

ORIT BASHKIN, *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel*
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Having established herself with books such as *The Other Iraq* and *New Babylonians* as a key scholar of the history of the Jewish community in Iraq, Orit Bashkin now turns her attention to the fate of those Iraqi Jews who went to Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Primarily a social history, with insights from cultural studies and sociology, *Impossible Exodus* is a valuable addition to the growing literature by the likes of Lital Levy, Ella Shohat, Reuven Snir, Jonathan Gribetz, Aomar Boum, and others which has first raised awareness of the experiences of Jewish populations in the Arabic-speaking world in their home countries and within Israel, and has then disaggregated the overarching category of Arab Jew to explore the cultural, historical, linguistic, and political differences within and between these communities.

Although, like Shohat and some other scholars of Arab Jewishness, this book is broadly critical of the State of Israel, it is not an un-nuanced or one-sided affair. Bashkin, for example, acknowledges that the structures of the new state in 1950-1951 were unavoidably precarious and chaotic, and that much of the poor treatment meted out to Iraqi newcomers was the result of disorganization and ignorance rather than active malice. She also attributes to the Israeli leadership in the state's early years genuine concern that Jews in Middle Eastern countries would face danger (even if that concern was founded in Orientalist and racialized ideas of Eastern Jews as primitive and degenerate). Unlike some proponents of the idea of Arab Jews, Bashkin also notes that the newcomers had poor relations with the elite Sephardim of pre-1948 Palestine, despite a shared "Easternness" and a common categorization as Other by the ruling Ashkenazim. This disaggregation of the Arab Jewish experience, highlighting the

differences between Iraqi, Yemenite, and Moroccan communities and practices, and their experiences both in their home countries, and in their experiences of migration and reception, is another growing trend in the literature of which this book is an important part. Pointing out that those people who were shaping the policies of labor and migration which affected the lives of Arab Jewish migrants included future presidents and prime ministers, Bashkin locates the Iraqi experience within the broader logic of state- and nation-building, with its pressures toward cultural and linguistic homogenization.

Within this narrative of what is firmly labeled “social engineering,” though, we also encounter the agency of Iraqi subjects, negotiating their way through the complexities of their new lives in a new state. Whether part of organized dissent such as the Israeli Black Panthers or, as Bashkin insists, in the more quotidian resistance of mothers and children figuring out how to survive through bitter winters in tents very similar to those occupied by Palestinian refugees across the borders of the new state, or teachers working their ways around the discriminatory education system, Iraqi Jews in Israel were not just victims, but resilient people who actively sought ways to build better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities. Again, Bashkin does not idealize her subjects; such survival strategies included using knowledge of Arabic language and culture to join the Israeli security and intelligence services. But *Impossible Exodus* also shows how state policies and the fears underlying them—of difference, and of Arabic as an enemy language—contributed not only to the marginalization of Iraqi Jews, but to the preservation of a separate identity and culture; immigrants confined to the infamous *ma’abarot*, or transit camps, could not assimilate linguistically and socially into hegemonic Israeli society, whether they wanted to or not.

To tell this story, Bashkin largely adopts a thematic approach, working her way through the experience of arrival and then areas of life such as education, work, political engagement, and culture. Drawing on a vast range of sources—from literature, song, and oral history, to demographic and economic statistics—we are presented with an extraordinarily rich account which manages, while maintaining a solid center, to incorporate myriad characters and to explore both the influences of Iraqi life and Mandate Palestine on the early days of the State of Israel, and to account for the impacts of this specific period in the paths taken by Iraqi immigrants and their descendants in later decades. The significance of the racism and

injustice of this period for the later development of Israel, its fractious politics, and fragmented identity, is thus made clear.

It is this combination of breadth and focused granularity which marks Bashkin's book out. On one hand, it builds on existing scholarship, drawing together strands of research to present what will doubtless be *the* go-to volume on the subject for some time. On the other, its power lies in the detail drawn from a wide range of primary sources. Through this echoes the voices of children arrested for theft in farmer's fields because they are too young for the police to believe that they are workers, of educated, multilingual women assumed by Ashkenazi nurses to be illiterate, superstitious, and thus incapable of taking an active and informed role in their own childbirth, or of youths rendered distant from their families by a Hebrew-focused education system which split them from their culture and history. As the literature on Arab Jews in Israel grows it is major studies like this, which grapple with the different experiences of the many groups and communities subsumed beneath the label, which adds detail and complexity to our understanding both of these migrants themselves and of their impact on the state. Books such as this also reinforce challenges on the theoretical level, feeding into ideas of dual or double diaspora and defying binary notions of belonging and identity. When Bashkin writes that "Israel of the 1950s and 1960s was a bilingual space," demanding questions about both Israeli and Arab nationalisms are implicit, underlining the political and ethical challenges that the experiences of the Iraqi Jews pose to histories inside and outside Israel. And as such, we must look forward to similarly authoritative and insightful studies of Moroccan, Egyptian, Yemeni, and Persian Jews in Israel to understand yet more of the political and theoretical nuances of modern Israel and its racialized, fragmented settler-colonial project.