A BAGHDADI ARAB-JEWISH CHILDHOOD –
JEWISH MUSLIM RELATIONS IN IRAQ, 1931-1951

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In April 2016, a *New York Times* reporter visited the Israeli city of Giva’tayim, where he met a Baghdadi Jewish woman:

During a boisterous Passover Seder with her extended family, Sabiha Ziluf, 75, paused and said softly that she could still see the Baghdad streets of her childhood. “I would love to visit Bab al-Sharji,” she said, referring to an old neighborhood near where her aunt lived. ¹

During the month in which the article was written, Iraq was torn by sectarian and religious violence. And yet, celebrating the holiday of freedom in Israel, Sabiha still longed for another Iraq, that of her childhood. This article follows the lives of Iraqi Jewish children and teenagers in the years 1931-1951. These youngsters, very much like Sabiha, liked Iraq, and especially its capital Baghdad, a great deal. This article suggests that during this period, Jewish children in Iraq identified with Iraqi-Arab culture and with Iraqi patriotism. Living in mixed neighborhood in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews resided and enjoying a new leisurely culture shaped these children’s nonsectarian identity.² The stories of these children, as narrated in their autobiographies and memoirs, challenge the conventional notion that Iraq was an artificial state marked by constant tensions between various ethnic and religious communities. While these tensions certainly existed in Iraq, urbanization, modern education and new approaches to the Arabic languages formed new relationships between children and young adults, on the one hand, and the space in which they lived, on the other.³

In the years 1931–1951, the Iraqi Jewish community thrived. Numbering around 150,000, this primarily urban community figured prominently in Iraq’s culture, literature and economy. Most members of the community resided in Baghdad.⁴ To cultivate a new generation of loyal citizens, the state invested in education. The Iraqi state’s elites made sure that the number of primary schools increased; that the professional training of teachers, bureaucrats, doctors, and engineers improved (in part by sending students and professionals to be educated abroad); and that the Arabic language and Arab and Islamic history were taught in private and public schools. The teaching of Arabic enabled the integration of Iraqi Jews into their state’s middle classes. Now Iraqi Jews were able to read and write in Arabic; others, who were more educated, understood the Quran, and appreciated both classical and modern Arabic literature, and even felt the need to contribute to the sphere of Arabic letters.⁵ The intellectual elite of Iraq, namely its newspaper editors, journalists, short story writers, poets, and publishers included many prominent Jews who wrote in Arabic and about Arab culture and history; these Jews cherished Arabic literature, and contributed much to the Arabic literary scene that came into being in interwar Baghdad.

The rise of Arab nationalism and Iraqi patriotism in Iraq affected Iraqi Jewish children and young adults. Some Iraqi Jews identified with Arab culture to such a degree that they called themselves “Arab-Jews.” Even more Iraqi Jews proclaimed that they were specifically Iraqi patriots. Being an Iraqi patriot meant seeing the
Kurds and the Turkmans, as well as the Arabic-speaking Shi’is, Sunnis, and Christians, as equal citizens in the same state, and acknowledging the validity and contributions of Ottoman, Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish cultures as well as Arab culture to Iraqi society. Jewish children were influenced by these national trends and increasingly spoke of themselves as “Iraqi Jews.”

It is with these historical considerations in mind that I turn to memoirs by Iraqi Jewish authors. I do not deal in this essay with either Iraqi politics or the diplomatic history that led to the Jewish departure from Iraq. Rather, I present a reading of autobiographical texts and place each of them within the unique cultural context of Iraq; I examine the Jewish, Iraqi, and Arab elements in these children’s lives and highlight the significance of neighborly relationships and friendships in fostering consistence and understanding.

ARAB JEWISH CHILDHOOD

The Iraqi Jewish community had a flourishing system of education, which included bilingual private schools and a network of primary, middle and secondary schools. Concurrently, as more Jews moved to mix neighborhoods, Iraqi Jewish children attended public schools in which they studied with Muslim and Christian students. Yet other Jewish children attended foreign private schools run by American administrators (like Baghdad College) or French Christian ones (like the Dominican School in Mosul). The teaching of Arabic became obligatory in the schools of minority communities in Iraq from the mid-1920s, primarily because Iraqi nationalists believed that the Arabic language would form a bond between the nation’s various religious and ethnic communities. From the late 1940s Iraq assumed a pioneering role in the formation of a new poetic language in Arabic and consequently, the works of Iraqi poets were admired across the Arab world. Although the public sphere was divided between a Pan-Arab camp and a Leftist camp that advocated an Iraqi, rather than Pan-Arab, patriotism, all intellectuals, were part of an Arab print market. The Arabic language thus became an important component in narratives of Iraqi-Arab nationalism and a marker of the national commitment of young Iraqis.

Children seemed to have liked their Arabic classes. David Naggar who grew up in the neighborhood of Bab al-Sheikh and studied at a Baghdadi public school where the majority of students were not Jewish, decided to attend the Qur’an classes, although officially he was exempt from participating in them:

I was curious to know what differentiated the Jewish religion, which I have learned for many years, from the Muslim religion. I greatly loved the Arabic language, which is the language of the Qur’an. … My love for the Arabic language probably originated from the fact that I was born and raised in a mixed neighborhood of Jews and Muslims and I used to hear the mu’azzin’s call for the prayer several times a day.
Many of the teenagers grew to love Baghdad, the city in which most Jews resided. Baghdad grew considerably in the first half of the 20th century, partly because of the waves of migration to the city from the north and the south, and partly because of the activities of Iraq’s expanding middle classes. Walking the streets of Baghdad (to school, to a café, to visit family members), inhabiting its public places, and attending its cafés, bookstores, libraries, and cinemas, became a constant motif in accounts of these children, teenagers, and young adults. Gurji Barshan attended the high-school *al-Karakhiyya* in the 1940s, where he was the only Jew in his class. He describes his companionship with his Muslim classmates. Even after their time as students had ended, they met in cafés, in the bus, on the road, or in one of the markets in Baghdad, where they “shook hands, exchanged words ... and in times of trouble ..., they stood by me.”

