Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus

by Abbas Shiblak, Saqi, 2005, 215 pp.

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The 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime and the occupation of Iraq by Allied Coalition Forces has served to generate a good deal of interest in Iraqi history. As a result, in 2005 Saqi reissued Abbas Shiblak's 1986 study T*he Lure of Zion: The Case of the Iraqi Jews.* The revised edition, which includes a preface by Iraq historian Peter Sluglett as well as minor additions and modifications by the author, is entitled *The Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus*. Shiblak's book, which deals with the mass immigration of Iraqi Jews to Israel in 1950-51, is important both as one of the few academic studies of the subject as well as a reminder of a time when Jews were an integral part of Iraq and other Arab countries.

The other significant study of this subject is Moshe Gat's *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951*, which was published in 1997. A shorter encapsulation of Gat's argument can be found in his 2000 Israel Affairs article '*Between Terror and Emigration: The Case of Iraqi Jewry*.' Because of the diametrically opposed conclusions arrived at by the authors, it is useful to compare and contrast their accounts. In fact, Gat explicitly refuted many of Shiblak's assertions as early as 1987, in his *Immigrants and Minorities* review of Shiblak's *The Lure of Zion*. It is unclear why Shiblak has very conspicuously chosen to ignore Gat's criticisms and his pointing out of errors in the initial version of the book. The republication of Shiblak's book 19 years after its first printing afforded him the opportunity to enact revisions, but where modifications were made they are minor, and almost no corrections are to be found. This article will highlight the major differences between Shiblak and Gat, and offer several comments on their respective conclusions.

General Observations

Before plunging into minutiae, a few general observations must be made. Shiblak refers to the subjects of his study as 'Arab Jews' (pp. 27-8). Although this is not meant as an ideological statement, and Shiblak's language is free of Arab nationalist rhetoric, a clarification is in order, perhaps all the more so because of a recent programme on Al-Jazeera entitled 'The Arab Jews,' which depicted Zionism as having introduced the idea that Jews were an ethnic nation. In fact, Zionism

channelled this pre-existing belief into a political enterprise, arguing that if Jews are a nation they should have a country of their own.

Although, in terms of language and culture, Shiblak's characterisation of many (but not all) Middle Eastern Jewish communities holds, the Jews of the region did not historically consider themselves, nor were they considered by others, as Arabs. In the Ottoman Empire – the political entity immediately preceding the formation of modern states – different communities were grouped into *millets*, largely self-enclosed sectarian units with distinct internal laws. In many respects, especially that of internal cohesion, these *millets* approximated nations, though disaffected groups were occasionally allowed by the Sublime Porte (Ottoman court) to break away and form new millets. Until the intrusion of modern nationalism, however, it was a non sequitur to conclude that each millet or 'nation' needed a country of its own.

The introduction of European notions of nationalism in the 19th century led many (primarily Christian) intellectuals to construct an Arab identity that included all who spoke Arabic. This initiative gained momentum after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of several different states, many of which were founded expressly upon Arab nationalism. Even then, however, Jews differed from minorities such as (Levantine) Christians in that they rarely gravitated toward Arab nationalism. Where Jews did enter politics – as in Iraq – it was in the framework of local nationalism, Western-style liberalism, or communism, but rarely Arab nationalism. It is also well to recall that many people who are today considered Arab were until recently far removed from such a characterisation. In Morocco and Algeria, identity politics in the first half of the 20th century was not Arab in orientation. Even in Egypt, where the government was heavily involved in various Arab initiatives, such as the Arab League, a *popular* Arab identity did not emerge until after the Free Officers' Coup of 1952. The rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser, who edged out fellow Free Officer Muhammad Naguib in 1954 and achieved popular acclaim by nationalising – in the name of Arab nationalism – the Suez Canal in 1956, accelerated this trend.

Shiblak refers to the late Meir [Meer] Basri (died 2006) as 'the last president of the Iraqi Jewish community' (p. 11). This is not true, even by Basri's own account. After leaving Iraq in 1974 and settling in the United Kingdom, Basri was succeeded by Reuben Naji Elias, who in turn was succeeded by Abraham Joseph Saleh Shohet when Elias left Iraq for The Netherlands in 1998. [1]

Iraqi Jewry

On the eve of their exodus, there were up to 140,000 Jews in Iraq, [2] where they had maintained a presence for some 2,500 years. The majority resided in Baghdad, where they comprised over one-sixth of the capital's population, while other significant concentrations could be found in Basra and Mosul. Jews were well integrated into Iraqi society, being especially indispensable to the economy; the Jewish community was heavily involved in finance and import. Iraqi Jews also played an important role in the emerging Arabic literature of the period, and were the most prominent and skilled of Iraqi musicians.

Apart from the struggle between Arabs and Zionists in Palestine/Israel, which led to discriminatory employment measures against Iraqi Jews during the 1936-39 Arab rebellion in Palestine and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, two local events shook the Jewish community of Iraq in the 1940s. These were the *Farhud* of 1941 and the trial and public execution of Shafiq Adas in 1948. The main feature of the *Farhud*, which means 'breakdown of law and order,' was a massacre of Jews during a power vacuum. Although many Muslims were also killed, the violence largely targeted Jews, who suffered disproportionately and may have been targeted because of their perceived sympathy for the British reoccupation of Iraq. In addition to the deaths and injuries, [3] many Jewish-owned shops and businesses were looted and destroyed. Seven years later, the trial of Shafiq Adas, a prominent Jewish businessman accused of having sold scrap metal to Israel, made even the most prosperous and well-connected members of the Jewish community realise that they were not immune from anti-Zionist purges. Adas may well have been innocent, a scapegoat for Arab military failure in Palestine and a symbol at which Iraqis could vent their anger at Zionists, but he was found guilty and publicly hanged.

