ports, the customs offices, or in financial services.<sup>23</sup>

The Jews continued to fill vital posts in the Iraqi bureaucracy after the establishment of the Iraqi Arab state under British mandate in 1920. The Iraqi monarchy under Faisal I was desperate for intellectuals to create the infrastructure for competently run state services. The Iraqi government encouraged the Jews, as it did the rest of the population, to go abroad to study at its expense, and did not obstruct their entrance into the colleges which began to open in Iraq in the 1920s. The government enlisted Jews to work in the government ministries — Treasury, Transportation, Post, and Justice — and in government authorities. The Minister of Finance in the first Iraqi governments was a Jew, Sir Yehezkel Sassoon. It is interesting to note that, despite their abilities, Jews were restricted to specific ministries, such as Justice and Transportation, and were not accepted into such ministries as Foreign Affairs, the Interior and Defense.<sup>24</sup>

During this period, the intellectual Jews in Iraq underwent a process of assimilation — Iraqization — into the life of Iraqi Arab society. The first Jewish writers and poets writing in Arabic, as Iraqis, appeared in the 1920s. Jewish poets expressed feelings of patriotism and identification with the national aspirations of the Iraqi nation. Such Jewish leaders as Sir Yehezkel Sassoon and Menahem Daniel, who served as a senator from 1925 to 1932, began to work for an independent and prosperous Iraq. Their motive was the good of Iraq, which they viewed as their homeland and towards which they displayed unequivocal loyalty. The prevailing conviction was that the Jews were Jews by religion and Arabs by nationality, for, after all, it was felt, Jews and Arabs are of the same race.<sup>25</sup>

What prompted the Jews to become part of Iraqi Arab society? The period under discussion was one of prosperity and flourishing in Jewish communal life, which had continued since the mid-nineteenth century. Economic prosperity and a long history formed the basis for this process of integration. Moreover, even if the Jews had sought another alternative, it was non-existent. The only option available to them was to link their fate with that of the Jews in Palestine, following the Balfour Declaration of 1917. For the Jewish community in Iraq, however, the Balfour Declaration was a utopian dream, which was unlikely to be realized. Palestine had nothing to offer them economically. Life in Iraq was paradise on earth compared to Palestine.<sup>26</sup>

Iraq, too, contributed to the integration of the Jews. In contrast to the contempt often displayed towards the Jewish community, which was considered inferior, the Iraqi monarchy tended to accept the Jews and to grant them equal rights, expecting them in return to do their share in building the state. Moreover, Iraq, as a new state under British mandate, sought to prove that it could safeguard its minorities and grant them the necessary protection. Iraq could not afford to harm its minority communities if it wished to achieve independence. In order to provide the Jewish minority with a sense of security, the rights of the Jews, like those of the other minorities in the kingdom, were secured in the Iraqi Constitution promulgated in 1925. Article 13 of the Constitution states that:

Islam is the official religion of the state, but guarantees complete freedom of conscience and worship in conformity with accepted custom, in so far as forms of worship do not conflict with the maintenance of order or public morality.

In addition, Article 16 "gives communities the right of establishing and maintaining schools for the instruction of their members in their own languages." The Constitution also instituted equal civil rights and equality in government appointments.<sup>27</sup> With its acceptance as a member of the League of Nations in 1932, Iraq reiterated its policy of protecting minorities. In a statement submitted to the member nations, it guaranteed minority rights, promised to safeguard their freedom and their lives, allowed them to conduct their religious life, culture and education independently, and accorded them equality before the law, and civil and political rights.<sup>28</sup> The Jews were even granted representation by four members of the House of Representatives and one senator. In short, the Jews enjoyed equal rights and a sense of complete security. As a result, many began to move out of the traditional neighborhoods where they had

lived for generations to other parts of the city, especially to Christian quarters.

The social and economic advancement of the Jews did not come to a halt during the British mandate period, but rather was accorded even greater momentum. This period saw the flourishing of the entire Iraqi population, and of the Jews in particular. The demand for consumer goods increased. Food products, agricultural equipment, clothing and later even automobiles contributed to a growth in imports. Jews remained dominant in this field, over which they maintained almost virtual control. On the other hand, the export trade was now concentrated in non-Jewish hands — British companies or Sunni Muslims. Jewish families with family representatives abroad in effect controlled imports. Before World War II, 95 percent of the imports were controlled by Jews, as opposed to 10 percent of exports.<sup>29</sup> This period represented the pinnacle of Jewish control of incoming trade, after which, as we shall see below, a gradual decline began. The results of the elections to the Baghdad chamber of commerce in the pre-war years show that the number of Jews in the directorate varied from about 61 percent in 1935-6 to 48 percent on the eve of the war.<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, the percentage of Jews began to decline.

