



The Journal of the Middle East and Africa

ISSN: 2152-0844 (Print) 2152-0852 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujme20>

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To cite this article: Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah (2016) Censorship and the Jews of Baghdad: Reading between the lines in the case of E. Levy, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 7:3, 283-300, DOI: [10.1080/21520844.2016.1227927](https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2016.1227927)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2016.1227927>



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Published online: 10 Nov 2016.



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Censorship and the Jews of Baghdad: Reading between the lines in the case of E. Levy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how members of the Jewish community of Baghdad used foreign newspapers and journals to bring to light and gain international sympathy for issues concerning the community and its relationship with the Iraqi regime during the early years of the Iraqi state (roughly 1930–1950). As an example of this phenomenon, the article examines a 1934 case in which authorities arrested E. Levy, author of a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* telling of the confiscation of foreign Jewish newspapers sent to Iraq and the opening of letters addressed to Jews by postal officials. Subsequent to his arrest, the community was not discouraged from writing in the foreign press. On the contrary, members of the Jewish community, both anonymously and by name, wrote in Jewish and non-Jewish foreign presses imploring the world to intercede on Levy's behalf and to bring to light the situation afflicting the Jews of Baghdad. This article argues that foreign media was a successful tool for the Jewish community of Baghdad as an unofficial channel of negotiation for both communal and individual rights.

KEYWORDS

Arab nationalism; Baghdadi Jews; censorship; Iraq; Zionism

Introduction

In Iraq, the British Mandate lasted from 1920 until 1932. In the long history of the region, this short period of the Mandate is often considered “the Best of Times” for the majority of Iraq's religious and ethnic minority groups.¹ For the Jewish community of Iraq, this period is often considered the apex of social and cultural integration into general Iraqi society. The community was bolstered by Jewish socio-economic mobility due to an extensive (Jewish) community-sponsored education system and an increase in white-collar employment opportunities in both the civil service and with foreign firms. It was also a time of relative intellectual freedom with little government censorship and increased access to foreign print media.

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¹Peter Sluglett, “Minorities under the Iraqi Mandate and Monarchy: The Best Years of their Lives?” (paper presented at Leiden University, May 13, 2015).

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However, the end of the Mandate in 1932 and the death of King Faisal in 1933 were met with concern in regard to the future of the relatively pluralist society which had developed and, as some would argue, foretold the beginning of the end for over two thousand years of Jewish life in Iraq. The 1930s represented a time of unease as the new state experienced political instability and unrest. Although not to be compared with the political turmoil and violence of the 1940s, for the Jewish community of Baghdad there was a perceivable difference in state policy in regard to the Jewish community after the Mandate ended. These changes included greater legislation in regard to education, unofficial quotas on the amount of Jews employed in the civil service, the official banning of Zionism (in 1935) as an ideology, greater anti-Jewish sentiment in the local press, and the censoring of both Jewish periodicals and post from abroad destined for Jews residing in Iraq. Although much attention has been given to the history of the Jewish community of Iraq in academic circles during the past decade, little work has specifically focused on how the Jewish community (both on a communal and on an individual level) perceived and reacted to these changes in the Iraqi state during this liminal period from the end of the Mandate of the 1920s to the chaos of the 1940s, and particularly on the question of competing loyalties between the Iraqi state and Jewish nationalism as embodied in the Zionist political movement.²

In this article, I will explore how different actors in Baghdad reacted to one specific episode within the Jewish community surrounding the censorship of foreign Jewish periodicals and post in 1934. Specifically, I examine the incident caused by Mr. Isaac Levy³ when he published a letter in the *Manchester Guardian* criticizing the Iraqi government's policies towards Jews in Iraq in regard to the censorship of foreign Jewish press and the opening of letters destined to or being sent by members of the Jewish community by postal offices. The sources for this article are based on Jewish and non-Jewish newspaper articles from 1934 to 1935, to understand how both the international and local publics were presented with the situation. I have used internal correspondence from the British Foreign Office that discusses the incident to understand how the Jewish community reacted on an official level to these new restrictions and how they used their connections with foreign Jewish communities, foreign governments, and the Iraqi government to protest the Iraqi state. Finally, to understand how a member of the Iraqi Jewish elite reacted to the incident, I have used a yet unpublished, secret report written by a member of the Baghdad Jewish lay council delegate to the Iraqi parliament, Ibrahim Nahum. Nahum was also the agent in Baghdad of the wealthy Eastern Baghdadi Kadoorie family who

²Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

³In the English language press and private correspondence, both Levy's first and last name appear in different formats. Specifically, his last name is also cited as Levi, Lewi, Lawee, and his first name is referred to as Eliahou. Given that each report is identical, the author assumes they are referring to the same bookshop owner.

were based in Shanghai and Hong Kong. It was in this capacity that he had a letter smuggled out of Baghdad by an unnamed, non-Jewish English friend. The friend, in turn, sent the letter to Sir Elly Kadoorie in Shanghai. To date, it is the first private, candid account of this incident that I have come across. The letter is unique in that it presents Nahum's detailed views of the Jewish situation in Iraq divorced from any concerns of censorship that are often apparent in regular postal correspondence or published material from the period.⁴

Political unrest and censorship

Censorship and the banning of newspapers, in general, had always been part of print culture in Iraq, causing local writers and publishers to self-censor. The Ottoman Laws regulating print culture were reapproved in 1921 and 1931, requiring publishers and sellers of print media to be in constant communication with the Ministry of the Interior.⁵ Failure to abide by these laws put publishers and booksellers at risk of having their business shut down and being sentenced to prison if their publications overstepped the defamation laws. This fact meant that, although printing and publishing flourished during the Mandate and early years of the state, the scope of publications was heavily balanced toward literature and areas not perceived as politically sensitive. With this factor in mind, foreign press and, particularly, non-Arabic press became extremely important in providing information on areas which the government was susceptible to censor.