Generally, however, the position of Jews in Iraq was secure, and relations between Jews and their Muslim and Christian neighbours were not characterised by communal feuding. Yet in 1950, after rising illegal emigration (to Israel) and Western pressure on the Iraqi government, a law was promulgated allowing Iraqi Jews to forfeit their Iraqi nationality and emigrate. The reason such a law was considered somewhat liberal was the open secret that many of the emigrants would go to Israel, with which Iraq had just been engaged in war and refused to recognise.

In March 1950, then, the Iraqi government promulgated Law 1/1950, or the Denaturalisation Law, to facilitate the denaturalisation of those Jews wishing to emigrate from Iraq and go to Israel. 'The Iraqi government's main justification for the

law was the rising rate of illegal Jewish emigration' (p. 105). The Iraqi government had also been subjected to criticism in the Western media due to reports of the mistreatment of Jews. Most of these reports were exaggerated and some wholly untrue, having been deliberately fabricated by Zionist emissaries in Iraq in order to gain international support for the cause of evacuating Iraqi Jews. [4] The Iraqi government thought that the new law would allow those Jews unhappy in Iraq – at most some 7,000 – to leave, but that the vast majority would remain. 9 March 1950 was the day the Denaturalisation Law came into effect, and 8 March 1951 – one year later – was set as the deadline for prospective emigrants to register. [5]

When it became clear that the number of registrants was going to include virtually the entire Jewish community of Iraq, the Iraqi government decided that it had to take action to prevent the outflow of capital. Though most Iraqi Jews were comfortable – not affluent – those who were members of the higher socio-economic classes had much of the country's wealth concentrated in their hands. The loss of such wealth would have adversely affected the Iraqi economy. The fact that this capital would have made its way to Israel, a country whose founders had just expelled much of the native Arab population, presented an added political risk insofar as the Iraqi government was concerned. As a result, a day after the expiration of the 8 March 1951 deadline for registration, the Iraqi government announced that the assets of all registrants – who now included all but 5,000 Iraqi Jews – would be frozen. This Property-Freezing Law caused much consternation among the registrants. Indeed, one of the ironies of this entire affair is that the mass exodus of Iraqi Jewry might never have occurred had the Jews known that registration for emigration would mean the loss of their property and assets.

Between April 1950 and June 1951, five terrorist bomb attacks occurred against Jewish targets and places frequented by Jews in Baghdad. The attacks occurred on 8 April 1950, 14 January 1951, 14 March 1951 (according to Gat, 19 March 1951), 10 May 1951, and the night of 5-6 June 1951. The devices used were hand grenades, small bombs, or small explosives (with these planted in advance). Casualties were not high (Shiblak and Gat provide differing figures), but the attacks clearly unnerved the Jewish community. Few Jews signed up between 9 March 1950, when the Denaturalisation Law came into effect, and 8 April 1950, when the first bomb was thrown. Yet in the period between 9 April 1950 and the registration deadline of 8 March 1951, during which the second bombing occurred (on 14 January 1951), virtually the entire community of Iraqi Jews signed up for emigration. A few months later, almost all the Jews of Iraq were in Israel, the result of an airlift dubbed

'Operation Ezra and Nehemiah' [6] by Israel and its Zionist emissaries in Iraq. The identity of those who perpetrated the terrorist bombings, and the role these attacks might have played in prompting the exodus, are debated to this day. While Abbas Shiblak believes that the bombings were the work of Zionist emissaries who succeeded in their cherished aim of stampeding the Jews of Iraq to Israel, Moshe Gat argues that the attacks, which he presumes were the work of Iraqis of extreme Arab nationalist persuasion, did not spur the exodus. Gat believes that the lifting of martial law on 18 December 1949 and the enactment of the Denaturalisation Law in March 1950 enabled the majority of Iraqi Jews to leave a country in which they had grown to feel uncomfortable and even unsafe, especially as a result of events in the 1940s. These events included the *farhud*, the trial and execution of Shafiq Adas, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and a wave of arrests targeting Jews in October-November 1949 after the discovery of the illegal Zionist underground, an event which threw the Jewish community into disarray and forced the resignation of its head, who had largely failed to ameliorate his community's woes. [7]

Scholarship

In terms of their use of sources, Shiblak and Gat overlap in some ways but differ in others. Shiblak uses British and Iraqi archival material, as well as books and articles in English, Arabic and Hebrew. He has not made use of US archives, but one of his five appendices is the British Foreign Office's record of a report submitted to the US State Department by the US embassy in Baghdad. Gat uses British, Israeli, and American archival material, but no Arabic primary sources and only two Arabic secondary sources.