Economic prosperity was accompanied by the flourishing of education. After World War I, the activity of the Alliance Israelite Universelle began to decline. Control over schools was transferred to the community institutions, which appointed a special committee charged with the proper running of the schools.<sup>31</sup> The growth in the number of students exceeded the growth in the size of the Jewish population. In 1920 in Baghdad, there were 5,511 students in eight schools administered by the community. By 1949 there were close to 11,000 students in 20 schools, an increase of 100 percent over a period when the Jewish population in the city increased by only 50 percent. The number of Jewish students in secondary schools and colleges also increased. From 1901-1920, a total of 15 Jewish students completed college studies. From 1920-1951, 792 received college degrees, of whom 225 completed their studies abroad. Haim Cohen estimates the number of Jewish students throughout Iraq on the eve of the exodus of Iraqi Jewry, in both Jewish and government schools, at about 19,000, as follows: 2,000 in kindergarten, 11,000-13,000 in elementary school, 3,500 in high school, and 500 in institutions of higher learning. Of this total number, close to 15,000 studied in Baghdad alone.<sup>32</sup>

Economic prosperity and social advancement affected the class structure of Iraqi Jewry. While there are no precise figures available, there was generally upward mobility in the community, with the

lower strata steadily shrinking. An intellectual class emerged, composed of members of the liberal professions, civil servants and others of the upper middle class, followed by a class of small tradesman and retailers.

In this context, we should note an element which highlights the uniqueness of the Jewish community in Iraq. Despite the economic and cultural changes which the community experienced, the modernization of education and the change in lifestyle, the Jews of Iraq were not characterized by any significant rifts, splits or polarization. If there was any rift, it was the result of the struggle between the traditional world view, preferring the continuation of Jewish life on Iraqi soil, and the Zionist movement, which emerged in Iraq in the 1940s, calling for a return to the Jewish homeland. This rift, however, appeared only shortly before the dissolution of the Iraqi diaspora. Throughout the nineteenth century and until the late 1940s, there was fruitful cooperation between the various social classes in all matters relating to community life. The wealthy and influential members regularly donated money to improve the welfare and intellectual level of the Jewish community.

The 1920s saw the emergence of a generation of intellectuals who took their place as part of the middle and upper middle class. They were well integrated in Iraqi Arab society, and some held prominent status in Iraqi government circles. They were not prepared to accept the complete control of the wealthy classes over the communal institutions, which were still governed by the old Ottoman law of 1864. Conflicts developed during the 1920s between this new class and the heads of the community.

By the 1920s, the Jewish population in Iraq was double what it had been in the mid-nineteenth century. In southern Iraq, with Basra as its center, there were 17,000 Jews, and in the north, with Mosul as the center, about 14,000. These changes in the Jewish population were among the factors which prompted the Iraqi monarchy to abolish the Ottoman law which had regulated the organization of the Jewish community and to replace it with a new law, in an effort to accord the community a more modern character.<sup>33</sup>

In 1931, the Iraqi government passed the "Jewish Community Law No. 77 for 1931" and promulgated Community Regulations No. 37. The law was in effect based on the existing structure of Iraqi Jewry. The government recognized the existence of three Jewish communities — in Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. The law was amended in 1947 to include two additional communities — in the Amara district and the Diyala district, with its center in Hankin. The new law also divided the post of *hakham bashi*, defining two new positions in each community: community head (*Rais al-Ta'ifa*) and the chief

rabbi (*Rais al-Hakhamim*). Both leaders had to be Iraqi subjects no less than 35 years of age. The head of the community did not necessarily have to be a rabbi, though both posts could be combined, with the chief rabbi serving also as community head, as was the case with Hakham Sassoon Kedoori who also served as community head from 1993-1949.

Each community had a general council elected for four years and a secular committee. The Baghdad community also had a spiritual committee. The number of council or committee members varied according to the size of the population in the area. In Baghdad the general council numbered 60, as opposed to 30 in Basra, 20 in Mosul and only 10 in Amara.<sup>34</sup> The function of the general council was to elect the heads of the community and the various committees, and to approve the annual budget. While the head of the community was indeed chosen by the council, he was appointed and dismissed by royal decree.