Unlike the majority of the Iraqi population in the mid-1930s, the Jewish community of Baghdad was relatively literate, a fact noted with frequency when discussing the influence of secular education. If a large portion of Iraqi Jews were able to read in multiple languages by the 1930s, this was certainly due to the sizeable portion of Jews in Baghdad who had received instruction in French, English, Hebrew, and Arabic (to varying degrees),⁶ making the community significantly more literate than the general Iraqi population of the time.⁷ This education was provided, in large part, by an extensive and varied network of Jewish schools which, by 1930, included eighteen separate institutions, many of which received funding from foreign Jewish institutions and individuals located outside of Iraq, adding an additional layer of

⁴In the majority of correspondence from Nahum to the Kadoories and vice versa, the issue of censorship is omnipresent. For example, to discuss the position of Jews in Iraq, they often use the weather as a metaphor or reference an individual's health. When discussing Nahum's personal situation, they often reference a common friend, "Mr. Smith." None of these metaphors are used in this report.

⁵Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 37–38.

⁶S.R. Goldstein-Sabbah, "Jewish Education in Baghdad: Communal Space vs. Public Spate," in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, edited by S.R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H.L. Murre-van den Berg (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 96–120.

⁷Abbas Shibliak, *Iraqi Jews: A History* (London, UK: Saqi Book, 2005), 44.

multiculturalism to the Jewish community.⁸ Given the multilingual nature of Jewish education in Baghdad, it is not surprising that many members of the Jewish community of Baghdad subscribed to both Jewish and non-Jewish foreign press, in addition to local press in Arabic and English, the latter a remnant of the Mandate period. The exact subscription and readership numbers are almost impossible to glean, as no records exist. Additionally, it is likely that foreign press was both shared via informal networks and consulted in the numerous cafes, libraries, and private Jewish clubs, further complicating the calculation of any concrete readership numbers. However, based on the list of censored Jewish newspapers from 1934, we know that there were at least sixteen foreign Jewish newspapers with subscribers in Baghdad in that year. Of these newspapers, nine were published in Hebrew, four in English, one in Arabic and, surprisingly, one in Yiddish.⁹ The majority of these newspapers came from Mandate Palestine, while others were published by Jewish communities in Beirut, Cairo, London, Bombay, and Shanghai. In particular, the latter two locations had Eastern Baghdadi satellite communities with strong ties to Iraq whereby their journals regularly carried holidays greeting and letters from residents of Baghdad and Basra. The Indian periodicals had a specific interest in Jewish life in Baghdad whereby they carried more original information on Jewish life in Iraq compared to Jewish newspapers in other regions. Many of these special pieces on Iraq were anonymous reports, and it is highly likely that they came from the residents of Baghdad. That the Jews of Baghdad were interested in these foreign and local newspapers attests to an interest in international Jewish news, general foreign news, and local news.

During the Mandate period, although censorship existed (as already mentioned), there are no records of censorship specifically targeted towards members of the Jewish community or foreign Jewish press. The case in point being the local Arabic language newspaper, *al-Misbah*, which was published from 1924–1929, focusing on specifically Jewish issues. Its second editor, Salman Shina, was an avowed Zionist and identified *al-Misbah* as a Zionist paper without causing scrutiny from the censors.¹⁰ And yet, although numerous literary reviews continued to be owned and edited by prominent Jewish intellectuals within Baghdad, there was no official publication of the Jewish community or a publication specifically dedicated to reporting Jewish news in Baghdad within Iraq.¹¹

⁸Zvi Yehuda, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Second Millennium CE* (Or Yehuda: The Babylonian Heritage Center), 62 [Hebrew].

⁹The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO/733/275/4.

¹⁰Orit Bashkin, "Misbah (Baghdad), al-," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, edited by Norman A. Stillman, Vol. 3 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 430–431.

¹¹However, *al-Hasid*, a weekly literary periodical, whose own editor, Anwar Shaul, was a prominent Jewish intellectual who would confront and attack the fascist ideas in Europe, it did not specifically represent the Jewish community. Orit Bashkin, "al-Hasid (Baghdad), al-," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, edited by Norman A. Stillman, Vol. 2 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 370.

That there was no longer a Jewish newspaper in and of itself may be a consequence of this heightened censorship in the post-Mandate era and concerns of accusations of conflicting loyalties.

