CHAPTER THREE

JEWS, KURDS AND ARABS, 1941–1952

The lack of documentation on the Jews of Kurdistan allows merely a limited discussion of the Jewish experience. The information on the Jews of Iraq, however, is superior, and as Longrigg articulates in discussing these years, “the art of living in Iraq, and surviving bad times, was no new” to the Iraqi Jews.¹ The eleven years between 1941 and 1952 composed the final chapter of the Jewish presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Two major events that occurred during this period reverberated throughout the Kurdish regions. The first event that rocked the Jews in Iraq was the coup of Rashid ‘Ali al-Gilāmī in mid-1941 and the consequent pogroms against Jews in Baghdad known as “Farhud.” The second event or in fact, a chain of events started roughly with the partition plan of Palestine between an Arab state and the Jewish state that was ratified by the UN on 29 November 1947. Britain announced its intention to terminate its mandate over Palestine on 15 May 1948, but hostilities broke out before the British departure. While the Arab countries opposed the partition plan, the Jews accepted it and proclaimed the Jewish state on 14 May 1948. The following day, five Arab armies, from Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq invaded Israel, but were repelled. Of these five states, only Iraq had no common border with the Jewish state. Therefore, its participation in the war was another indication for the acute hostility against the Zionists and the Jews that was propagated within its population during these years. The establishment of the State of Israel eventually led to the mass migration of Jews from Iraq in 1951–1952, finalizing this chain of events and ending the last chapter of the Jewish experience in Kurdistan.²

¹ Longrigg 1953: 192.
² Lewis (1984:188–91) discusses the influence of the conflict in Palestine on the rise of Arab anti-Semitism.
A. Effects of the Farhud Pogroms

In March 1941, at the height of World War II, Rashīd ‘Alī al-Gīlānī (1882–1965) led a coup and took control of Iraq, forming a nationalist and pro-German government. From the beginning of May, the new regime began to fight against the British. In the following months, anti-Jewish propaganda increased, although the Jews were not harmed physically. During April and May 1941, demonstrations took place in several Iraqi and Kurdish urban centers, such as Mosul, Kirkuk, Arbil and Amara in northern Iraq. The pogroms against the Jews of Baghdad took place immediately after the collapse of the regime and the flight of its leaders, Rashīd ‘Alī and the mufti of Jerusalem, and before the new regime under British sponsorship had managed to establish itself. The weekend of 31 May through 2 June 1941, coincided with the Jewish holiday of Pentecost in which the Jews of Baghdad commemorated the disintegration of this regime. These unprecedented riots and massacres of the Jews in Baghdad, known as the Farhud, during the early days of June 1941, “electrified the atmosphere in Iraq” and in Kurdish towns. These pogroms shocked the Jews of Iraq and inaugurated a new state of intimidation regarding their presence in Iraq. Among the perpetrators of the pogroms were members of nationalist organizations, supporters of the old regime and members of the defeated Iraqi forces. For the Jews and observers of Iraq, the most disturbing phenomenon was the participation of the masses in the pogroms.

During the Farhud, between 150 and 180 Jews were killed, hundreds more were injured and Jewish property was looted by mobs. A report based on data supplied by the president of the Jewish community in

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3 Rashīd ‘Alī was a member of a noble family (al-Gīlānī) in Baghdad and a prominent Iraqi politician. He was overthrown from his post as prime minister in February 1941 by the crown prince Abd al-Ilah, but in April, when Great Britain suffered many blows in the war, he reinstated himself through a coup organized by pro-Nazi Iraqi officers. In May 1941, The British forces defeated the coup and overtook Baghdad once again.

4 Yûnis al-Sabāwī was known for his hatred of the Jews. His underground name, “Farhud,” was attached to the pogrom of Jews in June 1941. He was one of the four persons behind the coup, also known as the “golden square.” Kazzaz 1991: 206–207.

5 Bar-Amon 1985: 35.

6 For more on this regime see Mohammad Tarbush, The Role of Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941 (London: Kegan Paul International). See also Hamdi 1987; Khadduri 1951 and Marr 1985.
