

Mardjan Seighali met Job Hulsman - Tot op de dag



*Mardjan Seighali. Ills.:
Joseph Sassoon Semah*

‘Wie in het buitenland opnieuw begint moet zich bewijzen.’

Mardjan Seighali (1964) is geboren in de Iraanse plaats Rasht, waar ze een liberale opvoeding genoot; religie speelde geen rol.

Als scholiere maakte ze mee dat Iran in opstand kwam tegen de exorbitante levensstijl van de Sjah en hem tot aftreden dwong. De Iraanse ayatollah Khomeini kwam terug uit zijn tijdelijke verblijfplaats in Parijs en werd als held onthaald. Hij won de verkiezingen en veranderde Iran in een theocratisch bolwerk.

Mardjan Seighali sloot zich aan bij de Iraanse oppositiepartij Mojahedin-e Chalgh, de Volksmoedjahedien, een partij die streefde naar een meer gelijke welvaartsverdeling. Twee jaar later, in 1981, werd de partij door Khomeini tot vijand van god verklaard. Ze werd voor haar veiligheid door haar vader ontvoerd naar een tante in Teheran.

Als ze tussentijds haar familie bezoekt voor het nieuwjaarsfeest, wordt ze door de Revolutionaire Garde opgepakt, en wordt in de gevangenis, gemarteld, bedreigd en vernederd. Haar wordt niets bespaard omdat ze voor de partij pamfletten uitdeelde en deelnam aan discussies. Veel van haar medegevangenen

eindigen in een massagraf, zoals haar vriendin Tahmina 'een bloem die niet tot bloei mocht komen.' Haar ouders sloten een deal met het regime waardoor ze na anderhalf jaar uit de gevangenis werd ontslagen, op voorwaarden dat ze moest trouwen en ze kreeg een studieverbod. Vlak na haar vrijlating trouwt ze, met tegenzin, met Rasoul: ze wilde vrij zijn, maar de eer van de familie was zo gered. Ze krijgt met hem twee zonen.

Mardjan Seighali was woedend omdat ze geen enkele inspraak had gehad op haar vrijlating; thuis mag ze nergens over praten.

Ze wil voor alles onafhankelijk zijn en vol strijd lust, ook in haar relatie met haar man Rasoul. Het is voor haar heel moeilijk over haar persoonlijke ervaringen te vertellen. Ze memoreert vaak de woorden van haar vader, toen ze vrijkwam uit de gevangenis: 'Hier praten we niet meer over!'

Haar man Rasoul was in 1989 gevlucht naar Nederland, omdat hij gezocht werd vanwege een filmopname van een steniging. Mardjan Seighali wordt vervolgens herhaaldelijk opgepakt en weer vrijgelaten. Ze komt als zesentwintigjarige, na een aantal mislukte vluchtpogingen, met haar twee kinderen in 1990 in Nederland terecht waar ze weer moeizaam een gezin vormt met Rasoul, eerst in Den Helder, dan in Brummen en uiteindelijk in Almere, waar ze zich thuis voelt: 'Almere - nieuwe stad waar je als nieuwkomer een nieuw leven kan beginnen.'

Ze worstelt nog steeds met haar herinneringen aan de gevangenis en het regime van ayatollah Khomeini, maar eenmaal in Nederland besluit ze alles op alles te zetten om haar leven weer betekenis te geven.

In 1997 voltooide ze haar studie Maatschappelijk werk- en dienstverlening aan de Hogeschool van Amsterdam. Later werd zij o.a. directeur van Stichting voor Vluchteling-Studenten UAF (die ook haar studie financierde), zat in de Raad van Advies College voor de Rechten van de Mens en krijgt een baan als hoofd Sector Communicatie & Publicatie en Relatiemanagement bij Stichting Erfgoed Nederland. Sinds november 2020 is ze voorzitter van het Humanistisch Verbond.

Schrijver en journalist *Job Hulsmans* van uitgeverij Ambo/Anthos, die in 2017 Iran bezocht, weet haar te enthousiasmeren haar verhaal op te schrijven. Ze ontmoeten elkaar regelmatig aan haar keukentafel in Almere, en ook zelf kroop ze achter haar computer.

Na de lancering van *Tot op de dag* weet ze niet of ze blij is, want ze denkt nog steeds aan de mensen die in onvrijheid woonden en wonen. Sinds haar vrijlating

in 1983 vraagt ze zich nog steeds af: 'is het een straf of een zegen dat ik vrijkwam? Als er iets te kiezen viel, wat zou ik dan hebben gekozen: thuiskomen met de herinneringen die ik heb en daarmee door het leven gaan of helemaal niet meer thuiskomen? De vragen galmen nog steeds door mijn hoofd.'

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Opnieuw beginnen: Mardjan Seighali bij TEDxAlmere

Linda Bouws - St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten

Biden's \$1.9 Trillion Stimulus Is A Vital Beginning For A New New Deal



President Joe Biden

In his first three days in office, President Joe Biden signed no less than 30 executive orders and memorandums, many of which dismantle Trump's policies. This is an impressive achievement by any standard, but only so much can be done with executive orders and it is all but certain that most legislation will be blocked by Republican senators, thanks to filibuster, and with the possible help of some

Democrats. In the meantime, Biden has proposed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus for the coronavirus-hit economy which includes, among other things, a third relief check, extending unemployment benefits, setting aside \$400 billion for a nationwide vaccine program, expanding the child tax credit and raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. One could say that Biden's economic plan is inspired by FDR's New Deal because nothing like it has ever been introduced during peacetime. But what exactly does this economic plan mean for households, for business and for climate change? What will be the impact of the stimulus on public debt? And what about reforms for the financial sector, which continues to reap huge profits when millions of Americans are struggling? Two progressive economists, Robert Pollin and Gerald Epstein, co-directors of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, address some of these questions in an exclusive interview for *Truthout*.

C.J. Polychroniou: Bob, the pandemic, in addition to having killed more than 400,000 Americans so far, thanks to Trump's reckless response, has had a severe impact on the U.S. economy: business closures, massive unemployment, huge decline in the gross domestic product, increase in multiple kinds of inequality. Obviously, with those disturbing realities in mind, Joe Biden has released an economic plan to combat COVID-19 and get the country back on track which, according to many analysts, is inspired by FDR's New Deal. Can you talk a bit about Biden's economic plan and offer your assessment with specific reference to how it will support individuals, households and business through the pandemic?



Prof.dr. Robert Pollin

Robert Pollin: The Biden administration has introduced a \$1.9 trillion short-term economic stimulus program. It targets six main areas of spending: \$1,400 in cash payments for people whose income is less than \$75,000; \$400 per week in

supplemental unemployment insurance for laid-off workers; major support for state and local governments that are right now staring, collectively, at budget deficits of \$500 billion or more; a major increase in spending on distributing COVID vaccines; and expanding the tax credit for families with children.

The total package amounts to about 9 percent of the economy's overall level of activity — i.e., gross domestic product (GDP). This proposed Biden stimulus would also be on top of the \$900 billion measure — equal to about 4 percent of GDP — that Congress and the Trump administration passed in December, as well as the \$2 trillion package — equal to 10 percent of GDP — that was implemented last March. So, if the Biden proposal passes, it would mean that over the past 10 months, the federal government stimulus would add up to roughly 23 percent of GDP. And on top of that, since March, the Federal Reserve has [purchased](#) over \$3 trillion in bonds — a 74 percent increase over their holdings as of last February — from Wall Street firms to bail them out and to keep pushing interest rates down on home mortgages, business loans and government bonds.

Overall, this level of economic stimulus since the COVID pandemic spread last March — which would amount to more than one-third of total GDP if the Biden proposal passes — has been historically unprecedented during peacetime. The only comparable level of government intervention was during World War II, when government deficit spending reached as high as 25 percent of GDP. But, of course, that spending was focused on fighting a world war.

The point, however, is that this level of public spending included in the current Biden proposal is absolutely necessary and, for that matter, will not be sufficient given the severity of the current economic crisis. Over the past nine months, [74 million people have filed to receive unemployment insurance](#). This is equal to fully 45 percent of the U.S. labor force. Meanwhile, as of the most recent data, nearly 20 percent of all U.S. households with children report that their families didn't have enough to eat over the past week. That figure rises to 24 percent for African American households. Similarly, [26 percent](#) of households with children report that they are unable to keep up with their rent. Amid all this, the Dow-Jones Industrial Average stock market index is up an incredible [68 percent](#) since the initial stimulus program passed in March, thanks to both the stimulus and the Fed bailout having successfully propped up Wall Street.

Combating climate change seems to be one of the central objectives of Biden's

administration. How does Biden's plan compare to the Green New Deal, especially the version of a "green economy" you have been fighting for over a decade now?

Pollin: The combined government spending injections since last March — totaling to roughly one-third of all spending in the economy if the current Biden proposal passes — don't include a single dime to address the climate crisis. This is while we now know that [2020 was the second-hottest year on record](#). Biden has emphasized that he is going to take major action to address the climate crisis. Specifically, he has said that he will introduce a huge public investment-led program soon, that will be over and above the short-term stimulus measure to fight COVID and the ongoing recession.

