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# Once A Diaspora, Always A Diaspora? The Ethnic, Cultural and Political Mobilization of Kurdistanis Jews in Israel

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of Kurdistanis Jews who were airlifted to Israel from Iraq in the early 1950s with the Operations Ezra and Nehemiah. The article seeks to answer questions regarding what transnational ties Kurdistanis Jews have with their former homeland in Iraq, how their ethnic, cultural, and political mobilization transpires in Israel, and whether the Kurdistanis Jewish community in Israel may be considered a diaspora. The article scrutinizes their (allegedly) enduring diasporic situation and identity formation in the specific context of ethnic and cultural mobilization regarding the community's former homeland. It also examines how this community maintain their attachment to the KRI and what kind of transnational activities they pursue to create a bridge between Israel and Kurdistan. The arguments are based on extensive fieldwork in Israel, consisting of semi-structured interviews with first and new generation Kurdish Jews who live in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, between October 2018 and May 2019.

## Introduction

The Kurdish diaspora is one of the most influential diasporas of significant visibility in the transnational space. As a result of conflicts in their countries of origin, Kurds have become dispersed throughout Europe and beyond. Many diaspora Kurds maintain an attachment to their places of origin, a sense of nationalism that encourages them to support and contribute to the Kurdish cause from afar.<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature, however, analyzes the Kurds in Europe and creates a somewhat Eurocentric focus on this issue. Diasporic identity formation is therefore examined considering present integration and opportunity structure debates in Europe, revolving around the question of how the Kurdish identity differs from that of host societies and how their attachment to their homeland affects their relationship with the host country. The political, social, and economic remittances diasporas transfer back to the homeland are also understood

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<sup>1</sup>David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*. Vol. 22. (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Martin van Bruinessen, 'Shifting national and ethnic identities: The Kurds in Turkey and the European diaspora.' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18, no. 1 (1998): 39–52; Vera Eccarius-Kelly, 'Political Movements and Leverage Points: Kurdish Activism in the European diaspora.' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22:1 (2002): 91–118; Bahar Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective*. (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015).

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within the context of the Global North–South dualism. But even outside of Europe are sizable communities that constitute Kurdish diasporas (such as Israel and Lebanon), and they also form transnational identities, which warrant academic scrutiny.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) held a referendum for independence in September 2017. And though the international community did not welcome this move, the political authorities in the Kurdistan Regional Government proceeded with their decision. The only country that communicated open support for the KRI's willingness to permit the popular vote to express its right for self-determination was Israel.<sup>2</sup> In addition to diplomatic support, Jews of Kurdish origin gathered in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to rally for Kurdistan's bid for independence. Various Kurdish newspapers published headlines claiming the 'Kurdish diaspora in Israel' supports Kurdish self-determination. Their activism during this salient political event bolstered their visibility, and generated many questions whether they helped lobby Israel to support Kurdish interests. Moreover, the transnational activities they engage in while building their identity, which combines the customs and traditions of Kurdistan with Israeliness, became a matter of debate in the regional and international media. The lack of extensive academic resources on this community's historical trajectory underscored the significant lacuna in the empirical literature on Kurdish diaspora activism in general and on the history of Jewish Kurds from Iraq in particular.

The State of Israel has been the recipient of two waves of mass migration: first in the 1950s and later in the 1990s. Each wave brought around one million immigrants to Israel, where they remained permanently. The first wave comprised European Jews (Ashkenazim) and Asian and Middle Eastern and North African Jews (Mizrahim and Sephardim). The next wave included European Jews as well as others from former parts of the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and other non-European countries.<sup>3</sup> Between 1948 and 1964, 648,160 immigrants arrived from Muslim majority countries including Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco.<sup>4</sup> Within the framework of these Zionist homecomings, Operations Ezra and Nehemiah airlifted thousands of Kurds from Iraq to Israel in the early 1950s, after Baghdad briefly reversed its ban on Jewish emigration. More Jews moved to Israel during the following decades from other Kurdish areas in Iran, Turkey, and Syria. The first generation and its descendants today constitute a sizable community in Israel, and most reside in Jerusalem and its surrounding towns and villages.

The literature on both the Kurdish Diaspora as well as Israel's cosmopolitan and multicultural population has largely overlooked the experiences of Kurdistan Jews. Many studies focused on larger groups of migrants to Israel, and 'peripheral groups,' such as the Kurds, have not received their deserved attention in history books.<sup>5</sup> Although 'the Jews of Kurdistan are a unique ethnic group in its geographic distribution, its economic occupation and its language,'<sup>6</sup> their distinct identity has been ignored, as they were categorized as Babylonian Jews. Traditionally, the scholarly works that address Israel-

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<sup>2</sup>Scott Abramson, 'A Historical Inquiry into Early Kurdish-Israeli Contacts: The antecedents of an alliance.' *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 9:4 (2018), p. 379.

<sup>3</sup>Sammy Smooha, 'The mass immigrations to Israel: A comparison of the failure of the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s with the success of the Russian immigrants of the 1990s.' *Journal of Israeli History* 27, no. 1 (2008): p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>5</sup>Mordechai Zaken, *Jewish Subjects and Their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival*. (Brill, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Rachel Sharaby, 'The Renewal of an Ethnic Tradition and Its Role in Shaping the Kurds Immigrants' Identity.' *Immigrants & Minorities* 35:2 (2017): p. 129.

diaspora relations are confined to the leading Jewish diaspora communities in the West, such as those of France, the United Kingdom, or the United States or, alternatively, focus on Jewish communities from Muslim-majority countries with whom Israel was in direct conflict. Examples of the latter more often focus on Arab Jews, as the perceived 'Arab' component of their identity complicated how they were treated in Israel. As Shenhav claims, 'State political actors formed a common Zionist identity for Jews of very different backgrounds, and simultaneously formed common oppositional identity for all 'Arabs'.<sup>7</sup>

A new Israeli school of thought, starting in the 1970s, developed a critical literature using the orientalist paradigm of what it described as the European Ashkenazi establishment's systematic discrimination against Oriental Jews.<sup>8</sup> Authors such as Shohat and Dahan as well as Levy demonstrated that Mizrahim,<sup>9</sup> as a new hybrid identity, was born as a response to Israel's assimilationist policies and the Eurocentric concept of a unified Jewish history.<sup>10</sup> These studies have allocated minimal attention to the unique case of Kurdish Jews with a few exceptions: Haya Gavish's excellent oral history of the Jewish community of Zakho in Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>11</sup>, Mordechai Zaken's rigorous historical research on the Jews of Kurdistan and their relationship with Kurdish tribes<sup>12</sup>, and Ariel Sabar's rich narrative of his father's memoirs in a semi-fictional book entitled *My Father's Paradise*.<sup>13</sup> Yet this community's contemporary attachments to Kurdistan and transnational activism have not been systematically analyzed as the central subject of a scholarly work.

This article, therefore, looks to fill these gaps by focusing on the Kurdistan Jewish community in Israel and the trajectory of their migration, considering their current ethnic and cultural mobilization within their new homeland. Kurdish migration to Israel has been considered an 'ethno-national homecoming',<sup>14</sup> but recent evidence also shows that some Kurdish Jews still feel attachments to Kurdistan as their former home. The article seeks to answer questions regarding what transnational ties Kurdistan Jewish have with their former homeland in Iraq, how their ethnic, cultural, and political

<sup>7</sup>Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006): 607.

<sup>8</sup>Most notable among these are Ella Shohat's 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,' in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 39–68; 'Rupture and Return: A Mizrahi Perspective on the Zionist Discourse,' *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* (May 2001): 58–71; and *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Sami Smooha's 'Class, Ethnic, and National Cleavages and Democracy in Israel,' in *Israeli Democracy Under Stress*, eds. Ehud Sprinzak, and Larry Diamond (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993): 309–342; Yehouda Shenhav's *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Mizrahim is a biased word. It was first used to discriminate between the Jews from the Middle East and Africa from the Ashkenazis. According to Shohat, 'Mizrahim' as an imagined community are a Zionist intervention. The author asserts, 'By provoking the geographical dispersal of the Jews from the Muslim world, by placing them in a new situation on the ground, by attempting to reshape their identity as simply 'Israeli,' by disdaining and trying to uproot their Easternness, by discriminating against them as a group, Zionism obliged Arab Jews to redefine themselves in relation to new ideological polarities, thus provoking the aporias of an identity constituted out of its own ruins.' See Ella Shohat, 'The Invention of the Mizrahim,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:1 (1999): pp. 5–0.

<sup>10</sup>Shohat 'Sephardim'; and Yossi Dahan and Gal Levy, 'Multicultural Education in the Zionist State—The Mizrahi Challenge,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 19:5–6 (2000): pp. 423–444.

<sup>11</sup>Haya Gavish, *Unwitting Zionists: The Jewish Community of Zakho in Iraqi Kurdistan*. (Wayne State University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup>Zaken, *Jewish*.

<sup>13</sup>Ariel Sabar, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq*. (Algonquin Books, 2008).

<sup>14</sup>Sharaby, 'The Renewal,' 130.

mobilization transpires in Israel, and whether the Kurdistan Jewish community in Israel may be considered a diaspora. The article scrutinizes their (allegedly) enduring diasporic situation and identity formation in the specific context of ethnic and cultural mobilization regarding the community's former homeland. It also examines how Jewish Kurds in Israel maintain their attachment to the KRI and what kind of transnational activities they pursue to create a bridge between Israel and Kurdistan. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on Kurdish diaspora activism as well as multi-ethnic studies on Israel. Besides its empirical contributions, the article also demonstrates the complexity and fluidity of transnational identities and their evolution through time and space.

### Theoretical framework: the fluidity of the concept of diaspora

In recent decades, 'diasporas' have become an incredibly popular topic for researchers and continue to gain increasing recognition in the academic world, making diasporas as a concept increasingly popular.<sup>15</sup> The term's meaning has been stretched to such an extent that there is no agreed definition among academics. As Faist states, striving for an exact definition of this term may even seem like a futile exercise.<sup>16</sup> Originating from the Greek word meaning 'scattering of seeds,' diaspora, as a concept, previously applied primarily to Jews and later to Greeks, Armenians, and Africans. The exile of Jews from the Holy Land and their dispersal around the globe paved the way for the equalization of the term diaspora to *galut*, a Hebrew word that expresses the feelings of the Jewish community as an uprooted nation. The Jewish experience constituted a paradigmatic example for the diasporic experience and set the prototype for creation of criteria for communities to be considered as a diaspora. These criteria included dispersion, collective memory, uneasy relationship with the host country and a desire to survive as a distinct community among others.<sup>17</sup> However, in the 1990s, it became such a fashionable concept that at present nearly every migrant group that has a collective identity or has established organizations in the receiving country is referred to as a 'diaspora' by themselves or others.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to overcome the semantic confusion, William Safran developed his six criteria to define what groups constitute a diaspora: 'a) dispersed groups from an original center to at least two peripheral places, b) that maintain a memory or myth about their homeland, c) that believe they are not fully accepted by their host country, d) that see the ancestral homeland as a place of return when the time is right, e) that are committed to the maintenance, safety and prosperity of the homeland and, f) that have group consciousness and solidarity.'<sup>19</sup> However, other scholars have criticized this definition, arguing that this restrictive categorization undermines contemporary diasporas that transformed themselves over time out of necessity. For example, in defining

<sup>15</sup>William Safran, 'Concepts, Theories, and Challenges of Diaspora: A panoptic Approach,' Prepared for presentation at the workshop on 'Dispersione, 'globalizzazione' e costruzione dell'alterità: diaspore et migrazioni nel bacino del Mediterraneo et oltre (XIX–XX secc.), Marsala, Italy, (2007).

