

Iraqi Arab-Jewish Identities: First Body Singular

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In the years 1921–51, the Iraqi-Jewish community thrived. This religious group, numbering around 120,000 and residing in urban centers for the most part, figured prominently in Iraq's culture and economy. Desiring to cement their status as full-fledged Iraqi citizens, the community's leading thinkers evoked the concept of "the Arab-Jew" in various locations and contexts. Whether by the communists of the League for Combating Zionism or the Jewish nationalists claiming to identify with their Palestinian (as opposed to their Jewish) brethren, the term was frequently used to negotiate the meanings of Jewish national identity in Iraq. The Iraqi educational system, which expanded tremendously during this period and emphasized Arab culture and Arab history as part of its curriculum, had fostered the notion that Iraqi Jews were part of an Arab-Iraqi nation. In this short essay, I raise a few questions relating to the different significations of the concept "the Arab-Jew" in Iraq. To do so, I quote briefly from Shimon Ballas's fascinating autobiography *Be-Guf Rishon* [First Body Singular] (Tel Aviv, 2009). Ballas (b. 1930) joined the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) at the age of 16. In 1951, with the growing persecution of both communists and Jews in Iraq, Ballas immigrated to Israel, where he has explored the Arab-Jewish experience in both Iraq and Israel in works of fiction and nonfiction.

To unpack the problematics of Arab-Jewish identity in Iraq, we need to turn to the terms "Arab" and "Jew." The Arabic language is typified by dyglosia, namely, by a separation between a classical written language on the one hand, and a variety of colloquial dialects (Iraqi, Egyptian, Algerian, and so on) on the other. In Iraq, a number of Arabic dialects were spoken, including a Baghdadi-Jewish one. Given these linguistic realities, an Arab-Jew could signify a Jew who was able to read and write in Arabic; an educated Jew who was able to understand the Qur'an and appreciate classical and modern Arabic literature and contribute to Iraqi letters; or an illiterate Jew who only spoke a local Jewish-Arabic dialect. Being Jewish also meant various things to different people, as many Jews at the time became secularized. As they joined the ranks of the middle and upper classes, they continued to celebrate Jewish holidays and visit synagogues on the high holidays—yet their leisure practices, the

literature they read, and the social circles in which they moved were increasingly Iraqi and Arab. Other Jews, especially the lower-middle classes and the urban poor, were less exposed to Western education, and remained more religious. How, then, are we to conceptualize their Jewish-Arab identity in a way that takes into account the various meanings of being both Jewish and Arab? Moreover, how are we to determine when one begins to be, or becomes, an Arab-Jew in Iraq: Does it begin when one is born? When one begins schooling? When one begins writing in Arabic? Should we talk of a process of Arabization?

For Ballas, being an Arab Jew was an experience that was mediated first and foremost by Iraq's Arabic print culture. His reading of the works of Egyptian intellectuals, especially Taha Husayn and Samala Musa, the hours he spent reading various Arabic novels and cultural magazines, and his writing of articles for an Egyptian newspaper all helped shape Ballas's worldview as an Arab intellectual. At the same time, this Arab and Iraqi identity was also framed in a Western context: in addition to his French education (as a bilingual product of the *Alliance* school), many of the writers whom Ballas favored belonged to an Arab elite that firmly believed in the power of science, reason, and critical inquiry. This Arab cultural imprint, moreover, remained with Ballas even after he no longer resided in Baghdad. After having lived in Israel for some time and having not read or written in Arabic for almost two years, Ballas happened to look at a book by Taha Husayn just before falling asleep:

After I turned off the light, I was flooded by a wave of Arabic words, phrases, and poetic verses, like a sudden break of a dam, which kept sleep away from me until the light of morning. It was Arabic's revenge on me, I used to tell myself, a punishment I rightly deserved for turning my back on the affectionate, beloved mother tongue.

The tensions between the different components of Arab-Jewish identity do not end at this point. Zionist Iraqis expressed in their Hebrew autobiographies their love of Arab music, cinema, drama, and literature. For their part, Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals who joined the ICP felt that they were part of an Iraqi nation and its Arab culture (despite the

party's critique of Pan-Arabism), and cast their communism as a choice of Iraqi patriotism. Furthermore, in such circles the evocation of religious difference was considered an act of sectarianism, to which secular Iraqi intellectuals (nationalists and communists alike) were vehemently opposed. However, the persecution of Jews within Iraq, and especially the support for Nazi Germany voiced by certain Pan-Arab nationalists, pushed Iraqi Jews towards communism. Often, joining the ICP marked an Iraqi, as opposed to an Arab, choice. Being an Iraqi communist meant seeing the Kurds and the Turkmans, the Shi'is, the Sunnis, and the Christians as comrades in a shared struggle. Thus, although historians speak of Arab-Jewish identity, at times people who do not identify themselves today as Arab-Jews were very much a part of Arab culture, while Iraqi-Jewish communists, although loyal to the party's internationalist, antireligious ideals, joined its ranks because of their Jewish identity.