On Wednesday, Biden signed a series of executive orders that will, among other things, suspend oil and gas leasing on federal government lands, transition the federal government's stock of automobiles and trucks to an all-electric fleet, and create an Environmental Justice commitment in federal policies that will "[address the disproportionate health, environmental, economic and climate impacts on disadvantaged communities](#)." Most broadly, Biden's climate directive commits his administration to move the U.S. onto "an irreversible path to a net-zero economy by 2050."

Nevertheless, for the most part, Biden has still not laid out his full-scale program for achieving the net-zero emissions goal. For now, we still need to look at what Biden proposed during the presidential campaign as a guide. That included both some positive as well as some seriously negative points. On the positive side, first, the overall level of investment spending that Biden proposed to deliver a zero-emissions economy by 2050 is in broad alignment with what I, as well as other researchers, have suggested is necessary. That is about 2-3 percent of GDP every year until we have built a clean energy infrastructure in the U.S., as well as contributed in a major way to building it throughout the rest of the world. For the next couple of years, that would mean about \$400 billion per year in investments in the U.S. alone, including from both private as well as public sources.

Biden's campaign proposal did also recognize the fact that building a clean energy economy will be a major new source of job creation throughout the economy, for people working in all kinds of jobs. Within this framework, Biden emphasized that labor unions will need to play a major role in ensuring that the jobs that are generated — upwards of about 4 million new jobs in total in the

initial years — will be good-quality jobs, with decent wages, benefits and working conditions, and that women and people of color are included in getting their fair share of these newly generated opportunities. Finally, Biden's campaign proposal did include just transition policies to support the workers, as well as their families and communities, who are now dependent on the oil, coal and gas industries for their livelihoods. Biden did also reemphasize this focus on creating good-quality union jobs in Wednesday's directive. So far, so good.

On the down side, the Biden campaign proposal gives high priority to so-called carbon-capture technology and nuclear energy as major new sources of zero-emissions energy supply. Under carbon-capture technology, we keep burning coal, oil and natural gas to provide energy, but the technology entails literally capturing the carbon before it enters the atmosphere, and transporting it into gigantic underground storage areas, to presumably remain there for all time. The fossil fuel companies love this idea, since it keeps them in business. But at best, the technology remains unproven at commercial scale, despite decades of trying by the companies who desperately want it to work. Nuclear energy also presents huge public safety problems as well as being very expensive, despite having operated as an electricity source for 60 years now.

We need to insist that the centerpiece of the Biden climate program be investments to dramatically expand the supply of clean renewable energy sources — including solar, wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and low-emissions bioenergy — along with investments to dramatically raise energy efficiency standards with public transportation, electric vehicles running on renewable energy and net zero energy buildings. That is the cleanest, cheapest and safest way to deliver a zero-emissions economy, and to do so in a way that greatly expands job opportunities.

Jerry, Biden's plan for sparking the economy has some folks concerned because it will obviously increase the public debt, although Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen played down the debt issue in her confirmation hearings. Is there a need to be worried about deficits and a public debt surge when the economy is weak and millions of Americans are struggling? Moreover, how would you assess the Federal Reserve's response to the COVID-19 crisis so far, and what else can the Fed do to revive the U.S. economy?



Prof.dr. Gerald Epstein

Gerald Epstein: Rich countries, especially those like the United States that can easily borrow at home and abroad in its own currency (the U.S. dollar is the main global currency), have a great deal of capacity to borrow for public spending. This is especially true when the cost of borrowing (interest rate) is well below the likely return on investment, as measured, for example, by the rate of growth of the economy. And now, U.S. interest rates on government debt is at historically low levels, below 1 percent in many cases. Keynesian and progressive economists have long understood this fact, but it has taken two major economic crises in the span of little more than a decade to convince even centrist and liberal economists and Democratic policy makers of this truth. Of course, Republicans, at least since Reagan, have understood that, when they are in power, they should have the government borrow a lot to fund tax cuts for the wealthy and subsidies for their pet constituencies, and then they should become austerity hawks when the Democrats are in power to block their initiatives and popularity. And of course, true to form, that is exactly what Mitch McConnell and the Republicans are doing now with respect to Biden's spending initiatives. And, as usual, some of the right-wing Democrats are parroting these Republican talking points.

It is important to note that this capacity to run deficits and borrow is not absolute; it is best to be used to help achieve full employment, to deal with national health and other emergencies, to invest in green transformation and the positive support for the poor, people of color and working class. And it is many of these targets that the Biden administration and Democratic leadership in Congress are trying to reach with their spending initiatives. (Of course, they continue to propose spending excessive amounts on the military, as well.)

The financial costs of borrowing relative to the great value of appropriate

spending demonstrates the folly of deficit phobia. As the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) [notes](#), “The interest the government pays on debt held by the public has remained low as a percentage of GDP, even though that debt has risen to historically high levels.” In rare instances, interest rates on some U.S. government debt have gone negative! In fact, net interest outlays now are about 1.5 percent of GDP compared to around 3 percent during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Looking ahead, the CBO projects that, even if the interest rates go up by more than they expect, net interest payments as a percent of GDP will go up less than 3 percent, the Reagan average, and if interest rates remain where they are now, then government interest payments will fall to only 1 percent of GDP, despite a continued increase in government borrowing.

Of course, much will also depend on what the Federal Reserve does. The Fed, like the European Central Bank and other rich country central banks, has pledged to keep interest rates low during the crisis. More than that, the Federal Reserve, in a potentially important initiative, has announced that they will try to keep interest rates low even in the face of modest increases in inflation in order to promote higher levels of employment, especially among workers, including nonwhite workers, who are often hired last. A policy that has long been promoted by progressive activists and economists, this policy could significantly contribute to bringing more workers out of poverty while helping to enhance their job skills and experience. The proof in the pudding here will be in the implementation, since we might be a long way off to increases in inflation in our depressed economy.

In addition to this change in policy framework, the Federal Reserve expanded its purchases of financial assets (quantitative easing [QE]) and set up special lending facilities, designed to help businesses and banks (including hedge funds and private equity funds), financial markets generally, small businesses and municipalities. In terms of QE, between mid-March and early December, the Fed’s portfolio of securities grew by [\\$2.7 trillion](#). General support for the financial markets by promising to lend money to financial institutions, support money market funds, support the repo markets, etc. were extensive. For example, it is offering \$2 trillion in support on an ongoing basis. The Fed was much stingier with its support of state and municipal government: [it set terms so high that very few borrowed](#).

Moving forward, the Fed should continue to work cooperatively with the Biden administration’s fiscal policy. This cooperation is likely to be enhanced with Janet

Yellen, former chair of the Fed, as treasury secretary. But in addition, the Fed should revive the special facilities, such as the state and municipal lending facility and the small business lending facility, and make the terms easier and the facilities easier to use. Equally important, the Fed should figure out how to play a bigger role in two areas: helping to finance the Green Transition, and helping to provide support and infrastructure for publicly oriented financial institutions, such as public banks, community banks, and so on. The Fed has spent trillions bailing out the Wall Street Banks. Now it should re-orient itself to support banking for the rest of us.

Biden and some of the people around him have suggested that there is a need for tougher Wall Street oversight. What sort of financial reform is actually necessary to tame Wall Street's aggressive posture of risk-taking and thereby ensure no repeat of the 2007-08 financial crisis?

Epstein: As you know, the key precipitating cause of the great financial crisis of 2007-2008 was the reckless behavior of mega banks in the U.S. (and some abroad) abetted by a whole financial ecosystem of mortgage lenders, ratings agencies and other financial institutions that facilitated these destructive financial activities. All of this destructive behavior was enabled by financial regulators such as Alan Greenspan, chair of the Federal Reserve, and politicians who, either for ideological or financial reasons (or both), pushed for financial deregulation in the 1980s and '90s, and then paid no attention as massive risk built up in the financial sector.

It all came tumbling down in 2008 and 2009, causing more than [\\$14 trillion in damage to the economy](#) and requiring as much as an estimated [\\$29 trillion bail-out by taxpayers](#). The financial meltdown stripped workers (many of them people of color) of their modest but only wealth — their homes — and ushered in a long period of slow economic growth and lots of political resentment. In response to the crisis, in 2009, the Obama administration and Congress passed a major financial regulation law known as the [Dodd-Frank Act](#). The Obama administration, led by Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, was pushed kicking and screaming by newly mobilized financial reform activists and labor unions centered around Americans for Financial Reform (AFR), Better Markets and progressives on Capitol Hill to pass financial regulation with real teeth. The Act was a compromise between these forces and the financial industry lobbyists who had plenty of leverage with Geithner and Obama but did have some teeth: higher capital,

leverage and liquidity requirements on large banks; serious regulation for the first time of derivatives such as credit default swaps, which Warren Buffett had called weapons of mass destruction; limiting banks' speculative activities (so called prop-trading) through the Volcker Rule; restricting the ability of financial traders to keep ill-gotten bonuses from destructive trades (bonus claw-backs), creating competition for the ratings agencies like S&P and Moody's; creating a framework for regulating the "shadow banking system"; placing some limits on commodities speculation; creating a new supervisory oversight committee — the Financial Stability Oversight Council (FSOC) — headed up by the treasury secretary with heads of the financial regulatory committees; and last but far from least, creating the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), the brainchild of Elizabeth Warren, designed to protect consumers from financial exploitation and fraud.