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Faist, "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners." *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* 11 (2010).

<sup>17</sup>William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective." *Israel Studies* 10:1 (2005): pp. 36–60.

<sup>18</sup>Rogers, Brubaker, "The 'diaspora'diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28:1 (2005): p. 1.

<sup>19</sup>William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1:1 (1991): pp. 83–99.

contemporary diasporas, Clifford has pointed out that diaspora communities do not inherently wish to return home. He suggests these criteria might be regarded as additional rather than decisive criteria for defining diasporas.<sup>20</sup> As recent studies show, the idea of return has also been replaced by circular exchange or transnational mobility, and it is still not clear whether all dispersed communities are considered diasporas or whether such an approach eradicates the thin line that separates diasporas from transnational migrant communities.<sup>21</sup>

Brubaker's intervention in the debate suggests that diaspora can be defined by three core elements: a) dispersion in space; b) an orientation toward the 'homeland,' real or imagined; and c) a boundary maintenance vis-à-vis a host society. Dispersion could be a traumatic experience or the dispersion that crosses state borders counts. Homeland orientation is the main determinant that shapes the diasporic identity. It might be directed toward a real or imagined homeland, but the strength of the ties, collective memory, and the myth of eventual return to the homeland determines the actions of the diaspora. In this vein, the diasporic identity is formed by resistance to assimilation to the host society through segregation or through exclusion by the host society. On the other hand, there also cases of creolization, hybridity or syncretism where one can develop a diasporic identity without experiencing total isolation.<sup>22</sup> Brubaker also states that what makes diaspora phenomenon interesting is the persistence of boundary maintenance through generations.<sup>23</sup> Bauböck also argued that the persistence of diasporic identity in a multi-generational perspective as the most obvious candidate for distinguishing diaspora groups from the phenomenon of migrant transnationalism. Arguing that transnational networks must be constantly reloaded by new migration flows, he explains the dividing line that makes diaspora a separate concept from transnational community: 'Diasporic identities are then phenomenologically distinguished from transnational ones through their capacity to be passed on to subsequent generations in the absence of new immigration from the same origin.' He claims that generational continuation does not necessarily require segregation from the host society—second or third generation diaspora members might be very well integrated but not completely assimilated to the host country. In other words, they might well keep their attachments to the ancestral homeland.<sup>24</sup> However, scholars are not in consensus whether the second generation possess transnational ties to the same degree as the first generation. Authors such as Portes<sup>25</sup> and Rumbaut<sup>26</sup> argue that the second generation maintains less ties with the homeland or that transnational ties might as well be a 'one-generation' phenomenon. Other authors, conversely, argue that members of the second generation also maintains ties with their parents' homeland. However, their attachment cannot solely be understood by looking at concrete facts such as remittances or number of

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<sup>20</sup>James Clifford, "Diasporas." *Cultural anthropology* 9:3 (1994): pp. 302–38.

<sup>21</sup>Faist, 'Diaspora and Transnationalism,' 13.

<sup>22</sup>Brubaker, 'The diaspora diaspora,' 6–7.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Rainer Bauböck, "Cold Constellations and Hot Identities: Political Theory Questions about Transnationalism and Diaspora." *Diaspora and transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (2010): 295–322.

<sup>25</sup>Alejandro Portes, "Introduction: The Debates and Significance of Immigrant Transnationalism." *Global Networks* 1:3 (2001): pp. 181–94.

<sup>26</sup>Rubén Rumbaut, "Severed or sustained attachments? Language, identity, and imagined communities in the post-immigrant generation." *Language, Identity, and Imagined Communities in The Post-Immigrant Generation* (2002): 43–95.

visits to the homeland. The second generation continues this trend of recreating the sense of belonging in the country of residence despite neither speaking the language nor visiting that imagined homeland, let alone entertaining the idea of return. This is accomplished by selectively preserving and recovering traditions such that they create or maintain identification with far-reaching historic, cultural, and political processes, granting a sense of attachment elsewhere, in a different time, accompanied by hopes or visions of renewal.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the academic debate that has emerged in recent decades, ‘the question of what we talk about when we talk about diaspora remains, to a large extent, unanswered.’<sup>28</sup> Besides the academic debates on semantics, home and host countries have also joined the bandwagon and started celebrating the rising profile of diasporas as bridges between the two countries, non-state actors in global politics, or agents of positive change in both countries. This burgeoning interest has also put the spotlight on diasporas in media outlets where individual or collective stories of diaspora success or horror stories have mushroomed in global press. These actors and outlets have almost ignored the academic debate, as a positivist approach to diasporas became the dominant manner in which to label groups as diasporas. The term diaspora, therefore, crossed over from academic debates into the common vernacular.<sup>29</sup> Although scholars still seek to avoid the essentialist labeling of communities and scrutinizing mobilizations, self-identifications, and fluid identity formations from a constructivist point of view, the literature on diasporas and contested definitions is growing.

In the light of these debates, the situation of Kurdistan Jews constitutes a complex case that pushes the conventional boundaries of diaspora studies. The complexity comes from the gap between the self-definition of this community and the labels attributed to them by others. In Safran’s words, ‘The Jews are the oldest diaspora: they lacked a ‘homeland’ for two millennia but thought about it constantly and the idea of return to it—at first an eschatological conception and much later a concrete one—remained part of their collective consciousness. Their diasporic condition was a long lasting and unhappy one, reflected in the Yiddish conception of the epitome of duration: ‘*lang vi der goles*’ (as long as (our) Exile).’<sup>30</sup> The Kurdistan Jewish dispersal from Iraq is traumatic and unexpected. However, their Aliyah to Israel is considered an ethnic-homecoming, and their commitment to their religious identity therefore compels them interpret their arrival to Israel as the end of their diasporic situation. On the other hand, their transnational identity formation and weak yet present attachment to Kurdistan also paves the way for this community to be defined as a diaspora by others. In the following pages, we scrutinize how the members of the Kurdistan Jewish community perceive their own positionality in Israel and whether they refer to themselves as a diaspora. The merit of the article is that the authors put their self-identification at the core of the analysis and demonstrate the fluidity of both concepts attributed to a group of people and group/national identities that persist through space and time.

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<sup>27</sup>Judith Shuval, “Diaspora migration: Definitional ambiguities and a theoretical paradigm.” *International Migration* 38:5 (2000): pp. 41–56.

<sup>28</sup>Jonathan Grossman, “Toward a definition of diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42:8 (2019), p. 1263.

<sup>29</sup>Joanna Story, and Iain Walker. “The Impact of Diasporas: Markers of Identity.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. PRI Submission Title Page 2, (2016): 135–141.

<sup>30</sup>Safran, ‘The Jewish diaspora,’ 37.

## Methodology

The article is based on a combination of extensive fieldwork in Israel, including in-depth interviews, and a content analysis of materials published by Kurdish Jewish organizations in Israel as well as academic and non-academic published sources and newspaper articles. The authors conducted intermittent fieldwork in Israel between October 2018 and May 2019. Interviews were held with Kurdish community leaders and members, academics, Israeli politicians, and journalists specialized in Israeli-Kurdish relations. A total of twenty-five interviews, in English and Hebrew, were held in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and the surrounding towns and villages. Among the interviewees were first-generation Kurdish migrants with vivid recollections of their lives in Kurdistan and second – and third-generation Israelis with Kurdish backgrounds. Interviews are anonymized except for those interviewees who specifically asked to be named in this paper.

The authors also conducted a literature review in English and Hebrew about the Kurdish migration to Israel. The leader of a Kurdish organization provided the researchers with periodicals published in Israel since the 1970s. Additionally, the authors visited the archives of the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, the Babylonian Heritage Center in Or Yehuda, and Kurdish Jewish synagogues in the Katamonim neighborhood of Jerusalem. The research relies on participant observations in Jerusalem's predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods.

## Kurdish Jews, zionism, and immigration

In personal interviews, the Jews of Kurdistan trace their history back to the eighth century BC, when the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and forcibly resettled them to the region later known as Kurdistan. As Zaken points out, however, mystery clouds this period in the early history of Kurdistan Jews.<sup>31</sup> Except for few, sporadic mentions in the Talmud, the earliest accounts of Jewish communities in Kurdistan date only to the mid-twelfth century.<sup>32</sup> The picture later crystallized, albeit not considerably, with the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers regarding the religious and communal practices of these obscure, Eastern Neo-Aramic speaking Jewish communities of Kurdistan and their relations with their Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, and Iranian neighbors.<sup>33</sup>

The Jewish communities in Kurdistan lived in rural areas under the mandate of Kurdish tribes and received protection from Kurdish tribal leaders. But their situation grew more precarious with the reorganization of the Middle East after the First World War and the subsequent emergence of nation-states in the Kurdistan region. Migrants' accounts from the earlier period of Kurdish Jewish immigration to Palestine demonstrate the influence of the First World War on the Jewish communities residing in Kurdistan, specifically the Russian-Turkish skirmishes in Northern Kurdistan and deep within Anatolia. Russian incursions into neighboring Iran also disturbed the Jewish communities there. Ovadya Yadya, from the town of Gavar (presently Yüksekova, Hakkâri) on

<sup>31</sup>Mordechai Zaken, 'The Jewish Communities in Kurdistan Within the Tribal Kurdish Society,' *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (2018): 181.

<sup>32</sup>Duygu Atlas & Mesut Alp, 'Mardin Yahudileri,' in *Türkiye'deki Yahudi Topluluklarından Geriye Kalanlar*, ed. Rifat N. Bali (Istanbul: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık, 2016).