As mentioned, Shiblak has included five important documents as appendices. These include the texts of both the Denaturalisation Law as well as the Property-Freezing Law, which consists of three sections. This is useful, given that both laws are referred to extensively throughout the book. The other three appendices are British Foreign Office reports. Two set forth British officials' views: Appendix 3 regarding the Denaturalisation Bill, and Appendix 4 regarding proposals by various parties that Iraq and Israel conduct a population exchange involving Palestinians and Iraqi Jews. The third British Foreign Office document – referred to above – is a copy of a report sent by the US embassy in Baghdad to the US State Department. The document provides an overview of the Jewish community in Iraq and discusses which sectors might be inclined to emigrate.

What little new material has been added to Shiblak's book consists largely of references to the work of Nur Masalha, who has endeavoured to prove the existence of clear Zionist/Israeli plans to expel the Palestinians, and that of Yehouda Shenhav, who points out Israeli hypocrisy in dealing with the issue of reparations both for Palestinians as well as for Jews from Arab countries (pp. 156-8, and 164-5). Though valuable in its own right, such scholarship has little bearing on the actual exodus of Iraqi Jews. Indeed, the often exploitive views held by many Zionist leaders – including Ben-Gurion – concerning Palestinian Arabs (whose expulsion was deemed necessary to de-Arabise the country) as well as Jews from Arab countries (whose immigration was required to bolster the new state's Jewish identity, as well as provide much-needed manual labour), do not constitute proof that there was a plan to stampede the Jews of Iraq to Israel.

Shiblak has corrected at least one apparent mistake: the name of a Jewish youth lionised by the Iraqi opposition – including the nationalist Yaqtha newspaper, unofficial mouthpiece of the (anti-Jewish) Istiqlal Party – for having been killed in an anti-government demonstration in 1946. The man's name has been changed from Shamran Olwan to Shaol Tuweq. Later in the same sentence, however, he is still – confusingly – referred to as Olwan (p. 76).

Specific Criticisms

In his review of the earlier edition of Shiblak's book, Gat pointed out a number of factual errors. Before discussing major issues, it is useful to have a look at a few of these errors, especially as they have not been rectified:

Shlomo Hillel, an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to Palestine and was later sent back to Iraq as a Zionist emissary on behalf of the State of Israel, may indeed have made several trips to Iraq in order to prepare the ground for his mission. Yet he arrived in Iraq to take up his actual post as an emissary of the Mossad on 27 April, after the first bombing, and not on 29 March, before the 8 April bombing. This is significant, as it would seem to preclude his involvement in the first attack. [8]

In its earlier incarnation, the Mossad was not the intelligence outfit it is known as today, but an organisation which facilitated the illegal emigration of Jews from various countries, including Iraq, to Palestine and then Israel. It was dissolved in 1951, after several operations – such as the exodus of Jews from Yemen and Iraq – had ended. [9]

There seems to be some confusion as to the origins of the term 'Cruel Zionism' (p. 151, 159), used to describe ruthless acts, including terrorist bombings, meant to force Jews to emigrate from Arab countries. Shiblak claims that the term has been attributed to Israeli PM David Ben-Gurion, while Gat counters that Ben-Gurion never used this term. [10] The attribution would appear to come from the 22 February issue of Jeune Afrique, the French-language newsweekly, which Marion Woolfson cites as her source for the term. [11] It is unclear, however, just who attributed this term to Ben-Gurion, and whether he employed it in reference to terrorism by Zionists against Jews. We will revisit this issue of *Jeune Afrique* again below when discussing another intriguing statement seemingly attributed to Ben-Gurion or Pinhas Lavon.

A significant lacuna in Shiblak's account is the complete absence of background on the discovery, in 1951, of several arms caches in synagogues and a few other locations. Gat explains that in the aftermath of the *farhud*, a group of Jewish youths set up an underground self-defence organisation.[12] Later, their activities were taken over by Zionist emissaries, who provided them with training and arms, yet also infused their mission with a Zionist orientation geared toward organising emigration and disseminating Zionist propaganda among Iraqi Jews.[13]

Soon, the Palmach, which was part of the Haganah (the precursor to the Israel Defence Forces), assumed command of this Iraqi outfit. This is a clear violation of Iraqi sovereignty, and may in fact constitute a link with the eventual bombings. Indeed, the British Foreign Office doubted that this organisation's purpose was strictly self-defence.[14] Yet this should not be taken for granted; Shiblak comments on the discovery of weapons in synagogues and safe-houses as if it were *self-evident* that these weapons had been stockpiled for terrorist bombings, and that the mere existence of such stockpiles proves the culpability of Zionist emissaries in the bombings. This ignores two developments. The first – cited above – is that following the 1941 *farhud*, when many Jews felt vulnerable, a band of young men decided to create an outfit that would defend the Jewish community from any future violence. The second development concerns storage. Whereas previously, weapons had been kept in private homes, once registration was underway it became apparent that many Iraqi Jews – including local members of the Zionist underground – were about to emigrate. Zionist leaders decided to sell some of their weaponry and stockpile the rest in specific locations, generally synagogues.[15]

The new edition of Shiblak's book includes a foreword by Iraq historian Peter Sluglett, author – with Marion Farouk-Sluglett – of *Iraq since 1958*, and the earlier *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*. Sluglett writes, 'Shiblak ... shows that the bomb attacks in Baghdad against Jewish lives and properties in 1951 were organised by Zionist activists, sent from Israel with the sanction of senior Israeli politicians' (p. 25). In fact, Shiblak shows no such thing, although he writes confidently that 'information about the bombs in Baghdad confirms the responsibility of the Zionist movement'(p. 155).