Due to the lack of a local Jewish newspaper, I argue that Iraqi Jews went to the foreign press for information on news related to the Jewish world, specifically to gain information about topics sensitive to the Iraqi state and therefore not often discussed in the Arabic language press. Additionally, many Jews (and non-Jews) subscribed to the English language *Iraq Times*, a paper often cited as the primary print source for general foreign news in Iraq during this period.¹² While Arabic newspapers were also widely read and subscribed to, particularly ones edited by local Jewish intellectual elites, these are rarely cited as a source of news and more referred to for their interesting discussions of Iraqi society and innovative literary styles.¹³ However, by 1934, it was becoming more difficult to get foreign Jewish journals into the country due to an increased level of surveillance for anything purported to have Zionist sympathies. British foreign office reports first mention the censoring of foreign Jewish publications in Iraq in September 1934.¹⁴ The initial mentions stem from inquiries sent to the Foreign Office by the editors of Jewish newspapers from London and Palestine. These newspapers had received notifications that their Iraqi subscriptions had been cancelled due to a ban on the publications; although the exact reason given is vague, all parties infer that the issue to relate to Zionist ideology. During the same period, the Bombay-based *Jewish Tribune* wrote directly to the Post Master General of Iraq, the Minister of the Interior, and other Iraqi officials in regard to their paper not being allowed into the country. The Indian Jewish newspapers never received a government response.¹⁵ That it is the publishers of these newspapers inquiring about their importation status would suggest that the subscription numbers were significant, as it is unlikely that the canceling of a handful of subscriptions would have raised any notice from the publishers.

Upon request from the Jewish publishers and the Anglo-Jewish Association, the British Foreign Office began to make inquiries into the status of foreign Jewish press in Iraq. This was all carried out in a discrete manner in an attempt to draw little attention to what could potentially be a sensitive subject, this in general being the tactic used by both foreign and local Jewish groups when addressing sensitive subjects with the Iraqi government. However, the issue of foreign Jewish newspapers being prevented from entering Iraq became public record on October 2, 1934 when a letter sent to the editor of the *Manchester*

¹²The *Iraq Times* was an English-language daily newspaper published in Baghdad from 1914 until 1964. It is consistently cited by Jews as the reference for world news in Iraq throughout its existence. See Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004).

¹³Bashkin, *New Babylonians*.

¹⁴The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO/733/268/6.

¹⁵"Iraqi Consulate Established in Bombay: Special Interview with Consul-General for India," *Jewish Tribune*, March 1935, 34.

Guardian regarding the same concern was published. Unlike the previously mentioned inquiries, this letter came directly from a Jew in Iraq:

Sir,—Iraq has become an intellectual prison; liberty of thought and belief have become a myth. Apart from the strict censorship and muzzling of the local press, all letters from Palestine are opened by the postal authorities before being delivered to their owners.

Anti-Zionist and hence anti-Jewish, feeling (all Jews are suspected of Zionist tendencies) is running high. A whole sale {sic} ban has been placed on Jewish papers or on papers in defense of the Jews from all over the world. Papers from England, America, France, Egypt, and Palestine have been confiscated without legitimate reason. All books written in Hebrew are also suppressed. Books addressed to the Chief Rabbinate of Bagdad have been confiscated.

The banning of Communist propaganda literature and of books of an obscene nature is quite understandable; but to ban all Jewish papers published in England, American, and France is an outrage which no-liberal minded individual can tolerate.—Yours, &c, E. Levy. Al Rashid Library, Bagdad, Iraq September 24.

The letter was written by Isaac (also referred to as Ephraim and Eliahou in different newspapers and correspondence) Levy, the Jewish owner of the Al Rashid bookstore in Baghdad. The letter itself is surprising in its description of the issue of censorship targeted at the Jewish community of Baghdad during this period. Looking beyond the very direct message the letter communicated, it also provides information about E. Levy, the Jewish community of Baghdad, and Iraqi society as a whole at this time. Although little personal information about E. Levy is available beyond that he was a modest bookseller of Persian origin,¹⁶ we can assume several points. We assume that he is generally well aware of foreign press, as his bookshop was responsible for importing the censored Jewish newspapers, and therefore probably was also a purveyor of other foreign press which had a wider audience. It is also highly probable that he received a secular education, given his profession and ability to write in English. Finally, we can assume that he is squarely positioned in the Baghdadi Jewish middle-class. As the owner of a bookstore, he would not have been considered a member of the elite, a spot reserved for those who controlled large import/export businesses or the few who held important government positions, a fact confirmed via descriptions of him in British Foreign Office correspondence and by Ibrahim Nahum, a member of the lay council.¹⁷ Had he been a member of the elite, it is unlikely that he would have opted to protest the policies of the state in such a public manner. Instead, he may have discretely approached government officials himself or he may have opted to lobby the government through back channels by requesting help from foreign Jewish philanthropic organizations or local

¹⁶The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO/733/268/6. Many Jews living in Iraq at this time were of Persian origin, so this fact is relatively unremarkable. I have included it only because it was explicitly noted in the Foreign Office files.

¹⁷Ibid.

consuls, which is exactly what the lay council was doing in private at this time.¹⁸

In fact, both the religious and lay councils were hesitant to publically criticize the state during this period or link themselves as individuals or on behalf of the community with anything remotely related to Zionism. The clearest example of this is evidenced in a letter written by the chief of the Jewish community in Baghdad, Sassoon Khadduri, in the local newspaper *al-Istiqlal*, in which he condemns Zionism in no unclear terms and shows support for the native Arab Palestinian population. That letter was sent less than a year after the Levy letter was published in the *Manchester Guardian*.¹⁹ In contrast to this, the community continued to privately maintain links with individuals associated with the Zionist movement, both in Mandate Palestine and elsewhere, even traveling to Palestine for both business and leisure up until the dissolution of the community.²⁰ In general, the public language of the community and its individuals remained nationalistic and patriotic during this period, although in private correspondence individuals appear much more conflicted by the political reality and their individual affinities to both the Iraqi state and the Jewish people.²¹

The more central question is what prompted Levy to act as such a maverick in writing this letter, and why to the *Manchester Guardian* in particular? What did he hope to gain from writing such a critical piece in such a public space? Did he think that this would lift the ban on Jewish newspapers or that the government would stop opening letters addressed to Jews from abroad? And was he concerned that there would be consequences in publishing a letter so critical of the Iraqi state? Although none of these questions can be definitively answered, by beginning to explore them we can understand how members of the very diverse Jewish community of Baghdad negotiated the shifting political scene and public opinion of the Jewish community in Iraq.