<sup>33</sup>Zaken, 'The Jewish communities,' 181.



the border between Turkey and Iran in Northern Kurdistan, gave an account that offers a unique look into hitherto undocumented and neglected aspects of Kurdish Jewish emigration from Kurdistan during the First World War.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the Kurdistanis Jews' immigration to Palestine predated the First World War. These movements began as gradual trickles in the mid-eighteenth century and continued until the mid-twentieth century. These early Kurdish Jewish immigrants came mainly from four centers in Kurdistan: the area surrounding Diyarbakır in Turkey, the mountainous region in Iraq between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, Kirmanshah in Iran, and further north in Iran from the area of Lake Urmia and Tabriz.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Kurdistanis Jews were among the first Jewish communities from Muslim-majority countries to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel), with their first settlement in Jerusalem in 1812.<sup>36</sup> During this inaugural period of immigration, it was religious affinity to Eretz Yisrael—expressed in prayers, common idioms, and naming villages and people—that played a decisive role in the Kurdish Jewish migration to Eretz Yisrael/Palestine.<sup>37</sup> In other words, rather than emerging from a Zionist conviction, early immigration to Palestine resulted from a desire to 'realize a collective ages-old dream of personal and religious redemption.'<sup>38</sup> Although information regarding the nineteenth-century Kurdish Jewish immigration to Palestine is scarce and the number of immigrants is relatively negligible, this early wave from Kurdistan is nevertheless important in that it established a center around which the Kurdistanis Jewish community grew in later decades.<sup>39</sup>

Already by the 1930s, many villages and towns in Kurdistan had been emptied of their Jewish residents, as a growing number of Jews immigrated to Palestine upon receiving favorable reports from their relatives already settled in the Holy Land. But the end of the British Mandate in Iraq meant the Jewish community's exposure to bouts of violence. Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, the pro-Nazi prime minister of Iraq who rose to power in 1933 and again intermittently between 1940 and 1941, allied with the Axis powers during the Second World War. His removal from power by the British instigated the pogrom against Jews of Baghdad in 1941, known as *Farhud*.<sup>40</sup> The breadth of *Farhud* and the anti-Semitic flare in Iraq were not limited to Baghdad but engulfed much of the country, including Iraqi Kurdistan. Personal accounts of Kurdistanis Jews described the events unfolding in Erbil, such as the murder of Jewish peddlers and the arrest of their grieving families. It was further noted that mosques disseminated anti-Semitic propaganda against the Jews of the city.<sup>41</sup>

As a result, the whole Kurdistanis Jewish community, like their Iraqi counterparts, gradually made their way to Palestine. Kurdistanis Jews' position in and relationship

<sup>34</sup>Amnon Cohen, 'Aliyat Yehudim le-Eretz Yisrael me-Kurdistan ha-Parsit u-mi-Turkiya ha-mizrahit la-ahar Milhemet ha-Olam ha-Rishona,' *Peamim* 5 (1980): 87–93.

<sup>35</sup>Haviv Shimoni, 'Aliyat Yehudei Kurdistan,' *Hithadshut* 7 (February 2000).

<sup>36</sup>Avraham Ben-Yakov, *Yehudei Bavel be-Eretz Yisrael me-ha-aliyot ha-rishonot ad ha-yom* (Jerusalem: Hotzaot Reuven Mas, 1980): 503.

<sup>37</sup>Gavish, *Unwitting Zionists*, 51.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>40</sup>Orit Bashkin, 'Iraqi Shadows, Iraqi Lights: Anti-Fascist and Anti-Nazi Voices in Monarchic Iraq, 1932–1941,' in *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion*, ed. Israel Gershoni (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 141–170.

<sup>41</sup>Asher Levi, 'Antishemiyut be-Erbil,' in *Kehilat Yehudei-Erbil: Sipura shel ha-kehila ha-Yehudit ve-ha-mahteret ha-Tsiyonit halutzit be-Erbil-Irak be-meah ha-20*, ed. Hertzal Yona (Or Yehuda: Amutat Moresheet Yehudei Erbil, 2008), 231–233.

with Palestine, however, was largely dictated by Zionism's intrinsic Euro-centric and Orientalist character as a political movement that emerged in Europe in response to the predicament of European Jewry. In the 1930s—and more so in the 1940s—the Zionist preoccupation with the fate of European Jewry diverted the focus from the plight of other Jewish diaspora communities, which were rarely considered to have Zionist potential. Accordingly, Eastern and Western European Jewry dominated the first five waves of *aliyah* (immigration to Palestine) from the late nineteenth century to 1939. Until the 1930s, the Zionist movement's immigration policy favored selective and gradual *aliyah* that could guarantee the arrival of ideologically committed and physically fit Jews to realize the Zionist vision of creating 'a model or exemplary society' in Palestine.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the Zionist Organization had little room to maneuver on matters relating to immigration, as it was forced to comply with the rules and criteria dictated by the British.<sup>43</sup> Under these circumstances, Jews from Muslim-majority countries represented an insignificant share of this immigration during the pre-state period. The Zionist movement's inherently Euro-centric ideological outlook, the severe crisis of European Jews concomitantly prioritized by the Zionist movement, and limitations on immigration resulted in marginal levels of migration from Middle Eastern Jewish communities.

Yet, contrary to the negative view held by Zionism toward Jews from Muslim-majority countries, the Zionist fervor was not absent from Kurdistan. The lack of documentation on Kurdish Jews makes it difficult to compile a precise understanding of the extent of Zionist activities there, but the limited resources suggest that Zionist activities in Erbil commenced after the First World War under the direction of the community leader Salah Yosef Nuriel and continued until 1935, when they were banned by the Iraqi government. The main Zionist activity in Erbil was reputed to have been the collection of donations from locals and their transfer to national funds in Palestine. Nuriel was also known to have corresponded closely with Zionist institutions in Palestine to secure immigration permits for members of his community.<sup>44</sup> According to Zvi Yehuda, no other Jewish communities in Kurdistan engaged in similar Zionist activities.<sup>45</sup>

As in other parts of Iraq, Zionist activities were carried out clandestinely in Iraqi Kurdistan, as they were criminal offenses. This carried great personal risk for activists if caught, and penalties included imprisonment. Perhaps the most well-known such case was that of Herzeliya Tsemah (Lokai), then a fourteen-year-old from Erbil, who was jailed in an Iraqi prison for two years on charges of conducting Zionist activities and colluding with the enemy.<sup>46</sup> Her story was made into a motion picture film titled *Tzamoto* (Braids) in 1989.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Avi Picard, 'Building the Country or Rescuing the People: Ben-Gurion's Attitude towards Mass Jewish Immigration to Israel in the Mid-1950s,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 54:3 (May 2018): 385.

<sup>43</sup>Aviva Halamish, 'Zionist Immigration Policy Put to the Test,' *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7:2 (2008): 121.

<sup>44</sup>Hertzel Yona, *Kehilat Yehudei-Erbil: Sipura shel ha-kehila ha-Yehudit ve-ha-mahteret ha-Tsionit halutzit be-Erbil-Irak be-meah ha-20* (Or Yehuda: Amutat Moreshet Yehudei Erbil, 2008): 152.

<sup>45</sup>Zvi Yehuda, 'Teudot al ha-peilot ha-Tsionit be-Erbil be-shanim 1930–1935,' in *Yehudei Erbil be-meot ha-19-20: Mehkirim, teudot ve-eduyot* (Or Yehuda: Amutat Moreshet Yehudei Erbil, 2012): 105.

<sup>46</sup>Mordechai Zaken, 'Ha-ovdim me-eretz Ashur: Ha-aliyot me-Kurdistan ve-ha-hityashvut be-Eretz Yisrael,' in *Edut – Edut le-Yisrael: Galut, aliyot, klita, truma u-mizug*, eds. Avshalom Mizrahi, and Aharon Ben-David (Netanya: Aguda le-tipuah hevra ve-tarbut, tiud u-mehkar, 2001): 13. An interview with Hertzelia Tsemah can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYcefa6uM9s>.

<sup>47</sup>The full movie is available (in Hebrew) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snk-iVLENI>.

The impact of the nationalist fervor among Kurdistan Jews can also be gleaned from the case of eleven Kurdistan Jews from Zakho who were imprisoned during Israel's War of Independence for singing a song that mentioned Israel. Caught in a storm in frigid weather, these manual laborers burst into a song and dance in praise of Israel to warm themselves. They were arrested and sentenced to three years in prison (1948–1952). As a result, they were unable to immigrate to Israel until 1952, after the mass migration of 1951 had already ended.<sup>48</sup>

What brought about a major reversal in Zionist policy vis-à-vis Jews from Muslim-majority countries in the early 1940s were the Second World War and the Holocaust, prompting the Zionist leadership to adjust their support from selective to mass aliyah. The systematic annihilation of European Jewry dealt a serious blow to the Zionist movement by destroying its major human resource for immigration and, as a result, raised doubts within the Zionist establishment regarding the future of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Under these circumstances, the Zionist Organization, hard-pressed to find an alternative, diverted its attention to Jews in Muslim-majority countries. Also contributing to this shift in attitude was the growing awareness of their increasingly fragile situation as evidenced by *Farhud* in Iraq and the victimization of North African Jewish communities under the pro-Nazi Vichy rule.<sup>49</sup>

A sizeable portion of the Jewish community, which had somewhat restored itself following the *Farhud* pogrom, found itself, like its counterparts in other Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, at the epicenter of a burgeoning crisis following the 1947 Partition of Palestine and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. Historical narratives convey that life among Kurdish tribes was not without difficulty for Jewish communities living in Kurdistan. Writing in 1947, Avraham Elmalih, who was later elected to the First Knesset (1949–1951) from the Sephardim and Oriental Communities party (*Sefardim ve-Edot ha-Mizrah*), described the situation for Jews living among Kurdish tribes as 'terrifying':

In Tashaz [1946–1947], Kurds increased their pressure on the Jews and abused them. The heads of Kurdish tribes, who failed in all their revolts against the central government in Baghdad now divert the anger of their masses towards the Jews. They levy heavy taxes on them [in amounts] more than impossible to bear. They incite their people to rob [the Jews] of their belongings, and claim that every Jew who was murdered or disappeared that 'he escaped to Eretz Yisrael.'<sup>50</sup>

From the 1940s—particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948—through the mid-1970s, an estimated 850,000 Jews, of whom 600,000 were later absorbed in Israel, were expelled from or forced to flee Arab countries.<sup>51</sup> In March 1951, Israel began airlifting around 120,000 Iraqi Jews in Operations Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>52</sup> This period marked the second stage of the mass migration of Iraqi Jews, including Kurdish Jews, to Israel.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Haya Gavish, 'Tsiyonim be-koakh u-ve-foal: Asirei Tzion be-Zakho, Kurdistan,' *Peamim* 131 (Spring 2012): 67–114.

<sup>49</sup>For the situation of North African Jewry under the Vichy-rule, see Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>50</sup>'Yahadut ha-Mizrah be-Tashaz,' *Hamashkif*, September 28, 1947.