Much of the information to which Shiblak refers is culled from David Hirst's *The Gun and the Olive Branch*,[16] and Marion Woolfson's *Prophets in Babylon*.[17] These two authors (especially Hirst) rely in large part on a 20 April 1966 article in Israeli politician Uri Avnery's newspaper Haolam Hazeh, as well as a 9 November 1972 article in the Israeli journal *The Black Panther*, for their conclusions. Yet neither Hirst nor Woolfson presents actual evidence of Zionist involvement in the Iraq bombings. Immediately after claiming that there is information confirming Zionist responsibility for the bombings, Shiblak – paraphrasing Hirst – notes that the Haolam Hazeh article is based in large part on the 'testimony' (p. 155) of Yehuda Tajjar, a Zionist emissary arrested by the Iraqi authorities. It remains unclear whether this refers to Yehuda Tajjar's court testimony in Iraq, or a later interview in Israel after his release. Tajjar did not confess to the Iraqi court that he or his associates were responsible for the bombings; he admitted only to being an Israeli spy, and identified a British member of the Zionist ring named Robert Rodney.[18] Indeed, no claim of responsibility by Tajjar for the bombings is presented by Hirst or Woolfson in their coverage of the Haolam Hazeh article.

In an interview conducted in 2006, Tajjar maintains that the Zionist emissaries did not receive instructions to conduct the bombings, but that he believes Yusuf Khabbaza [19] perpetrated the last one or two bombings of his own accord. According to Tajjar, this was hinted at by Yusuf Basri, arrested sometime after Tajjar was caught. Tajjar spoke with Basri before the latter was executed. [20] Significantly, Tajjar also cites a conversation with Khabbaza's widow years later. 'She said she'd asked him [if he had thrown the bombs] and he'd replied that if a bomb were thrown while we were in prison, it would have proved that it was not us who bombed the Masauda Shemtov.' [21] The attack on the Mas'uda Shemtov synagogue [14 January 1951] was the second of the five, and resulted in the deaths of five Jews according to Gat, though Shiblak lists the casualties as two Muslims killed and several Jews injured. Tajjar continues: 'She implied that

he on his own initiative, without orders from Israel, did it in order to save us.' [22] Tajjar himself also believes that Khabbaza, who remained at large after the others' arrest, perpetrated the last one or two attacks as an attempt to convince the Iraqi authorities that the Zionist emissaries in their custody had not perpetrated the earlier (three) attacks. 'He was an activist. He always wanted to do things. Thinking that it would help us, I believe that he did it.' [23]

Given Tajjar's role during this critical period and his knowledge of those involved in the Zionist underground, his claims deserve a measure of credibility. It should be noted, however, that if Khabbaza's aim was truly to deflect accusations directed against imprisoned Zionist comrades, he would have perpetrated only the fifth bombing. Tajjar was arrested after the fourth bombing, which occurred on 10 May 1951. Gat cites 22 May as the date of Tajjar's arrest, [24] while Tajjar refers to 25 May. [25] And it was only with the arrest of Tajjar, together with that of Mordechai Ben-Porat, that the Zionist ring began to collapse. This would mean that only the fifth and final bombing (5-6 June 1951), would have occurred during Tajjar's incarceration.

As mentioned, the 9 November 1972 issue of *The Black Panther*, the monthly organ of the Oriental Jewish party of the same name in 1970s Israel, is also relied on by Hirst and Woolfson. The full (translated) text of the article on Iraqi Jewry, which uses some of the material which appeared in *Haolam Hazeh*, was published in *Documents from Israel 1967-1973*, edited by Uri Davis and Norton Mezvinsky. [26] The article revolves principally around the testimony of two Iraqi Jews in Israel who believe that the bombs were thrown by Zionist emissaries. Neither individual saw the assailants, though one was injured by an attack. The article does little more than prove that many Iraqi Jews – whatever their stance vis-à-vis Zionism – were convinced that Zionist agents were behind the bombings.

To begin with, there were no eyewitnesses to the crimes. Unlike Gat, [27] Shiblak does not mention that Shlomo Salih Shalom (according to Gat, Shalom Salih), [28] who initially confessed to throwing the bombs in the last three attacks along with Yusuf Basri and Yusuf Khabbaza, later told the court that he was tortured and that his confession was extracted under duress. This was also the assessment of the US ambassador to Iraq, Edward S. Crocker. [29] Interestingly, Shalom, Basri and Khabbaza were charged with the last three attacks, for which they were found guilty – Shalom and Yusuf Basri were hanged, while Yusuf Khabbaza was never apprehended – but nobody was charged with the first two attacks. This was despite

an apparent reference by Iraqi police to a report that one of the perpetrators had been captured. [30]

As mentioned, most Iraqi Jews believed that Zionist emissaries were behind the bombs. This belief is well-known and attested to by both Shiblak and Gat. [31] Indeed, many held Mordechai Ben-Porat (Morad Qazzaz) personally responsible for the affair, endowing him with the sobriquet 'Morad Abu al-Knabel, or 'Morad, Father of the Bombs.' [32] Ben-Porat himself, in strenuously denying such charges, freely admitted their popularity among Iraqi Jews. [33] Shiblak refers to Israeli journalist Baruch Nadil, who accused Ben-Porat of being behind the bombings. Yet Shiblak should have mentioned that Nadil retracted his statements some way into a defamation suit filed by Ben-Porat, as pointed out by Gat. [34] However, Ben-Porat never sued Uri Avnery or anyone else for the accusatory article in *Haolam Hazeh*, [35] despite denying the charge; nor did he sue another man – an Iraqi Jew in Israel – who made similar allegations against Ben-Porat in letters to the Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Justice, in which he also expressed the hope that Ben-Porat would prosecute him. [36]