Attending sports events and participating in athletic competitions likewise served as a vital measure that tied children to the society in which they lived. A star in the school’s volleyball team, Gurji once ate with fellow players who were Shi’is to whom his Jewish identity was unknown. Even after his religious identity was revealed, they did not wash the dishes he used (as obliged by Shi’i dietary law), because, as the one of the physical education teachers explained, “sports make no distinctions between religions.”

Shim’on Ballas is one of Israel’s most respected novelists, whose literary works uncover many aspects of Jewish life in Iraq and Egypt. Born in Baghdad in 1930, Ballas attended the French-Jewish bilingual high-school, the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*. He recalls how the Arabic language itself deeply shaped his everyday experiences in Baghdad:

> For me, reading Arabic was a pleasure; the material available was a lot more interesting, a lot more exciting. When I was a little older, I could read literature that I liked in French. I read world literature in French, I read English literature in French. ... Though my source for world literature was French, I loved Arabic and it was the language I wrote in so the situation was quite different than under more extreme forms of colonial rule.

For Ballas, Arabic and French are not in competition with one another. On the contrary, both shape his cultural life as a young teenager in Baghdad. French is the language of world literature, although English was the language of Iraq’s colonizers in the 1920s. Arabic is a language affiliated with emotions: pleasure and love. Indeed, the philosophical, poetic and literary texts that formed Ballas’s worldview derived from the works of various Arab authors and intellectuals:

> I read more in Arabic translation. When I was twelve or thirteen, I discovered Gibran. I learned whole sections by heart, I would imitate him. I read everything including the books written in English and translated into Arabic. I also read Taha Hussein. ... But at the same time I was very drawn to the newspapers even though they were in a pretty sorry state then in Iraq. In terms of journalism, Iraq was a province of Egypt, whose dailies and weeklies came to us with their literary supplements and higher standards. I subscribed through one of the newsdealers. We had a deal where I would go twice a day to take the newspapers and magazines—since I didn’t have enough money to buy them all—and read them quickly before bringing them back so he could resell them at a discount. From that I went on to
more serious literature. My French had gotten better, so I could read more complex works. But Arabic was the only language in which reading was a real pleasure. For those of my generation, the state of modern Arabic prose—in terms of the novel and short story forms—was still in gestation. I think only the generation younger than me grew up on authentic Arabic literature. We didn't have that experience, we grew up much more on translated literature, there was always this orientation toward the West, that's where the influences were supposed to come from. 14

For Jewish teenagers like Ballas, then, Arabic represented a complex trans-regional world, which was both Iraqi and Arab. The Arabic literature he admired included Arabic literary luminaires such as the Lebanese romantic writer Gibran Khalil Gibran, and the Egyptian novelist, literary scholar, and theoretician Taha Hussein. 15 Most importantly, Arabic, again treasured as a language associated with love, was mediated to teenagers through a variety of Iraqi commercial means, like newspapers, novels, and magazines, all sold in Baghdadi streets, libraries and bookstores. Furthermore, Arabic was connected to daily leisure practices, as Ballas explains:

I used to see several movies a day, going from cinema to cinema. I saw anything that came; inevitably this meant American films from Hollywood. I went to Arabic movies more for the music. There was a time when I wanted to be an actor. There was an Egyptian actor that I worshipped, Yusuf Wahbi, very theatrical, very exaggerated in his roles, and I would try to imitate him. I even signed up with a group of theater enthusiasts that started in Baghdad then, I must have been fourteen. 16

Here once more, Arabic is associated with a larger world of Egyptian films, of Iraqi music, and of theatrical groups performing in Baghdad. None of these forms of entertainment is particularly Jewish in its orientation, and yet it is the Arabic language taught in Ballas's Jewish-French school that enables him, as a Jew, to be a part of the Baghdadi public sphere. Arabic, additionally, is associated with the realm of the intimate, with the private domain of the home, and with cherished friendships with other students:

In the Alliance I wrote short stories which I still didn't show anyone, but I had two friends who also loved writing and we would discuss things together. My first novel was a detective story set in Baghdad. Then we lived in the old city of Baghdad in a small house and in the evenings I used to go out to the cafés and sit in a corner and write. That's where I wrote the novel. I also kept a diary which I would conclude every year with a notebook of memories so that I could assess what I had gone through in the previous year, judging it from more of a distance. 17

The city of Baghdad plays a part in the life of the Baghdadi Jewish teenagers like Ballas. It is a set of his imaginary novel, and it provides him with the coffee-shops in which he writes the novel about his beloved city. Arabic is likewise an intimate language with which he discusses his inner-thoughts and secrets with his friends, and in which he expresses his most personal desires and hopes in the form of a diary.