<sup>51</sup>Malka Hillel Shulewitz & Raphael Israeli. 'Exchanges of Populations Worldwide: The First World War to the 1990s,' in *Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands*, ed. Malka Hillel Shulewitz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 126–141.

<sup>52</sup>Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948–1951*. (Taylor & Francis US, 1997): 165, 195.

<sup>53</sup>Yosef Sasson Halevi, *Yosef ish ha-halomot* (Tiberias: Dotan Dfus Digitali, 2017).

Historically, immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries—collectively referred to as *Mizrahim*—formed the ‘internal other’ of the Ashkenazi-dominated Hebrew culture of the Yishuv and its successor, the State of Israel. According to Mordechai Zaken,

The population of Kurdistan Jews outside Israel in 1948 is estimated around 20,000 people. In 1935, the number of Kurdistan Jews in Mandatory Palestine was around 8,000. In 1972, two decades after the large immigration of the 1950s, Kurdish Jewish organizations in Israel put the number of the Kurdish population in Israel between 80,000-100,000 people.<sup>54</sup>

Kurdish Jews, along with other Mizrahi migrants, arrived in Israel without property and in destitute conditions. Stark differences existed between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahim in terms of education and human capital. Their homecoming was supposed to provide them a life without stigmatization or discrimination. But these new circumstances in Israel initially failed to meet their expectations.<sup>55</sup> The Mizrahim were sprayed with DDT to disinfect and delouse them upon arrival in Israel.<sup>56</sup> They were placed in Development Towns and *moshavim* (‘cooperative’) villages in remote areas and borderlands.<sup>57</sup> They still constitute the ‘lowest rungs of Israeli Jewish Society.’<sup>58</sup> Scholars argue that these towns, which mainly comprised Mizrahi Jews, fueled the reproduction of inequalities and created a discernible low-status population of non-white backgrounds.<sup>59</sup> ‘During Israel’s early years, ethnic tensions often arose between Jewish ethnic groups, as Ashkenazi immigrants enjoyed social contacts and cultural affinities with veteran Israelis while Mizrahi immigrants lacked such contacts.’<sup>60</sup> The cultures of non-Ashkenazi immigrants were regarded as primitive, and they were subjected to assimilation and asked to abandon their backgrounds.<sup>61</sup> According to Meir-Glitzstein, Oriental Jews did not receive worse treatment than other North African immigrants, such as Moroccans, but they were indeed ostracized in the hierarchy of ethnicities, because they adopted the national culture of their countries of origin.<sup>62</sup> In other words, ‘the culture of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries was shunted aside as a Diaspora culture, a non-European or Levantine culture, and an Arab culture, the culture of the enemies of the state.’<sup>63</sup> For that reason, the ethnic identities that the Mizrahim brought with them remained dormant in public spaces until the 1970s, when non-European communities began challenging the inherent meaning of Israeliness and demanded equal inclusion and recognition in Israeli society.

Kurdistani Jews’ accounts of arrival and adaptation have been somewhat lost within the larger narrative of Babylonian Jews. The traumatic departure of Iraqi Jews from Baghdad has been studied extensively<sup>64</sup>, and their aliyah to Israel, strategies of

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<sup>54</sup>Mordechai Zaken, ‘Ha-ovdim me-eretz Ashur,’ 22.

<sup>55</sup>Sharaby, ‘The Renewal of an Ethnic Tradition,’ 131.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph Massad, ‘Zionism’s internal others: Israel and the Oriental Jews.’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25:4 (1996): 56.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>58</sup>Sami Shalom Chetrit, ‘Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative.’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:4 (Autumn 2000): 51–65.

<sup>59</sup>Oren Yiftachel, ‘Social Control, Urban Planning and Ethno-class Relations: Mizrahi Jews in Israel’s ‘Development Towns.’’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24:2 (June 2000): 418.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 424.

<sup>61</sup>Sabar *My Father’s Paradise*, 100; Sharaby, ‘The Renewal of an Ethnic Tradition,’ 137.

<sup>62</sup>Meir-Glitzstein, ‘Our dowry,’ 168.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from exile: Israeli writers from Iraq*. (SUNY Press, 2012); Rejwan, Nissim. *The last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland*. (University of Texas Press, 2004); Marina Benjamin, *Last Days in Babylon: The History*

integration, and struggle against hierarchies situated between European Jews and themselves have interested academics for decades. Many books published in English and in Hebrew detail their lives in camps, contributions to Israeli society, and enduring nationalism.<sup>65</sup> Although they lived in ‘Babylonia’ for thousands of years, their arrival in Israel was regarded as a ‘homecoming,’ and their lives in Iraq were referred to as a ‘diaspora,’ because, ‘through its prism, Zionism viewed the Jewish communities around the world as inherently part of the Jewish national identity in Israel.’<sup>66</sup> Events have been organized to commemorate their days in Iraq and cherish their contributions to Iraqi society. The ‘Babylonian Heritage Center’ was built to demonstrate the hardships they faced and how they helped (re)build Israel.<sup>67</sup> The exhibits in the museum even today are dominated by items reflecting primarily the heritage of Baghdadi Jews. When we visited the museum in May 2019, we were unable to find any exhibits portraying Kurdistan Jews.<sup>68</sup> The stories presented mostly revolve around the experiences of the Baghdadi Jews who lived a different life than those in Kurdistan. The folklore and customs of Kurdish Jews differed due to the discrete conditions under which they lived in Kurdistan as isolated communities. They also maintained distinct clothing traditions, eating habits, customs, and language.<sup>69</sup> Linguistically, they differ from the Arabic-speaking Jews of Iraq, as Kurdistan Jews speak an ancient Aramaic language.<sup>70</sup> After coexisting peacefully for decades, they also left their villages in towns, such as Amadiya and Zakho, and migrated to Israel. The following sections aim to shed light on their specific experience in Israel and the transnational ties they have created over the years with their former homeland.

### **The aliyah experience and relations with the Kurdish tribes: leaving ‘Home’ to come ‘Home’?**

‘A complete history of the Jewish Kurdistan is impossible,’ writes Ariel Sabar in his book *My Father’s Paradise*, because they never recorded their story and most sources rely on oral histories.<sup>71</sup> Few in-depth studies, including those by Gavish and Zaken, illustrate the experiences of the Jewish community in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in Zakho. Jewish communities in Kurdistan lived under the protection of tribal jurisdiction of *aghas*.<sup>72</sup> As Gavish notes, ‘relations between Jews and Muslims in Kurdistan were shaped by the delicate balance of power between the formal sovereign in Mesopotamia and local

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*of a Family, the Story of a Nation*. (Simon and Schuster, 2006); Moshe Gat, ‘The Connection Between the Bombings in Baghdad and the Emigration of the Jews from Iraq: 1950–51.’ *Middle Eastern Studies* 24:3 (1988): 312–329.

<sup>65</sup>For an excellent account of Iraqi Jewish migration to Israel, see Tamar Morad and Dennis Shasha. *Iraq’s Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon*. (Springer, 2008).

<sup>66</sup>Yehouda Shenhav, ‘The Jews of Iraq, Zionist Ideology, and The Property of the Palestinian Refugees of 1948: An Anomaly of National Accounting.’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31:4 (1999): 606.

<sup>67</sup>For a more detailed account on the Babylonian Heritage Center and the rationale behind its foundation, see Meir-Glitzstein, ‘Our dowry.’

<sup>68</sup>This lack of representation was criticized by Menachem Aloni, the head of the Association of Erbil Jews (*Amutat Moreshet Yehudei Erbil*), which was founded in 1999. Aloni spoke about his disappointment with the Babylonian Heritage Museum, where he could not find anything about Erbil Jewry. Menachem Aloni, ‘Hakdama,’ in *Kehilat Yehudei-Erbil: Sipura shel ha-kehila ha-Yehudit ve-ha-mahteret ha-Tsionit halutzit be-Erbil-Irak be-meah ha-20*, ed. Hertzal Yona (Or Yehuda: Amutat Moreshet Yehudei Erbil, 2008), 11.

<sup>69</sup>Sharaby, ‘The Renewal,’ 129.

<sup>70</sup>Sabar, *My Father’s Paradise*; Zaken, *Jewish*.

<sup>71</sup>Sabar, *My Father’s Paradise*, 54.

<sup>72</sup>Zaken, *Jewish*, 135.

strongmen who ruled areas in Kurdistan. The central authorities exercised no real control over Kurdistan, in fact, it was the tribal leaders who ruled there.<sup>73</sup> The protection of the Jews was the duty of the agha, Zaken explains, and in return, he expected taxes, gifts or other favors. The Jewish community was not considered a threat to Muslim Kurds and the aghas perceived them as loyal subjects.<sup>74</sup> Sabar expanded on this in his book:

In the mountains, hundreds of miles from religious fanaticism and nationalist movements of big cities, the Kurdish Jews faced almost none of the virulent anti-Semitism that hounded Jews in Europe or even, to a far lesser extent, Baghdad. They went to work, prayed to Jewish God, and spoke their own language without major disruption for some twenty-seven hundred years.<sup>75</sup>

Sabar's account confirms that different religions could coexist in Kurdistan and that extremism was rare compared to central Iraq. Many Jews depended on Kurdish smugglers to take them out of Iraq.<sup>76</sup> The Jews' departure actually saddened Muslim Kurds, as it constituted a great loss both societally and economically.<sup>77</sup> Gavish's oral history revealed that Kurdish Jews left Kurdistan in agony, and, according to her interviewees, Muslim Kurds felt a profound sorrow. Dramatic farewell scenes were commonplace.

Zaken's accounts also show that the Jews trusted Kurdish tribal leaders for protection and described them as honest.<sup>78</sup> This Kurdish tribal protection seemed to have helped the Jewish community reside in the Kurdistan region of Iraq for hundreds of years. Especially in Zakho, home to many Kurdish Jews, Muslims had an admiration for the rebellion leader Molla Mustafa Barzani<sup>79</sup>, who also cultivated special relationships with Kurdish Jews.<sup>80</sup> Zaken's work testifies to the Barzani tribe's affirmative attitude toward the Jewish community. However, a confluence of factors—the developments during WWII, domestic politics in Iraq, and the foundation of Israel—compelled Kurdish Jews to depart for the promised land. Mordechai Yona, a first-generation Kurdish Jew from Zakho, wrote volumes of books on aliyah experience and confirmed their amicable relations with Muslim Kurds during our interview:

The Kurds didn't actually treat the Jews in Kurdistan so badly, they protected them from the Muslim raiders, they had good relationships with the Jews, both commercial and personal. But they didn't have complete autonomy, so the Jews were still getting hurt in the pogroms.

He then acknowledges that the tense atmosphere in central Iraq pervaded Kurdistan: 'Still, the pogroms created animosity, even between us and the Kurds. Even though we had good relationships with them, there were still Kurds who were affected by the pogroms and the Muslim Arabs. So some of them harassed us.'<sup>81</sup> Both Gavish's, Zaken's and Sabar's accounts point to this fact as well.