Although Shiblak airs several rumours concerning the identity of the bombers, he does not mention the rumour 'that Major Jamil Mamo, a Christian officer in the Iraqi army, had been arrested on suspicion of perpetrating the crime in the Mas'uda Shemtov synagogue [the second bombing].' [37] Gat believes the bombers were probably extreme nationalists of the Istiqlal variety, and mentions that the Israeli newspaper Davar, which ran an article on this rumour, claimed that 'three explosive devices of the kind thrown into the synagogue' [38] were found by police in the home of Mamo, whom some Iraqi Jews in Israel began to suspect was a member of the Istiqlal Party. The UK ambassador also cited a rumour in the Iraqi bazaars that an Iraqi army officer had been arrested, but that the British embassy was unable to confirm this. [39] Ultimately, this rumour, like others, was never proved.

It is significant, however, that the British diplomatic officials in Iraq came to believe the Iraqi version of events; Shiblak quotes a memo in which it is stated that the Iraqi investigation 'left no room for doubt who were behind the bombs' (p. 153). Curiously, Gat does not refer to this quote, and attempts to argue that though the British believed that the trial was properly conducted and that there was circumstantial evidence pointing to Zionist responsibility, they did not explicitly state their agreement with the guilty verdict for those charged with throwing bombs. [40] Years later, former CIA operative Wilbur Crane Eveland, who was

in Iraq at the time, referred in his book *Ropes of Sand* to 'evidence' brought to the US embassy by Iraqi authorities that proved Zionist culpability in the bombings, without elaborating (quoted in Shiblak, p. 154).

What emerges from the above is that the theory of Zionist culpability clearly is not implausible; it just lacks hard evidence. Certainly, there is circumstantial evidence, both on the regional as well as the Iraqi level, to support such a contention. In 1954, a few years after the exodus of Iraqi Jews, Israeli agents in Egypt together with local Egyptian Zionists engaged in several terrorist bombings of US and Western targets, including cinema theatres. This later became known as the 'Lavon Affair,' named after the Israeli Defence Minster who was framed for the bombings. Israel's intention was to sully Egypt's reputation and dissuade the West from cooperating with the new Free Officers' regime. Years earlier, in 1940, the Haganah had blown up the Patria ship carrying Jewish refugees in order to prevent the Jews from being deported to Mauritius. [41]

There have also been accounts, many by Iraqi Jews, of highly suspicious activities on the part of Zionists in Iraq. Flyers urging Jews to leave Iraq appeared in large numbers just after the attacks. Unusually, some had printed on them the exact time of day they were allegedly created; perhaps this was a deliberate means of parrying accusations of responsibility for a bombing which occurred later than the time indicated. [42] Marion Woolfson cites an interviewee, an Iraqi Jew in Israel named Eliahu Yusef, who claims that a poor Iraqi Jew was paid by Zionist emisarries to impersonate a Muslim and assault the rabbi of Zakho, after which all the Jews fled that town. [43] Naeim Giladi, an Iraqi Jewish member of the Zionist underground who, due to imprisonment and then escape from Iraq, no longer had any role when the bombings occurred, argues that they were the work of Zionist agents in his book Ben *Gurion's Scandals: How the Haganah and the Mossad Eliminated Jews*.

Perhaps the most damning statement to emerge from the swirl of controversy and rumour is, 'This method of operation was not invented for Egypt. It was first tried in Iraq' (p. 159), attributed to an unnamed Israeli Defence Minister in the aftermath of the Lavon affair. Shiblak cites Woolfson as his source, who in turn cites the 22 February 1978 edition of *Jeune Afrique*, the French-language newsweekly, as her source for this statement. [44] The identity of the minister is not provided. Two figures served as Minister of Defence in 1950s Israel, Ben-Gurion from 1949 until the end of 1953 and again from early 1955 until 1963, and Pinhas Lavon from the

end of 1953 until early 1955. It would be interesting to find out more about the author and context of this statement.

Strong suits

Shiblak makes a convincing case that an agreement between Zionist emissary Shlomo Hillel and Iraqi Prime Minister Taufiq al-Suwaidi concerning the evacuation of Jews who wanted to leave had a major impact on the Jewish community. When it became known that the highest echelons of the Iraqi government were secretly negotiating with a representative of Israel, which Iraq officially did not recognise, this served to increase the stature of the Zionists in the eyes of the Jewish community. Ordinary Iraqi Jews began to look for advice and guidance from Zionist activists; the latter quickly displaced traditional leaders, already discredited to some extent by their failure to convince the Iraqi government to lift various restrictions on Jews imposed after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. 'Zionist supporters, who previously had lacked influence in the community, suddenly became people to be feared, and consulted' (p. 160).