While these experiences were mostly those of young men, women, too, experienced the city and its language. As more Jewish girls attended primary, middle, and high schools, they too, although in a limited
fashion, enjoyed the city and its Arab culture. Shoshana Levy, although residing in a strictly Jewish alley, came to appreciate Baghdad. Here is how Shoshana depicts the relationship between herself, her father, and her city:

My father had a weekly practice: to go on a tour, by foot, every Sabbath, in the afternoon. I, and my brother Ephraim, accompanied him. With time, my other brother, Joseph, born in 1945, joined as well. ... Along the way we would pass different stores whose owners knew my father from his workplace; my father would greet them al-Salam ‘Alaykum, Peace be upon you, and, as they exchanged greetings, the owners would give us, the little ones, ice cream and candies. On al-Rashid street there was a big and luxurious hotel. We used to enter it, and gaze at a small artificial pond with fish and a fountain located in the hotel’s foyer. These were colorful golden fish and we, the children, loved to watch them. Our final station was Ghazi cinema, to watch a movie. ... Since my father was religious, he did not carry money in his pocket on the Sabbath, and therefore, when leaving the cinema, he would go to a liquor store owned by a Jew ... and borrow money from him for the bus fare back home. In the summers, the tours would continue on the banks of the Tigris. This was truly a wonderful journey. Along the banks were fishermen who lit fires. ... It was a splendid sight: the maddening smells were in the air; in the background the quiet sound of the wide river was heard, and the lights of the fires and the lamps of the coffeehouses were seen in its waters. When I learned to read Arabic, my father would stop by the signs and ask me to read them: this way my reading of Arabic improved.

With her father, Shoshana experiences the city. She gets to know its people; not only the bourgeois man and women within her own family but Baghdad’s fishermen and vendors. Baghdad represents to her elements of modernity like flashy big hotels, the cinema, the street signs, and the new cafés; these elements, however, are intertwined into more traditional forms of trade and consumption. It is also an Arabic town; the city becomes her school, as she learns to read street signs and posters. School, family and city thus become entangled.

The love of Arabic so keenly felt by children and young adults was also connected to secularism and secularization processes. The decline in the role of religion in public Jewish life had to do with the fact that the social capital that came with a religious education was quite limited. Conversely, the knowledge of Arabic, a foreign language, a high school diploma, and a university degree were important tools of social mobility. Jews had access to these, because their education system was initially bi- and trilingual; they acquired French and English in the Alliance school (established in 1864), and English in the Jewish high-school Shamash (established 1928). These language skills came in very handy during the British mandate during the 1920s and after the attainment of Iraqi independence. It allowed Jews to work as clerks and businessmen, to find positions with banks, the Basran port authority, and the railway company, and to provide services needed by the growing middle classes in Baghdad. For children and young adults who belonged to the Baghdadi middle and upper classes, this type of education changed their relationship to the Jewish faith itself. Sasson Somekh (born 1933; today a noted professor of modern Arabic literature) grew up in a posh Jewish neighborhood of Bustan al-Khass in Baghdad and attended the Shamash high school. Somekh’s family members went to synagogue on the holidays, yet their identity as Jews manifested itself linguistically, that is, belonging to a multilingual elite
(speaking the Baghdadi Jewish dialect of Arabic, French and English), and socio-culturally, that is, living in an affluent neighborhood in which many Jews lived, socializing with mostly Iraqi Jews, and sending their children to Jewish schools. 21 The family was quite westernized, as seen in the clothes family members wear in photos that appear in Somekh’s autobiography, and in the mother’s reading preferences (mostly English and French magazines). Like his parents, and even more than them, Somekh’s religiosity was also a matter of ambivalence. In fact, he found little use for the Bible classes taught in his school:

At the Jewish Shammash high school we had an hour a week of Bible and Judaism. The teacher, Rabbi Dori, was modern in his outlook, and he did not turn up his nose at students like me, who did not know the basics of the Hebrew language. Therefore, he would excuse me from the part of the lesson devoted to reading the Hebrew Bible, and include me in the half-hour devoted to “religion,” during which he told many stories from the Bible and from the Second Temple period. 22

While Somekh’s autobiography details at great length his love of Arabic, his friendships with Arab poets and writers, and his writing poetry and prose in Arabic, Hebrew seems to be relegated to the margins of his cultural universe. Whereas other Jewish teenagers report in their memoirs about celebrating the Jewish holidays, keeping strict kashrut laws, and attending synagogues on Sabbaths and holidays, Somekh’s relationship to his faith is far more complex. He criticized a Jewish heroine like Hannah, a mother who was willing to sacrifice the lives of her children for the sake of kashrut laws, 23 and questioned the miracles of the Bible, which seemed to him to belong to the realm of science fiction. His upbringing also created rifts between him and other Jews:

Our school took pride in its high level of instruction in the natural sciences, and I remember arguing with a classmate who came from a somewhat religious family and excelled in the study of science. I persisted doggedly in my heretical arguments. On one occasion, his face expressed increasing consternation, and I felt that he was torn between two conflicting “narratives,” both of which he fully believed. I, however, was exempt from this personality split and so, it seems to me, were most of my classmates. 24

Being modern in this sense means challenging fellow Jewish teenagers who were more traditional than he was, in order to underscore his modern education and outlook. In fact, the only way he can make sense of the holy text of his own Jewish faith is through Arabic:

At some stage, I got hold of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic that had been done in the nineteenth century by American missionaries in Beirut. It included, of course, the New Testament. I began to read the Bible stories in sequence. The stories of Genesis captivated me, and I was also attracted by the charms of the Book of Ruth and the angry exhortations of the Prophets. However, the poetic books of the Bible, which were later to become my great love, did not make a very great impression on me at this stage. … I also bought the English version of the Bible, the King James version, which has served as a mainspring for the English language over centuries. The Song of Songs in the English version was astonishingly beautiful. 25
The translation of the Bible into Arabic by American missionaries was considered a major moment in the history of the Arabic cultural and literary revival movement of the late 19th century and early 20th century, a movement known as the \textit{nahda}. Sasson Somekh himself would write about this as a grownup, when he became professor of modern Arabic literature. As a child, however, he needed the two languages acquired in his Jewish high school, Arabic and English, in order to make sense of, and fall in love with, the Holy Books of the Jewish faith.\footnote{For Sasson Somekh, Shim'on Ballas, Shoshana Levy, and many other teens, Arabic became a language connected to both the most public aspects of their lives, to their city, with its cafés, cinemas, and schools, and the most private realms of their existence: their diaries, their faith, and their intimate relationships with parents and dear friends. It is thus no wonder that when Somekh was about to leave Baghdad for Israel, at the age of seventeen, he went to visit two Arab friends to say farewell:}

