BOOK REVIEW

Hijra aw Tahjir. Zuruf wa Mulabasat Hijrat Yahud al-‘Iraq [Voluntary or Forced Displacement: Conditions of Iraqi Jewish Migration], by Abbas Shiblak, Beirut, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2015, 308 pp.

Some history books have their own ‘special’ histories. Abbas Shiblak’s book is one of them. It was published for the first time in 1986 under the title The Lure of Zion. The Case of Iraqi Jews (London: Saqi). In 2005, a second edition was published under a new title: Iraqi Jews. A History of Mass Exodus. Finally, in 2015, an Arabic version of the book was published by the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut (translated by the author himself). The title was again revised to: Hijra aw Tahjir. Zuruf wa Mulabasat Hijrat Yahud al-‘Iraq (i.e., Voluntary or Forced Displacement: Conditions of Iraqi Jewish Migration).

One of the main additions to the later versions of the book involves the contribution of the ‘new’ Israeli historians, including Avi Shlaim and Benny Morris, to the understanding of the Nakba. Additionally, the emergence of post-colonial studies in Palestinian studies, such as the works of Yehuda Shenhav and Nur Masalha, has had a significant influence on the second and third editions (chapter 5). The recurring updating of the book is in itself a clear indication of the constant growing interest in the topic of Jews leaving Arab countries en masse between the 1950s and the 1970s, and in particular in its relationship with the expulsion of Palestinians roughly at the same time. Every version of Shiblak’s book deserves reading for the reasons exposed in the present review.

In its different versions, the overall structure and thesis of the book are the same. It is composed of a short introduction, five core chapters, a conclusion, five appendices, a bibliography and an index. In the first chapter, the author offers a demographic overview of the Jews in Iraq at the turn of the 20th century. The impact of modern education such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle on socio-economic transformations within the community is also discussed. In chapter 2, Shiblak examines Iraqi Jewish hostile responses to Zionism and British rule, and concludes that none of these elements can explain the rise of feelings of suspicion among the Iraqi population. To the question, then, of ‘what caused the suspicion and hostility?’ Shiblak provides answers in chapter 3. He locates the turning point in 1948, when the State of Israel was created and major demonstrations against it took place in Iraq (wathba). By allying with the right-wing anti-Jewish Istiqlal Party, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said first intended to crush the growing internal opposition. But the defeat of the Iraqi army in Palestine and the news of systematic expulsion of Palestinians from their lands further fuelled the already mounting anti-Jewish feelings stirred by the Istriqlal Party. In the fourth chapter, the author explores the context in which the denaturalization law of 1950 addressed to the Jews who wished to leave Iraq was passed. He examines from different angles the hypothesis of a ‘transfer scheme’ supported by the British and the Zionists. The scheme was intended to relocate expelled Palestinians in Iraq, while Iraqi Jews would be absorbed in Israel. While Shiblak writes that evidence is too scarce to contend that the transfer scheme may have directly influenced the passing of the law, he nevertheless concludes that the British, Israeli and American pressure was decisive in the process. Finally, chapter 5 is devoted to the infamous and, to this day, unsolved series of bombings that took place in Baghdad following the passing of the law, and how it has affected the final departure of Jews from Iraq. The author carefully suggests Zionist involvement in the bombings.
The main question Shiblak addresses is the following: why did the vast majority of Jews leave Iraq in 1950–51 and settle in Israel, even though the community had been well-integrated and deeply rooted in the country? In this respect, the change of titles throughout the history of the book is significant. In *Lure of Zion. The Case of the Iraqi Jews*, the title only suggests that migration is involved, while by using the word ‘exodus’ in the second version of 2005 (*Iraqi Jews. A History of Mass Exodus*) the author more clearly identifies his thesis. Similarly, in the Arabic version of 2015, the title *Hijra aw Tahjir* (Voluntary or Forced Displacement) directly addresses the question. The later versions, then, more clearly reflect on the content and goal of the book.

The author offers a complex and multilayered answer to the question. And in order to do so, he provides a set of hypotheses, divided between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. The former term is used to define the negative features of life in one’s country which drive an individual to leave it, while the latter refers to the opportunities attracting the same individual to another country. Shiblak concludes that push factors have played a smaller role than in the case of Jews from other Arab states, because ‘the Iraqis were better integrated into their society’. Pull factors, Shiblak continues – in this case, the ideological Zionist attraction to Palestine and later Israel – neither can explain the exodus, as ‘Iraqi Jews were skeptical or antagonistic to Zionism’. In other words, neither push nor pull factors are satisfactory to Shiblak, who sees in the creation of the State of Israel, followed by repeated Israeli and American mingling in Iraqi Jewish affairs, but mainly in the 1950–51 bombings, the main factors that eventually ‘helped many Jews to make up their minds’.