In hindsight (and perhaps also in foresight), Levy's letter to the *Manchester Guardian* was a complete folly, especially as the letter was published under his own signature.²² That Levy chose to sign his name to the letter makes it unique; other letters like this had been published before and after this particular incident, but they were mostly published in Jewish newspapers abroad with smaller readership bases and, more importantly, these appeared as anonymous letters under names such as "an Iraqi Jew" or "Well Wisher,"²³

¹⁸Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

¹⁹*Al-Istiqlal* (October 8, 1936). Reproduced in English in Norman A. Stillman, *The Jewish of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991), 389.

²⁰The Hong Kong Heritage Project Archives, Hong Kong, and the Jewish foreign press cited in this article both document this phenomenon.

²¹Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 15–57.

²²Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15. The National Archives of the UK—CO/733/268/6.

²³These two examples come from letters to the editor in the December 1936 issue of the *Jewish Tribune* published in Bombay.

even for much less contentious letters, such as the suggestion that Iraq should have its own Jewish newspaper.²⁴ Given the uniqueness of the letter, one could be led to think that it was a forgery written to either hurt Levy personally or the Jewish community in general. That being said, I believe that the letter is legitimate. Had the letter been a forgery, it is reasonable to believe that follow-up articles on Levy would have hinted at this idea; instead, there is only mention of affidavits which attest to the veracity of the letter, and Levy never contests his authorship. Secondly, both the British Foreign Office records and the private letters of Nahum never allude to any doubt that the letter is legitimate, nor does the lay council ever makes a public statement about the incident.

We know that Levy sent his letter to the *Manchester Guardian* only after it had been rejected by all of the Arabic language newspapers in Baghdad.²⁵ It is possible that some newspapers in Iraq were sympathetic to Levy's stance, but none were willing to risk the repercussions publishing such a letter would have, given the strict censorship laws regarding defamation of the state. Publishing the letter in a foreign Jewish newspaper would also have been an option, as Jewish newspapers were very receptive to these types of letters. In fact, copies of Levy's letter were published in the *London Jewish Chronicle* and the Hebrew- and English-language Zionist press in Palestine once the story was picked up by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, although it is unclear as to whether this was Levy's doing or if the newspapers simply copied the letter from the *Manchester Guardian*.²⁶ It is my contention that Levy specifically sent this letter to a non-Jewish foreign newspaper as a result of his frustration at being censured in the Iraqi press, and also out of protest to the Jewish communal leadership who were not publically addressing the issues of censorship or challenging the state to reform its policies regarding the opening of post. Finally, since Levy had a vested interest in the importation of foreign Jewish press, as this was central to his livelihood, he had the most to lose from a financial perspective in the interdiction of Jewish press entering Baghdad, which could have also influenced him in making such a risky decision. Others were surely put at an imposition by these bans and opening of post, but found creative ways to smuggle letters and newspapers in and out of Iraq using non-Jewish friends and colleagues. An example of this was the way in which Ibrahim Nahum smuggled his report on the state of Jews in Iraq to the Kadoorie family in Shanghai via an English acquaintance.

As negative as the predicament appears, it is clear, from the tone of the letter, that the author has far from given up on Iraq as home for its indigenous Jewish population. In his letter, Levy states that he finds the current government policies unfair in equating Jewishness with Zionism, but not the idea of

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵JTA article, November 7, 1934, JTA online archives, <http://www.jta.org/jta-archive/archive-page>.

²⁶JTA article, November 18, 1934, JTA online archives, <http://www.jta.org/jta-archive/archive-page>.

government censorship as a whole to be problematic. This gives the impression that he supports the government, and only wants to draw attention to this particular issue that he feels is misguided. Noting that the banning of Communist and obscene literature is understandable gives the impression that he wanted to demonstrate that he is not against the Iraqi state and its policies in their entirety, only their specific targeting of the Jewish community on this particular issue. Additionally, he chose not to bring up the other issues afflicting the Jewish community in Iraq at the time—notably, the dismissal of some Jewish civil servants, the denial of travel visas to Palestine for Iraqi Jews, and a sharp rise in anti-Jewish writing in the Arabic-language Iraqi press²⁷—all of which the British Foreign Office and Ibrahim Nahum group together with the issue of censorship as hardships befalling the Jewish community. Therefore, the only logical explanation of Levy's strategy is that he hoped that his letter would incite international criticism for Iraq's censorship policies both from Jewish and non-Jewish sectors, who would, in turn, pressure the Iraqi government to rescind their policies.