First-generation interviewees such as Mordechai Yona offer similar accounts of this departure:

<sup>73</sup>Gavish, *Unwitting Zionists*, 27.

<sup>74</sup>Zaken, *Jewish*, 161.

<sup>75</sup>Sabar, *My Father's Paradise*, 69.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>77</sup>Gavish, *Unwitting Zionists*.

<sup>78</sup>Zaken, *Jewish*, 184.

<sup>79</sup>Gavish, *Unwitting Zionists*.

<sup>80</sup>Zaken, *Jewish*, 69.

<sup>81</sup>Author's interview, Jerusalem, October 2018

We, Jews, prayed every day for Jerusalem, for the land of Israel, we had missed it for generations ... So in March, 1950 when it was announced over the public radio that the parliament had approved a law allowing Jews to leave Iraq—not to go to Israel but to leave Iraq—on the condition that they abandon all of their property, everything, without even taking a suitcase, and that they renounce their citizenship. So when the Jews who wanted to reach Israel heard that the Jewish Agency was opening up options to make aliyah, they wanted to go.<sup>82</sup>

According to Sarah Adeki, another first-generation migrant from Zakho, the departure was inevitable yet something she longed for.<sup>83</sup> Mordechai Yona vividly remembered the departure scenes:

They set up tables in the synagogues to sign up, and it cost 25 dinars to go, not everyone had that, it was a lot of money. We suspect that the Iraqi government thought the Jews wouldn't leave their property, they didn't think all of the Jews would be so willing to drop everything and just leave. The first to sign up were actually the poorest members of society. The rich and well-educated members of the community thought the government was trying to trick them in order to figure out who was a Zionist and arrest them, because there were anti-Zionist laws.

However, he said, the poor had nothing to lose: 'Many who tried to sell their homes or their shops, no one would buy it from them. Because they knew they would have to leave everything anyways and they could just take it without paying.'

When they arrived in Israel, they were placed in temporary settlements (*ma'abarot*), where they lived under arduous conditions until receiving government housing in Katamonim. They had limited resources and lived in cramped apartments while rebuilding a mini-Zakho in the neighborhood.<sup>84</sup> Upon arrival, the Kurds mostly worked in construction, transportation, and portage.<sup>85</sup> An Israeli journalist and Middle East expert claimed that, as Jewish Kurds, they were subjected to double discrimination: first for being Mizrahim and second for being Kurds. Negative stereotypes that persist today emerged as soon as they arrived in Israel. He gave the humorous saying, 'Kurdish work' as an example, meaning sloppy and dubious. However, it also implied physical toughness and resilience, because Kurdish Jews worked mostly in construction.<sup>86</sup> In this respect, the Israeli press provides important fragments of information from both ends of the spectrum, from a general Ashkenazi perception of Kurdish Jews and from Kurdish Jews' own reactions to their positioning within the Israeli society.

A documentary produced by Histadrut's Department of Education and Culture exemplifies the surviving Orientalist approach toward Jews from Muslim-majority countries that lasted, for Kurdish Jews, into the 1960s. A short documentary directed by Zeev Rav-Nof, the renowned film critic at the newspaper *Davar*, recounted the story of the Kurdish Jewish community of Nes-Harim, and 'the progress of its residents who integrated nicely and fast into life in Israel.' The footage captured 'a Kurdish house characteristic of our times, its modern furniture, and its kitchen equipped with a gas stove and an electric refrigerator.'<sup>87</sup> Perhaps to juxtapose the 'advancement' of the Kurdish town,

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Author's interview, *Mevaseret Tzion*, October 2018.

<sup>84</sup>Author's interview, Jerusalem, October 2018.

<sup>85</sup>Sharaby, 'The Renewal,' 136.

<sup>86</sup>Author's interview, Jerusalem, October 2018.

<sup>87</sup>'Nes-Harim mesaheket be-sinema,' *Davar*, June 1, 1964.

director Rav-Nof expresses his desire to film an elderly resident of the village named Hayim Hayim, whom he decorates with Orientalist tropes: a nargileh (which the newspaper article notes that Kurds apparently did not smoke) and prayer beads.<sup>88</sup>

In an article he penned for the newspaper *Ba-ma'aracha*, Duhok-born Israeli politician Haviv Shimoni referred to the negative connotations that the word Kurdistan 'immediately' evoked in the Israeli psyche: 'Primitivism, ignorance and even rudeness. An unfounded perception, but one that any honest person will admit to its existence. Very few, very few people know that the Jewish tribe that lived in Kurdistan has a history of 3,000 years behind it ... That is yet to be deciphered.'<sup>89</sup>

Although Kurdistan Jews were among the first Jewish communities to settle in Palestine, they nevertheless were subjected to the trenchant discrimination, inherently to the Zionist ideology, against Jews from Muslim-majority countries. One example from the Jewish press in the 1950s showcases how the prejudices of Ashkenazi Jews toward their Mizrahi counterparts impacted the social fabric of Israel. In this case, a Poland-born groom, engaged to a Kurdish woman, was forced to cancel his wedding, because his father refused to allow his son to marry someone from the Kurdistan *edah* (a subset of the Jewish religious community).<sup>90</sup> The intra-Jewish rift in Israel, based on Jewish ethnicity/descent (*adatiyut*) and the resulting discrimination toward (Mizrahim), remains relevant today and occupies the country's contemporary agenda.

In fact, like 'Kurdish work,' '*Kurdi*' (Kurd in Hebrew) has been widely used as a derogatory term in Israel, denoting someone of lesser intelligence. As the Polish-born director and journalist Natan Gros wrote in 1956, 'In Poland, people would say 'Don't act like a Greek.' In Israel, the same Greek has become the Kurd. To call someone a Kurd means seeing that person as someone primitive, someone who doesn't know anything or pretends like he doesn't know.'<sup>91</sup> The term, as one of the authors of this article observed, is still used today. However, these stereotypes have gradually dissipated with younger generations. Currently, the Kurdish community is very committed, and many Kurds serve in politics, senior law enforcement positions, the health sector, and academia.<sup>92</sup>

Jews from Iraq have lived in Israel for more than five decades, and an overwhelming majority identify as Israelis and consider the Jewish state their home.<sup>93</sup> All the interviewees articulated the preeminence of their Israeliness and Jewishness. For instance, for Sarah Adeki, as a first-generation migrant, acknowledged that she is Kurdish but 'is more Israeli,' and although she wants to visit the region, she would not want to live there permanently.<sup>94</sup> For younger generations, we found that repatriation was out of the question. The first generation still speaks Aramaic in addition to Hebrew, and some also spoke Kurdish. But subsequent generations adopted Hebrew as their native language and use Aramaic and Kurdish to a lesser extent.

Our findings corroborate Rigby's arguments with regards to the second generation: 'The new generations grow up speaking different languages, and their view of the world is inevitably influenced by the experience of living in different societies and

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Haviv Shimoni, 'Toldot Yehudei Kurdistan,' *Be-ma'aracha*, February 2, 1964.

<sup>90</sup>Ayn Roa, *Be-ma'aracha*, January 3, 1964.

<sup>91</sup>Natan Gros, 'Ha-Kurdim mi-moshav Patish,' *Davar*, February 3, 1956.

<sup>92</sup>Author's interview with Levi Herzal, President of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association, October 2018.

<sup>93</sup>Zvi Ben-Dor, 'Invisible Exile: Iraqi Jews in Israel,' *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads ISSN 972* (2006).

<sup>94</sup>Author's interview, *Mevaseret Zion*, October 2018.



cultures. In certain cases, the sons and daughters of migrants focus more on their lives in what is for them their country of origin and feel less involved with the conflict that caused their parents to resettle in a new country' (2006: 3). According to this point of view, identification with the parents' homeland loses importance as members of subsequent generations develop primary allegiance to the society in which they grew up. Transnational activism might still take place but in a selective manner and not equal to the first generation's interest in homeland-related activities.<sup>95</sup> Our interviews determined that, although first-generation Kurdistan Jews retain nostalgic sentiments about their origins, transnational ties evolve with each generation into other forms of remembering that do not necessarily bear a sense of belonging to Kurdistan. Temporal and spatial changes in Israel have also triggered a transformation in Kurdistan society. In Katamonim, a historical place of Kurdistan settlement, there are many Kurdistan synagogues, which are divided along the same tribal lines as before they came to Israel—Amediya or Zakho, for example. Several Kurdistan restaurants have also cropped up near the Mahaneh Yehuda market at the heart of Jerusalem. However, gentrification has forced Kurdistan families into other neighborhoods, and some synagogues were abandoned; one synagogue the authors visited in May 2019 now belongs to the Chabad movement. Previously Kurdistan houses are now occupied by university students. The community is spreading out from their traditional housing locations, and younger generations are more assimilated into Israeli culture, while certain markers of Kurdistan identity remain intact.

### **Ethnic and cultural revival of Kurdistan Jews**

Kurdistan Jews' ethnic revival started with the 'unique process of ethnicisation in Israel,' which corresponds to push by Israeli citizens of various backgrounds to reinterpret their cultural and traditional heritage in the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> When they arrived in Israel, Kurdistan communities abandoned their cultural heritage due to the negative stereotypes in predominantly white Israel.<sup>97</sup> According to Sharaby, the feeling of cultural inferiority among non-white Jewish groups began to dissipate in the 1970s and a 'selective return to traditional ethnic roots' commenced.<sup>98</sup> Israeli citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds started establishing organizations and publishing periodicals in local languages. The revival of ethnic identities sought greater inclusion in Israeli society and integration with Israeliness. Rather than reaching out to the Kurdistan homeland they left behind, these cultural activities and heritage-reclamation movements were intended to legitimize their identity in a predominantly white society and demand recognition of their differences.<sup>99</sup>

The most visible cultural activity for Kurdistan Jews is the Seharane celebration, 'which signifies a multi-participant leisure event in the countryside, on the eighth day of Passover.'<sup>100</sup> The current president of the Kurdistan-Israeli Organization confirmed that Seharane is the main celebration that assembles most of the community outside the synagogues

<sup>95</sup>Peggy Levitt, 'Roots and routes: Understanding the lives of the second generation transnationally.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35:7 (2009): 1225–1242.

<sup>96</sup>Sharaby, 'The Renewal,' 129.

<sup>97</sup>Sabar, *My Father's Paradise*; Sharaby, 'The Renewal.'

<sup>98</sup>Sharaby, 'The Renewal,' 130.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Sharaby, 'The Renewal,' 135.

and that it has a symbolic meaning. In fact, teaching folk dances to each generation sustains the retention of Kurdish cultural heritage.<sup>101</sup> While conducting fieldwork in Jerusalem, the first author was invited to a weekly folk dance course to better understand Kurdish traditions in Katamonim.

