Conclusion

The two synagogues of the ‘Jewish Mosque’ are dusty and empty. Birds have built nests in the lamps, and prayer books and ragged talets [sic] (prayer shawls) lie unused on the shelves along with a shofar, or ram’s horn, that in happier times was used on high holy days. In one of the synagogues are stacks of mouldering possessions belonging to people who have long since left or died.1

This 2002 description of Kabul’s crumbling Jewish infrastructure is symbolic of the fate of the community in Afghanistan. Congruently, the aim of this work was to reconstruct the history of this people from a wide number of sources, before it also fades away. Despite modern decay, and the limits of memory, some of the detail and wealth of past events can emerge through patient research. It is hoped that by joining the history of the Jewish community to that of Afghanistan, both are further enriched.

The modern history of the Jews in Afghanistan is directly linked to trading opportunities. As a result of commerce, business and family ties were established with distant places, thus enabling the record of this community to be preserved, while so many other histories in Afghanistan remain obscured. Through international commercial connections, the Jews of Afghanistan formed an unusual link to Europe and Eretz Yisrael. When their plight worsened, they were able to inform British, American, Indian, and Israeli officials through elaborate channels of communication based on the karakul trade. Economic ties are the only reason why this social history has been preserved. As such, it is unusual and precious; for so many other recorded histories of Afghanistan have been lost.

By tracing the economic patterns of the mid-twentieth century, the experience of the Jewish community is brought into further relief. This approach has not been utilized before, though it provides vital information as to the reasons for expulsion from the northern tier of Afghanistan in the 1930s and the hostility the community endured under the weight of nationalistic economic policy. Without an understanding of the Jewish economic niche, and atypical domestic arrangements, it is difficult to understand the severity of the restrictions imposed against them and why they led to the demise of the community.

The ways that economic development was pursued in Afghanistan caused the impoverishment and persecution of marginalized members of society.

1 Judah, 37.
The monopoly system was devastating for non-Muslim minorities. The Ministry of National Economy and monopolist ventures like the Bank-i Milli, pursued discriminative political action through the guise of economic development. The monopolist system linked the economy to nationalist rationale. The structure of economic development pursued by the state of Afghanistan had a distinctly political role—to limit and protect against Soviet influence. This was particularly devastating for the Jewish community as it was often prejudicially suspected of owing primary allegiance to the Soviet Union and working on its behalf.

Ernest Gellner’s description of Diaspora nationalism provides further depth to a study of the Jews of Afghanistan. He explains that economic strength and a distinct culture combined with political and military weakness can lead to suffering and even the destruction of a community as the impact of development changes the attitudes of the elite and majority population. The government may choose to appease wide swaths of the population through the persecution of entrepreneurial minorities.2 In Afghanistan, entrepreneurial minorities could have paved the way towards development, but their marginal status precluded participation. In fact, nascent economic nationalism led to the downfall of the Jewish community. Jews were unable to become part of the conception of an Afghan nation.

Part of this estrangement may have been based on Afghan elites taking Germany as a model for nationalism. On the basis of material available, certain Afghan leaders, notably ‘Abd al-Majid Khan, attempted to follow Germany. The Minister of National Economy’s importance cannot be underestimated during Muhammad Hashim Khan’s regency. ‘Abd al-Majid Khan was consumed by the goal of ridding ‘foreigners’ from Afghanistan’s business community, to the extent that older systems were destroyed. While the theme of economic nationalism was invoked, its benefits did not reach beyond the Pashtun elite. Much of the populace suffered needlessly from inflation and shortages, and radical programs were approved as a way of containing the Soviet Union’s influence in Afghanistan. This fear of communism meant that strategies based on far more developed economies were applied—to disastrous results. ‘Abd al-Majid Khan was also allowed to pursue political action through the guise of economic development. Consequently, Jews and some Central Asian Muslims who settled in northern Afghanistan became internally displaced and refugees once again.

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