Consequences of the *Manchester Guardian* letter

In short, Levy was successful in drawing attention to the Iraqi state's treatment of the Jewish community, inciting international criticism of its policies. Shortly after the publication of his letter, many Jewish and non-Jewish newspapers published related stories in regard to the Jewish situation in Iraq.²⁸ The other immediate outcome of the publication of his letter is that Levy was thrown in jail and charged with "intended libel and defamatory remarks damaging to Iraq's integrity." This fact, in turn, was picked up in the Jewish and non-Jewish foreign press along with the Arabic-language press in Baghdad, the foreign press sympathizing with Levy, and the local press defending both the state's actions in regard to Levy and its general policies in regard to censorship. On November 7, 1934, a short article was disseminated by the Jewish Telegraph Agency to Jewish press around the world, informing them of the outcome of the Levy letter. The piece noted that Levy had been arrested and jailed after the publishing of his letter in the *Manchester Guardian*. It went on to state that Levy had sworn affidavits from a number of Jews on the banning of Jewish newspapers addressed to them and on the opening of registered mail sent to them from other countries.²⁹ Finally, it mentioned that the president and council of the Baghdad Jewish community protested vigorously to the government against the anti-Jewish tone of the Arabic press, but that the government took no steps to halt the anti-Semitic agitation.

²⁷This anti-Jewish writing is also technically illegal under the Iraqi censorship laws.

²⁸Virtually all of the Jewish newspapers carried stories as information was distributed via the JTA. Additionally, many U.K. periodicals also picked up the story.

²⁹JTA Nov. 7, 1934, JTA online archives, <http://www.jta.org/jta-archive/archive-page>.

The key points in the piece from the JTA is that Levy was not alone in his complaint; he had sworn affidavits stating that his accusations were true, meaning that others were willing to confront the government over this injustice, although no names are ever given in print. Secondly, the piece brought up an additional issue confronting the Baghdad Jews at the same time, namely, the anti-Jewish tone of the Arabic press, an issue that Levy exacerbated by publishing his letter, playing right into the initial Zionist accusations of the Iraqi press. When reading the JTA piece quickly, one may have the impression that the Jewish community leaders were publically protesting the treatment of Levy. However, this was not the case; instead, the Jewish community was publically protesting the fact that Levy was being portrayed as a representative of the Jewish community within the local press, once again showing their caution in publically avowing any opinion in contrast with government policy.

In reality, the Jewish community in Iraq at the time was divided over the letter written by Levy. On the one hand, it made a tense situation even tenser when the Arabic papers increased their public accusations of Zionist sympathies, questioning the loyalty and patriotism of Iraqi Jews using Levy's letter as evidence for the community's Zionist sentiments. On the other hand, in private, many Jews probably admired Levy and his maverick streak, for standing up for his beliefs and questioning the state in such a public form. This point is supported both by the affidavits supporting Levy and anonymous letters from Baghdadi Jews published in foreign Jewish newspapers defending him.³⁰ This conflicted opinion is clearly evident in Nahum's letter describing the issue. Although he states that Levy's actions are inappropriate, aggravating an already tense situation, he does not defend the state's actions, only noting that the consequences of Levy's actions were to be expected. Nahum also does not question the validity of Zionist ideology, only mentioning that he understands why Zionism is unacceptable to the greater Arab population. In regard to the foreign press, in general, Nahum believe that they are sensationalizing the whole event, although it is unclear in his letter whether he actually believes what he is saying or is simply trying to reassure the Kadoories (and possibly himself).

Just as the Jews of Baghdad were debating Levy's letter, they were garnering greater attention from foreign Jewish communities over the Levy case, but also the issues facing the community in Baghdad. This should be seen in the light of global Jewish concern over the declining situation of the Jews in Germany and a preoccupation with the rise in anti-Semitism felt in Europe.³¹ For example, the *Jewish Tribune* in Bombay interviewed the consul general for Iraq in India on the subject of the Levy case, asking very direct questions

³⁰*Jewish Tribune*, Bombay, March 1935, 33.

³¹Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

in regard to the anti-Jewish sentiment in the Iraqi press and their general impression of a growing anti-Jewish sentiment in Iraq.³² Beyond demonstrating the interest of events in Baghdad amongst Jewish communities abroad, it also demonstrates the Iraqi government's desire to ameliorate how they were viewed in the foreign Jewish press. The interview reveals certain openness but also a lack of coherence by the Iraqi government, in that they were willing to allow the consul to be interviewed by a Jewish newspaper that had previously been banned in Iraq under the pretence of Zionist leaning. The Iraqi state most likely underestimated the reaction to the Levy case, and therefore the interview was one attempt to de-escalate the tension surrounding censorship of Jewish press.

Like the Iraqi state, the additional attention from foreign Jewish communities was an added stress for the Jewish communal leadership in Iraq, whose general policy was to maintain political neutrality as much as possible and avoid criticizing the Iraqi state. However, the communal leadership was not idle. Discretely, the lay committee was lobbying the government both in regard to the press-related issues and Levy's imprisonment, first by sending official letters requesting his release and greater censorship of anti-Jewish press, and then, when these went unanswered, by sending an official delegation of community leaders to the premier's office to discuss the matter.³³ The British Foreign Office also made inquiries to the Iraqi government in regard to the Levy case and the issues of censorship, these inquiries stemming from a request to the Foreign Office from the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA), the main Jewish Philanthropic organization in the United Kingdom, which had strong ties to Iraq going back many decades.³⁴

It is unclear what prompted the AJA to contact the Foreign Office. The most likely scenario was that they received a request from the Jewish lay council in Baghdad as to how best to de-escalate the situation in a fashion mutually suitable to the Jewish community and the Iraqi government.³⁵ This construction of the AJA and the Foreign Office acting as intermediaries between the lay council and the Iraqi government for sensitive issues was used consistently throughout the Mandate and the early years of the Iraqi state, as is seen in the Foreign Office files.³⁶

³²*Jewish Tribune*, Bombay, March 1935, 33.

