

Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 270.

by *Marcella Simoni*

This volume tells the history of the Jews of Baghdad in the nineteenth and early twentieth century—“the age of nationalism”—when communal life and politics in Baghdad were reshaped by the effects of multiple modernizing influences in religious and secular culture: language, administration, economy and politics, and nationalism. From a political and administrative perspective, this period saw the reforms of the *Tanzimat* and the appointment of Midhat Pasha as governor in 1869, followed by the establishment of a British mandate (1920-1932) and, later, the birth of the Kingdom of Iraq (1932). Considering Jewish culture, this period witnessed the adoption and adaptation of the ideals of the *Haskalah* to the linguistic and religious context of Jewish Baghdad. From the point of view of Jewish organized life, the Lay Council of the community of Baghdad became the new body regulating communal life in its many aspects. Considering education, this period saw the growing influence of foreign Jewish institutions in Baghdad, like the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA) and, to a lesser extent, of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

In this scenery of change, the main characters of this history are not so much the individuals, the families, and the Jewish community of Baghdad *per se*; rather, this work focuses on their administrative, cultural, and political transformation as a result of the impact of these modernizing forces, as well as on the web of relations that they developed looking Westwards—towards England, France, and the US—and Eastwards, towards the communities of Baghdadi Jews (from Iraq and the broader Middle East) in India, Singapore, Burma (Myanmar), China and Japan, that the author defines “satellite communities.” Here, thousands of Baghdadis (see Appendix B, pp. 224-225 for population estimates) had started to settle from the mid-eighteenth century, growing into more structured communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By identifying them as satellite communities, the author sees their history in relation to that of the community of Baghdad and Iraq, and considers the role they played in making the latter more globalized and secularized in the years that saw “the height of the Jewish participation to the Iraqi

state,” and the beginning of the country’s political instability. This would then culminate in the mass migration of over 100,000 Iraqi Jews between 1949 and 1952 (p. 2).

Given the wealth of primary sources that the author has used in this research, my review of her work starts from them.

Primary Sources

Originally a Ph.D. thesis defended at the University of Leiden in 2019, this volume is based on a large body of primary documentary, printed and oral sources, memoirs, and of secondary literature. Primary sources show the breadth of the thematic and geographic coverage of this volume. Jews in Iraq are placed at the center of a web of Jewish and non-Jewish contacts, commercial networks and cultural transformations that occurred through collaborations with associations and agencies located in London, Paris and New York on the one hand, and in various Asian cities on the other; therefore, evidence for these relations was looked for—and found—in archives of different types in various locations worldwide. Sources from institutional archives come from the UK National Archives at Kew for Colonial and Foreign office files, and from the British Library for materials from the India Office; from the National Archives of Singapore, that hold an important oral history collection (which is in part available online), while the papers of David Marshall (born David Saul Meshal, who became Singapore’s first Prime Minister in 1955) were studied at the “Ysof Ishak Institute” (ISEAS) at the University of Singapore. The author also explored systematically the archives of the AIU, the AJA and the JDC, and of the Jewish Welfare Board of Singapore. Sources from these archives speak of the long-term impact that these Western Jewish associations had in Baghdad between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from an administrative and educational point of view, for example. The Israel National Library gave access to some of the Sassoon papers (that were still only partially catalogued at the time of this research), while the “Hong Kong Heritage Project—Kaadorie Archives” provided ample material to draw individual or family portraits (in this case of members of the Kadoorie family, and of their multi-layered relations with the Jewish community of Baghdad and