Dodd-Frank's structure was very problematic: one major flaw is that it left open the details of many of its provisions to final rule-making by various regulatory agencies, thereby giving enormous opportunity for financial lobbyists to water down key rules. Despite this, a number of key provisions remained potent, including capital, liquidity and leverage requirements, derivatives regulation, aspects of the Volcker Rule against prop trading and the creation of the CFPB.

With Trump's election, an army of mega bankers and their hired guns filled the ranks of the regulatory agencies and started a relentless assault on Dodd-Frank. Many but the largest banks were exempted from the strongest capital requirements, derivatives legislation was watered down, the FSOC stopped its regulation of financially dangerous nonfinancial firms and the shadow banking system, neutered the CFPB, and more. They were not able to completely eliminate added restrictions on the biggest banks, but they left their fingerprints on weakened enforcement and more loopholes just about everywhere (see Better Markets).

So, what should the Biden administration do? As with so many other aspects of policy, simply restoring the Obama policies, though in some cases a step in the right direction, will not be enough. Among the good ideas that were rejected in 2009 and should now be implemented include: breaking up the mega-banks by instituting asset size limits or instituting a 21st-century "Glass-Steagall Act" to separate commercial from investment banking; bringing all financial institutions, including private equity, hedge funds, fintech (the shadow banking system) under

strict regulation and monitoring; a financial products regulatory mechanism to ensure that new financial products are safe and effective; creating a level playing field of support for community and publicly oriented banks, especially those serving underserved communities and communities of color.

But for any of this to happen, the first order of business must be to clear out the regulatory agencies of big bank hired guns and Trump administration lackeys and replace them with competent, progressive leaders and members of the key financial regulatory agencies, including the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC), the CFPB and the Federal Reserve.

So far, the Biden administration is indicating a mixed start in this regard. Biden has nominated Gary Gensler, former Goldman Sachs banker-turned-tough-financial regulator, who had been head of the CFTC under Obama. He has been strongly endorsed by many progressives, including Elizabeth Warren. "He is a tenacious regulator who stood up to the industry titans to rein in their risky behavior," the Massachusetts Democrat tweeted. "He will be an excellent SEC Chair during this economic crisis." Biden has also nominated Rohit Chopra, who helped Warren set up the CFPB and is aligned with her policies, to be head of the CFPB. On the other hand, Biden [is] rumored [to be considering] former Obama official Michael S. Barr to head up the key regulatory agency, the OCC, one of the most powerful of the regulatory agencies. Progressives [have been pushing](#) for Mehrsa Baradaran, a law professor and expert in community banking and banking for poor communities and communities of color.

And then there is the key role of Janet Yellen as secretary of the treasury. Yellen, of course, is much more progressive than her predecessor. But the finance industry still has a great deal of political power over Biden, Kamala Harris and the Democrats. Reporting on only the tip of the iceberg, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, political action committees (PACs) raised over \$227 million for Biden-Harris, \$148 million of which are linked to financial interests. Looking more broadly at overall Biden funds, the finance, insurance and real estate sector spent \$202 million, only somewhat behind liberal groups who raised up to \$294 million to pursue ideological/single-issue causes. In fact, the amount spent by the industry was significantly higher than the \$117 million spent on Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential race. This is in contrast to the 2020 campaign of Donald Trump, for whom the finance, insurance and real estate sector "only"

spent \$84 million. Similarly, Senate and House Democrats also receive big money from finance. The figures for the 2020 election show that the 425 PACs of the finance, insurance and real estate sector “only” spent \$84 million. Similarly, Senate and House Democrats also receive big money from finance. The figures for the 2020 election show that the 425 PACs of the finance, insurance and real estate sector contributed \$34 million to Democrats, only slightly less than the \$42 million they contributed to Republicans.

This reliance on big pocketed financiers will be a continuing obstacle to truly reorienting finance to serve society, rather than to continue as the other way around.

One final question for both of you: How can progressives ensure that Biden puts an end to “business as usual,” which was the Obama administration’s strategy and may have indeed been responsible for the rise of Donald Trump to power?

Pollin: In fact, nothing can be assured. But we can be almost certain that the Biden administration could very easily lapse into the Clintonite neoliberal pattern of allowing Big Capital — including Wall Street and the fossil fuel corporate giants — to call the shots. The only way to prevent that, and to enact truly transformative progressive economic programs, will be for progressives to fight very hard for them right now and in the coming months.

Epstein: To follow up on my earlier discussion, among many other things, progressive institutions will have to increase their support and attention to following and trying to influence the nitty gritty detail of government policy and government structures. In terms of financial reform, for example, there are relatively few organizations with relatively little financial resources who are attempting to monitor and help influence these important, but somewhat technical issues: for example, Americans For Financial Reform, Better Markets, Public Citizen, the Center for Responsible Lending, and a few others. Progressive financing institutions and individuals should step up and make sure these institutions and others have the funds to act as watchdogs and advocates to counter the enormous money and power of finance in these battles.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His

main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

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“Sant al-Tasqit”: Seventy Years Since The Departure Of Iraqi Jews



Ella Shohat. Ills.: Joseph Sassoon Semah

Source: jadaliyya.com. Seven decades after their massive exodus, the narrative

about the departure of Iraqi Jews is hardly settled, not even within the displaced community itself. A continuous millennial existence in Mesopotamia was rendered impossible in the wake of a historical vortex generated by overpowering political forces and conflicting ideologies. The fall of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent rule of British colonialism, and the emergence of Jewish and Arab nationalist movements generated internal and external political pressures on the Jewish-Iraqi community. The Zionist redefinition of Jewishness as an ethno-nationality, which was in discord with its traditional status as a religion, brought about new dilemmas and tensions, irrespective of how the Arab Jews may have viewed their Jewish affiliation. The clashing political camps of colonialism, monarchism, and communism, as well as of Zionism and Iraqi/Arab nationalism, underline the story of a community pulled in opposite directions. Consequently, Arab Jews ended up becoming the collateral damage of warring ideological zones, a diasporization born out of historically new colliding movements.

The majority of Iraqi Jews were dislocated in the wake of the U.N. partition of Palestine, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the *nakba*. Between 1950–1951, about 120,000 Iraqi Jews ended up departing, largely for Israel, in a process referred to as *tasqit al-jinsiyya*— the precondition of relinquishing Iraqi citizenship required for exiting without the possibility of return. This exodus, recalled among Iraqi Jews as “*sant al-tasqit*” (the year of the *tasqit*), is conventionally narrated as the end of the Babylonian Exile and the fulfillment of the promised messianic return to Zion. Within Jewish tradition, Babylon is a site of the Diaspora, the ultimate exilic condition epitomized in the Biblical phrase “By the waters of Babylon we laid down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” Converting religious concepts into an ethno-nationalist discourse, the Zionist notion of ‘*Aliya* (literally “ascendency”) has had the effect of mystifying the epic-scale cross-border movement between enemy zones. What was lived as a wrenchingly chaotic experience was emplotted as having a liturgically-sanctioned purpose culminating in a kind of happy end. Indeed, the very official term deployed for the airlifting of Iraqi Jews to Israel, “Operation Ezra and Nehemia” invoked the prophets associated with the Biblical return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. In a more modern and secular parlance, the nomenclature celebrated the return to the legitimate “Land of origins.” Yet, such discourses downplayed the multilayered social, material, and emotional toll of the dislocation—for instance, the fact that many Iraqi Jews in Israel continued to pine for a place that had been seen simply as home. What is often recounted as the

“ingathering of the exiles” and the restoration of “the Diaspora” to Jerusalem, was in fact a painfully complicated experience, an ongoing intergenerational trauma which engendered an ambivalent sense of belonging for dislocated Middle Eastern Jews. This return, within a longer historical perspective, could also be viewed as a new modality of exile, hence my inversion (in “Reflections of an Arab-Jew,” 1992): “By the waters of Zion we laid down and wept, when we remembered Babylon.”



Image

source:

<https://www.elal.com/magazine/portfolio-items/moreshet/ezra-and-nehemiah/>

Departing and its Discontents

In many ways, the departure is a consequence of a shifting set of geopolitical circumstances in the post-World War I era, but mostly of the facts-on-the-ground *Yishuv* settlements, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the 1947 U.N. resolution to partition Palestine. The 1948 foundation of the State of Israel and the consequent massive dislocation of Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries placed indigenous Middle Eastern Jews in an acutely vulnerable position. Within the landscape of crossed-affinities, Arab Jews had to pledge allegiance to one identity articulated by two clashing movements— either “Jewish” or “Arab” —both newly defined under a novel historical banner of ethno-national affiliation. In dissonance with the traditional view of Judaism as a religion, the Zionist ethno-nationalist redefinition generated new predicaments for the community itself. Some of the Iraqi-Jewish youth came to view Israel as a promising option, especially since Arab nationalism also generated new predicaments for Arab Jews. Ironically, the Zionist view of Arabness and Jewishness as mutually exclusive gradually came to be shared by Arab nationalist discourse, placing Arab Jews on the horns of a terrible dilemma. The rigidity of both paradigms has produced the particular Jewish-Arab crisis, since neither paradigm can easily contain porous identities and multiple belongings.