Even in Gat's account, the encroaching power of the Zionists becomes clear. In late 1949, Sassoon Khaddouri, head of the community, was edged out partly because of his failure to procure the release of youths arrested on charges of Zionism. The Zionists were able to exploit general Jewish dissatisfaction with (mostly post-1948) discriminatory measures against Jews – such as the firing of Jewish employees from certain government ministries and state-run ventures – and combine this with many Jews' concern over the anti-Zionist arrests. The Zionists initiated a successful boycott of kosher meat, the taxes of which benefitted the Jewish community, in order to punish the Jewish leadership. Khaddouri was made to look impotent and resigned. The Zionists – emissaries and their local protégés – were able to get Yehezkel Shemtov (Hasqil Shamtoub), who was more amenable to their concerns, elected as acting head. [45] Later, when Shemtov had a falling out with Zionist emissary Mordechai Ben-Porat, this led to Shemtov's resignation. [46]

Shiblak establishes that the bombings were a major – if not the decisive – factor in prompting Jews to emigrate. Contrary to Gat's assertion, [47] Shiblak does not entertain notions of a conspiracy, whether between Iraq and Israel or an Iraq-UK-Israel scenario. 'There is no evidence ... that the exodus came as a result of a secret official agreement between [the] Iraqi and the Israeli governments' (p. 168). Gat does come up with a few inconsistencies and errors in Shiblak's account, but his findings do not devalue Shiblak's argument concerning the effect of the bombings.

For example, Gat's assertion that the rush to register following the first bombing was not indicative of panic, but rather the result of a long-awaited green light issued by the Zionist emissaries to the Jewish community, remains unconvincing. [48] Indeed, if anything, the timing of such a green light, the day after the 8 April bombing, might be deemed suspicious. Gat also claims that a single bombing would not have prompted 86,000 people to sign up between 8 April 1950, the date of the first bombing, and 14 January 1951, the date of the second bombing. [49] He argues that earlier bombings in the 1930s did not precipitate any kind of mass flight. [50] Yet this overlooks the fact that in the 1930s Iraqi Jews were faced neither with a government facilitating their emigration nor an organised Zionist network actively seeking their settlement in a country willing to grant them automatic citizenship. In the 1930s and 1940s (following the *farhud*), a few wealthy merchants with international connections did leave for various destinations, and some newly Zionist youths made their way to Palestine, but the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Jews stayed put. In 1950-51, by contrast, the Iraqi government had established a mechanism for legal emigration, while the 1950 Israeli Law of Return, which granted automatic Israeli citizenship to Jews, guaranteed a new home for all prospective immigrants to Israel, rich or poor.

According to Gat, Shiblak errs in asserting that 7,600 Jews registered in the two weeks following the second bombing, which occurred on 14 January 1951. Gat claims that British Foreign Office records indicate that the 7,600 figure applies to the period 14-27 February. [51] He argues that the rush to register in those two weeks was due to the approaching 8 March deadline for registration, and not the January bombing. Yet Gat fails to see that any rush to register before the deadline would only have occurred had there been a newly pressing reason to emigrate. In other words, the approach of the deadline would not in and of itself sow panic. Moreover, it is unlikely that the general malaise experienced by the Jewish community as a result of on-again, off-again official discrimination, including the wave of arrests in the wake of the October-November discovery of the Zionist ring, would be sufficient to induce tens of thousands of people to sign up for emigration.

In covering the issue of registration following both the first and second bomb attacks, Gat consistently ignores the contagious nature of hysteria. Such hysteria could have easily accounted for growing numbers of registrants even as a specific bomb attack faded into the background. That, after all, is the nature of a phenomenon that becomes self-generating.

Discrepancies

The major discrepancy between the accounts of Shiblak and Gat concerns the deadline set by the Iraqi government for registration on the part of those Jews wishing to emigrate. Shiblak claims that the 8 March 1951 deadline was extended (p. 162), but does not elaborate. Gat asserts that there was no extension of the deadline for registration, and that the only extension given was for the departure of those who had already registered. [52] The significance of an extension for registration lies in the dates of the last three of the five bombings. Three of the five bombs went off *after* the expiration of the 8 March deadline, by which time only about 5,000 Jews had chosen to remain in Iraq. Gat argues that this effectively invalidates the assumption that the bombs were meant to intimidate Jews into emigrating. After all, these three attacks occurred when there were very few Jews left to intimidate, and all channels of legal emigration had closed. If Shiblak's contention concerning an extension is correct, his reasoning as to why the last three attacks took place would be strengthened immeasurably. Shiblak writes that 'The [14] March 1951 attack on the US Information Centre was probably an attempt to portray the Iraqis as anti-American and to gain more support for the Zionist cause in the United States' (p. 163). He goes on to say that 'The last two attacks, in May and June 1951, were directed against Jewish firms. They were probably intended to put pressure on well-established members of the community, who were the last to emigrate' (p. 163). If there was no extension, as Gat argues, the emigration of wealthy Iraqi Jews would still likely have been desired by Zionist emissaries, but these latter would have known that any action after the expiration of the deadline would be too little too late.