institutional actors in the UK and in Iraq itself). More limited reference is also made to the so-called Iraqi-Jewish archive, a large set of more than 10,000 documents that, since their accidental recovery by the US armed forces in the flooded basement of the Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad in 2003, has undergone a process of restoration and exhibition in the US, to be later returned to Iraq after digitalization.¹ The author has also made use of printed sources from the Jewish press of Baghdad, from that of the so-called satellite communities, as well as of some issues of Jewish periodicals from London (*The Jewish Chronicle*) and Paris (*Paix et Droit* and the *Bullettin de l'Alliance*). These were used in this work to complement other primary sources: in Baghdad alone, in 1934, the Foreign Office had counted subscribers to sixteen foreign newspapers. Of these “eight were in Hebrew, five in English, one was in Arabic, French and Hebrew and one was in Yiddish” (pp. 14-15 and p. 187). As table n. 1 shows (p. 93), between 1856 and 1940 in India alone the Baghdadi communities (Bombay and Calcutta) published twelve Jewish newspapers in Judeo-Arabic, English and Hebrew; and even though not all of them were published at the same time, this number remains a remarkable indicator of the existence of a very lively cultural life and of a transnational Baghdadi public sphere. Since 1904 the voice of the Baghdadis in Shanghai could be heard through the *Israel's Messenger*, and that of those in Singapore came from *The Israelight*. It is to this press, published in the in the Asian context, that the Jewish community of Baghdad turned for news and debate after the mid-1930s, when censorship at home became increasingly stringent, especially on politically sensitive topics, like Zionism. Zvi Yehuda had already made this point, which the author of this volume also shares and develops through various examples.²

¹ *Preserving the Iraqi Jewish Archive*, <https://ijarchive.org/>, Accessed April 17, 2022.

² Zvi Yehuda, *The New Babylonian Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Community in Iraq, 16th-20th Centuries C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Yehuda, “Jewish press in India in Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic as an indispensable source for the history of Iraqi Jews in the nineteenth century,” in *The Baghdadi Jews in India: Maintaining Communities, Negotiating Identities and Creating Super-Diversity*, ed. Shalva Weil (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 145-162.

Historiography

The broader picture that emerges from this book carries historiographical significance, in reference to at least three contexts: first, when compared to previous histories of the Jews of Iraq (from which this volume in part also draws); second, as to the placement of these histories within a Zionist or anti-Zionist historiography; third, when considering the relations of Jews from Iraq with Baghdadis in the Asian context. I will address the latter point—which is analyzed here in chapter two and partly in chapter five—in a separate and final paragraph. This volume is indeed different from the existing literature on the Jews of Iraq because it is built on the notion of relations and networks, while previous works have analyzed the history of this community mainly by looking at the cultural, social and political dynamics within the community itself and with broader Iraqi society.³ As a result, it challenges and deconstructs the binary historiographical debate that has placed the history of the Jews of Iraq within a Zionist or anti-Zionist perspective. The former has explored “a community that had ceased to exist due to the mass migration of Iraqi Jews, primarily to the state of Israel” (pp. 4-5), downplaying the Jewish participation in the Iraqi public sphere and depicting immigration to Israel as caused by anti-Jewish persecution and a combination of religious messianism and adherence to Zionism. The latter perspective, on the other hand, has overemphasized Iraqi Jews’ self-identification as Arabs and the limited success of Zionism among them. With a different critical intent, these themes have already been explored for Iraq also by authors like Ella Shohat, for example, and by Yehouda Shenhav.⁴ By placing her narrative outside this consolidated polarization, as also Esther Meir Glitzenstein and Orit Bashkin have done before her,⁵ Goldstein-Sabbah adopts a more complex approach in which

³ Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁴ Ella Shohat, “The Invention of Mizrahim,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 5-20; Shohat, “The Invention of Judeo-Arabic,” *Interventions* 19, no. 2 (2017): 153-200; Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Esther Meir-Glitzstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s*, (London: Routledge, 2004); Bashkin, *New Babylonians*.

she discusses the multiplicity of factors and the variety of interests (and their combination) that eventually brought to the migration of numerous Jews from Iraq to Israel. She therefore deals with the question of Zionism indirectly, providing a clear scholarly answer to the effect that this topic should be understood in its historical complexity and not simplified for ethno-national political purposes.

Main Contents

As for the contents of this volume, “each chapter explores different components of how Jews in Baghdad participated in the global Jewish network through communal organization, Baghdadi satellite communities, transnational Jewish philanthropy, secular Jewish education and the global Jewish press” (p. 33). The first four chapters detail the complex economic, political and cultural dynamics that regulated the transformation of the Iraqi Jewish community and, at the same time, the ways in which Arab nationalism brought it to an end.