The Zionist pressure to dislodge Jewish communities and end “the *gola*”

(Diaspora) on the one hand, and the Arab nationalist gradual equation of Judaism with Zionism, on the other, brought about the eventual parting of Arab Jews from their homes. Within the rapidly shifting environment, Jews in Iraq, Egypt, Syria and so forth had to defend a Jewishness that was associated for the first time in their history not with religious culture but with colonial nationalism. These momentous events resulted in general expressions of hostility and various discriminatory measures toward indigenous Jews throughout the region. In the post-1948 era, with the deteriorating conflict in Palestine, the push-and-pull pincer movement became increasingly more intense. While the Palestinians were experiencing the *nakba*, Arab Jews woke up to a new world order that could not accommodate their simultaneous Jewishness and Arabness. The Orientalist split between “the Jew” and “the Arab” as two separate entities, already in embryo within colonized Middle East/North Africa, was to fully materialize with the 1947 partition. It resulted in the corollary dispossession and dispersal of Palestinians largely to Arab zones, as well as in the concomitant dislocation of Arab Jews largely to Israel. Thus, the dislocation is embedded in a new ethno-nationalist lexicon of Jews and Arabs. The historical question is whether Arab regimes bear the full weight of the responsibility for the dislocation of Arab Jews, who consequently had to be rescued by Israel; or whether, the emergence of the Zionist movement could itself be seen as igniting turmoil for Middle Eastern Jews who until the escalation of the Jewish/ Arab conflict were not in need of saving? Or, perhaps both?

Since post-'48 Palestinian refugees were arriving *en masse* to the Arab world, Arab Jews were placed in an impossible position. A product both of colonialism and nationalism, the overpowering regional conflict situated Arab Jews between crushing opposing forces, while the community as a whole had little control over circumstances that had colossal bearing on their very existence. The departure from the Arab world, in this sense, was not simply the result of a decision made solely by the community and its individual members themselves. It took place, for the most part, without the Arab Jews' comprehensive awareness of what was the role played by each party in their alarming push-and-pull situation; and thus, what was really at stake in their departure and what was yet to come. Terrified by the indiscriminate animosity propagated against “*al-yahud*” in Iraq, the Jewish Iraqis were simultaneously buffeted by manipulated confusion, misunderstandings, and projections provoked by a Zionism that blended messianic religiosity with secular

nationalist purposes. While on one level, their departure was marked by an anticipation for a land imbricated with liturgical sentiment, on another, it was driven by fear and hope for refuge—key emotional elements compelling the final lock on the doors to their millennial home.

Nationalist paradigms hardly capture the complexity of this historical moment of rupture for Arab Jews. The idiosyncrasies of the situation of a community trapped between two nationalisms—Arab and Jewish—have generated a proliferation of terms to designate the dislocation. In fact, each term used to designate the displacement seems problematic precisely due to the ambiguity of its circumstances. None of the terms—“*aliya*” (ascendancy), “*yetzi’a*” (exit), “exodus,” “expulsion,” “immigration,” “emigration,” “exile,” “refugees,” “expatriots,” and “population-exchange—” are adequate. In the case of the Palestinians, the forced mass exodus corresponds to the conventional understanding of the notion “refugees,” since they never wanted to leave Palestine and have maintained the desire to return. In the case of Arab Jews, the question of will, desire, and agency remain much more ambivalent and ambiguous.

The very proliferation of terms suggests that it is not only a matter of legal definition of citizenship that is at stake, but also the issue of mental maps of belonging. The post-’48 circumstances generated a rather anomalous situation that to my mind was neither the paradigmatic refugee nor the archetypal immigrant story. Could the departure of the Iraqi Jews be seriously regarded as an exercise of free will and a matter of straightforward agency? And once out of Iraq and unable to go back, even for a visit, did they regret the impossibility of their return? In the post-’48 climate of uncharted anxiety about their Iraqi future, the various push-and-pull forces steered many into the *tasqit*. The Meir Tweig synagogue inaugurated in 1942 and located in the affluent district of al-Bataween, was one of the sites for the registration of the departing Jews. As a *tasqit* point, the synagogue was no longer merely a gathering place for worship and socializing, but a site of rupture—of giving up Iraqi citizenship in exchange for a *laissez-passer* stipulating that the document holder is definitively not permitted to return. (Stamped in the Arabic as “*la yasmahu li-hamilihi bi-l-’awda illa al-’Iraq batatan.*”) The virtually over-night cross-border movement was thus not only a physical dislocation but also a cultural and emotional displacement, a defining traumatizing event in the recent history of Iraqi Jews.



Registration point for departure from Iraq at the Meir Tweig Synagogue[1]

These traumatic displacements have shaped new national and ethnic identities where officially stamped classifications did not necessarily correspond to cultural affiliation and political identification. Emotional belonging has existed in tension with identity cards and travel documents such as passports and laissez-passers, or in the absence of such papers altogether. Some have been shorn of citizenship for decades (such as post-1948 Palestinians who repeatedly moved from camp to camp); while others have partaken in forms of citizenship that have not been hospitable to the complexities of their cultural identity (like the Arab Jews). Against this backdrop, “Arab” and “Jew,” as I suggested in my earlier work, came to form mutually exclusive categories, with “the Arab-Jew” becoming an ontological oxymoron and an epistemological subversion. The notions of “Palestine” and “the Arab-Jew,” in this sense, stand not simply for historical facts, and for their contestations, but rather for a critical prism. Just as all communities, traditions, and identities may be said to be “invented,” the idea of “the Arab-Jew,” I have argued, provides a post-partition figure through which to critique segregationist narratives while also opening up imaginative potentialities.

One could provide an analysis, as some historians have indeed done, of a multidimensional political context that engendered the vulnerable position of Arab Jews within Arab spaces. Critical forms of discourse and scholarship have delineated the intricate positioning of ethnic and religious minority-communities throughout the region, taking on board such issues as: the colonial divide-and-conquer tactics and strategies that actively endangered various “minorities”

including Arab Jews; the implementation of Zionism as an exclusivist project toward the Arabs of/in Palestine; the hostile rhetoric of some forms of Arab nationalism that deemed all Jews Zionists; the massive arrival of desperate Palestinian refugees in Arab countries; and the various “on the ground” activities, some violently provocative, to dislodge Iraqi, Egyptian, or Moroccan Jews from their homelands.



Image

source:

<https://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2017/11/an-israeli-stamp-on-cereal-packet-could.html?m=1>

Even if a growing number of Jews in countries such as Iraq were expressing a desire to go to Israel (or to the *Eretz Israel* in liturgical parlance), the question is why, suddenly, after millennia of not doing so, would they leave overnight? The displacement, for most Arab Jews, was the product of entangled circumstances in which panic and disorientation, rather than a simple desire for *'aliya*, in the nationalist sense of the word, played a key role. In Iraq, even subsequent to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish community was founding new

enterprises, a fact that hardly indicates an institutionalized or organized plan to evacuate. The “ingathering” then seems less natural and inevitable when one takes into account the intricate political environment that engendered the departure from Iraq, to wit: 1) the efforts of the Zionist underground in Iraq to denigrate the authority of the traditional Jewish community leaders, especially Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, who did not subscribe to this new version of Jewishness;^[2] 2) its attempts to place a “wedge” between the Jewish and Muslim communities;^[3] 3) the Iraqi institutionalization of discriminatory practices toward Jews; 4) the vehement anti-Jewish propaganda visibly circulating in the public sphere, especially as channeled through the Istiqlal (Independence) Party; 5) the reticence on the part of many non-Jewish Arab intellectuals to spell out the distinction between “Jews” and “Zionists”; 6) the failure of the Iraqi political leadership to actively secure the place of Jews in the country; 7) the persecution of communists, among them Jews, who opposed the Zionist idea; 8) the secretive agreements between some Iraqi and Israeli leaders concerning the departure of Jews to Israel; and 9) the misconceptions, on the part of many Arab Jews, about the differences between their own religious identity, affiliation, or sentiments and the modern nation-state project, premised on a Eurocentric secular vision even while invoking a quasi-religious messianic rhetoric.