Shiblak depicts Israelis as unanimously in favor of the evacuation of Iraqi Jews. This assessment lacks the nuance provided by Gat's careful investigation of the matter. While Ben-Gurion was often eager to accelerate immigration of all Jews to Israel, many other members of his cabinet were not, arguing that the nascent state could not absorb a large influx of people. And, contrary to Shiblak's assertion (p. 122), Gat points out that Iraqi Jews were not viewed as being on a par with Eastern European Jews. [53] This applies both to culture as well as the issue of political exigency; Gat writes of a pervasive fear among Israeli government officials in 1950-51 that the Iron Curtain would once again be lowered over Romania and Poland, and emigration of Jews would be halted. [54]

Indeed, Shiblak seems unaware that relations between Israel and its underground emissaries in Iraq grew increasingly strained in 1950-51. Ben-Porat and his

associates were becoming desperate as a result of the limbo in which many Iraqi Jews were forced to languish. Having quit their jobs and sold their possessions for a fraction of their worth, many of these people were fast running out of money. More and more destitute rural Jews began to arrive in Baghdad, and large numbers of people were housed in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Israel kept dithering, and the emissaries in Iraq began to think that their entire project might fail, and that they would have caused the impoverishment of the Iraqi Jewish community for naught. At one point, Ben-Porat complained, 'Everything we built has been destroyed ... Why should we sit here and watch the death of chained Jews whom we chained with our own hands.' [55]

It may be that some of these emissaries decided to engage in terrorism of their own accord, and not at the behest of Israel. We have already explored this possibility in a completely different scenario, namely that explained by Yehuda Tajjar, but it is worth considering another scenario. Gat cites a proposal made in 1949 by a leading Zionist emissary – frustrated at Iraqi Jews' indifference and even hostility to Zionism – that would have Zionists 'throwing several hand-grenades for intimidation into cafes with a largely Jewish clientele, as well as leaflets threatening the Jews and demanding their expulsion from [Iraq].' [56] His proposal was categorically rejected by the Mossad and he relented. Perhaps, however, this idea was later resurrected.

If so, it would likely signify a difference in objectives – and perhaps perpetrators – between the first two attacks, which occurred when registration was still underway, and the last three attacks, which occurred after the deadline for registration had expired and most Iraqi Jews were in the process of leaving. Thousands of Jews who had registered to leave were still in Iraq when the final bombing occurred on 5-6 June and it would be more than a month before the exodus was completed. In such a scenario, the objective of the last three attacks would have been not to prompt more Jews to register for emigration (since according to Gat the deadline had expired), but to induce Israel to accelerate the evacuation of those who had already registered. The idea might have been to oblige Israel to do this without regard for its immigrant entry quotas, and to make haste, as the Iraqi government might change its mind and bar Jews from leaving.

Gat himself thinks that the Israelis raised entry quotas and became more amenable to absorbing the entire Iraqi Jewish community at once – something they had previously resisted – as a reaction to the second bombing (14 January 1951), and

the Iraqi government's announcement on 17 January that 31 May would be the final date for the departure of those Iraqi Jews who had registered. [57] Yet even at this point the quotas evidently were not high enough, and those who had registered were not fully evacuated until early July. Throughout, the emissaries seem to have felt that Israel was tarrying, and that a capricious Iraqi government might at any time clamp down on the entire project. Admittedly, Gat mentions one reason that would militate against the emissaries perpetrating the final bombing. The Iraqi government had recently broken the Zionist ring (which it had discovered in 1949) when the fifth and final bomb went off, and any rash action could have further endangered Zionist operatives in the country. [58] (According to Tajjar, of course, the arrests were precisely what compelled Khabbaza to perpetrate the fifth attack, but let us not stray from the current scenario). Even if Gat's argument is true, it would have applied only to the fifth and final bombing, not the third and fourth, when Zionist emissaries still enjoyed freedom of movement in the country. If the emissaries had wished to pressure Israel, they could have carried out the third and fourth attacks without undue fear of being caught. It was only in the period between the fourth and fifth attacks that the Zionist ring was broken. Though this might have led the emissaries to lay low, it is also conceivable that they had long since become consumed by their mission and now, what with their cover blown, felt that they had nothing to lose.

Concluding Thoughts

It is likely that we will never know for sure who the perpetrators of the attacks were. As for the final word on the effect of the bombs, it is distressing to note that neither Shiblak nor Gat saw fit to conduct a survey among surviving Iraqi Jewish emigrants in order to ascertain, in the emigrants' own words, their reasons for leaving Iraq. This would have been of inestimable value in determining whether or not the bombings were in fact the main reason for the exodus. Without evidence, Iraqi Jews are not necessarily more qualified than anyone else to opine as to the identity of the terrorists responsible for the bombs. Yet who could be more qualified than Iraqi Jews to explain which factors impelled them to leave Iraq for Israel?! There is much anecdotal evidence to support the contention that the bombings – whoever perpetrated them – were the decisive factor behind Iraqi Jews' emigration. Personal testimonies to this effect abound. Yet, inexcusably, there has apparently been no organised effort to collate such testimonies within the framework of a scientific survey. Though Shiblak cannot prove that Zionist emissaries from Israel were responsible for the bombings, he succeeds in demonstrating that these bombings

were a major factor in the flight of Iraqi Jewry. Had Shiblak included a scientifically conducted survey of explanations provided by Iraqi Jews as to why they left, results might have proved that the bombings were the overriding reason – and not simply a major factor – behind the exodus.

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Notes

[1] Basri 1999.

[2] See Shiblak 2005, p. 163 for details, including statistics in footnote 2.

