

## Arabized Jews in Modern Times between Interpellation and Exclusion

In modern times, the process of Arabization of the Iraqi-Jewish intellectual elite's canonized culture could be considered to be unique among all other Jewish communities in the Middle East. However, based on my previous studies on the history and culture of Iraqi Jews and a close look at the subjectivities and singularities of about 120 Iraqi Jews,<sup>151</sup> I believe that there is, nevertheless, a solid basis for the hypothesis that similar processes have also occurred among intellectuals from other communities of Arabized Jews, albeit in different rhythms and scales. The similarity of these processes, as I will attempt to show, has mainly to do with the double exclusion most Arabized Jews experienced both in their mother countries and in Israel.

Iraqi Jews trace their uninterrupted domicile as an indigenous population in the Land of the Two Rivers back to the Babylonian Exile, which took place two-and-a-half millennia ago. During the first half of the twentieth century, in the newly formed Iraqi nation-state with its new vision, Iraqi Jews developed a vision of their own—a sort of Andalusian dream for integration into the new Iraqi nation-state. It was a vision that had its roots in the previous century in the atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance, especially under the governance of Midhat Pasha, Governor of Baghdad from 1869 to 1872 and leading advocate of the Tanzimat reforms. Even before these reforms, minorities in Baghdad, including the Jews, had enjoyed a rare period of tolerance.<sup>152</sup> In 1846, Rabbi Israel-Joseph Benjamin II had said that “nowhere else as in Baghdad have I found my coreligionists so completely free of that black anxiety, of that somber

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151 See Appendix 1: Iraqi-Jewish Intellectuals, Writers, and Artists. Due to a lack of space, it is impossible in the present study to delve in detail into each of those subjectivities, but the reader is encouraged to use my studies on Arabized Jews listed in the References, including the index of my 2005 Hebrew book on the culture of the Iraqi Jews (*Arviyut, Yahadut, Tziyonut: Ma'avak Zehuyot ba-Yetzira shel Yehude Iraq* [Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Struggle of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews]), in order to find the necessary material.

152 Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 257 and the references in n. 184.

and taciturn mood that is the fruit of intolerance and persecution.”<sup>153</sup> The reasons and circumstances which paved the way for Iraqi Jews in modern times to be much more open than other Arabized Jews to participation in the wider canonical culture of the local society await further research. We know, however, that since the early Islamic era Jews in territories that would later be part of Iraq took part in Arab multicultural gatherings. Referring to the events of the year 156H (772/773 A.D.),<sup>154</sup> one text reads as follows:

Khalaf ibn al-Muthannā related: “Ten persons used to meet in Basra regularly. There was no equivalent to this gathering for the diversity of the religions and sects of its members: al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad—a *sunnī* (Sunni), and al-Sayyid ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥimyarī—*rāfiḍī* (Shiite), and Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Qaddūs—*thanawī* (dualist), and Sufyān ibn Mujāshī’—*sufri* (Khārijī), and Bashshār ibn Burd—morally depraved and impudent, and Ḥammād ‘Ajrad—*zindīq* (heretic), and the Exilarch’s son—a Jew, and Ibn Naẓīr—*mutakallim al-naṣārā* (a Christian theologian), and ‘Amrū the nephew of al-Mu‘ayyad—*majūsī* (Zoroastrian), and Rawḥ ibn Sinān al-Ḥarrānī—*ṣābi‘ī* (Gnostic).” At these gatherings they used to recite poems, and Bashshār used to say: “Your verses, Oh man, are better than *sūra* this or that [of the Qur’ān]”; and from that kind of joking and similar things they declared Bashshār to be a disbeliever.<sup>155</sup>

153 Rabbi Israel-Joseph Benjamin II, *Cinq années de voyage en orient, 1846–1851* (Paris: Michel Levy Frères, 1856), p. 84.

154 During the rule of the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (754–775); he founded the city of Baghdad and propagated an open, multicultural policy towards religious minorities.

155 Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām wa-Wafāyāt al-Mashāhīr wa-l-A’lām, Ḥawādith wa-Wafāyāt 141–160H* [*The History of Islam and the Deaths of the Eminent Personalities, Events, and Deaths 141–160H*] (ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī) (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1988), p. 383. For another version of this episode, see Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira* [*The Shining Stars in the History of the Kings of Egypt and Cairo*] (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub, 1930), II, p. 29 (= 1992 edition, II, pp. 36–37); on that liberal cultural atmosphere, see also Yāqūt, *Muḥjam al-Udbā’*, III, pp. 242–244. On the atmosphere of freethinking in Basra and on the participants in such gatherings, see also Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), pp. 254–256. Ibn Warraq (b. 1946) is the pen name of a secularist author of Pakistani origin and founder of the Institute for the secularization of Islamic Society; he believes that the great Islamic civilizations of the past were established in spite of the Qur’ān, not because of it, and that only a secularized Islam can deliver Muslim states from “fundamentalist madness.” On open debate in the classical Muslim world, which included Jews, see Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥumaydī, *Jadhwat al-Muqtabis fī Ta’rīkh ‘Ulamā’ al-Andalus* [*The Firebrand of the Seeker in the History of the Scholars of al-Andalus*] (ed.