Particularly important in chapter one is the history of the new administrative, political and economic role that the Lay Council of the community of Baghdad acquired after the Ottoman administrative reforms of 1864. These turned it into the engine behind the transformation of Jewish religious, cultural and political life in Baghdad and, at the same time, in the institution where domestic and transnational networks became instruments of modernity and modernization. The Lay Council was far from being a democratic institution; on the contrary, as Goldstein-Sabbah writes, “it was a representation of the wealthiest and more powerful members of the community;” “rabbinical leadership was picked by these elites, thus reinforcing the political, as opposed to ecclesiastical, nature of the office of the rabbinate” (p. 58). All in all, the Lay Council represented “the coming together of the structural changes brought about by the communal reorganization of the *Tanzimat* and Enlightenment ideals espoused by the local Jewish elites” (p. 57). In this respect, it acted as “an agent of modernity,” becoming a secular partner in constructing a communal policy (p. 58). The centrality of this body and its branching out in many directions is particularly evident in chapter three, when the author discusses its history and role in dealing with, and regulating, Jewish

philanthropy. Central to this chapter is a discussion of the main economic sources that provided the means to support welfare and social aid in Baghdad and for the Jews of Iraq in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One such source originated in the Asian communities, where Baghdadi families that had accumulated enormous wealth redistributed a (small) part of it for the opening of schools and other social institutions that would continue to carry their name in the Diaspora, a practice that recalls the family endowments in Islamic law through which many *awqaf* were established in Arab countries. The Kedoorie family provided funds for several AIU schools and for hospitals entitled to the women of the family, for example (p. 120). The AJA managed four major funds dedicated to Baghdad that were paid for by the Kedoories and the Sassoons. The other main source of funding originated in Europe (and in the US), and came from the AIU, AJA (and JDC); the direct involvement of these organizations made them agents of modernization and, at the same time, the representatives of specific imperial French and British interests. As chapter four shows, in different ways both the AIU and the AJA played an important role in the (secular) education of Jews in Baghdad, in terms of the languages that students acquired (pp. 158-159), the secular teachings they received, the connections that they were able to establish, and the access granted to girls in the context of secular and modern schooling. Their Western educational approach also reverberated further East, when many former graduates of these schools embarked in commercial activities and new lives in the Asian communities. While AIU was primarily concerned with education, the AJA was a “more active partner in the community, acting as a liaison for the Jewish community to both the British and Iraqi governments” (p. 112). The JDC was not a dominant philanthropic organization at this time, but its long-established presence and support turned out to be invaluable in the period 1945-1951, when the Jewish community was leaving Iraq and needed the logistical aid and the economic resources that this organization could provide.

In the fifth chapter of this volume, the author presents three case studies that illustrate, in very different ways, the variety and the relevance of the transnational networks that engaged the Jews of Iraq. (p. 173). Each of these could be considered an example of microhistory, within the transnational perspective of the volume. The first considers the spread of theosophy in Basra between 1921 and 1935 and discusses in which ways the establishment in Basra of a lodge of the Association of

Hebrew Theosophists came to challenge religious authority and tradition, and the Jewish community at large. The second example takes us into the 1930s, when Ephraim Levy, a middle-class owner of the Al-Rashid bookstore in Baghdad, was thrown in jail with the “accusation of defaming the Iraqi government in a British newspaper” (p. 185). Levy had written a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, protesting the self-censorship to which publishers, booksellers and librarians were subject in Iraq in the mid-1930s; his words were precise, accusing the government of unfairness in their equation of Jewishness and Zionism (p. 191). Levy’s letter did not obtain tangible results (except for attracting attention to himself); however his case is noteworthy for the extent of the transnational mobilization that it triggered. Members of the Lay Council became involved, and one of them, Ibrahim Nahum, intervened with the Kedoories in Hong Kong (letter published in Appendix C, pp. 226-229), hoping that their voice could help get Levy out of jail. The British Foreign Office inquired with the Iraqi state about Levy, the British embassy in Baghdad monitored the case and the Jewish press in Europe followed the court case in which he was tried. The third case study is that of the already mentioned Ibrahim Nahum, a middle-class member of the Lay Council and, most of all, the agent of the Kedoories in Baghdad, in the Levant and in Iran (p. 200). Here, Goldstein-Sabbah discusses the intermingling of the political, social and economic spheres within Iraq and in the relations that some Iraqi Jews entertained with members of the “satellite communities” in Asia. It is to this last point that I now turn.