The secular committee comprised nine members in Baghdad and six in Basra. In Baghdad, it operated through sub-committees: the hospital committee, the school committee, and the religious trust committee. It was responsible for handling revenues and expenditures, taxes, property matters, etc. The spiritual committee, which existed only in Baghdad, dealt with all religious affairs. In other communities, these were handled by the chief rabbi.

As in the Ottoman period and afterwards, political power remained in the hands of the few. Most members of the Jewish community had no say in communal affairs. However, in contrast to the past, the wealthy no longer had absolute power in determining community policies. After the British occupation of Iraq, Jews occupied senior and influential positions in government. There were such figures as Abraham El-Kabir, Director-General of the Finance Ministry, Salman Shina, a well-known lawyer and Member of Parliament, Ezra Menahem Daniel, a Senator, and Yosef El-Kabir, a famous jurist, who, along with others like them, were the real leaders of the community. It was they who made the major decisions, especially in times of crisis. They did not have to fight for their status in the community as their eminent position in Iraqi society accorded them prestige and influence.

In the latter half of the 1930s, the situation of the Jews in Iraq underwent a change, as the Iraqi authorities began to curtail the progressivism which had characterized the Jews for so many generations. Nazi propaganda began to penetrate various classes of Iraqi society. At the same time, nationalist groups in Iraq were influenced by rising tensions in Palestine, with the onset of the Arab revolt in April 1936. During this same period, a generation of Iraqi intellectu-

als emerged, seeking employment in the various government authorities. All these circumstances combined to produce an anti-Jewish policy. This period was marked by the imposition of a *numerus clausus* on the number of Jews admitted to government secondary schools and institutions of higher learning, a wave of dismissals of hundreds of Jewish government employees, and even physical attacks. These attacks, known as the *farhud*, reached their peak in the well-planned riots<sup>35</sup> of June 1-2, 1941, during the *Shavuot* (Pentecost) holiday. In the course of these two days, some 180 Jews were killed and several hundred injured.<sup>36</sup> Damage to Jewish property was estimated at several hundred thousand pounds sterling. The severity of this attack was unprecedented in the history of the Jewish community and was the most tragic event in its historic memory. The psychological effect was so profound that the Jews were unable to free themselves of the fear of a recurrence. The *farhud* of June 1941 completely undermined the stability and security which the Jewish community had enjoyed.<sup>37</sup>

The Muslims had never accepted Jewish domination of Iraqi trade, and sought to regain control. During World War II, the number of Jews engaged in imports gradually declined. If prior to the war 95 percent of imports had been in Jewish hands, this percentage declined progressively to 80 percent during the war years, 50 percent in the post-war period, and only 20 percent after 1948. The same trend can be seen in exports, where 10 percent was controlled by Jews before the war and only 2 percent after 1948.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 marked the beginning of a deliberate policy of the removal of Jews from the economic position they had enjoyed for so long. This process of dispossession was accompanied by a policy of repression, terrorization and discrimination, reflected in the almost total dismissal of Jews from government offices.<sup>38</sup>

This marked the beginning of the end of Iraqi Jewry which, in the 1940s, was one of the wealthiest Jewish communities in the Middle East. Most of its members emigrated to Israel during the years 1950-52. Those who chose to remain in Iraq were forced to leave in the two decades that followed.

## Notes

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1. E. Kedourie, "The Jews of Baghdad in 1910," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 7:1 (1971):357-358; Y. Meir, *Hitpathut Hevratit-Tarbutit shel Yehudei Iraq me-1830 ve-ad Yameinu* (Tel-Aviv: The Center for Jewish Culture Publishers, 1989), pp. 508-512 (Hebrew); N. Kazzaz, *Ha-Yehudim be-Iraq ba-Meah ha-20* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1991), p. 27 (Hebrew).
  2. Meir, *op. cit.*, p. 28; A. Ben Ya'akov, *Yehudei Bavel me-Sof Tekufat ha-Geonim ve-ad Yameinu* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1979), pp. 150-151 (Hebrew).
  3. N. Shohet, *Sipura shel Golah: Perakim be-Toldot Yahadut Bavel le-Doroteha* (Jerusalem: Hevron Investments, 1989), pp. 89-91 (Hebrew).
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