³³Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

³⁴The Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA) is a British organization founded in 1871 to promote social, moral, and intellectual progress among Jews, similar to the Alliance Israelite Universelle in France. That AJA took a particular interest in Iraq is partially due to Britain's role in Iraq during the Mandate. However, another important factor predating the Mandate was that some of the main funders of the AJA, such as the Sassoon and Kadoorie families, were of Iraqi origin. These families partially used the AJA to oversee some of their charitable actions in Iraq. In Iraq, the AJA was responsible for providing humanitarian aid in the form of financial support and in sending specialists, such as teachers and medical professionals, to help the Jewish community, in addition to assisting the Jewish lay council in Baghdad to liaise with the British authorities in Iraq.

³⁵The National Archives of the UK—CO/733/268/6.

³⁶The National Archives of the UK—see files beginning with CO/733.

Beyond the inquiry from the British Foreign Office, what surely vexed the Iraqi government is that general foreign newspapers maintained an interest in Levy. Two days after the JTA piece, the *Manchester Guardian* also provided an update on the Levy case.³⁷ They published additional information not mentioned in the JTA notice of Levy's arrest. Specifically, they contacted the Iraqi legation in the United Kingdom for comment on the Levy affair. The legation stated that their only knowledge of the case was derived from newspapers and that they were therefore unable to comment on the matter. The newspaper also contacted the Foreign Office, which also described having no information and that they would continue to have no information unless the person in question was a British subject, which Levy was not. It is not possible to know if the Iraqi legation to the United Kingdom had any supplemental information about Levy or any directives from Baghdad as to how to respond to such inquiries; however, it is plausible that they had been informed not to make any public statement in the hope of de-escalating the situation. The British Foreign Office, however, was certainly lying, as the Foreign Office records provide a private narrative of the Levy case that parallels the public narrative given in the press.

As already mentioned, the British Foreign Office was aware of the bans on foreign Jewish press entering Iraq prior to the publication of the Levy letter, as the remarks were bundled with general observations on the increasing difficulties which Jews in Iraq were facing, such as dismissals from public service, harassment in the street and, in a few cases, trouble in immigrating to Palestine, all issues which Levy does not mention in his letter.³⁸ As reports from F. H. Humphreys of the British Embassy in Baghdad make clear, both the British Foreign Office and the Jewish communities of England and Iraq were closely watching the situation and negotiating with the Iraqi government about these restrictions via the British Foreign Office.

After the letter's publication and during the subsequent trial, the Iraqi government remained relatively inactive as they let Iraqi press criticize Levy in particular and the Jewish community of Iraq in general. This is significant, as criticizing a particular religious community as such was contrary to these same censorship laws, but the government initially chose not to react. When pushed to comment, their remarks were extremely limited, simply stating that Levy "had no business criticizing his country in the columns of a foreign paper" and that the Iraqi government was averse to racial discrimination, seeing Jewish, Christians, and Muslims alike as citizens and that the Levy case was an issue of defamation unrelated to the general treatment of minorities.³⁹

³⁷*Manchester Guardian*, November 16, 1934, 14.

³⁸The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO 733/275/4. Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

³⁹*Jewish Tribune*, Bombay, March 1935, 33.

In his report to the Kadoorie family in Asia, Nahum postulates that the lack of action by the government is either due to negligence or weakness.⁴⁰ In reality, the latter—weakness—is more plausible. In the summer of 1934, Prime Minister Jamil al-Mafdai resigned after less than ten months in office and ‘Ali Jawdat al-Aiyubi accepted the position of Prime Minister. Jawdat came into office with a full plate of pressing issues, particularly growing sectarianism from tribal groups, Shi’is, and Kurds, to name a few of Iraq’s many religious and ethnic groups which were also unsure of their status in the new republic. There were also issues in regard to the shortcomings of the new king in comparison to his father, and questions over what Iraq’s relationship with Great Britain should be⁴¹; in comparison to these issues, the issue of foreign Jewish press was relatively minor.

The initial ban on Jewish newspapers and the reaction to the Levy letter must be understood in this context of a weak government trying to manage these many potential crises. It is possible that the initial bans on foreign Jewish press had been a poorly conceived attempt from that state to minimize any Iraqi Jewish involvement in the Zionist movement and shield the community (albeit in a paternalistic fashion) from any such accusations from other groups within the country. However, given the negative press this policy garnered from abroad after the publication of the Levy letter, it obviously had the opposite effect by drawing attention to the Iraqi Jewish community from abroad and giving the local press fodder to accuse the Jews of Zionist leanings, ultimately further degrading the Jewish position in Iraq. In sum, after the publication of the letter, the Iraqi government most likely wanted to de-escalate the situation as quickly and as quietly as possible with a goal of minimizing confessional tension and drawing as little negative attention from the West as possible.

The sentencing of Levy

The actual sentencing of Levy is indicative of this desire to de-escalate and the government incapacity to do so in a smooth manner. Initially, Levy was sentenced to one year of hard labor followed by one year of police surveillance.⁴² Levy’s sentence was then tried and re-tried several times in the months following the initial conviction, as he appealed the case.⁴³ After his imprisonment, the case was reopened when an Iraqi merchant residing in London claimed that his business suffered due to Levy’s letter, resulting in the loss of 2000 pounds revenue, causing the High Court to fine Levy

⁴⁰Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

⁴¹Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraqi 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1953), 238–240.

