

Two letters about the exodus of the Iraqi Jews

Editors: Ms. Lyn Julius, who wrote a Letter to the Editor in response to my review of Abbas Shibliak's book, seems to have misread my conclusion. I do not conclude that the bombings against Jewish and other targets in Iraq were the 'decisive' factor behind emigration. Though I consider the possibility, I point out that we cannot properly determine the import of the scattered anecdotal evidence supporting such a contention. The absence of any 'organised effort to collate such testimonies within the framework of a scientific survey' has ensured as much. As a result, I describe the bombings as 'a major factor' behind the exodus. Such a distinction, though nuanced, is important.

It is unfortunate that (an entirely justified) moral outrage at the Iraqi state's poor treatment of its Jewish citizens sometimes leads to (a factually groundless) certainty regarding the reasons for a very sudden exodus. Ms. Julius also gets a few facts wrong. The Farhud is one example. Conflicting casualty figures aside, the Farhud of 1941 was not the work of the Iraqi state; it occurred during a power vacuum between the fall of Rashid Ali al-Kaylani's government (which fled Baghdad before oncoming British soldiers) and the British reassertion of control. The term 'Farhud,' after all, means 'breakdown of law and order.'

With the advantage of hindsight, we can certainly say that the decision by most Jews to leave their native Iraq in 1950-51 was a wise one. As portrayed most recently by Mona Yahia's semi-autobiographical novel, *When The Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad*, the post-exodus era was a dark and oppressive time for those Jews who remained. In addition to Iraq's descent into the world of military coups and dictatorships – bad news for all Iraqis – Jews quickly became the object of systematic persecution. Yet the focus of my review was much more limited; I simply wished to further investigate claims made by Abbas Shibliak, Moshe Gat and others concerning the significance of the 1950-51 bombings, an issue which is hardly as clear-cut as many make it out to be.

Sincerely, Rayyan Al-Shawaf

Editors: A few years ago I had occasion to ask my uncle, who was ten year old when his parents left Iraq for Israel, about the claims, similar to those made by Rayyan Al-Shawaf. His answer tallied, to a great degree, with Lyn Julius's main argument, that more than two thirds of the Jews were already gone or on their way out when those incidents took place. There was a rumour that Jews were responsible for those bombs, he said. The rumour persisted because, he said, this mode of terrorizing the Jewish population was an aberration – too small, understated, patently useless – from what Iraqi Jews had come to expect. They knew officially sponsored riots which involved mobs, organized from outside urban areas, and openly staged. There was nothing clandestine about them. That's why the idea that these bombs were of Jewish origin had some purchase among Iraqi Jews. But the rumour was heard by a community that had already dwindled into insignificance.

I also happen to know the daughter of Shafik Ades. She told me about her family's history. Needless to say, the shadow of such a history haunts her to this day. She said that her father was a businessman who had no interest in Zionism whatsoever. I don't know if it proves anything that the family, upon fleeing Iraq, moved to England and later on to Canada. Presumably, Zionism was not necessarily a value that they learned at home. Of course this is all circumstantial, but it does lend some support to Ms. Julius's misgivings about Rayyan's Al-Shawaf's thesis.

It is also worth noting that for a community that was terrorized out their comfortable life, Iraqi Jews seem remarkably sanguine about Zionist culpability etc. Most Iraqi Jews who do not live in Israel love Israel, have relatives there and visit regularly. This however does not exclude some lingering resentment over the social prejudice Iraqi Jews had to suffer in Israel in the years immediately following their immigration.

Since my information is anecdotal and personal, I do not feel I can creditably challenge Al-Shawaf's article. But I would like thank Ms. Julius for her points, which I think need to be made.

Sincerely, Noga Emanuel