CHAPTER 4

Globalization and the Search for Inessential Solidarities

In the course of less than half a century, the Iraqi Jews went through a rapid process that firmly consolidated their Iraqi-Arab-Jewish identity and that was only to be followed by another process that resulted in the speedy fragmentation of that same identity. Many had hoped that their being uprooted from the Iraqi homeland might be a blessing in disguise, dreaming that their migration to the new Jewish land would guarantee for them full integration into a unified new Israeli-Jewish identity without them having to renounce their Iraqiness and Arabness. Their sorrow was great when they discovered that this was not to be. Unable to accept a situation in which they would be totally excluded from Iraqiness and Arabness, some of them chose to stay in their ancient homeland in the hope that the more recent anti-Jewish atmosphere would resolve itself.576 In Israel, the fragmentation of their Iraqi-Arab-Jewish identity, an identity that was anticipated to lead to full integration into a unified new identity, instead left them excluded from both old and new identities. Their shock was even greater when they realized that this time they were being excluded by their own coreligionists, the Ashkenazim. That is to say, after having found themselves excluded in Iraq due to their Jewish religious identity, they found themselves excluded once again—now in Israel—because of their Arab-Iraqi identity.

The political circumstances in the Middle East, which were the direct cause of that double exclusion, accelerated among many of the Iraqi-Jewish immigrants a tendency, that at the time was universally still in its infancy, to reject in principle the notion of stable and fixed identity, to assert their particular singularities, and to search for alternative forms of identification, mostly various inessential solidarities. These local, regional, and global processes and developments, sometimes simultaneous and overlapping, served as fertile ground for the formation of a kind of subjectivity that responded to the natural human need for identification and belonging and, at the same time, was flexible enough to provide them with something of a shield against additional frustrations and disappointments.

It was thus the very absurdity of both exclusionary operations that paved the way for the rejection of the notion of having a fixed identity—especially because each of these operations aimed at the heart of a major component of their identity. In Iraq, for example, precisely when the Jews felt themselves to be more Arab and Iraqi than Jewish—the supremacy of culture and nationality over religion—they were excluded as the “other” in a way that left them no alternative but to emigrate to the new Jewish state. In Israel, precisely when they should have felt themselves to be more Jewish than Arab and Iraqi—Jewishness as a religion and nationality being the rule of the day—they were excluded as the “Other,” their Iraqiness and Arabness being paramount insofar as it was that which was taken into consideration. At this point, however, there could by no means be any thought of escaping to a new Arab haven. This double exclusion prepared Arabized Jews to understand the fragility of collective identities, and it was at this point, in my view, that the notion of stable and fixed identity started to be looked upon with some mistrust. The fact that another overlapping process of interpellation was at work at the same time—and this time a global one—inevitably created the propensity among Arabized Jews to adopt inessential solidarities.

Also, living in a democratic state, if for the Jewish majority at least—and for that no one has ever questioned their Jewishness—the intellectuals among the Arabized Jews could choose their own way of belonging. Consequently, in this “no-man’s” conceptual space with their level of sophistication already sharpened by their disappointment in ideologies both great and small—Marxism, Communism, Capitalism, Arab Nationalism, Zionism, and so on—they sensed either consciously or unconsciously the need to seek other ways of identification and belonging that would not lead them once more into a new dead-end where they might face another, third, bitter exclusion. The worldwide accelerating process of globalization, in addition to the particular openness of Israeli culture to participation in contemporary trends of globalized

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577 Some sporadic attempts, real or otherwise, were made, the famous one being that of Samir Naqqash (1938–2004) (Snir, ‘Arviyut, Yahadut, Tziyonut, pp. 442–452). On Naqqash’s search for identity, see Geula Elimelekh, “The Search for Identity in the Works of Samir Naqqash,” Middle Eastern Studies 49.1 (2013), pp. 63–75. As for immigration to other countries, I do not know of any studies about the motives of the emigration of Arabized Jews from Israel to other countries after 1948. I assume most of the emigrants did it for material reasons (work, studies, etc.). One cannot exclude, however, the readiness of those immigrants to take up new identities, or, better still, to add new layers of identity to their own subjectivities.

578 The existence of large Arab-Palestinian minorities in Israel, which has always been considered to be a demographic “threat” to the Jewish nature of the state, helped consolidate the status of Arabized Jews as part of the majority.