⁴²*Israel: Hebomodaire Juif Independent*, Cairo, May 5, 1935, 3.

⁴³*Palestine Post*, Jerusalem, December 24, 1934, 5.

seventy-five pounds in damages.⁴⁴ The case was later reopened again when Levy appealed, the charges being dropped at one point and then revised. Finally, in June 1935, eight months after the letter was published, the fine was dropped and his prison stay was shortened to six months, three of which he had already served after his initial conviction.⁴⁵ That Levy was able to appeal his case and that his punishment was consistently changing yet again shows the strange predicament in which the Iraqi state found itself, specifically its desire to develop a secular democracy and its inability to do so.

Throughout the trial, the official government message was consistent, if relatively quiet, specifically that Levy was being tried as an Iraqi citizen for his public critique of the state. And although they allowed the Arabic language press to attack the Jewish community directly after the publication of the letter, as the affair dragged on, the government took certain steps to reassure the Jewish and key diplomatic partners, such as the British government, as to the safety of Jewish life in Iraq. This included temporarily banning the Arabic language newspaper *Hedaya* due to its virulent anti-Semitic articles and closing down another anti-Jewish newspaper, *al-Ikab*, only ten weeks after its founding.⁴⁶ The actions can be seen not only as an olive branch to the Jewish community, assuring them that the government still valued their place in the country, but also as reassurance for the international community and an attempt to quell international criticism. From the most pragmatic perspective, the Jewish community was one of the most visible and internationally connected minorities in Iraq. If the government was to demonstrate to the West that they were a reliable and stable developing country, it was essential to end this conflict promptly and quietly.

The acts were successful in that both Jewish and non-Jewish newspapers reported the banning of the anti-Jewish newspapers, interpreting this as a symbol of the government's desire to protect the Jewish community. Within a global context, these actions are particularly significant in that they are the opposite of the actions that Germany was taking towards its Jewish community at the same time, a point also not missed by Jewish and non-Jewish press.⁴⁷ Specifically, the Iraqi state was seen as taking measures to protect the Jewish community by shutting down anti-Semitic factions in the press and, in general, distancing itself from anything that could be perceived as anti-Semitic. This can be seen, moreover, as an attempt by the Iraqi government to prove to Europe that it was capable of maintaining a pluralist nation where all minorities had rights and were equal citizens.

In March 1935, the short-lived regime of Jawdhat was over, and after a two-week return to office by Mafdai, his government fell as well, events

⁴⁴The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO 733/275/6.

⁴⁵*Israel: Hebomodaire Juif Independent*, Cairo, June 20, 1935, 4.

⁴⁶JTA, December 4, 1934, <http://www.jta.org/jta-archive/archive-page>.

⁴⁷The National Archives of the UK, Kew—CO 733/275/4, JTA bulletin 94.

consistent with the weakness of the Iraqi government during this period. In April, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency noted that the new government, under the leadership of Yassin Pasha al-Hashimi, “consists of broad-minded ministers many of whom are very friendly and disposed toward the Jews,” a point confirmed in internal documents from the British Foreign Office, which concluded that the Levy crisis was coming to a close. It also noted that it was now possible for the banned newspapers to be allowed back into Iraq.⁴⁸ And yet, it is difficult to glean the efficiency of Levy’s letter in resolving the issue of censorship of the Jewish press and the opening of foreign post addressed to Jews, especially considering that new bans on foreign Jewish press were issued in March 1936. The new ban also focused on newspapers with a Zionist philosophy as part of the new laws against Zionism, meaning that Levy’s letter was unsuccessful in its objective of lifting the ban on Jewish periodicals.⁴⁹

However, this small incident had other less tangible and longer-lasting consequences as well. Within Iraq, it forced the Jewish communal leadership of Baghdad to address the issue of discrimination and Zionism publically, a role it was never comfortable in undertaking. The international attention should not be perceived as emboldening the Jewish community; instead, it should be seen as publically highlighting questions of conflicting loyalties. The incident also forced members of the Jewish community to consider what the new Iraqi nation could possibly look like in the post-Faisal era. For all of the pluralist discourse of the state, this incident reminded the Jewish community of its relative weakness as a religious minority. Finally, it put Iraq on the radar of the Jewish world as a country whose Jewish minority could potentially be in danger.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Mr. Levy, a middle-class bookseller, is but one very small part in the history of the Jews of Baghdad. However, it demonstrates the agency one man in Baghdad had in addressing what he perceived as a social injustice by bringing it to an international audience. His actions forced both communal elites and the Iraqi government to publically address the issue of the Jewish community’s relationship to other Jewish communities, especially the Jewish community in Palestine, which was growing in importance. It is unclear how much Levy knew of the Jewish communal leadership’s lobbying to the Iraqi government in regard to the censorship of Jewish newspapers or the inquiries made by the Anglo-Jewish Association via the British Foreign Office on behalf of both the foreign publishers and the

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

Iraqi Jewish leadership. Perhaps, had he known about their work, he would not have risked compromising himself by writing such a critical public letter.