To this day, discussion of the circumstances that led to the departure of Iraqi Jews provokes a heated political quarrel especially vis-à-vis the 1948 Palestinian refugee question. The dominant Arab nationalist discourse has represented the mass departure of Jews as a sign of the Jewish betrayal of the Arab nation. The dominant Israeli discourse, meanwhile, has narrated the same departure as a story of expulsion of Jews. More recently, the issue of “Jewish refugees from Arab and Muslim countries” has been linked to the 1948 Palestinian exodus as part of an effort to dispute Palestinian claims of expulsion and dispossession. As a new version of the older rhetoric of “population exchange” between Arab and Jewish refugees, the *nakba* and the *tasqit* have been lately circulating as equivalent historical events. When discussed together in the international public sphere, the discourse on the mass departure from Iraq is paralleled to the 1948 Palestinian refugees in a kind of contestation of the *nakba* (the catastrophe), performing a combat over the monopoly on historical suffering. The pairing of the *nakba* exodus with the presumably equivalent case of the *tasqit* exodus has attempted to assuage Israeli responsibility for the Palestinian dislocation. In its updated version, in a kind of “narrative envy” usually projected onto Palestinian

intellectuals, each argument used to reject the *nakba* expulsion is echoed with a similar argument and phrasing with regards to Arab Jews. The tragedy of “the Palestinian refugees” is answered with the tragedy of “the forgotten refugees from Arab countries;” “the expulsion of Palestinians” is cancelled out by “the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries;” “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Palestinians is correlated with “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Jews from Arab countries; and even “the Palestinian *nakba*” is retroactively matched with a “*nakba* of Jews from Arab countries.” Yet, without engaging the consequences of nationalism, the recent campaign for “justice for the forgotten Jewish refugees from Arab countries” silences the violent dispossession of Palestinians summed up in the word *nakba*, as if one event annulled the ethical-political implications of the other.

Some versions of the “Jewish refugees from Arab countries” discourse, moreover, embeds the assumption of Muslims as perennial persecutors of Jews, absorbing the history of Jews in Arab/Muslim countries into what could be called a “pogromized” version of “Jewish History.” In its most tendentious forms, this rhetoric incorporates the Arab Jewish experience into the Shoah, evident for example in the campaign to include the 1941 *farhud* attacks on Jews in Iraq in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. One can denounce the violence of the *farhud*, and even connect it to Nazi propaganda in Iraq coming out of Berlin, without instrumentalizing it to equate Arabs with Nazis, or forge a discourse of eternal Muslim anti-Semitism. Apart from the fact that during the *farhud* some Muslims also protected their Jewish neighbors, the designation of the violent event as a pogrom has shaped a Eurocentric historical narrative for Iraqi Jews. This millennial persecution discourse connects the dots from pogrom to pogrom, projecting the historical experience of Jews in Christian-Europe onto the experience of Jews in Muslim spaces. Such discourse *farhudizes*, as it were, Iraqi-Jewish history, as though the 1941 moment is emblematic of the story of “Jews under Islam.” The present-day discussion of the *tasqit al-jinsiyya* has, in sum, been subjected to contradictory interpretations and marshalled for radically divergent purposes, with each historical reading having serious legal, political, and cultural implications.

Remaining and Its Discontent

The community’s displacement evokes two contradictory exilic/homecoming narratives: on the one hand, the Zionist translation of the Biblical redemptive

restoration—“kibbutz galuiot”—into a modern nation-state formation; and, on the other, the uprooting of a community from its indigenous geography in Mesopotamia/Iraq. Bavel, traditionally the Biblical locus of Babylonian Exile was after all also the millennial home for Jews whose notion of “Return to the Promised Land” was premised on a set of messianic beliefs. Hence, the historical opposition to the Zionist idea among traditionally observing Jews, for whom the formation of Jewish nationalism signified a rupture with Judaism, advancing a blasphemous idea, a kind of false messiah. The figure of Hakham Bashi (the Chief Rabbi and also the President of the Jewish community) Sasson Khdhuri epitomizes, in a way, the story of a well-established community that came under horrendous pressures leading to its fragmentation and ultimate collapse. With the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel, the *tasqit* resulted in the departure of the majority of Iraqi Jews. However, some did remain in Iraq, enduring family separation. They lived through wars, revolutions, and a dictatorial regime that rendered hellish the situation of all Iraqis, but took on a specifically-compounded reality for Jews, existing as they did under the unrelenting suspicion of disloyalty. Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, along with a few members of his family, was among those who stayed in Iraq, although some of his children left for Israel. The enormous task of representing the community fell largely on the shoulders of the Hakham.[4] Separated until the end of his life from most members of his family, the Hakham continued his role in working to safeguard the Jewish community in Iraq. Throughout five turbulent decades, until his death in Baghdad in 1971, Hakham Sasson Khdhuri navigated the powerful political shifts in the region that had momentous consequences for the Jewish Iraqi community and for Middle Eastern Jews more broadly.



The visit of King Faisal I to the Jewish community in 1924.
Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, front row, fourth from right.[5]

Although the majority of Iraqi Jews were not involved in political activity—whether Arab nationalist, Zionist, or communist—they were involuntarily and dangerously implicated in these clashing ideologies. As Iraq's *Hakham Bashi*—the Chief Rabbi and also the President of the Jewish community—Sasson Khdhuri was vocal in publicly distancing the Jewish community from the unfolding events in Palestine. Already, for example in 1936 with the escalation of the conflict between the Jewish Yishuv and Palestinians in Mandatory Palestine, the *Hakham*, in his capacity as the president of the Jewish community in Iraq, published a statement on behalf of Iraq's *al-ta'ifa al-Isra'iliyya* (the Israelite community). Its purpose was to clear the Jews of Iraq of any doubt that may be cast on them concerning their possible association with the Zionist movement. "None of the members of the Israelite community of Iraq," wrote the *Hakham*, "have any relation, contact, or joint activities with the Zionist movement, in any respect." The *Hakham's* declaration insisted that the members of the community never "supported or adopted this movement neither inside nor outside of Palestine," since the "Jews of Iraq are Iraqis, and they are part of the Iraqi people" who are their "Iraqi brothers" and with whom they share "everything through thick and thin." The declaration also emphasized that the community's members "share the same feelings as all Iraqis, whether in joyful or troubled times." [6] The various pronouncements against the Zionist movement made by religious leaders, including by *Hakham* Sasson Khdhuri, have been the subject of much political debate and historiographical interpretation. Was the antagonistic stance toward Zionism a result of deep religious beliefs as indicated by the traditional leaders themselves, or of the leaders' effort to maintain their grip on

power as Zionist activists claimed? Were the petitions signed by the *Hakham* across several decades, before and after the *tasqit*, a result of coercion by the various Iraqi regimes; or of a desire to shield and protect the vulnerable community; or of a sincere theological rejection of a sacrilegious nationalist idea? In the post-1948 era, the circumstances of Iraqi Jews were to be transformed dramatically, engendering a general state of insecurity. The ideological tension concerning the future of Iraqi Jews, and the concomitant tensions between the traditional leadership of the community and the Zionist underground movement, reached an unprecedented paroxysm. Mediating between the Iraqi regime and the Jewish community, the *Hakham* pursued an approach of reconciliation which was regarded by some Jews as, at best, inadequate and which was denounced especially by the Zionists as appeasement of a persecutory regime.[7] With the increasing number of arrests of youths accused of Zionist activity, outraged community members expressed their frustration and an unusual demonstration was organized against the *Hakham*, leading to his resignation as the head of the Baghdad Jewish community in December 1949.[8]

With the implementation of the *tasqit al-jinsiyya* law, the anxiety around staying or leaving was palpable. Some of the *Hakham's* children, like the oldest and the family's matriarchal figure, Victoria, were hardcore Zionists. His daughter, Marcelle, for her part, moved to Israel following her communist husband, Edward Semah, who believed that Israel would be a safer place than Iraq, where communism was outlawed. (This former lawyer for the Iraqi military became a lawyer for the Israeli Histadrut, the General Organization of Workers. In Iraq, Edward, according to his son Joseph Sassoon Semah, had naively believed in "the *kibbutz's* propaganda" about equality but after arrival to Israel he became deeply disillusioned, "feeling badly mistreated." On his deathbed, Edward confessed to his son Joseph that if he had had the chance, he would have done it all differently and not moved to Israel.[9]) Although the majority of Iraqi Jews were dislocated in the wake of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, a minority of the community's members did not register for the *tasqit*. The reasons for staying were various, including because they saw themselves first and foremost as Iraqis, and/or they believed the storm would pass, and/or they simply did not want to abandon their lives. After the *tasqit* and the exodus of the majority of Iraqi Jews, however, the *Hakham* resumed his leadership position. He continued to practice a flexible approach to Jewishness that accommodated shifting social mores. Deeply involved in the remaining community's life, in celebration and in

mourning, the *Hakham* was a vital symbolic figure for its Jewish identity.



Hakham Sasson Khdhuri attending a graduation ceremony in the Jewish School, Frank Einy, Baghdad, early 1960s[10]

In the period following the *tasqit*, the cataclysmic atmosphere subsided. Although the anxiety linked to the Israel/Arab conflict persisted, this period is nonetheless characterized by relative stability in comparison with the following decade of the post-1963 coup d'état and especially with the violence of the post-1967 War era. With the 1968 coup d'état, the dictatorial Ba'athist control of Iraq had a devastating impact on Iraqis of all denominations. The terrorizing measures taken to crush the regime's real or imagined adversaries led, as we know, to the imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, and killing of many innocent Iraqi citizens generally, but the repression became exacerbated in the case of the Jewish community, now under a blanket suspicion of treason. The surveillance of all Iraqis became for Iraqi Jews a ready-made accusation of collaboration with "*al-'adu al-Sahyuni*" ("the Zionist enemy"), which resulted in violent acts and carried dangerous implications for the very existence of a Jewish community in Iraq. As a result of the Ba'ath-sponsored repression between 1969 and 1971, the numbers of the already dwindling community continued to shrink. Faced with a terrifying reality, those who did remain in post-*tasqit* Iraq were now compelled into fleeing, leaving behind a virtual eclipse of the once-thriving Jewish-Iraqi communal life. A dispersal from a millennial existence in Mesopotamia that has taken Iraqi Jews to such countries as the U.K., Israel, Canada, and the U.S. By the time of the 2003

invasion, Iraqi Jews in an estimate numbering only in the tens remained during the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.[11] Despite its indigenous history in the land, the Jewish-Iraqi community came under fateful pressures, which ultimately fractured its intricate social structure and led to its utter fragmentation.