At the end of the evening, after most of those around the table had gone their way, two of my closest friends remained: the poets Rashid Yassin and Abdul-Razzaq Abdul-Wahad. I had already spoken to both of them a number of times about my approaching emigration. All that was left to do that evening was to bid goodbye, to promise that we would never forget our friendship, and for me to swear that I would remain loyal to Arabic literature. I took that oath, and I believe I have remained true to it.\footnote{ENDANGERED CHILDHOODS
The love affair between Baghdadi children and their city, their friendships with Muslims and Christians, and their way of life were all challenged starting in 1939. Part of the nationalistic Arab Iraqi elites sought to cooperate with Germany, as an enemy of England. In April and May of 1941, Iraq experienced a military coup, led by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. The British responded by sending troops to Iraq, and reoccupying the country (as they had done in World War I). When the British forces were about to enter Baghdad (on the first and second of June), with the defeat of Rashid Ali's forces, a terrible slaughter against the Jews of Iraq took place. A mob of discharged soldiers, military youth groups, corrupt policeman, and ordinary city dwellers -- and on the second day, poor robbers and looters -- took the lives of at least 179 Jews. The British forces could have entered the city earlier and saved the Jews but they decided to not get involved.\footnote{The Farhud is rooted in the memories of Iraqi children and young adults. They disclose a sense of betrayal during the two months of the coup, as their friends and neighbors began suspecting them. An account from Basra reveals how secluded Jewish teens were at this point, even in their mixed schools during the months of the coup: The children were physically in school ..., but there was not any learning of essence. A wave of nationalism took over all reason; the radio declared the victories against the British, using wild exaggerations. In the fourth and fifth classes in high-school, students demanded to be enlisted in the army and fight the colonizers. The blackboards were filled with letters dispatched to the authorities from the students, written in a passionate style, full of revolutionary citations of nationalist poets. Instead of [attending] classes students prepared fervent speeches in order to encourage the revolt and}
in adulation of its leaders. Even David was tempted to write such a poem in praise of freedom, but he did not dare reading it in class. The sentiments of nationalism encouraged feelings of exaltation ... and the willingness for sacrifice.30

Moreover, in their memoirs, Iraqi Jews recount the fears they sensed as children during the Farhud itself, when the rioters approached their homes. Shmu’el Moreh (then Sami Mu’allim) captures this sense of horror:

My father’s face became very serious and worried. He closed the door quickly and ordered his six children with a severe voice to help him fortify the door with heavy furniture. He asked my elder brother to bring the revolver from its secret pit under the tiles of the bathroom, to load it and bring it to him. He ordered the rest of his younger children to collect bricks, iron bars and objects and to take them to the roof, to defend ourselves in case we were attacked. We were all tense and frightened at the news that some Jews were massacred in the Old Quarter of Baghdad. In the evening we noticed heavy smoke and heard shots coming from that direction. ... We were terrified. We children couldn’t stop our teeth from chattering, my mother and my two sisters were ordered to read a chapter of the Psalms asking God to save my uncle’s family of four daughters and one son. Soon more fires and heavy smoke were seen; the firing of heavy machine guns and bullets was followed by the terrifying cries of desperate voices. Calls for help and mercy were heard from the faraway Jewish houses of the Old City. We were unable to sleep all night.31

Jewish teenagers and children were also amongst the victims of the Farhud, especially in the poor Jewish neighborhoods. As Sami Mu’allim/Shmu’el Moreh recounts:

One of our relatives told us how her 12-year-old son was shot by a policeman when trying to escape to the next roof. ... "When my son fell by the bullet in his thigh, I took him in my bosom, trying to bind his wound in vain and ease his horror. He was bleeding heavily. He looked at me ‘with his big blue eyes’ screaming horrifying screams, asking for help. But nobody could help. Bullets were whistling above our heads and all around. Screaming, hungry and wounded men and women begged us for help, and anyone who dared go down to the streets would be killed by the maddened mob. My son was bleeding in my arms a slow, horrible death. Even God did not have mercy upon us, and he died, he died. ... He died upon my breast, from where I fed him when he was a child!"32"

Even after the Farhud ended children felt betrayed. Sha’ul Menashe describes his experiences after the Farhud in Basra, where Jewish property was looted a month prior to the Farhud in Baghdad but no murders took place. A month after the riots, says Sha’ul,

Some people who obtained merchandise looted (from Jews) sat on the market’s floors by the market’s stands, selling the merchandise very cheaply. Hamza, who was my English teacher in the Christian school Caldan, was a textile-merchant. He was ashamed of what had happened and covered his face.33

While in accounts of other Jewish teenagers their Arab teachers are presented as the mediators to Arab culture, as beloved mentors, and even as friends, here, the teacher is presented as a traitor since he goes to buy merchandise looted from Jews. In this description, the teacher and the student change roles; it is the teacher
who tries to avoid the student’s accusing gaze. The teacher is identified with the majority community, yet precisely because he feels that this community has wronged the Jews, he seeks to hide from his students.

