

Bint Jbeil

► Occupation Op-Ed

Reflections By An

ARAB JEW

by **Ella Habiba Shohat**

Irvi Nasawi: Sephardic & Middle Eastern Cultures

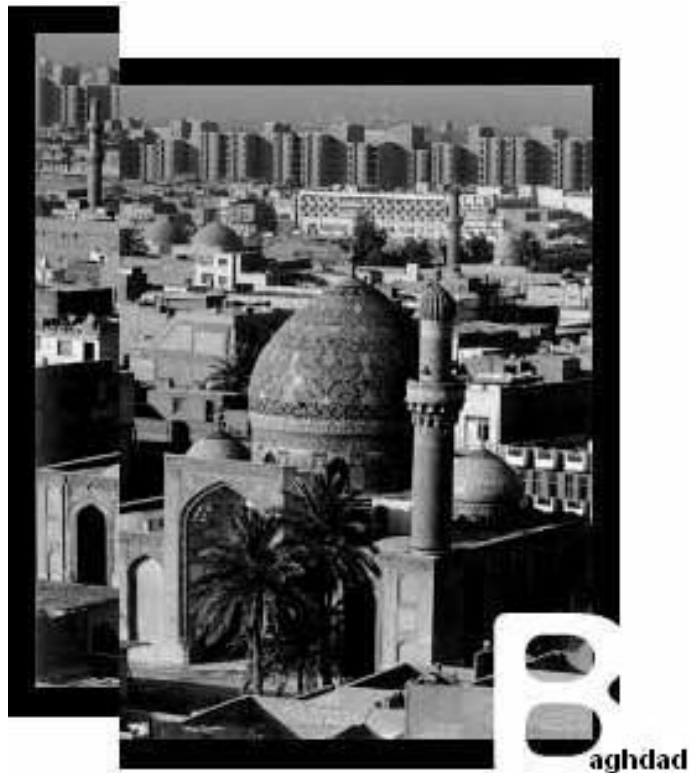


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When issues of racial and colonial discourse are discussed in the U. S., people of Middle Eastern and North African origin are often excluded. This piece is written with the intent of opening up the multicultural debate, going beyond the U.S. census's simplistic categorization of Middle Eastern peoples as "whites."

It's also written with the intent of multiculturalizing American notions of Jewishness. My personal narrative questions the Eurocentric opposition of Arab and Jew, particularly the denial of Arab Jewish (Sephardic) voices both in the Middle Eastern and American contexts.



I am an Arab Jew. Or, more specifically, an Iraqi Israeli woman living, writing and teaching in the U.S. Most members of my family were born and raised in Baghdad, and now live in Iraq, Israel, the U.S., England, and Holland. When my grandmother first encountered Israeli society in the '50s, she was convinced that the people who looked, spoke and ate so differently--the European Jews--were actually European Christians. Jewishness for her generation was inextricably associated with Middle Easternness. My grandmother, who still lives in Israel and still communicates largely in Arabic, had to be taught to speak of "us" as Jews and "them" as Arabs. For Middle Easterners, the operating distinction had always been "Muslim," "Jew," and "Christian," not Arab versus Jew. The assumption was that "Arabness" referred to a common shared culture and language, albeit with religious differences.

Americans are often amazed to discover the existentially nauseating or charmingly exotic possibilities of such a syncretic identity. I recall a well-established colleague who despite my elaborate lessons on the history of Arab Jews, still had trouble understanding that I was not a tragic anomaly--for instance, the daughter of an Arab (Palestinian) and an Israeli (European

Jew). Living in North America makes it even more difficult to communicate that we are Jews and yet entitled to our Middle Eastern difference. And that we are Arabs and yet entitled to our religious difference, like Arab Christians and Arab Muslims.

It was precisely the policing of cultural borders in Israel that led some of us to escape into the metropolises of syncretic identities. Yet, in an American context, we face again a hegemony that allows us to narrate a single Jewish memory, i.e., a European one. For those of us who don't hide our Middle Easternness under one Jewish "we," it becomes tougher and tougher to exist in an American context hostile to the very notion of Easternness.

As an Arab Jew, I am often obliged to explain the "mysteries" of this oxymoronic entity. That we have spoken Arabic, not Yiddish; that for millennia our cultural creativity, secular and religious, had been largely articulated in Arabic (Maimonides being one of the few intellectuals to "make it" into the consciousness of the West); and that even the most religious of our communities in the Middle East and North Africa never expressed themselves in Yiddish-accented Hebrew prayers, nor did they practice liturgical-gestural norms and sartorial codes favoring the dark colors of centuries-ago Poland. Middle Eastern women similarly never wore wigs; their hair covers, if worn, consisted of different variations on regional clothing (and in the wake of British and French imperialism, many wore Western-style clothes). If you go to our synagogues, even in New York, Montreal, Paris or London, you'll be amazed to hear the winding quarter tones of our music which the uninitiated might imagine to be coming from a mosque.