In the 1999 biography of the *Hakham* written by his son, Sha'ul Hakham Sasson, the author who stayed with his father in Iraq, vehemently attempts to contest the negative image of the *Hakham*, whose reputation tended to be rather maligned within the Zionist narrative.[12] Entitled in Arabic *Ra'in wa-ra'eeyya* (*A Leader and his Community*), the book is a testimony of the son who passionately argues that the



Book Cover of Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's *Ra' wa-ra'eeyya* (*A Leader and his Community*)[13]

Hakham was without a shadow of a doubt a generously dedicated leader. For the author, the *Hakham* acted responsibly and did not abandon his community, staying in Baghdad to shepherd the Jewish life of those who remained. Fearing for the welfare of the remaining community, and indeed for its very existence, the *Hakham* defended its members in highly dangerous situations, when Jews were disappearing, detained, tortured, or publicly hanged. *Hakham* Sasson Khdhuri, as the president of Iraq's Jewish community, in other words, acted under extraordinary pressures and at high personal cost.

Indeed, in the tumultuous period of the post-1967 era, the *Hakham's* son Sha'ul was himself detained, apparently in an attempt to extort the *Hakham* to make pro-regime declarations in the face of growing international protestations. Sha'ul, as

the *Hakham's* son, had symbolic value for the Ba'ath regime in its effort to counter the vocal diplomatic pressure. In 1969, Sha'ul was included on the regime's list of Jews to be hung but he was released the following morning while the others accused of spying for Israel were condemned to death. This exception that saved Sha'ul life was commonly attributed to his father's position, and prompted anger among some Iraqi Jews who cursed and threw stones at the house of the *Hakham's* daughter, Marcelle, in Ramat Gan, Israel, for months.[14] In defense against these accusations that charged the *Hakham* with only intervening on his son's behalf, Sha'ul suggests in his book that decisions about his release from prison were all the doing of the regime, since his father was ultimately powerless to influence Saddam Hussein's maneuvers.

In his 1999 prison memoir, Sha'ul Hakham Sasson vividly captures the tormenting experience, recollected while in his nineties in London. Entitled in Arabic *Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein: Thalathmi'a wa-khamsa wa-sittun yawman fi "qasr al-nihayya"* (*In the Hell of Saddam Hussein: 365 Days in the "Palace of the End"*), the quotation marks in the subtitle invoke the acerbic epithet describing the prison from which many did not come out alive.[15] After his release, Sha'ul made a decision to leave Iraq, which he calls "my homeland, my birthplace." [16] But he stayed by his ailing father's side and only left following the death of the *Hakham* on 24 March 1971. "I could not imagine," writes Sha'ul, "leaving my father alone at his age and with all the pains and illnesses he was going through." [17] Only after the *Hakham's* passing, Sha'ul testifies: "I uprooted myself and moved to England where my son Samir lived." [18] He continues: "I still live in this country...with sad memories, wishing for God to liberate Iraq from its oppressors the Ba'athists." Sha'ul expresses his hope for Iraq "to live in peace and prosperity" and for Iraqis to take advantage of "the tremendous resources of the country." He concludes by wishing that all those "obliged to leave would be able to return to a free and democratic Iraq where all communities and citizens of different religions could coexist in tolerance and equality." [19]

Both Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's biography of his father, the *Hakham, A Leader and his Community*, along with his prison memoir, *In the Hell of Saddam Hussein*, were published in Arabic by the Jerusalem-based Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq. At the time of the publication in the late nineties, the Association had already printed a number of books written by Jews who stayed in Iraq in the post-*tasqit* era. In addition to Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's two books, the list included

publications by such figures as Anwar Sha'ul and Meer Basri, who, like the *Hakham's* son, ended up leaving Iraq only during the reign of Saddam Hussein. (Basri, after the death of the *Hakham*, served as the head of the Jewish community, but left in 1974 and lived in London, whereas Sha'ul ended up in Israel.) Such publications by the Iraqi-Israeli editorial team, Shmuel Moreh and Nissim Kazzaz, would seem surprising given the criticism expressed toward these proponents of "the Iraqi orientation," i.e., of those who believed in staying in Iraq and did not exit to Israel during the *tasqit*.^[20] However, their post-'67 departure is marshalled as evidence of the failure of the Iraqi option carried out by the Jewish leadership. Similarly, the story of the *Hakham* and his son's departure resonate with the view that the place of Jews was outside of Iraq, in Israel. The publication of Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's biography of his father nonetheless signifies a certain shift in the attitude toward the *Hakham*, even a kind of a Zionist recuperation of the image of the once vehemently denounced head of the community. The *Hakham*, in this sense, can now be presented positively, but only as part of the metanarrative of the failure of "the Iraqi orientation." Eli Amir's 1992 Hebrew novel *Mafriah ha-Yonim—The Dove Flyer*—depicts a character based on the *Hakham* within a typically overall critical stance, but which nonetheless endows him with some sympathy vis-à-vis the anti-Jewish Iraqi regime. Within such recuperative gestures, the *Hakham's* declarations against the Zionist movement are arguably not being read as signifying a theological perspective or a political reading of the regional map, but rather as a result of a no-choice situation of a Diasporic (*galuti*) traditional leader appeasing various brutal, even anti-Semitic Iraqi regimes.



The Iraqi-issued laissez-passer during the tasqit (of Aziza and Sasson, the author's parents)



The *Hakham* and his family, in many ways, embody the story of Jewish Iraqis now dispersed in multiple geographies—a Mesopotamian community fragmented and diasporized. In the wake of their exodus from Iraq and the shock of arrival in Israel, Iraqi Jews along with Arab/Sephardi/Middle-Eastern Jews more generally, experienced exclusion, rejection, and otherization as Arabs/Orientals, in a place that had been viewed, at the least, as a refuge. The realization of unbelonging could be glimpsed in the frequent lament: “In Iraq we were Jews, in Israel we are Arabs.”[21] The same year of the *Hakham*’s death in Baghdad coincided with the founding of the Black Panther movement which protested the discrimination of the Mizrahim in Israel. Indeed, for decades after the *tasqit*, Iraqi Jews often gave expression to their frustrated sense of betrayal by both Iraq and Israel. They invoked the rumors about the (still disputed) placing of bombs in synagogues and the secretive deal between the Iraqi and Israeli governments under the auspices of the British. They also spoke of both countries as benefitting materially from their departure—Iraq, from their property left behind, and Israel, from turning them into cheap labor. The phrase “*ba’ona*”—“they sold us out”[22]—gave expression to an embittered sense of a no-exit situation, from a pre-departure fear of persecution if they were to remain in Iraq to a post-arrival encounter with Euro-Israeli Orientalist attitudes and discourses. Such a post-*tasqit* sentiment of being doubly out-of-place was hardly in tune with the official narrative of rescuing Jews from their perennial Muslim oppressors, but it did turn the Jewish-Iraqi exodus into a calamitous tale of a scapegoat sacrificed on the altar of the Arab/Israeli conflict.

Notes

[A shorter version of this essay was published in *Orient XXI*, October 22, 2020. Some of the material on the Hakham is based on my chapter “Remainders Revisited: An Exilic Journey from Hakham Sasson Khdhuri to Joseph Sassoon Semah” in [*Joseph Sassoon Semah’s On Friendship / \(Collateral Damage\) III -The third GaLUT: Baghdad, Jerusalem, Amsterdam*](#), Joseph Sassoon Semah & Linda Bouws, eds., Amsterdam: *Stichting Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten*, 2020, pp. 26-55.]

[1] Photo sourced from Youth Movements Photos, “Jews of Baghdad gathered beside the Meir Tweig Synagogue, that served as the registration point for legal immigration to the Land of Israel.” *Ghetto Fighters House Archive, Catalog No. 10766*,

https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook_ext.asp?item=69546&site=gfh&lang=ENG&menu=1

[2] This effort is clearly expressed in texts written by Iraqi Zionists. See, for example, Shlomo Hillel, *Ruah Kadim*(Operation Babylon) (Jerusalem: Edanim, 1985), 259–63 (Hebrew).

[3] One of the most debated cases concerns the Zionists’ placing of bombs in synagogues. See Abbas Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion* (London: Al Saqi, 1986); G. N. Giladi, *Discord in Zion* (London: Scorpion, 1990).

[4] The spelling of the Hakham’s name here corresponds to its pronunciation in the Jewish-Baghdadi dialect rather than the various transliterations, including in the Hakham’s official seal of the “President of the Jewish Community” (or “Israeli Community,” as defined in Arabic—“*Isra’iliyya*”—and in Hebrew—“*Yisra’elit*”—at a time when the word did not yet connote the State of Israel.)