However, during the Farhud, the friendships Jews had with their neighbors saved many lives. Dozens of testimonies recount the same tale: Muslims who knew Jewish children from their school days, teachers, neighbors, friends and acquaintances all came to rescue their Jewish friends and neighbors; many, in fact, risked their own lives while doing so. Here again is Sami Mu'allim’s family

The next day, our gardener, the milkman, Abu 'Alwan, knocked at our door; I went to the window to see who was knocking. Abu 'Alwan was standing at our threshold. He took a long, sharp knife out of his clothing and told me, "Sami, look, tell your father that I am guarding you and will defend you! Don’t be afraid. Anyone who would try to attack you will be slaughtered with this knife!" I thanked him and ran to tell my family of Abu 'Alwan’s noble gesture and bravery. 34

Steve Acre, a young child who lived with his widowed mother and eight siblings in a house owned by a Muslim, climbed a palm tree in the courtyard where he lived when the violence began. He remembers the shouts calling to kill the Jews, but he also recalls that from the tree he could see their Muslim landlord sitting in front of the house. "When the mob came he talked to them. He told them that we are orphans who took refuge in his house and they cannot touch us. If they want us they have to kill him.” 35 The perpetrators retreated. The roles of Muslims as constituting an alternative family to orphaned Jewish children, and the celebration of the fact that these Muslims were willing to endanger their relationship with their own family members in order to protect fellow Jews, reappear in several accounts of Jews who were children and teenagers at the time, as this testimony relates:

My father returned that day from the market, told us about the terrible killing happening throughout the city in the Jewish neighborhoods, and said we must defend ourselves. We, who lived in the heart of the Muslim Arab neighborhood, climbed up on the roof and cried out for help. The aid came from our Muslim neighbor. With his encouragement, we jumped from our roof to his. As this was happening, the neighbor threatened his mother with a gun that if she will turn us in instead of helping, he will shoot her. We stayed at the neighbor’s house for two days of horror and he protected us and provided us with water and food until the rage faded away. Our house was pillaged but we were saved. 36

Perhaps the most telling is the story of a Jewish teenager called Salim. His family lived in the Baghdadi neighborhood of Mahdaiyya. When the riots began, the family members rushed to their richest neighbor, Haj Musa, who employed many of his neighborhood’s dwellers, including the Jews, in his construction projects. Haj Musa’s sons had befriended Salim and his brother Fu’ad, and consequently bonds of friendship tied the two families. During the Farhud, Salim’s family, as well as other Jewish families in the neighborhood, jumped from roof to roof until they reached Haj Musa’s home. When they arrived to this safe heaven, Salim’s family realized that in their haste to escape, they left their six-months-old baby, Farouk, in their home. Haj Musa’s wife told her elder son, Ja’far, to accompany Salim, and to look for the baby. When Ja’far found out that the looters were gone,
the two friends entered the house, found the baby, and brought him back to the Jewish family taking shelter at Haj Musa’s home. Ja’far and Salim, encouraged by Haj Musa’s wife, then toured Baghdad and rescued all the members of the Jewish family, scattered across Baghdad; all were brought to Haj Musa’s home. Two armed men Haj Musa sent with Salim and Ja’far ensured that the two friends, the Jew and the Muslim, would not be hurt by the angry mob as they walked the street of violence-stricken Baghdad. Here, perhaps most revealingly, relationships between two young adults appeared to have been essential for the survival of the Jewish family during these appalling urban riots. The two teenagers became friends in a social environment in which Muslims and Jews studied, worked, and lived together. The belief of the noble Muslim couple that Jews should be protected saved their lives. Companionship between the teens, subsequent camaraderie between adults, and the willingness of Muslims to risk their lives proved invaluable under these very harsh circumstances.

INDIVIDUAL FRIENDSHIPS: CROSSING SECTARIAN BOUNDARIES

Individual friendships between students were a source of protection to Jewish students. In their memoirs, Jewish children and teenagers report on how Muslim friends of theirs protected them when they were wrongly accused of being Zionists; how they joined religious ceremonies of students from other religions; and how they learned to know more about the ethno-religious makeup of Iraq through such friendships. One such example is the relationship forged between Emile Murad, a Jewish student, and his Kurdish friend, Baban ‘Ali Baban. Both attended the American School for Boys; established in 1924, this elite school trained Iraq’s finest.

Emile notes that his friendship with this Kurdish student, as well as his warm relationships with another student, an Armenian, pushed him to realize that other minorities, not just his own religious group, faced great difficulties and challenge in modern Iraq and in the Middle East more broadly. Indeed, friendships between a Kurdish teen and his Arabized Jewish schoolmate were not as simple as one might imagine. The interwar period was characterized by constant tensions between the Baghdadi and Northern regions, as the Baghdadi center, with British support, attempted to assume control over the North (especially after the Frontier Treaty with Turkey, 1926), based on the assumption that both regions belonged to the same nation-state. Tribal revolts (against landlords, land leasers, and state authority) by Kurdish tribes took place in all regions throughout the period, and Kurdish demands for autonomy typified their interaction with the state. During this period, the North emerged as a unique geographical unit, comprising a sizable Kurdish population (the majority) and Turkish-speaking populations, as well as Christians and Jews. It was also characterized by a mixture of languages, such as Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, and various dialects of Aramaic spoken by the Christians and the Jews. At the same time, migration to Baghdad, the adoption of the Arabic language by those who either studied or settled in the capital, and the need to work with the Sunni Arab elites of the state, created new ties between Northern Iraq and the Baghdadi center.
In his memoir, Emile recalls how he and his friend grew to like each other because of the school setting; the two studied together, interacted with the same students, and worked on their homework together. Yet the friendship was solidified even further when Baban ‘Ali invites Emile, as well as other friends from their school, to visit his hometown of Rawanduz (Rowanduz, or Rwandz), a city in the Erbil province, located close to the borders with Iran and Turkey, and in the family household in Sulimaniya. While Iraqi students went on numerous school trips and fieldtrips, be they historical explorations of the city of Nineveh, trips of students from the provinces to the capital of Baghdad, or tours of the holy sites, such as Jewish students traveling to Chifel where the Prophet Ezekiel is buried, here the trip has more meaningful meanings, as it celebrates the companionships between schoolmates.