[3] Shiblak 2005, p. 71, cites an [Iraqi] Official Investigative Committee which listed the deaths of 110 persons, of whom 28 were Muslims, and put the figure of injured at 204. The head of the Jewish community put the figures at 130 dead (including 25 missing) and 405 injured. Shiblak

points out that these figures are likely more accurate than higher ones, which may have been inflated by Zionist polemicists.

[4] See Shiblak 2005, p. 99, also Gat 1997, pp. 52-6.

[5] While Shiblak cites 8 March, Gat (1987, 1997, p. 144) initially uses 9 March, until his 2000 article, in which he also uses 8 March.

[6] See Gat 1997, p. 101, especially footnote 84.

[7] See, for example, Gat 1987, and Gat 1997, pp. 192-5.

[8] Gat 1987.

[9] Gat 1987.

[10] Gat 1987.

[11] Woolfson 1980, p. 223. Woolfson also cites its usage in the 20 April issue of *Haolam Hazeh,* though without reference to Ben-Gurion. 'Twenty-five years ago, there were whispers about "Cruel Zionism" but only now is the most secret affair in the history of the State of Israel revealed' (quoted in Woolfson 1980, p. 190, attribution p. 223). The term reappears in the 9 November issue of *The Black Panther* (see Davis and Mezvinsky 1975, p. 131) and Hirst 1984, p. 155.

[12] Gat 1997, p. 25.

[13] Gat 1997, pp. 26-7.

[14] Gat 1997, p. 190.

[15] Gat 1997, pp. 165-6.

[16] Hirst 1984, pp. 155-64.

[17] Woolfson 1980, pp. 182-201, especially 189-201.

[18] Gat 1997, p. 170-71, and Neslen 2006, p. 65, in his interview with Tajjar (Tajar), pp. 58-66.

[19] Here (Neslen 2006, p. 163) rendered as 'Josef Habaza,' and more often appearing as 'Yosef Habaza,' in line with Hebrew-influenced transliteration. Yusuf Basri becomes Yosef Basri.

[20] Neslen 2006, p. 63. Tajjar notes that Yusuf Khabbaza's real name is Yosef Bet Halachmi. (Many Zionist operatives in Iraq and elsewhere had codenames.)

[21] Neslen 2006, p. 63. Brackets in the original.

[22] Neslen 2006, p. 63.

[23] Neslen 2006, p. 63. Tajjar, who concedes that he would have perpetrated the bombings had he believed that it would save Jewish lives or encourage Jewish emigration, asserts that the earlier attacks were carried out by the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood.

[24] Gat 1997, p. 169.

[25] Neslen 2006, p. 62.

[26] Davis and Mezvinsky 1975, pp. 126-33.

[27] Gat 1997, pp. 180-1.

[28] See Gat 2000. Other sources (e.g. Giladi 1998) also refer to him as Shalom Salih. Earlier, Gat had transliterated Salih incorrectly as Salah (see Gat 1997, pp. 171-3). The incorrect transliteration of Arabic names and terms is one of the features of Gat's writing, due to his over-reliance on Hebrew sources.

[29] Gat 1997, 180-81.

[30] Gat 1997, p. 179.

[31] Gat 1997, p. 177.

[32] Giladi 1998. Knabel (Qanabel) means bombs in Arabic.

[33] Woolfson 1980, p. 198.

[34] Gat 1987.

[35] Giladi 1998.

[36] Woolfson 1980, p. 195. Ben-Porat called this latter 'small fry.'

[37] Gat, 1997, p. 180.

[38] Gat 1997, p. 180.

[39] Gat 1997, pp. 179-80.

[40] Gat 1997, p. 181.

[41] There are too many books and articles covering these two events to list here. For the sources cited in this bibliography, consult Gat 1997, p. 178, Hirst 1984, pp. 164-70, and Woolfson 1980, pp. 201-7.

[42] Giladi 1998.

[43] Woolfson 1980, p. 195.

[44] Woolfson 1980, p. 223. In Woolfson, the quote can be found on page 199.

[45] Gat 1997, pp. 61-5. In his 2006 Arabic-language book A'lam al-Yahud fi'l 'Iraq al-Hadith (p. 114), Meer Basri asserts that Khadduri had been spurned by the government, which did not forgive him for his role in the 1948 anti-government uprising known as the wathba. According to Basri, in 1949 the government pressured Khadduri indirectly to resign. It would appear that Khadduri was between a rock and a hard place during this critical period.

[46] Gat 1997, p. 118.

[47] Gat 1987: 'In short, [Shiblak] sees a kind of conspiracy between Israel, which was interested in the emigration of Iraqi Jewry for its own reasons (economic growth, expansion) and the Iraqi authorities, for whom the departure of the Jews provided an opportunity to line their pockets.'

[48] Gat 1997, p. 180.

[49] Gat 2000.

[50] Gat 1997, pp. 187-8.

[51] Gat 1987, also Gat 1997, p. 184. In his *Israel Affairs* article (Gat 2000), the author has revised the dates slightly, which are now 15-28 February.

[52] Gat 1987.

[53] Gat 1997, p. 194.

[54] Gat 1997, p. 103, 110.

[55] Quoted in Gat 1997, p. 185.

[56] Yudke Rabinovitz quoted in Gat 1997, p. 61.

[57] Gat 1997, pp. 194-5.

[58] Gat 1997, p. 186.