One of the questions this book raises is that of causality in history in general, and in the history of migration in particular. Why do people leave and when? Which factors lead them to take such a decision? To determine which factors are decisive and which are not is a very difficult task. For some observers and witnesses, the 1941 Farhud – when several hundreds of Jews were murdered in the streets of Baghdad – announced the ‘beginning of the end’ for the Jewish community in Iraq. They tend to see in the rise of pan-Arab nationalism, as well as in Iraq’s rapprochement with Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, a direct threat to the security of Jews in Iraq. Accordingly, they see in the creation of the State of Israel and the passing of the denaturalization law an opportunity to escape the threat by becoming citizens of a country where they would be safe. Shiblak shows, however, that a time of relative freedom and liberalization followed the end of the Second World War, and Jews felt safe again. For this reason, he does not see 1941 as a cause for departure. He argues that the position of Iraqi Jews began to deteriorate after May 1948 and that the events following the passing of the law in 1950 further stimulated Jewish emigration. But more recently, on the question of ‘what motivated the Iraqi state to support the denaturalization law’, Orit Bashkin has suggested that in the light of high tensions in Iraq after 1948, Jews were exposed to the threat of new attacks. The state being seriously ‘anxious to avoid another Farhud’ (Bashkin 2012, 93), found in the passing of the law an opportunity to get rid of the problem. In other words, if the law were an attempt to avoid a new international scandal, the Farhud can also be considered an indirect cause for the departure of the Jews. Here, Bashkin’s and Shiblak’s explanations are not fundamentally contradictory, but the way causality is established differs.

The Jewish emigration from Yemen is also a very peculiar case in the history of Jews in Arab lands. Its first emigration to Palestine dates back to the late 19th century already, while in the rest of Arab lands, mass emigration to Palestine took place only after the State of Israel was created. The phenomenon is all the more interesting as Yemeni Jews were extremely remote from Zionist influences. Recently, Ari Ariel offers a new perspective on this by applying the notion of cumulative causation to the case of Yemeni migration. While the ‘initial causes’ (the Ottoman conquest of 1872; the need to increase Hebrew labour in the Yishuv etc.)
were certainly decisive, subsequent ones were arguably as influential (networks established between Palestine and Yemen after migration). In the Iraqi case, applying the notion of cumulative causation means avoiding to isolate one or several ‘initial causes’, but rather examining how initial causes affect and ‘alter how future decisions to migrate will be made’ (Ariel 2014, 23). If one looks at the history of Iraqi Jews, migratory destinations were not restricted to Israel. Movements and circulatory migrations outside Iraq were not uncommon. In the early 19th century already, Baghdadi Jewish families settled in Bombay, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore, where they continued financially to support the community in Iraq. Many moved to Syria and Iran, while after the creation of the State of Israel Iraqi families settled in Beirut, or alternatively in the UK or the USA. While not questioning the direct impact of the creation of the State of Israel in the mass emigration of 1950, many questions remained to be answered when it comes to explaining the Iraqi Jewish ‘exodus’ in general.

Except for minor mistakes, such as the incorrect spelling of a Jewish newspaper, which should be الحاصد Al hassid and not الحاسد Al hassad, Shiblak’s book continues to be a major reference for the history of Jews in Iraq, and the latest publication in Arabic constitutes the most accomplished version. In some instances (for example, the conclusion), the book is significantly enriched by more detailed explanations of the context. The translation is very clear and accessible to both native speakers of Arabic and Arabic learners. The work is now available in both languages to scholars interested in the history of Iraq, to the issue of non-Muslim communities in the Arab Middle East in general, and to the history of migrations.

Notes

3. For more on this period, see Schlaepfer (2016).

References

Ariel, Ari. 2014. Jewish–Muslim Relations and Migration from Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Leiden: Brill.

Aline Schlaepfer
Université de Genève – American University of Beirut
aline.schlaepfer@unige.ch

© 2016 Aline Schlaepfer
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2016.1229887