[5] The photo which was taken on the occasion of the visit of King Faisal I to the Jewish community in 1924 is included in Sha’ul Hakham Sasson’s *Ra’ wa-ra’eeyya* (*A Leader and his Community*) with the following identifications: Front row from right to left: Ruben Zluf, Salim Ishaq, Yehuda Zluf, Hakham Sasson Khdhuri (the president of the court), Hakham Bashi Ezra Dangoor, Mahmud Nadim al-Tabaqcheli, King Faisal I, Safwat Pasha al-’Awa, Senator Menahem Daniel, Abraham Nahom, Sion Gurji, Tahsin Qadri. Second row from right to left: Dr. Gurji Rabi’, Eliyahu al-’Ani, Sasson Mrad, Saleh Shlomo, Yussuf Mrad, Gurji Bahar, Karek Menashi Gurji. p. 263.

[6] The declaration was published in Iraq’s Al-Istiqlal newspaper on October 8, 1936. (The Arabic and Hebrew declaration is located in the Archive of “Va’ad ha-’Eda ha-Sefaradit” in Jerusalem.) See Sha’ul Hakham Sasson, “Son of the Former

Head of the Jewish Community of Iraq,” Ra‘in wa-ra‘eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra‘is al-ta‘ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-‘Iraq (A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq) with an Introduction by Shmuel Moreh, Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999, p. 398.

[7] On the Zionist views of Hakham Sasson’s leadership see for example Moshe Gat, Khila Yehudit be-Mashber: Yetz’iat ‘Iraq, 1948-1951 (A Jewish Community in Crisis: The Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951), The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem, 1989; Esther Meir, Ha-Tnu‘a ha-Tziyonit ve-Yehudei ‘Iraq, 1941-1950 (Zionism and the Jews Iraq, 1941-1950), Am Oved Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1993.

[8] Emile Marmorstein, “Baghdad Jewry’s Leader Resigns,” The Jewish Chronicle, December 30, 1949. Republished in Middle Eastern Studies with an introduction by the editor, Elie Kedourie, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1988), pp. 364-368. Kedourie suggests that the opposition to the Hakham’s views by “a small, secret group of Zionist activists may have led to his downfall,” p. 364.

[9] Based on a conversation between the grandson of the Hakham, artist Joseph Sassoon Semah, and the author, Ella Shohat, Amsterdam, December 1, 2019.

[10] Photo courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

[11] Guy Raz, “The Last Jews of Baghdad in Post-Saddam Iraq, a Disappearing Cultural Legacy,” NPR News, May 22, 2003. https://www.npr.org/news/specials/iraq2003/raz_030522.html

[12] See Sha‘ul Hakham Sasson, Ra‘in wa-ra‘eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra‘is al-ta‘ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-‘Iraq (A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq) with an Introduction by Shmuel Moreh, Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[13] Book Cover of Sha‘ul Hakham Sasson’s book Ra‘ wa-ra‘eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra‘is al-ta‘ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-‘Iraq (A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq), Published by the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[14] Based on a conversation between the grandson of the Hakham, artist Joseph Sassoon Semah, and the author, Ella Shohat, Amsterdam, December 1, 2019.

[15] Sha‘ul Hakham Sasson, “Son of the Former Head of the Jewish Community of Iraq,” Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein: Thalathmi’a wa-khamsa wa-sittun yawman fi “qasr al-nihayya” (In the Hell of Saddam Hussein: 365 Days in the “Palace of the

End”), edited by Shmuel Moreh and Nissim Kazzaz. Association for Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[16] Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein, p. 59.

[17] *ibid*

[18] *ibid*

[19] *ibid*

[20] Nissim Kazzaz, *Ha-Yehudim be-Iraq ba-Me’a há-‘Esrím*. Jerusalem, Machon Ben-Zvi, 1991.

[21] I am citing here a sentence that my mother used to repeatedly express.

[22] The phrase formed part of conversations in my family’s circle.

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Chomsky: Coup Attempt Hit Closer To Centers Of Power Than Hitler’s 1923 Putsch



Noam Chomsky

Even as the Biden administration takes the reins of power, the fact remains that authoritarianism and a fascist strain of political thinking have taken firm root on U.S. soil among a large proportion of its citizens. This utterly disturbing development will, according to Noam Chomsky in this exclusive interview for

Truthout, be hard to contain. A recent poll shows that the overwhelming majority of Republicans continues to give a thumbs up to Donald Trump, even after the storming of the Capitol. In the wake of the attempted coup, and on the cusp of a new administration, what do the current political currents mean for the future?

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, you had been warning all along of a potential coup in the event that Trump would lose the 2020 election. In this context, are you surprised at all by what took place on Capitol Hill on the Electoral College vote count?

Noam Chomsky: Surprised, yes. I'd expected a strong reaction from Trump's voting base, raised to a fever pitch by his latest antics. But hadn't expected the attempted coup to reach this level of violence, and I suspect most of the participants didn't either. Many seemed to have been caught up in the excitement of the moment when the leaders of the crowd surged into the hated Capitol to drive out the demons who were not just "stealing the election" but "stealing" their country from them: their white Christian country.

That it was an attempted coup is not in question. It was openly and proudly proclaimed as just that. It was an attempt to overturn an elected government. That's a coup. True, what was attempted was not the kind of coup regularly backed by Washington in its dependencies, a military takeover with ample bloodshed, torture, "disappearance." But, nevertheless, it was an attempted coup. True, the perpetrators regarded themselves as defending the legitimate government, but that's the norm, even for the most vicious and murderous coups, like the U.S.-backed coup in Chile on the [first 9/11](#) - which was actually much worse in virtually every dimension than the second one, the one that we remember and commemorate. The first one is best forgotten on the principle of "wrong agents": Us, not some radical Islamic fundamentalists.

The emotions of those attempting the [Capitol] coup were apparent. Belief that the election was stolen was plainly held with real fervor. And it is understandable among people who live in passionately pro-Trump areas where he is revered as their savior, and for some, even chosen by God, [as he once declared](#). Many may scarcely have seen a Biden sign, or heard anything from *Fox News* or Rush Limbaugh to suggest some possible flaw in their beliefs.

In some respects, these beliefs are not as bizarre as they may look at first. A shift

of tens of thousands of votes in a few counties might have swung the election the other way in a deeply undemocratic system such as ours, where 7 million votes can be swept aside along with an unknown number of others eliminated by purging, gerrymandering, and the many other devices that have been devised to steal the election from the “wrong people,” effectively authorized by the Supreme Court in its shameful 2013 decision nullifying the Voting Rights Act ([Shelby County v Holder](#)).

As we’ve discussed before, the malevolent figure in charge deserves credit for his talent in tapping the poisonous streams that run not far below the surface of American society, with sources that are deep in U.S. history and culture.

I have to say that I was also surprised by the quick reaction of those who own the country and have a large share of responsibility for the malaise that broke forth on January 6. In no small part, it is a consequence of the neoliberal assault since Reagan, amplified by his successors, that has devastated the rural areas that are the homes of many who stormed the Capitol. Those who hold the levers of the private power that dominates the society and political system never liked Trump’s behavior, which harmed the image they project as humanists dedicated to the common good. But they were willing to tolerate the vulgar performance as long as Trump and his accomplices delivered the goods, lining their pockets by robbing the public.

And that they did. The “transfer of wealth” from the lower 90 percent to the ultra-rich since Reagan opened the doors for highway robbery reaches almost \$50 trillion, according to a [recent Rand corporation study](#). No one can place numbers on the vastly greater cost of environmental destruction that was a high priority of the Trump-McConnell years of service to the very rich and corporate sector.

But January 6 was apparently too much, and the marching orders were delivered swiftly by the Big Guns.

One has to have some sympathy for the legislators caught between powerful contending forces. On the one hand, they see the angry hordes whipped to a frenzy by Trump’s performances, and still in his pocket, poised to wreak vengeance on those who betray their leader. And on the other hand, looking down on them from above, are the captains of finance and industry who fund their elections and dangle before them many other privileges to keep them in line.

(How many members of Congress leave office to become truck drivers or secretaries?)

The dilemma is particularly harsh for senators, who are more reliant on the large donors. And their defection from the ranks of obsequious Trump loyalists has been somewhat greater.

Apparently, D.C. Council members had been briefed by the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia that Donald Trump might invoke the Insurrection Act to seize control of the city police, but did not expect an attack on the Capitol itself. In your own view, what explains the enormous security failures that led to the Capitol siege, and do the events of January 6, 2021, qualify as a putsch?

An attempted putsch, though the connotations of the term putsch may be too strong. The events reminded many, including historians of fascism, of Hitler's failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, which actually did not so easily penetrate the centers of power as the attempted coup of January 6.

The reasons for the security failures are being debated. I have no special insight. Black members of the Capitol police, who showed great courage along with many of their white colleagues, have charged for years that the force has been infiltrated with white supremacists. There may have been some collusion, and possibly serious corruption higher up the chain of command.