The first Seharane festival was held in 1972.<sup>102</sup> In addition to reinforcing their pride in their Kurdishness, the festival was frequented by senior Israeli politicians, such as President Yitzhak Navon, Knesset members Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres in 1980, Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1981, and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1988.<sup>103</sup> The festival also serves as a conduit to establish and maintain close connections with Kurds from Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe. A representative of Kurdish tribes in Iraq, for example, was present at the 1980 Seharane. In his speech, the unnamed guest thanked Shimon Peres in person, as it was during his tenure as defense minister that Israel provided aid to the Kurdish rebels. In return, Peres commented, 'Israel helped the Kurds in the past and will continue to do so.'<sup>104</sup> An anonymous member of the Barzani family who was invited by the Association of Jews from Kurdistan attended the Seharane festival in 1983.<sup>105</sup> A band formed by Kurdish exiles residing in Germany participated in the 1984 Seharane festival.<sup>106</sup> Yehuda Ben Yosef, the chairperson of *Ha-Tenua le-Yedidut Yisrael-Kurdistan* (Israel Kurdistan Friendship Movement) stated in an interview during the 2019 Seharane that his organization maintains close contact with the Kurdish people in Kurdistan as well as in the diaspora. He added that a guest from Rojava, whose identity was not disclosed, was also in attendance.<sup>107</sup> It is worth noting that attendees at the 2019 Seharane wore black scarfs, and pictures of Kurdish fighters in Syria were projected on the screen in a display of solidarity. Similarly, Hadassa Yeshurun, an Israeli-born singer of Kurdish origin, released a song in Kurdish titled 'We Are All Peshmerga' in February 2017 as a tribute to the Peshmerga fighting against ISIS in Syria. She is seen wearing a soldier's uniform and holding Kurdish and Israeli flags in her music video shot in Tel Aviv-Yaffo.<sup>108</sup> Music, in fact, serves as an important conduit to maintain aspects of Kurdishness in Israel. Ilana Eliyah, who is considered to be among the leading Kurdish-Israeli singers in Israel, ended her concert in November 2019, which took place to promote her new album composed of Hebrew songs, with the popular traditional Kurdish song 'Ez Kevok Im.' Addressing the crowd, she stated that her audience would be upset if she did not sing a song in Kurdish.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, the first Kurdish ethno-cultural organizations were founded in the 1960s to revive the Kurdish cultural heritage and customs. Some interviewees expressed that homeland politics—meaning political change in Kurdistan—was not on top of the

<sup>101</sup> Author's interview with Levi Herzel, President of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association, October 2018.

<sup>102</sup> 'Le-bnei ha-eda ha-Kurdit be-rahavei ha-Aretz,' *Maariv*, October 5, 1972.

<sup>103</sup> 'Le-tzilei zurna ve-dula nimshekhu hagogot ha-'Seharane' be-Sakhne,' *Maariv*, September 30, 1980; 'Hamonim shaagu 'Begin Begin' be-hagogot ha-Seharane be-K. Malachi,' *Maariv*, October 15, 1981; 'Yitzhak Shamir hesig si: Be-yom ehad hagag im yotzei Marakesh, Kurdistan, Luv ve-Teiman,' *Maariv*, September 29, 1988.

<sup>104</sup> 'Peres mavtiah: Azarnu le-Kurdim ve-od naazor,' *Davar*, April 4, 1980.

<sup>105</sup> 'Tsair Kurdi - Ben mispachat Barzani oreah be-Seharane,' *Yediot Aharonot*, September 27, 1983.

<sup>106</sup> 'Lahakat mordim Kurdim me-Germanya tavo ha-shana le-hagogot ha-Seharane,' *Davar*, October 9, 1984.

<sup>107</sup> 'Hagogot Seharane 2019,' *Jerusalem Times*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCxpoWjKC10>.

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/not-just-news/watch-kurdish-israeli-artist-sings-tribute-to-peshmerga-forces-481065>

<sup>109</sup> Participant observation by the second author who was present at the concert.

agenda. Rather, the activities were intended to redefine Israeliness and show others in society that a multicultural Israel can host a coexistence between heritage and Jewishness.<sup>110</sup> However, the activities listed in the next section are a clear testimony to political declarations and activities undertaken to support the Kurdish cause in Iraq.

The nostalgia that first-generation Kurdish Jews feel for Kurdistan was evident in interviews but is not a novel phenomenon. Authors such as Ben-Dor argued that ‘many individuals in Israel do feel displaced or dislocated at the very least, and constantly engage in expressions of nostalgia for their former homes in other countries.’<sup>111</sup> First-generation interviewees in particular recounted visiting the region after the fall of the Hussein regime despite the dangers and stigma of visiting Iraq—an enemy of Israel. Since the Jews were stripped of their Iraqi citizenship when they left and promised never to return, those wishing to visit Kurdistan had to find alternative ways to cross the border. It was also impossible to travel to Iraq with an Israeli passport. Levi Herzl mentioned that those who visited only did so after the fall of the Hussein regime and were forced to take an indirect route to do so: first to Turkey, then to Diyarbakir by plane, and finally, with the help of Kurdish smugglers, they crossed the border into Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>112</sup> Sarah Adeki’s accounts also confirmed this narrative. She visited the Kurdistan region in the early 1990s after the no-fly zone was established:

We came in through Turkey. We flew to Turkey, and then went by car. We contacted [people we knew in Kurdistan] in advance and we told them we were coming, so they came and took us in their cars. They searched us at the border, but they let us through with our Israeli passports.

In addition to her nostalgic reasons for visiting, she also sought to assist the Muslim Kurds she knew when she lived in Zakho:

Everyone was very poor. After Saddam had killed so many people, then they were dying of starvation. When I went there, they didn’t have a cup of tea to give us. From [Israel], we brought tea, sugar, cakes, we brought everything over there... the market was operating, but they didn’t have any money, so my late husband and two of his friends went to the market, and bought them rice, bread, fruits and vegetables, tea and coffee and sugar, cheeses, everything. We stayed there for almost a month, we travelled. And they invited us in, they hosted us very kindly. Even though they didn’t have food.

She claimed to have been recognized immediately and welcomed in her village:

Coming back there, everyone was very happy to see us. Some people nearly fainted from excitement, they never believed they would see us... I didn’t believe it myself, that we would come back there. But when I saw the excitement and the hospitality... We would all cook together and eat together.

Sarah Adeki was a pioneer of the revival of Kurdish culture in Israel and, together with her husband, formed a folkloric Kurdish dance group, participating in dance

<sup>110</sup>The author’s interview with a first-generation Kurdish Jew, one of the most well-known figures in Kurdish society in Jerusalem, November 2018.

<sup>111</sup>Ben-Dor, ‘Invisible Exile,’ 139.

<sup>112</sup>Author’s interview with Levi Herzl, President of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association, October 2018.

competitions around the world. She retains her Kurdish traditions in food and music. In fact, kubbeh that Kurdish Jews and Iraqis introduced in Israel upon their arrival in the 1950s, has become extremely popular in the country, and turned into ‘the term most identified with Mizrahi cookery.’<sup>113</sup>

But while she was welcomed in Kurdistan, Adeki said she never wanted to return, as Israel was her home.<sup>114</sup> Mordechai Yona also visited the region many times, traveling via Turkey since the KRI was established. He too said that everyone welcomed them but that he would not consider returning to Kurdistan, as ‘he is Jewish first, but his origins are Kurdish.’ When asked whether others will consider this option, he said, ‘No Jewish Kurd would choose to go [to Kurdistan] again. Aliyah is an ideology. With Zionist motives, they come to the holy land. This is their country. They believe this is home.’<sup>115</sup>

These feelings of nostalgia are observed less among younger generations. According to an Israeli-American journalist who spent considerable time in Kurdistan, the attachment that Kurdish Jews feel to the region is mostly emotional and cultural. Political activism may appear to be present, but it is mostly ‘Facebook activism’ rather than mobilization with tangible leverage and impacts. He called the transnational ties ‘reminiscence,’ and said, ‘They came to Israel, and that’s it.’<sup>116</sup> For instance, a third-generation interviewee who owns a small shop in Mahaneh Yehuda stated that he only shows interest in his Kurdish background because he respects his father’s past. He said he would love to visit one day, but ‘to live, [*he would*] only [*live*] in Israel.’<sup>117</sup> Another third-generation interviewee who owns a small kubbeh shop said he is not terribly interested in his Kurdish roots. He said he only feels he is Israeli, and, when asked whether he would like to visit Zahko, said, ‘Why would I go back in time?’ From his accounts, we understood that he is proud to live in Israel, and at times he even described countries in other parts of the Middle East as ‘backward and primitive.’<sup>118</sup>

In terms of return, it is difficult for Kurdish Jews to visit Kurdistan for a variety of reasons. Most of the interviewees expressed concerns for their safety should they decide to visit. One second-generation interviewee mentioned that Kurdistan’s prosperity might mean peace, which will bring business and travel. But he was not optimistic about prospects for visiting the region: ‘Returning to Kurdistan ... Nice thought, but not real. I will fear for my life if I go back.’ For others, such as a third-generation kubbeh restaurant owner, it would be a dream to visit, because his great-grandparents are buried in Zakho. The sentiments he conveyed emphasize the connection he feels to Kurdistan as a memory, but, he said, ‘It is perceived as dangerous,’ and so he never made attempts to visit.<sup>119</sup> When asked whether it is because they are ‘Jewish’ or ‘Israeli’ that they are hesitant to return, most mentioned that it is due to them being Jewish. ‘Harm will not come from Kurds but from others,’ said one interviewee. None

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<sup>113</sup>Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish food*. (HMH, 2010).

<sup>114</sup>Author’s interview, *Mevaseret Zion*, October 2018.

<sup>115</sup>Author’s interview in Jerusalem, October 2018.

<sup>116</sup>Author’s interview in Jerusalem, November 2018.

<sup>117</sup>Author’s interview in Jerusalem, October 2018.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup>Author’s interview in Jerusalem, October 2018.

of the interviewees showed any indication that they would return to the region permanently.

