

Letters page

The Iraqi Jews

Editors: Rayyan Al-Shawaf's review of Abbas Shibliak's book *Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus (Democratiya 7)* starts off promisingly, by pointing out the discrepancies and errors in Shibliak's book. But instead of debunking Shibliak's assumption that Zionist agents set off bombs to 'cause' or 'speed up' the Jewish exodus during 1950-51, he concludes that the bombs were the 'decisive' factor behind the Jewish exodus.

There were five incidents. Three occurred after the deadline for registration to emigrate had already expired and did not cause any casualties. Even if the most serious incident, the attack on the Mesouda Shemtob synagogue on 17 January 1951 which killed four, had been the work of the Zionists – and there is strong evidence to suspect that it was the work of Iraqi nationalists – two thirds of the Jews had already signed up to leave.

It is a pity that scholars expend an inordinate amount of time, energy – and (judging by the kilobytes devoted to this subject in Democratiya) cyberspace – discussing the futile 'bombs' issue whenever the exodus of the Iraqi Jews is debated. It is a bit like rearranging (or more like deconstructing) the deckchairs, when the Titanic of the Iraqi Jewish community had been on a fatal collision course with the iceberg of state repression and anti-Semitism almost as soon as Iraq became independent.

Regrettably, an obsessive focus on 'the bombs' almost always seems to reflect the author's mission to deflect the blame for the Iraqi Jewish exodus on to 'the Zionists' instead of placing it squarely where it belongs: on the Iraqi state.

It was the Iraqi state which passed a law making Zionism illegal, crowning a series of proto-Nazi laws against the Jews in the 1930s. It was the Iraqi state which was guilty of the pro-Nazi pogrom which killed 180 Jews in 1941. It was the Iraqi state which hanged the wealthy businessman Shafik Ades on trumped-up charges in 1948; making every Jew, no matter what his feelings about Zionism, feel insecure. It was the Iraqi state which threatened Jews and extorted money from them to pay for its failed assault on Israel in 1948. It was the Iraqi state that first stripped the departing Jews of their citizenship, and then stripped them of their property.

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Al-Shawaf suggests that someone should do a survey among Iraqi Jews to find out what really caused them to leave. I conducted a straw poll among my relatives. My parents, who left in the summer of 1950, said, 'bombs, what bombs?' – as if arbitrary arrest, intimidation and extortion had not been reason enough for them to want to flee Iraq. As for the rest of my relatives, the bombs had no impact whatsoever. They foolishly stayed on and were to face travel bans, pauperisation, hangings and arrests in the late 1960s before they were, with tacit help from Israel, finally able to escape their country through Kurdistan.

Yours sincerely, Lyn Julius