Ballas's joining of the ICP was motivated by the ICP's nonsectarian vision. He recalls how his bourgeois family objected to his becoming a member of the party of "these barefooted people," and how he himself came to feel solidarity with, and value the opinions of, Iraqis of various classes through his party activities. Ballas describes his participation in a wave of urban riots in Baghdad in 1948:

These were the days . . . when I marched arm in arm with demonstrators whom I have not known before, and when I loudly called to topple the government of national betrayal, to release political prisoners, and to have free elections....

They [the communists] courageously fought publications that incited against the Jews in the rightwing press. . . . In demonstrations along al-Rashid Street the demonstrators called: "We are the brothers of the Jews; we are the enemies of imperialism and Zionism!" I remember this rare sight, how as the demonstration approached the commercial and banking area, and, as this slogan was chanted by the demonstrators, merchants and bankers, all Jews, came out to the balconies and clapped their hands enthusiastically.

Arab-Iraqi-Jewish identity thus grew out of both national Iraqi and Jewish concerns. On

the one hand, Ballas critiqued what most young Iraqi radicals criticized at the time: the state's comprador, pro-British elite, and its antidemocratic nature, typified by its violations of human and welfare rights. His marching in the anonymous crowd facilitated the feeling that his concerns were also the concerns of the nation. On the other hand, the communist, pro-Jewish position made him proud of his political affiliations, and, moreover, elicited the enthusiastic responses to the ICP on the part of Jewish merchants and bankers, who would not normally support a communist agenda.

Another question related to Arab-Jewish identity is: When does one cease to be an Arab-Iraqi Jew? Some Jewish-Iraqi intellectuals argue that the 1941 anti-Jewish riots, known as the *Farhud*—in which nearly two hundred Jews were killed in the aftermath of a pro-German coup—changed their national visions and caused them to turn their backs on their Arab-Iraqi identity. Others argue that when they immigrated to Israel, they ceased to be Arab-Jews. In the years 1948–67, the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict rendered Jewish-Arab identity an oxymoron, and hence many Iraqi Jews adopted a Hebrew culture after discarding their Arab cultural heritage. Nonetheless, not all intellectuals went this route: Iraqi-Jewish communists, who joined the Israeli Communist Party, labored to maintain their Arab-Jewish identity. They formed cultural bonds with Palestinian writers, published in Arabic, and organized a literary club dedicated to Arab-Jewish coexistence. In their novels and short stories, they commemorated Arab-Jewish identity in both Iraq and Israel. The works of Shimon Ballas, and his activities within the party, are prime examples of the continuation of the Arab-Jewish project. Writing about his time in the Israeli Communist Party, Ballas, although highly critical of the party's leadership, recalls fondly his first encounter with the Palestinian novelist Emile Habibi; his contributions to the party's literary journal, *al-Jadid*; his meetings with Iraqi-Jewish communists whom he had not known in Iraq; and cultural activities in Arabic organized by Iraqi Jews in Israel in collaboration with other Palestinians.

Jewish intellectuals in Iraq produced a number of literary works in Arabic, and Ba'thi historiography has acknowledged the seminal role played by Jews in the formation of Iraqi literature and culture. While many of the texts by Iraqi Jews owe their survival to Israeli archives (most notably the archive in the Museum for the History of Babylonian Jewry in Or-Yehuda) and have been anthologized

in new editions thanks to the efforts of Iraqi Jews, the newspapers and journals in which these works first appeared and in which they were reviewed and critiqued were based outside of Israel, mostly in Iraq. This created the paradoxical situation in which Iraqi works written by Jews were often inaccessible to Iraqi and Arab researchers, while the ways in which these works were received and consumed could only be reconstructed by Iraqis and other Arab scholars. Tragically, with the ongoing destruction of the Iraqi archives and national libraries since 2004, many of these collections have been lost. Another outcome is that very sympathetic depictions of Arab-Jewish life, expressed in the works of Iraqi Jews such as Ballas, are unavailable to Arab audiences. Many of Ballas's texts, especially his historical novels about Arab-Jewish intellectuals and activists and his evocation of Arabic literary texts within his Hebrew novels would be much appreciated

by contemporary Arabs, but presently have only a Hebrew-speaking audience (or English readers of the works in translation).

The reconstruction of the Baghdadi, Arab, Iraqi, and Jewish experience, which informed Arab-Jewish identities, can therefore be only partial. It can be, and is, carried out by historians, sociologists, and literary scholars who consider the connections between texts, their meanings, and the conditions of their production. It is also carried out by second-generation Mizrahi Jews, and other Israelis sympathetic to the Arab-Jewish agenda. Most importantly, Ballas reminds us that within Israel, people still carry the memories of their Arab pasts.

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