On a larger scale, this event illustrates the complicated predicament the Jews of Iraq found themselves in in the 1930s, both on a communal level and an individual level. Years of cooperation with foreign Jewish organizations had built strong ties with foreign Jewish communities, who acted as both benefactors for local charities and negotiators with the Iraqi government. In particular, the AJA had grown in importance as a political advisor and negotiator for the lay council during the Mandate period. However, in the post-Mandate period, certain factions of the Iraqi government began to consciously distance themselves from Britain. That the Jewish community maintained these strong ties with Britain (particularly via the AJA, but also via other channels) was another factor, beyond Zionism, leading to their loyalty to the Iraqi state being called into question.

That the Jews of Baghdad were interested in Jewish world news and maintaining personal ties with Jews living outside of Iraq was understandable, as many Iraqis had both personal and commercial ties to other Jewish communities, meaning that the censorship of Jewish newspapers and the opening of letters was not only upsetting but potentially problematic for commercial interests. At the same, since Iraqi independence, many Jews had grown to see themselves as members of the Iraqi nation culturally, linguistically, and socially. It is unlikely that the majority of the population was willing to sacrifice one identity or relationship for the other, and thus there was a constant attempt to maintain an equilibrium between the two.

For other Jews in Baghdad, the issue of censorship was not the main concern during this period. As Nahum mentions in his report, the issue of censorship was a point that could be sorted out (and eventually was, at least temporarily), and his concerns came from larger disconcerting trends he saw emerging within the state. Iraqi society itself was changing at a rapid pace, leading Nahum to question the value of the Jewish community in Iraq to Iraqi society as a whole in the future. As Nahum notes, with the improvement of public education and a growing Arab⁵⁰ educated middle-class, there was less need for Jews in the civil service, a process he sees as already having begun, given the recent dismissals of certain Jewish government officials.⁵¹ This trend would also spill over into the private sector, as other Iraqis began to speak Western languages, leading to a decrease in the need for Jews to act as a cultural bridge between the two societies. And yet, even when considering the problems for Jews in Iraq, according to Nahum, the actual

⁵⁰Nahum, in his writing, generally refers to Arab Muslims as simply Arabs; therefore, I interpret his use of the term Arab here to only refer to Arab Muslims and not Arab Christians.

⁵¹Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong—SEK 8 C-001 A02/15.

situation of Jews in Baghdad had been sensationalized by the foreign press, giving the West an inaccurate perspective. Nahum even states that the Syrian and Palestinian Muslim newspapers⁵² remained much worse than the actual Iraqi newspapers. He also makes mention of the persecution of the Jews in Germany, a constant theme throughout the Levy affair, clarifying that Iraq was nothing like Germany. Nahum's letter to the Kadoories is contradictory in nature in that it recognizes the troubles facing the Jewish community in the first half, questioning the future of Jewish life in Iraq, and yet, in the second part, tries to downplay the same troubles, providing excuses and justifications. Similarly, Levy's letter is conflicted in that it compliments certain aspects of the Iraqi government and only chooses to address one of the issues facing the Jewish community, as opposed to discussing the deeper issues causing the recent censorship.

Both Levy and Nahum position themselves as Jews, part of a larger Jewish community living in Iraq. Both men's livelihoods depended on their connections to Jews from other communities, Levy via the importation of Jewish press and Nahum from his employment by the Kadoorie family, not to mention the likely affinities they had with Jews living outside of Iraq. Within their writings, private government documents, and the press, words such as race, minority, and religious group are constantly used interchangeably in reference to the Jewish community of Baghdad. Their link to Iraq as a place and also to the nation is never questioned, and yet their identity, both ascribed by others and through personal appellations, is never clearly defined, and at least in the case of Nahum is constantly changing based on language, audience, and emotion. Therefore, the assertion by the sociologist Philip Mendes that "overall, Jews [in Iraqi] viewed themselves as Arabs of the Jewish faith, rather than as a separate race or nationality" seems flawed. In reality, these identities were surely fluid and positioned in different ways, depending on context, constantly being redefined.

In conclusion, the story of E. Levy's public protestation of Iraqi government policies and the conflict that ensued illustrates the emerging dichotomy of the Iraqi Jewish identity whereby, tragically, being an Iraqi citizen and a Jew (with transnational Jewish connections) were becoming mutually exclusive. This event shows the complexity of how the Jewish community interpreted the changing political scene in Iraq, using the political situation of Jews in Germany (and later Europe as a whole) as a litmus test for their situation, whereas we do not see comparisons to other minorities in Iraq who were facing their own problems, such as the Assyrians. It also shows that the Jewish communal leadership, although generally loathe to engage in public political statements or directly

⁵²Although Nahum generally uses the term Arab when referring to Muslims, in this case Nahum specifically uses the expression "Muslim newspapers," perhaps to distinguish from Jewish and Christian Arabic-language newspapers.

confront the government, was willing to defend members of the Jewish community, even regarding sensitive subjects, showing that, from at least a structural perspective, a strong communal identity existed.

Ironically, in many ways Levy's letter was successful, in that it forced both the Jewish community and the Iraqi government to squarely confront the issue of Zionism in regard to the Jewish community of Iraq. His letter also contributed to the temporary lifting of the newspaper ban and the censorship of foreign Jewish post. And yet, the outcome was frustrating, in that it never fully addressed the issue at hand, namely reconciling two loyalties which were quickly becoming conflicted, that of the Iraqi national and contemporary Jew.

Funding

The author was a recipient of a 2015 ASMEA Research Grant to support work that resulted in this article.

Notes on contributor

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