Baghdadis in the Asian Context

Chapter two (and in part chapter five) are the sections of this volume where the author analyzes the family and commercial networks, the philanthropic relations and the travels of many Baghdadis (generally men and a few women) between Iraq and numerous sites in Asia.

When analyzing and representing Baghdadis’ relations in the Asian context with their point of origin, it is almost impossible to strike the right balance between drawing a picture of connection and one of separation, of continuity and/or rupture. Both dimensions co-existed in varying degrees during the two centuries

of this experience, and the balance between the two changed with the changing historical contexts, both in Baghdad and in Asia. These relations were transformed as the geographical and the generational distance from the point of origin increased and by the encounters that Baghdadis in Asia had with other Jews, with Bene Israel in India and Burma (Myanmar) and with Ashkenazi Jews on the run from Russia to China at the turn of the century, or from central Europe after 1933 and 1938.

This volume is about Jews in Iraq as they developed family, commercial and political relations within precise cultural and geographical networks; in this context the history of the Baghdadi “satellite communities” in South, East and Southeast Asia—whether Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Rangoon (Yangon), Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong and/or other cities—is seen through the framework of connection and continuity with Iraq rather than through that of separation. By (re)establishing such a continuity, this volume (re)unites histories that previous literature has separated, thus changing the idea that migration from Baghdad and Iraq to distant lands necessarily implied severance from this point of origin. On the contrary, more than once in this volume the Asian communities are credited for their positive influence in transforming relations and lives in Baghdad. From this point of view, this volume marks another difference with the already mentioned existing literature both on the Jews in Iraq and on the Baghdadis in Asia. Indeed, from the perspective of Burma (Myanmar), Baghdadis have been analyzed as an interconnected diaspora; from India, they have been defined as a super-diverse community; and from the vintage point of Shanghai, they have been seen as imagined Britons; more recently, in less scholarly works and mainly considering the histories of men alone, they have been grouped with other Shanghailanders, international businessmen living and prospering in the French Concession and in the International Settlement of Shanghai at the turn of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth.⁶

⁶ Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lenham: Lexington Books, 2007); Weil, *The Baghdadi Jews in India*; Chiara Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2003): 999-1023; Johnathan Kaufman, *The Last Kings of Shanghai: The Rival Jewish Dynasties that Helped Create Modern China* (London: Viking, 2020). The volume by Joseph Sassoon, *The Sassoons: The Great*

By focusing more extensively on the elements of connection and continuity between Iraq and the Asian contexts than on those of separation, this volume does not explore the history of the new generations of Baghdadis born and raised in Asia from the end of the nineteenth century and their relationship with Iraq. As Jewish Iraq and Baghdad began to enter a fatal political crisis in the 1930s, these Asian Baghdadis developed a new individual and collective identity that was less attached to their point of origin. From this perspective, the Asian communities could be seen as “hubs” rather than as satellites, a term which may appear similar but that implies some detachment from their necessary orbit around Baghdad and Iraq. As Goldstein-Sabbah herself shows, some of the commercial and political networks that involved the Baghdadi communities of the Asian hubs had already started to bypass Baghdad in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in politics and commerce, when turning to London became an obvious choice. And when, especially since the mid-1930s, political instability in Baghdad (and in Europe) made Jewish life increasingly difficult and threatening, the Baghdadi networks in Asia helped Jews reorganize along different routes and find an escape. Centrally placed in the title of this volume, and recurring throughout the text, the word “networks” represents the main key to read the history of this population group, one that makes us look at the history of the Baghdadis by taking into account their dynamic, multiple and many layered commercial, cultural and political relations, and their constant intertwining.

Marcella Simoni, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

How to quote this article:

Marcella Simoni, discussion of *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism*, by Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 21, no. 1 (2022), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13370

Global Merchants and the Making of an Empire, expected for publication in October 2022, is likely to add other perspectives on this topic.