In terms of being referred to as a ‘diaspora’ in Israel, the interviewees showed little interest in such a label. While discussing their interest in Kurdistan, the word frequently used was ‘heritage’ rather than ‘diaspora,’ ‘identity,’ or ‘homeland.’ A second-generation interviewee said that Kurds in Israel do not feel like a diaspora, because “They are home, they came back home.”<sup>120</sup> Another second-generation interviewee mentioned that his parents built Israel—meaning they worked in construction—and, through their manual labor, contributed to the achievement of the Zionist enterprise. He claimed that they feel like a part of Israel, since they have been there since the beginning.<sup>121</sup> This is a notable difference for the Kurdish Jews compared to the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. European Kurds feel displaced and stateless, but Kurdish Jews have a state to call their own, and they feel at home in Jerusalem. Like other Middle Eastern immigrant communities in Israel, Kurdistan Jews identify primarily as Jews and Israelis. Such a unifying religious and national identification, however, does not trump self-identification, which is evident for Kurds through a nostalgic affinity to their former homeland. To the contrary, the ethnic and cultural Kurdish identity coexists with a broader national Israeli identity. While their attachment to Kurdishness and Kurdistan can be categorized as an emotional and nostalgic tie originating from a prolonged process of acculturation, it is also political in the sense that it operates contrary to hegemonic Ashkenazi models of Israeliness.

### Political activism of Kurdistan Jews in Israel

Israel and the Kurds in Iraq have frequently interacted throughout history, so Israeli support during the Kurdish referendum process was not an isolated demonstration of solidarity. As Abramson argues, Kurdish independence could not have opened the possibility of Israeli-Kurdish relations, because such relations had existed since the early 1950s.<sup>122</sup> In the past, Israel has provided weapons and training to Kurdish insurgents fighting the Iraqi state. The Jewish state also ‘lent their much-needed assistance in other domains, including agriculture, health care, radio broadcasting, education, public relations and diplomacy.’<sup>123</sup> Israelis have also served as advisors to Kurdish insurgents.<sup>124</sup> In return, the Kurds supplied intelligence to the Israeli army and facilitated the aliyah of many Jews during the pogroms in Baghdad.<sup>125</sup> This kind of cover and explicit collaboration continues even today.<sup>126</sup> In addition to serving both sides’ obvious interests, the Jewish Kurds in Israel have arguably fueled this relationship and built ties between the two countries.

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<sup>120</sup>Author’s interview in Jerusalem, May 2019.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

<sup>122</sup>Abramson, ‘A Historical Inquiry,’ 381.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Ofra Bengio, ‘Surprising ties between Israel and the Kurds,’ *Middle East Quarterly* (2014): 5.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

<sup>126</sup>Aldo Liga, *Israel and Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East*. Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2016: 9.

Important conduits to achieve this goal were the associations founded by Kurdistanis Jews in Israel. The association of Kurdish immigrants was established in 1962 and, as of 1963, had seventy-five thousand members, concentrated mainly in Jerusalem, Tiberias, and thirty-five agricultural settlements.<sup>127</sup> As early as July 1963, the Kurdish Jewish community initiated propaganda activities to highlight the Kurdish predicament in Northern Iraq and to pressure the Israeli government to address the massacre of the Kurds and express its support for Kurdish independence.<sup>128</sup> They published a public statement entitled 'Israeli Government! Raise your voice against the massacre of the Kurdish people in Iraq!':

The Kurdish people, who excel in free spirit and life of labor, have been struggling for its independence for generations... Jews of Kurdistan, who lived for hundreds of years beside the Kurds, remember the deep friendship and understanding that existed in their neighborhoods, and how [the Kurds] helped quite a lot to protect the [Jewish] communities and their values from total annihilation... The Association of Jews from Kurdistan would like to address the Jewish people, who, more than any other nation, knows the taste of annihilation... to raise its voice against the massacre of Kurdish people in Iraq. The Israeli government will awake the consciousness of the enlightened nations, recruit their support and demand in the United Nations that an end should be put to the massacre of the Kurdish people.<sup>129</sup>

In October 1963, leaders of the Kurdish Jewish community in Israel convened a press conference to draw attention to the situation for their 'Muslim brothers in Northern Iraq' and announce the establishment of an 'Israeli Public Committee for Kurdistan' (*Vaad tsiburi Israili le-maan Kurdistan*) to support the Kurds in Northern Iraq.<sup>130</sup> Haviv Shimoni, who led the initiative, explained that the objective of the committee was to shape Israeli and global public opinion and garner support for Kurdish independence. Shimoni added, 'The idea is to apply pressure on the Israeli government from below, by large sectors of the society, in order to make the Israeli government extend a hand, one way or another, to the Kurdish rebels. It is probable that the committee will also raise money to be transferred to rebel representatives who are outside Iraq.'<sup>131</sup> As for the Israeli government's stance, Shimoni noted that the it did not 'look unfavorably' upon the committee, nor did it support its establishment.<sup>132</sup> In November 1963, the Kurdish Jewish community took to the public stage again to rally support for Kurdish independence, stating that the Kurds were 'fighting for their lives' and that they 'deserved Israel's aid and support.'<sup>133</sup> Shimoni abandoned the committee shortly thereafter due, allegedly, to a message he had received 'from the top' expressing Israel's active involvement on the ground and the possibility that open public activity in Israel might prove counterproductive to 'the cause.'<sup>134</sup>

The relations between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan began in the 1950s as part of Israel's policy of peripheral alliance, which sought to alleviate Israel's isolation in the Middle East

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<sup>127</sup>Vaad Israili le-maan maavak ha-Kurdim, *Maariv*, October 30, 1963.

<sup>128</sup>Yotzei-Kurdistan korim la-memshala leharim kola neged tevah ha-Kurdim, *Kol HaAm*, July 16, 1963.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Vaad Israili, *Al Hamishmar*, October 31, 1963.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid.

<sup>132</sup>Vaad Israili le-maan maavak ha-Kurdim, *Maariv*, October 30, 1963.

<sup>133</sup>Korim le-hakamat vaad le-maan ha-Kurdim, *LaMerhav*, November 1, 1963.

<sup>134</sup>Uri Avneri, 'Ha-mered,' *Hithadshut* 7 (February 2000), 39.

by establishing strategic friendships with non-Arab nations, such as Turkey, Iran, and the Kurds.<sup>135</sup> Ofra Bengio summarized this policy, noting that the Israeli-Kurdish relations were premised on the principle of ‘My enemy’s enemy is my friend,’ with the Ba’ath government in Baghdad constituting a common enemy.<sup>136</sup> The relations were kept secret and peaked in 1968–1975. During this period, Israel provided humanitarian aid, arms, and military training to the Kurds fighting the Iraqi central government.<sup>137</sup> Eliezer (Geizi) Tsafirir, who served as the head of Mossad operations in Iraqi Kurdistan at the time, later wrote a historical novel about the Kurdish struggle in Iraq and dedicated it to ‘the memory of Molla Mustafa Barzani, his son Idris, his son Masoud (may he live long), and all the commanders and fighters of the Peshmerga.’<sup>138</sup>

On their part, Kurdish Jews and their personal connections to Kurdistan were instrumental in introducing the Kurdish people and their national cause to the Israeli public. One such example was the full-page coverage of Molla Mustafa Barzani’s friendship with members of the Gabbai family by one of the most widely read newspapers in Israel, *Maariv*. Prior to their immigration to Israel and settlement in Tiberias, the Gabbai family had resided in a town called Akre, which was south of Barzani’s hometown of Barzan.<sup>139</sup> The piece opens with a quote from a member of the Gabbai family, demonstrating how closely the Kurdish Jewish community followed the developments surrounding the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq and their emotional investment in the fate of their fellow Kurds as the rebellion unfolded: ‘It is as if I am sitting on fire. Baghdad says that the rebellion has been crushed and Barzani has been killed, and there is nothing we can do to help them. If it were possible, we would have given [the Kurds] everything in property and in spirit.’<sup>140</sup>

It is certainly not an understatement to suggest that Mustafa Barzani, as the leader of the Kurdish rebellion, was extremely popular and revered among Kurdish Jews. A year after his passing, a 1980 editorial piece in the Kurdistan Jews’ community journal *Hithadshut* (Revival) wrote, ‘The Kurdish eda will carry his memory for a long time. But moreover, it will accompany, with love... the Kurdish struggle for freedom.’<sup>141</sup> Such warm declarations by Kurdish Jews about their Muslim counterparts were instrumental in instilling a positive image of the Kurds as friends and allies of the Jewish people. This facilitated broader support for the Kurdish cause across Israeli society regardless of ethnic identification. A recent expression of this was the establishment of a pro-Kurdish lobby in the Israeli Knesset by a non-Kurd, the Egyptian born MK Eli Avidar, against the backdrop of US President Donald Trump’s abandoning of America’s Syrian Kurdish partners, who had fought to eradicate the Islamic State in 2019.<sup>142</sup> The Chairperson of the *Lobby for Strengthening the Relationship between the State of Israel and the Kurdish People* is Ksenia Svetlova, a Zionist Party MP of Russian origin. She

<sup>135</sup>Galia Lindenstrauss and Oded Eran. ‘The Kurdish Awakening and the Implications for Israel.’ *Strategic Assessment* 17, no 1 (April 2014): 87.

<sup>136</sup>Bengio, ‘Surprising Ties.’

<sup>137</sup>*Ibid.* Journalist Shlomo Nakdimon’s 1996 book *Ha-tikva she-karsa: Ha-kesher ha-Yisraeli-Kurdi 1963–1975* gives a detailed account of the bilateral relations during these crucial years.

<sup>138</sup>Eliezer (Geizi) Tsafirir, *Ana Kurdi: Roman milhama u-milut be-Kurdistan* (Mendeli, 1999).

<sup>139</sup>Manhig mered ha-Kurdim – ve-ha-yedidav ha-yoshvim be-Tiveria,’ *Maariv*, July 5, 1963.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup>‘Kurdistan ha-Aretz, toshveya ve-Yehudeha,’ *Hithadshut* 4 (1980): 9.

<sup>142</sup><https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/israeli-government-leader-initiates-support-for-kurds/>

has led efforts to lobby the Israeli State to recognize the KRG as a distinct entity to allow diplomatic and trade relations within the framework of paradiplomacy.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, initiatives such as the Jewish Coalition for Kurdistan—founded by non-Kurdish Jews—allow Kurdistan Jewish organizations to frequently collaborate.<sup>144</sup>

The president of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association also confirmed that the Kurdish Jews have always had personal and political relations with Iraqi Kurdistan:

For example, during Saddam's rule ... Israel was doing undercover activities to stop it. Haviv Shimoni, who founded this organization and was later a member of the Knesset, [*was really active*] ... but all the activities were done in secret. But the community in Israel helps the Kurds, in Kurdistan and in the rest of the world, absolutely, yes and yes and yes.