The travel to the North, however, accentuated how Emile was a Baghdadi whose culture was entirely Arab-Jewish. Emile depicts the home of his friend in Sulimaniya as a paradise of sorts; the green colors typical of the wondrous landscape, the lively market, the old family house, and the dinner served to him, gave Emile the impression that “Heaven (gan eden) is within our reach!” The space of the North, nonetheless, also seems to have preserved some primordial qualities, as Emile depicts elements of nomadic and rural life he witnesses in the North. Moreover, Emile inspects the ethnically different Kurdish population; he emphasizes on a number of occasions the differences between the dark, tall men, and the pale, white, blue-eyed Kurdish women; in particular when he applauds the beauty the girls of the Baban family. Baban ‘Ali’s sister, for example, is described as a gorgeous young woman; “her eyes are lovely, her hair long, ... in her rural dress, she looked like a Russian aristocrat from the Czarist era.”

While Emile tends to both romanticize and idealize the family of his Kurdish friend, it seems that the differences he identifies between the people of the Iraqi center, on the one hand, and the North, on the other, are based on education and the ability to speak Arabic. Through Baban ‘Ali’s connections, Emile meets many Jews from Kurdistan, whom he had never met before. The Jewish population of the North included the Arabized Jewish community of Mosul, the Turkified communities in Kirkuk and Sulimaniya, and the bilingual Kurdish-Aramaic communities in provincial towns such as Khanaqin, Zacho, Dahuk, and Erbil (many Jews in these towns spoke Arabic as well). There were also rural Jews in the hinterlands of each city and town, who mostly spoke Kurdish and Aramaic. The stability of Jewish communities often relied on collaboration with local Kurdish tribal elites. Because their cultural practices, such as their dress codes and food, resembled those of their Kurdish neighbors, with whom they lived and traded, many Jews who lived in Northern Iraq were identified as “Kurdish Jews” by European travelers, by south-central Iraqi Jews, and often by themselves. These Jews, however, differed considerably from Baghdadi Jews like Emile who spoke Arabic; as we have seen, the latter were more urbanized and educated, and their Westernized elites, especially those of Baghdad, often employed Jews who migrated from the North to Baghdad as servants, housekeepers, and porters.
Kurdish Jews in the North he cannot talk to them, since they speak a dialect of Aramaic and “my language was Baghdadi Arabic”. Thus it is easier to him to speak with his dear friend Baban ‘Ali, who went through the same processes of socialization in Baghdad, than with fellow Kurdish Jews. When he visits the Jewish Kurdish village of Sandur, for example, he is describes, with much wonder, the Kurdish Jews who arm themselves every Shavu’ot. They seem no less strange to him than the Kurdish Muslims.

When Emile visits his friend Baban ‘Ali in the North for the second time, he is accompanied by another Jewish friend, Rahamim. All are fourteen years old at the time. They first arrive to Mosul and visit the ancient site of Nineveh. Emile notices that in Nineveh, the Jews and the Turkmans dress in the same fashion. They spend many days with Baban ‘Ali, and learn to admire his grandfather, who resembles, in Emile’s narration, a character from the Arabian nights. They hear from the grandfather fascinating tales about the Turks, the Mongols, and especially about the Kurdish leader Mula Mustafa Barazani, narratives that reminded the friends of stories from the Wild West. It could be assumed that the stories the Jewish friends heard from the grandfather, whom they both admire and Orientalize, were very different than the national narratives they have heard from their Arab history teachers in their school. And yet it is the relationship forged in the Baghdadi school that allowed the friends to discover Northern Iraq and its cultures. The friends then travel with Baban ‘Ali from Mosul to other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan:

We were surprised by the essential change in climate, weather, the lifestyle of the people, and their bizarre garbs. You had the impression as if you left the realm of Iraq and moved to another country, with another people, speaking a different tongue.

Depicting the regions around Sulimaniya, Kirkuk and Erbil, Emile writes:

Civilization has yet to reach these parts, and I had to adjust myself to primitive conditions. Baban ‘Ali prepared me to all of that, and was not at all ashamed of this fact. On the contrary, he kept talking about the beautiful scenery, the dances, the ways of life, all the magnificent and enchanting things he grew up with. In my enthusiasm, I wrote a poem [on what I have seen] and published it in the beginning of the year in the school’s bulletin. Baban ‘Ali was proud of me and of his country.