If Trump incited an insurrection against elected officials of the U.S. government, is it enough that he has been impeached again? Shouldn't he be facing sedition charges since inciting an insurrection against the government is a criminal act under Title 18 of the U.S. Code?

I presume the Joint Chiefs of Staff chose their words carefully in their [message on the "violent riot"](#) on January 6, "a direct assault on the U.S. Congress, the Capitol building, and our Constitutional process," an act of "violence, sedition and insurrection." They surely considered the fact that incitement to sedition and insurrection carries a heavy prison sentence. I presume that they also weighed the evidence that such incitement took place from the Oval Office.

Many questions arise about how to pursue such barely concealed charges, but we should be careful to avoid the Watergate trap. The Nixon impeachment procedures were initiated by [Massachusetts] Rep. Robert Drinan, S.J., charging

him with the bombing of Cambodia, a truly monstrous crime, of Nuremberg Trial caliber. That charge was struck down by Congress. The prime charge against Nixon was that he organized thugs to invade one of two seats of political power in the country, the Democratic Party headquarters. This attack on the foundations of the Republic was overcome in a “stunning vindication of our constitutional system” (famed liberal historian Henry Steele Commager).

In short, the powerful can rise to their own defense. The victims of truly monstrous crimes can look elsewhere for recourse. Maybe history, with luck.

Incitement of an attempted coup is no laughing matter, but it scarcely weighs in the balance against a dedicated effort to destroy the environment that sustains life on earth or demolition of the arms control regime that mitigates the threat of nuclear war.

Do you believe that Trump is finished as a political figure? Or, to put the question slightly differently, was the Washington putsch of January 6, 2021, the beginning of the end of the rise of Trumpism?

Far from it. Whether Trump will survive the error of judgment that turned major power centers against him is unclear. He may well do so. The voting base of the Party seems to remain loyal, maybe with even greater fervor after this attack on their hero by the “deep state.” Local officials too. He was cheered on his visit to the Republican National Committee the day after the Capitol riot. He has other resources.

Whatever the fate of the individual, Trumpism will not be so easily contained. Its roots are deep. The anger and resentment raised to a frenzy by this talented con man is not limited to the U.S. The \$50 trillion robbery is only the icing on the cake of the neoliberal disaster, which itself is built on foundations of deep injustice and repression. We are not out of the woods, by far.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a

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White Freedom: An Interview With Tyler Stovall



Professor Tyler Stovall. Photo: UC Santa Cruz

The idea of freedom has a contradictory legacy in the modern western world: it's all about whiteness mixed with practices of racial inequality and discrimination, argues Tyler Stovall, Distinguished Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of California at Santa Cruz, in his newly published work [*White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*](#) (Princeton University Press, 2021). In the interview that follows, Tyler Stovall discusses the main thesis of his book, highlights the difference in the way conservatives and progressives view freedom, and talks the return of white supremacy in American politics.

C. J. Polychroniou: You have just published a new book, titled White Freedom: The

Racial History of an Idea, in which you argue that freedom has been defined in the western political tradition in racial terms. Can you elaborate a bit on this thesis?

Tyler Stovall: I argue that in America, France, and other Western societies in the modern era freedom is central to white racial identity and that whiteness is an essential component of freedom. To be free is to be white, and to be white is to be free. The book explores how societies based on liberty, like the French and American republics, could without contradiction also practice racism against peoples of color because those who were not white by definition could not be free.

It also shows how the clarion call of liberty in these societies derived its force in part from its appeal to race.

CJP: Didn't gender and class also play key roles in the social construction of freedom?

TS: Since those are not the primary subjects of this book my answer to this question is necessarily limited, but class and gender certainly also played an important role. One need only consider the history of voting as a political right in the modern era. In many Western democracies the franchise was only gradually granted to people without property, and until the twentieth century it was almost universally reserved for men. The right to property, a key component of freedom in capitalist societies, was also highly gendered, and more generally if one did not have property (the case of most working people in the modern era) one could not truly be free.

CJP: Isn't it also the case that freedom has always meant something different to conservatives and progressives?

TS: To a certain extent, yes: conservatives have traditionally focused on individual liberty and negative ideas of freedom, freedom from, whereas progressives have tended to emphasize the freedom of groups from oppression based on class, race, gender, and other identities. I would say, however, that in many ways the conservative, individualistic interpretation of freedom has been dominant during the modern era, and that conservatives are more likely than progressives to foreground ideas of freedom in their politics. Many progressives give greater importance to equality than freedom, for example. Also, if you consider the very

idea of liberal democracy, which I consider a kind of compromise between these two approaches, conservatives stress liberalism and progressives stress democracy.

CJP: Racism not only remains a major problem in American society, but race relations seem to have gotten worse over the last few years. In fact, we have seen the return of white supremacy in U.S. politics during Donald Trump's reign of rage and destruction. What's your explanation for this unsettling socio-political development which threatens the very fabric of American democracy?

TS: I'm not sure I agree with the basic premise of this question, because I don't think that white supremacy ever went anywhere, and I don't think it's necessarily worse now than in the past. For example, what strikes me most about the Black Lives Matter movement is how many whites support it, in a way that would have been hard to imagine ten years ago. That said, there certainly remains lots of racism in American society, and I think it is due to the combination of two factors.

First, American society and culture are growing more multicultural and diverse, and second the living standards of many Americans, including working class whites, have declined significantly since the 1970s. Traditionally in American society lower class whites who had very little property or social status could take comfort in their whiteness and white privilege, but now that seems to many to be increasingly jeopardized. Those whites who invaded the Capitol building on January 6, 2001 felt that their communities and their futures were threatened by the new contours of American life, and as we have seen in such situations people react violently.

CJP: *Given the thesis of your book, namely, that racism and freedom are intertwined in the western political tradition, isn't there a need therefore to redefine freedom?*

TS: I would say rather that it is important to reinforce universal ideas of freedom that have also existed in the West, and bolster their rejection of white freedom. For example, in my book I discuss the ways in which the Statue of Liberty has been an icon of white freedom, symbolizing the ability of European immigrants to achieve white privilege in America. My preferred solution to that would not be to take down Lady Liberty, but rather to underscore other kinds of

liberty. The Statue of Liberty and the myths around it tend to obscure the fact that New York was one of America's great slave ports, so why not have another statue in New York harbor that commemorates slave rebellions in New York as symbols of liberty? Many people in America and throughout the world have rejected white freedom and fought for liberty for all, and it's important to honor their struggles.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

Salam Hamid - The Arab Countries' Expulsion Of The Jews Was A Disastrous Mistake



Photo:

<https://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com>

Emirati writer Salam Hamid, founder and head of the Al-Mezmaah Studies and Research Center in Dubai, published an article titled “The Cost of the Expulsion of the Arab Jews” in the UAE daily Al-Ittihad, in which he lamented the expulsion of the Jews from the Arab countries following the establishment of Israel in 1948. This expulsion, he said, was a grave mistake, since the Arab countries thereby “lost an elite population with significant wealth, property, influence, knowledge, and culture,” which could have helped them, including against Israel, and lost the potential contribution of the Jews in many spheres, especially in the financial sphere. The Arabs, he added, should have learned a lesson from the expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492, and from Hitler’s expulsion of the Jews of Europe, which eventually harmed the countries that lost their Jews. He stated further that antisemitism, which is deeply entrenched in Arab societies, stems from the books that teach Islamic heritage, studied in schools throughout the Arab world, and therefore called for an overhaul of the curricula in order to strengthen tolerance and banish extremism.

The following are translated excerpts from his article:

“During the years that followed the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, most Arab countries expelled their Jewish citizens, who numbered approximately 900,000, to Israel. With this apparently strange behavior, [the Arab countries] gave a gift to the growing Hebrew nation. This makes me wonder: Why were these people deported, and what was their crime?”

“Over time, [this expulsion] had disastrous repercussions, when [it turned out that] the Arabs had lost an elite population with significant wealth, property, influence, knowledge, and culture. Soon enough, the Arabs waged pointless wars against Israel, until they were defeated [in June 1967] with heavy losses.

Nevertheless, the mentality of the Arab leadership persisted, as they spun conspiracy theories to their defeated peoples and sought scapegoats in order to justify their repeated defeats at the hand of Israel.

“If you ever visit Israel, you will see citizens of diverse colors, just like in the U.S. They arrived as immigrants from across the globe, of various races, and almost half of them are from Arab countries. Any intelligent person is aware that Jews had lived in Arab countries for 2,000 years before being arbitrarily expelled – yet here they are now, making up half of Israel’s citizens.

“Just a look at the number of Jews remaining in their Arab countries elucidates the difference between the past and the present. In the past, there were hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and the Maghreb, while today only dozens remain. Meanwhile, the Palestinians make up the largest group of asylum-seekers in the world. Some 700,000 of them left their lands after the 1948 war – not just because of the war, but because of several Arab leaders who asked them to leave the Jewish areas so that they could return after the fledgling Jewish state was destroyed. It is worth noting that in his memoir, Syria’s then-prime minister Khalid Al-‘Azm acknowledged the role played by the Arabs in convincing the Palestinians to leave – a mistake whose severity the Arabs failed to grasp, which created the Palestinian refugee crisis, and which prompted the founding of UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] in 1949.

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