However, explicit communication was uncommon until the Saddam regime was toppled. Kurds have been wary to contact the friends they left behind, let alone visit the region to ease their nostalgic yearning.<sup>145</sup>

Building on the legacy of these past relations, the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association currently seeks to foster ties between the Kurdish nation and the Israeli state in addition to efforts to assist their friends in Kurdistan. Their political activities have included demonstrations, petitions, and declarations, and they built bridges between Iraqi Kurdish politicians and Israel. For instance, Levi Herzl mentioned that many Kurdish politicians visited Israel, where they worked as intermediaries between Israeli politicians and their own government.<sup>146</sup> Yona Mordechai corroborates Herzl's accounts:

The Kurds like us, they like Israel, and we like them back ... [Israel] helped them out a lot, with weapons, with strategy, and they don't forget this. They remember us positively. And we feel the same way, here in Israel, we support them, we consider them very good people.  
<sup>147</sup>

According to Bengio, Kurdish Jews became excellent ambassadors for Iraqi Kurds, publicizing their cause throughout Israel.<sup>148</sup> For instance, Kurdish Jews launched relief operations when Saddam's regime perpetrated genocidal acts against the Kurdish community. They also organized protests and asked the US government to support the Kurds in their struggle against the Iraqi regime. Herzl Levy illustrated how this trend continues today:

A year ago, when they wanted to do the referendum, I organized a demonstration in front of the [American] embassy ... There was an agreement, between the US and Iraq, that the Iraqis wouldn't attack the Kurds using American weapons, and I had a copy of that, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And in 2018, it happened, the Iraqis attacked the Kurds with American weapons. I went with that document to the American consulate, and we made sure that this was stopped.

Although these protests made the headlines in Kurdish and Israeli newspapers and attracted academic attention, they did not translate into significant action for younger generations of Kurdish Jews. One third-generation interviewee seemed unconvinced of

<sup>143</sup><https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/mks-unite-to-support-kurdish-people-at-knesset-515613>

<sup>144</sup><http://www.jcfc.org/about>

<sup>145</sup>Author's interview with Levi Herzl, President of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association, October 2018.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

<sup>147</sup>Author's interview, Jerusalem, October 2018.

<sup>148</sup>Bengio, 'Surprising ties,' 2.



the leverage such demonstrations would have: ‘There was a demonstration in Tel Aviv, but there is no organization, there is no political power. It isn’t up to us, it’s all about whether Turkey will allow them independence, if there’s international support.’<sup>149</sup>

We observed the capacity of the Kurdish community for mobilization, political engagement, and lobbying for the well-being of their former homeland. But such efforts are neither sustained nor systematic. The community has acted during critical junctures in Kurdistan to draw attention to the Kurdish cause in Israel and beyond. But compared to the European Kurdish diaspora, which is highly mobilized and consistently lobbying for policy change in their host states<sup>150</sup>, the political impact and leverage of the Kurdish Jewish community remains negligible. For example, Seharane celebrations are not as politicized as Newroz celebrations. They do not aim to spark interest in human rights abuses in Kurdistan but, rather, include films or informational leaflets on Israel’s Kurdish community and their achievements that challenge past negative stereotypes.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, Kurdistan Jewish organizations, despite being mobilized for the self-determination and welfare of the KRI, typically refrain from delving into internal political rivalries between Kurdish political actors within the KRI. Therefore, their interest remains at the macro level, where the KRI is treated as a homogenous entity that needs liberation from oppressive parent states.

Herzel’s accounts show that Kurdish Jews are becoming more familiar with the Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe, fostering transnational ties not only along the KRI-Israel nexus but also globally. In recent years, they have participated in large Kurdish conferences in Hamburg and have been invited to other meetings in Brussels. Some community members also plan to arrange trips to Iraqi Kurdistan to join Newroz celebrations. Herzel was confident in saying, ‘There is an Israel-Kurdistan lobby dealing with everything happening with the Kurdish community all over the world.’<sup>152</sup>

It is also important to mention that the Kurdistan Regional Government passed a law in 2015 that ensures equal rights for all ethnic and religious minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan. The law guarantees the provision of legal protection to minorities and punishes discrimination and hate speech. The government also supported the establishment of a representative office for the Jewish community, which now numbers around 300 families—of Jewish ethnic origin rather than necessarily religious.<sup>153</sup> In Al-Qosh, the Jewish prophet Nahum’s tomb is being restored with a \$1 million grant from the United States as well as funds from local authorities and private donations. These gestures place cultural diplomacy at the heart of Israeli-Kurdish relations.<sup>154</sup> The KRG has also organized events commemorating the Holocaust.<sup>155</sup> Sherzad Omer Mamsani was appointed director of the Jewish Affairs Directorate

<sup>149</sup> Author’s interview, *Mevaseret Tzion*, October 2018.

<sup>150</sup> Bahar Baser, ‘Tailoring Strategies According to Ever-Changing Dynamics: The Evolving Image of the Kurdish Diaspora in Germany,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29:4 (2017): 674–691.

<sup>151</sup> For more details see Sharaby, ‘The Renewal,’ 141.

<sup>152</sup> Author’s interview with Levi Herzel, President of the Kurdish-Israeli Friendship Association, October 2018.

<sup>153</sup> Agnieszka Graczyk, ‘Trapped within the law. Will the Kurdish Jews return to their homeland?’ *Review of Nationalities* 8:1 (2018): 161.

<sup>154</sup> Liga, *Israel and Iraqi Kurds*, 10.

<sup>155</sup> <http://www.thetower.org/article/in-iraqi-kurdistan-a-jewish-past-comes-to-life-sherzad-mamsani/>

and visited Israel a couple of times in this role.<sup>156</sup> The expansion of representation and initiatives for peaceful coexistence offer Kurdish Jews the hope of return despite the hostile relations between the Iraqi state and Israel.<sup>157</sup> The Directorate is also responsible for restoring synagogues, cemeteries, and the remnants of Kurdish Jewish culture in Kurdistan.<sup>158</sup> The new law may mean that Kurdistan Jews can demand compensation for lost property and other grievances.<sup>159</sup> Since the KRI is not an independent state, its capacity to reinstate citizenship for Iraqi and Kurdistan Jews and their descendants is limited, but Iraqi state has also taken steps in this direction. The present dilemma, then, is about what happens to those wishing to regain their Iraqi citizenship. Considering Israel's perception of Iraq as an enemy state, such a request for Israeli citizens would be an awkward if not outright criminal.<sup>160</sup> If they travel to Iraq with an Israeli passport, they fear being subjected to interrogation by police or intelligence services.<sup>161</sup> Transnational ties are therefore destined to remain in predominantly virtual platforms and elite level visits.

## Conclusion

'Jews were hated everywhere they were. Only the Jewish Kurds are sentimental about where they want to be. The main reason is the Kurdish people,' said one interviewee as we sat in a café near the Kurdish neighborhood in Jerusalem.<sup>162</sup> Our research shows that Kurdish Jews fondly remember their past homeland thanks to their relationship with the Kurdish community and that they are willing to keep their connections to not only the territory but also to its people. Unlike other Jewish communities that left their homeland amid pogroms and deportations, most Kurdish Jews have good memories from Kurdistan that were transmitted to younger generations as family stories. They preserved aspects of Kurdish Jewish culture, and even today, it is possible to find festivals and rituals that were brought from Kurdish lands. However, our study revealed that they have not yet repositioned themselves in politics, nor do they strive to have a stake in Kurdish politics from afar. Our findings corroborate what Jonathan Grossman suggested when in terms of differentiating transnational communities and diasporas: 'While diaspora and transnationalism are often bundled together in the literature, they are not identical. All diaspora communities are transnationally embedded in at least two locations, but not all transnational populations constitute a diaspora.'<sup>163</sup> The Kurdish Jewish community demonstrated the existence of transnational ties that are weakening by each generation and their self-identification do not refer to their community as a Kurdish diaspora in Israel. For them, Israel is home and assimilation is not something to be avoided. That is why, our findings were closer to the melting pot approach rather than 'immunized integration,' which is a strategy adapted by other communities within

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<sup>156</sup>Liga, *Israel and Iraqi Kurds*, 10.

<sup>157</sup><https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iraq-jews-return-kurdistan-representation-office.html>

<sup>158</sup>Liga, *Israel and Iraqi Kurds*, 10.

<sup>159</sup>Grazcyk, 'Trapped within the law,' 163.

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup>Author's interview with the founder of a Kurdish-Israeli friendship page on Facebook, Jerusalem, May 2019.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup>Grossman, 'Toward a Definition of Diaspora,' 1269.

Israel.<sup>164</sup> The traumatic dispersal from the KRI is a part of their suffering as Jews in general and their residence in Kurdistan was considered as a diasporic situation despite their contributions to cultural, economic, and political life there. Although they fit the criteria for definition of contemporary diasporas with their distinct community consciousness, traumatic dispersal from their previous home, and forming associations to protect cultural heritage, the core of diasporic identity pertaining to homeland orientation, the myth of return and distance from the host society is not present. Their cultural and political mobilization resides within the framework of expressing solidarity to their ancient friends, a people with whom they lived side by side for centuries. As the interviewee noted, 'Kurdish Jews' support for independence is not just political, there is a feeling there.<sup>165</sup> And this very feeling sustains the transnational ties between their previous and current homelands while forever rendering them a diaspora, at least for the Kurdish community they left behind. The question at hand is why these ties have survived for generations. Could they mobilize politically in a sustained manner for Kurdish interests? Our findings suggest the potential for creating a political interest group within Israel to enhance relations with Kurdistan. But this requires a capacity-building initiative in which diaspora entrepreneurs must invest to transform dormant members into core diaspora activists pursuing a cause. Only then can we discuss an 'epistemic community or policy community'<sup>166</sup> that is influential in Kurdish politics within Israel. Currently, cultural ties are strong among the first generation, and nostalgia is prevalent among the first and second generations. But an elite-driven systematic effort, originating from both Israel and Kurdistan, is needed to revitalize political mobilization. Besides the repertoire of actions of Jewish Kurds in Israel, studies on Kurdish-Israeli contacts are notably lacking,<sup>167</sup> and more comprehensive research is needed to better understand the relations between the two segments and the intervening role of the transnational Kurdish Jewish community. Moreover, future research might also examine the realpolitik that is in play in the region in order to develop a critical approach that goes beyond merely looking at Kurdish diaspora activism or the fraternity of Jewish communities that constitute Israel today as we know it. The developing and complex interactions between the Kurdistan Jewish community, the state of Israel, and Kurdish policymakers in Kurdistan warrant attention from different disciplines of social sciences, especially international relations from a perspective of globalization and transnationalism.

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<sup>164</sup>Udi Lebel, 'The 'immunized integration' of Religious-Zionists within Israeli society: the pre-military academy as an institutional model.' *Social Identities* 22:6 (2016): 644 and 648.

<sup>165</sup>Author's interview with the founder of a Kurdish-Israeli friendship page on Facebook, Jerusalem, May 2019.

<sup>166</sup>See Udi Lebel and Batia Ben-Hador. 'Influence from within? Senior managers from the Religious-Zionist community in the public administration—a phenomenological research.' *Israel Affairs* 25:3 (2019): 488–513.

<sup>167</sup>Abramson, 'A Historical Inquiry,' 381.

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