The travel account mirrors the dissimilarities between the two regions and between the two friends. Emile, the Baghdadi child, recognizes the fact that Northern Iraq is officially part of the state, yet everything about the region, geographically, physically, and climatically appears different to him; and the differences between the two regions are constructed in terms of primitiveness and civilization. The tours to his friend’s homeland, however, and Baban ‘Ali’s pride in his birthplace, are commemorated through a poem, written in an institution in the center of the country (a Baghdadi school), in the language of the center (I assume the poem was written in either Arabic or English, given that those were the languages of instruction in the American School for Boys), and in a newspaper read by other Baghdadi students.
Emile's third visit to his friend evokes again the binary distinction between civilization and plainness. Emile feels that unlike in the North, in Baghdad, "one could purchase appliances like in other European cities, such as a transistor, a modern watch, an electronic shaving machine, and so on." 49 When in the North, Baban 'Ali himself uses a typewriter to write letters his Baghdadi schoolmates, in which he promises to visit Emile "in the bustling modern city, the city of lights, in Baghdad, which is not at all like the cities of the distant North." 50 To Emile and to Baban 'Ali, then, Baghdad is not only a city representing Arabness, but also a modern city, with its modern appliances; it is a city of lights (usually a title affiliated with Paris) and of education; Kurdistan, in contrast, is its Other. To further emphasize that the North was to a Baghdadi student a Wild West of sorts, Emile recalls that he had learned to ride horses in this region. He nonetheless celebrates the kindness of his Kurdish hosts; "they are hospitable, as the Arabs, and influenced by the stories of Hatim al-Ta'i who was known for his hospitality and love of his guests." Hatim al-Ta'i is a pre-Islamic Arab hero, who was famous for doing everything in his power for his guests, including slaughtering his beloved horse for them. The reference to Hatim exposes the diverse cultural components of Emile's upbringing: his Baghdadi modern surrounding causes him to compare the people of the North to those who lived in the Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic Arabia), and the historical metaphor he evokes relies yet again on Arab education, which familiarized a Jew with the Arabic literary pantheon. The meeting with the Kurdish Jews shocks him and his Jewish friends once more:

We met a Jewish peddler by the name of Baba Michah, who was sixty years old. He spent all his life in Zacho, and has never visited Baghdad. Our dress and our speech were so different to him that he could not possibly believe that we were Jews. When I read to him the verse "Shema' Yisra'el"51 in my accent, he also refused to believe in my Jewishness. ... Finally, we managed to prove to him that we were Jewish, and he invited us to his home. 52

Although Baba Michah is a Jew, the Jewish friends need the mediation of a Muslim Kurd to speak to him. Even the Arabic both speak is accented in different manners. Their Hebrew is incomprehensible to Baba Michah; they speak Hebrew with a Baghdadi Arabic accent, while he speaks it with an accent of a man whose native tongues are Aramaic and Kurdish. Baban 'Ali, moreover, teaches Emile much about the differences between the two cultures and about the Jews of the North.

In 1945 things change; Baban 'Ali is no longer in Baghdad since the relationships between Baghdad and the North deteriorate quickly. Emile fears for his friends; "the news from the distant North, the wild North, had reached my ears in many forms and channels." 53 Emile sends succinct letters to his friend (fearing government supervision). The next time he hears from him, both graduate from high school in different parts of the country, and Baban 'Ali invites Emile to his wedding, as he is about to wed the widow of his brother, Jamal, who was killed in the wars with the state. Emile, however, cannot travel, because of the difficult conditions. Both have
now turned adults, at least in their family's eyes; adulthood means separation and putting an end to this warm relationship.

The friendship between these students is important. It accentuates the significance of Arabic as a communication tool between children of various ethnicities. Concurrently, however, it also shows that while the education system was effective in creating bonds of affinity and solidarity between young adults and children, these bonds did not obliterate the differences between various groups in the state. Finally it demonstrates that religion was not the most important component in Emile's identity. To him, Kurdish Jews, who spoke Aramaic and lived in the Wild West (or rather the Wild North), were as exotic and mysterious as the other dwellers of the region; they did not go through his socialization and urbanization processes and thus seemed much stranger than his dear schoolmate, Baban 'Ali. After 1945, and indeed after 1948, these relationships between Jews, Arabs, and Kurds will be difficult to maintain.

CONCLUSIONS

We live today in a highly sectarian Middle East. It is very difficult for us to imagine friendships between Jews and Muslims, Christians and Muslims, or even Sunnis and Shiites. We should not, however, project the realities we see today onto the Iraqi, and indeed, the Middle Eastern and Islamic, pasts. In fact, there is something incredibly consoling in knowing that shared education, as well common reading habits and leisure practices, and especially the urban setting of modern Baghdad, created shared bonds between various children. The autobiographies of Iraqi Jews reveal the efficacy of an education system in which Jews studied Arabic and Arab and Islamic history. Because of their education, Jewish students grew to love Arabic and enjoyed the fruits of the Iraqi and Arab print markets; they treasured the imaginary world offered to them by Arabic novels, films, theatrical performances, and by the city of Baghdad itself. Moreover, they relished the opportunity to befriend Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Kurds. The most astonishing moment of this complex relationship occurred during the Farhud when, faced with horrific sectarian urban violence, the Muslim dwellers of the city risked their lives to protect their Jewish neighbors. And while students came from different backgrounds, and while a family of a Kurdish student might seemed exotic and primitive to a young Baghdad Jewish urbanite, they could still converse, find things in common with one another, and enjoy their friendships and entangled histories.
For Iraq’s history in this period, see:


On the mandate years, see:


On Shi‘i-Sunni relationship, see:


On the effects on urbanization and shared socialization on Jewish life, see:


On Iraqi Jewish life, see:


On the rise of the Baghdadi middle classes and their national aspirations, see:


On the political meanings of Arab Jewish identity, see:


On Jewish education in Iraq, see:


Yosef Me’ir, *Hitpathut tarbutit hevratit shel yehudey ’iraq me’az 1830 ve ’ad yemeynu* (“Cultural and social developments amongst Iraqi Jews since 1830 until the present”). Tel Aviv: Naharayim, 1989.