Now that the three cultural topographies that compose my ruptured and dislocated history--Iraq, Israel and the U.S.--have been involved in a war, it is crucial to say that we exist. Some of us refuse to dissolve so as to facilitate "neat" national and ethnic divisions. My anxiety and pain during the Scud attacks on Israel, where some of my family lives, did not cancel out my fear and anguish for the victims of the bombardment of Iraq, where I also have relatives.

War, however, is the friend of binarisms, leaving little place for complex identities. The Gulf War, for example, intensified a pressure already familiar to the Arab Jewish diaspora in the wake of the Israeli-Arab conflict: a

pressure to choose between being a Jew and being an Arab. For our families, who have lived in Mesopotamia since at least the Babylonian exile, who have been Arabized for millennia, and who were abruptly dislodged to Israel 45 years ago, to be suddenly forced to assume a homogenous European Jewish identity based on experiences in Russia, Poland and Germany, was an exercise in self devastation. To be a European or American Jew has hardly been perceived as a contradiction, but to be an Arab Jew has been seen as a kind of logical paradox, even an ontological subversion. This binarism has led many Oriental Jews (our name in Israel referring to our common Asian and African countries of origin is Mizrahi or Mizrachi) to a profound and visceral schizophrenia, since for the first time in our history Arabness and Jewishness have been imposed as antonyms.

Intellectual discourse in the West highlights a Judeo-Christian tradition, yet rarely acknowledges the Judeo-Muslim culture of the Middle East, of North Africa, or of pre-Expulsion Spain (1492) and of the European parts of the Ottoman Empire. The Jewish experience in the Muslim world has often been portrayed as an unending nightmare of oppression and humiliation.

Although I in no way want to idealize that experience--there were occasional tensions, discriminations, even violence--on the whole, we lived quite comfortably within Muslim societies.

Our history simply cannot be discussed in European Jewish terminology. As Iraqi Jews, while retaining a communal identity, we were generally well integrated and indigenous to the country, forming an inseparable part of its social and cultural life. Thoroughly Arabized, we used Arabic even in hymns and religious ceremonies. The liberal and secular trends of the 20th century engendered an even stronger association of Iraqi Jews and Arab culture, which brought Jews into an extremely active arena in public and cultural life. Prominent Jewish writers, poets and scholars played a vital role in Arab culture, distinguishing themselves in Arabic speaking theater, in music, as singers, composers, and players of traditional instruments.

In Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Tunisia, Jews became members of legislatures, of municipal councils, of the judiciary, and even occupied high economic positions. (The finance minister of Iraq in the '40s was Ishak Sasson, and in Egypt, Jamas Sanua--higher positions, ironically, than those our community had generally achieved within the Jewish state until the

1990s!)

The same historical process that dispossessed Palestinians of their property, lands and national-political rights, was linked to the dispossession of Middle Eastern and North African Jews of their property, lands, and rootedness in Muslim countries. As refugees, or mass immigrants (depending on one's political perspective), we were forced to leave everything behind and give up our Iraqi passports. The same process also affected our uprootedness or ambiguous positioning within Israel itself, where we have been systematically discriminated against by institutions that deployed their energies and material to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent disadvantage of Oriental Jews. Even our physiognomies betray us, leading to internalized colonialism or physical misperception. Sephardic Oriental women often dye their dark hair blond, while the men have more than once been arrested or beaten when mistaken for Palestinians. What for Ashkenazi immigrants from Russian and Poland was a social aliya (literally "ascent") was for Oriental Sephardic Jews a yerida ("descent").

Stripped of our history, we have been forced by our no-exit situation to repress our collective nostalgia, at least within the public sphere. The pervasive notion of "one people" reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before Israel. We have never been allowed to mourn a trauma that the images of Iraq's destruction only intensified and crystallized for some of us. Our cultural creativity in Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic is hardly studied in Israeli schools, and it is becoming difficult to convince our children that we actually did exist there, and that some of us are still there in Iraq, Morocco, Yemen and Iran.

Western media much prefer the spectacle of the triumphant progress of Western technology to the survival of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. The case of Arab Jews is just one of many elisions. From the outside, there is little sense of our community, and even less sense of the diversity of our political perspectives. Oriental-Sephardic peace movements, from the Black Panthers of the '70s to the new Keshet (a "Rainbow" coalition of Mizrahi groups in Israel) not only call for a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians, but also for the cultural, political, and economic integration of Israel/Palestine into the Middle East. And thus an end to the binarisms of

war, an end to a simplistic charting of Middle Eastern identities.

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