On Arabic, the role of Arabic in Iraqi national life, and Pan Arabism in Iraq, see:


Sati’ al-Husri, *Abhath mukhtara fl’iq qawmiyya al-‘Arabiyya* (“Selected studies in Arab nationalism”). Beirut:


On the effects on the conflict in Palestine on Arab nationalist thinking at the time, see:


Barshan, 80-81.

For Ballas’s autobiography, see:


Other students, Muslims, Jewish and Christians, note the immense impact Egyptian cultural products had on their lives. For more on these relationships, see:


On Jewish women in Baghdad, see:


Sha’ul Sehayek, “Changes in the Social Status of Urban Jewish Women in Iraq as the Nineteenth Century

19 Shoshana explains in the text that the cinema owner knew her father and thus they did not have to pay.


21 On debates regarding secularism, the position of the chief rabbi in Iraq, and religiosity in the community, see:


23 He refers in the autobiography to "the woman with her seven sons", a Jewish mother whose martyrdom tale is narrated in the Book of Maccabees and in other Jewish sources, such as the Talmud. She is sometimes identified as Hannah (although the names Miriam and Solomonia are also mentioned. According to Maccabees 2:8 Antiochus IV ordered the mother and her children to eat pork, and upon their refusal, he tortured and killed the sons one after the other.


25 Somekh, *ibid*.


27 Somekh, *ibid*.


Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*.


https://972mag.com/farhud-1941-iraqi-jews-remember-a-massacre/91738/


Esther Me’ir-Glitsenshtain, ”Ha-Pera’ot bi-yehudey Baghdad” (The Riots against Baghdadi Jews), Pe’amim 8 (1981), 21-3.


Shemu’l Aviezar, Mey Ha-Veradim (“The Rose waters”). Tel Aviv: Gevanim, 1996, 38. (The text is written in the third person, and is an autobiographical novel based on the author’s experiences in Iraq.)

http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2014/05/a-schoolboys-vivid-memories-of-farhud.html

http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2014/05/a-schoolboys-vivid-memories-of-farhud.html

Quoted in David Sagiv, op. cit., 109.

http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2014/05/a-schoolboys-vivid-memories-of-farhud.html


http://972mag.com/farhud-1941-iraqi-jews-remember-a-massacre/91738/

http://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-545197


Emile Murad, Yedidi me-Kurdistan. Tel Aviv, Yesod, 1977, 19.

Murad, Yedidi, 34.

Murad, Yedidi, 38.

Murad, Yedidi, 19.

“In 1919 Iraqi Jews numbered 87,488 in a population of 2.8 million: 50,000 lived in Baghdad and 14,000 in the North. By the end of 1949, a British account estimated the number of Jews at 180,000: 90,000 lived in Baghdad, 30,000 lived in other towns, and 60,000 were listed as rural Jews. An Alliance official reported that the number of Jews in the vilayet of Mosul was 15,000 in the early 20th century: Mosul had 3500 Jews, Kirkuk, 2,800, Zacho, 2400, Irbil, 1800, and Sulimaniya, 1500. Kirkuk had a famous Jewish community, with important rabbis since the 18th century; in 1888, the city had 1200 Jews; the number rose to 1500 in 1931.”
Jews living in villages lived in Muslim villages or in villages that were exclusively populated by Jews. Halabja had about 400 Jews (in 1930)." Quoted from Orit Bashkin, "Jews in an imperial pocket." op. cit.


45 Murad, Yedidi, 22.

46 Murad, Yedidi, 30.

47 Murad, Yedidi, 30.

48 Murad, Yedidi, 31.

49 Murad, Yedidi, 32.

50 Murad, Yedidi, 33.

51 Emile Murad refers to the prayer Shema' Yisra'el, meaning "Hear O Israel." It refers to the first two words from the morning and evening services, evoking the verse from the Torah: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is out God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Jews say the Shema' also in times of troubles and as their last word.

52 Murad, Yedidi, 39.

53 Murad, Yedidi, 58.
Averroës is the Latin name of ibn Rushd, the 12th century Andalusian polymath whose philosophical works integrated Islamic traditions with Ancient Greek thought. Over subsequent centuries, his commentaries on Plato and Aristotle came to influence Jewish and Christian thinkers throughout Europe, among them Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and Baruch Spinoza. The choice of Averroës as the name for the Lecture Series is significant because it points to a history of Cordoba’s Jewish-Muslim relations and the connections between Averroës and Maimonides, both of whom were committed to intellectual exchange and communal life across religious boundaries.

The Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES), founded in 1957, is one of the earliest research centers at a U.S. university promoting interdisciplinary studies of the Middle East and the Islamic World. Over the decades, the Center has attracted an outstanding faculty and developed a world-class multi-lingual library collection for Middle East research. We offer an intellectual home for scholars from all over California, along with independent scholars from around the world who contribute to our lively programs of colloquia, lectures, conferences, teacher workshops, and public events.

The Series. Underwritten by a generous anonymous donor, this lecture series focuses on Jewish communities living in Muslim lands prior to the 20th century. In addition to shedding light on this often-neglected history, the lectures will serve an important outreach role to local community colleges and high schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan region, inviting students interested in the topic to attend the discussions.

Organized by the Center for Near Eastern Studies, the Averroës Lecture Series is cosponsored by UCLA’s Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies and Center for the Study of Religion. The program offers quarterly lectures over two years by experts from around the world, publishes an occasional paper series, and culminates in a major conference featuring young scholars engaged in cutting-edge research on the topic.

The series builds on UCLA’s strength in having a large number of faculty across disciplines whose research touches on this topic, as well as a number of research centers interested in a series exploring the experiences and legacies of Jewish communities in the Muslim world.

CNES is extremely grateful for the vision, innovation and generosity of this donor whose valuable contribution has enabled us to expand programming at the Center.