

“Not a Figure in the Past”

Zionist Imperial Whiteness, the Iraqi Communist Party, and Their Reverberating Histories of Race and Gender, 1941–1951



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ABSTRACT This article uses the racial divisions encouraged by European Zionism in early-state Israel among European and Middle Eastern Jews as a point of departure to explore racialization and gendering among Iraqi Jewish women during the years 1941–51 from a sociopolitical standpoint. Restricting itself to politics given this standpoint, a study of Jewish women’s participation in the illegal Zionist and Communist movements of Iraq reveals that racializations, rather than a single racialization, occurred—a racial reality no other scholarship provides for Iraq’s Jewish community. Because Jewish women participating in these movements contended with patriarchal organizing structures, it is necessary to set apart the racial logics palpable in their articulations. This argument rests on primary sources in the form of three memoirs from the Iraqi Jewish women Tikva Agassi, Shoshana Levy, and Shoshana Almoslino, as well as Zionist women’s letters, a biographical dictionary of Communist participation, and British Foreign Office documents.

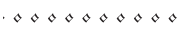
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James Baldwin: A Russian Jew walking through Tel Aviv is not a figure in the past. He is carrying his history with him and acting it out. So is the Algerian Jew.
Margaret Mead: And so is the Yemenite.
Baldwin: All of them. It is not yesterday’s history. It is now.
— James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race*

Transcribed in the book *A Rap on Race*, the conversations between James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, held August 25–27, 1970, dealt with localized manifestations of race and racism within geographies such as the United States, South Africa, France, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East. Binary racial divisions loom large in these dialogues. Discussions of racial divisions are particularly salient when Baldwin and Mead cast their racial analysis on the subjects of Zionism, the state of Israel, the displacement of Palestinians, and (although they do not employ these exact titles) the divide between Ashkenazim (European Jews) and Mizrahim (Middle Eastern Jews) in Israel. Having visited Israel himself, Baldwin could utter an epigraphic invocation of “Russian Jew” and “Algerian Jew” that was experientially based. He is precise not only in his summation “It is not yesterday’s history. It is now” but also in his implication that this history is divisively and racially fraught — a reality distilled in Baldwin’s use of the two opposing terms: *Russian Jew* and *Algerian Jew*. From a café in Tel Aviv, he observed “The Russian Jews, the German Jews, the English Jews, and those are Europeans. You see the Egyptian Jews, the Algerian Jews, and those are not Europeans. And they do not mix with each other. . . . And all of them look down on the Yemenites” (Baldwin and Mead 1971: 192). By specifying the unmixing before his eyes, Baldwin illuminates the stakes of history not being laid to rest in this instance. These stakes are the cultivation of racial divides and animus.

Baldwin’s remarks are evocative of, as Ella Shohat, Orit Bashkin, Bryan Roby, and Aziza Khazzoom have shown, the reality that, in immigrating to Israel, Mizrahi Jews came to live in a state founded primarily by Ashkenazi Zionists who were committed to racializing themselves as white and racially otherizing Mizrahim as nonwhite.¹ In light of the expert theorizing of these scholars, taking the Baldwin-Mead conversation (specifically Baldwin’s remarks) as a point of departure might seem a circuitous or unintuitive choice. After all, while this *Rap on Race* happened in 1970, Shohat’s seminal English-language “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims” was published in 1988 and remains a watershed moment for naming not only an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi divide but a Mizrahi elision. Yet, in situating his analysis from the standpoint of race, Baldwin’s remarks spark a *particular* kind of historical retracing: that of race consciousness and racial logics. In other words, whereas other analyses rely on naming an East/West or Oriental/European divide, Baldwin’s remarks allow for further specification. To grasp how Israeli society got to the place where it is now, it is necessary to take the Israeli conceptions of race Baldwin describes and find the development of racial logics for certain Jews prior to their arrival in the state of Israel. Informed by the kind of analysis Baldwin did more than fifty years ago, this article reveals aspects of this reverberating history through its investment in uncovering the kinds of histories certain “non-European” immigrants brought with them to Israel in the 1950s.

Baldwin’s race lens vis-à-vis Israeli society begins from a sociopolitical context. For this reason, this article will ruminate on certain socially informed political



positions of a particular “non-European” Jewish population. To do so, the article’s analysis will need to leave Israel, go back, and uncover logics operating in these Jews’ country of origin. Because Ashkenazi political Zionism dominated Israel at the time of Baldwin’s visit (and still does), detailing its relationship to race arises as paramount. To explore Ashkenazi political Zionism’s relationship to race, it is possible to draw a point of contrast by detailing the racialized aspects of a different political affiliation. I have chosen Communism for the explicit contrast it provides in terms of race. The country of focus is Iraq, an illustrative choice for several reasons. For example, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was the largest in the Middle East while Jews still lived in Iraq, and although the number of Iraq’s Zionists was never statistically significant, its historical record is significant in its documentation and impact (Slugglet 2018: 103). Furthermore, because a rather large group of Mizrahi Jews immigrated to Israel from 1950 to 1951 (roughly 123,000 on their arrival), much can be said about exactly how and why migration was so traumatic, due to how the aforementioned Ashkenazi hegemony curtailed the prospects of so many.

In terms of primary sources, the most comprehensive are memoirs from the Iraqi Jews Tikva Agassi, Shoshana Almoslino, and Shoshana Levy. These memoirs typically follow the politically active women, born in different Iraqi cities, from birth until the time of their writing in Israel. First-person voices are captured as well through letters authored by young Zionist women and published in Mordechai Bibi’s *Zionist Pioneer Underground Movement in Iraq*. The letters were exchanged between young Zionist women who had immigrated to Israel and those still in Iraq. I also used a compendium of Jewish Communist activity in Iraq called *Mainly in the Underground: Jews and Politics in Iraq*, by Yosef Meir, and I consulted archival documents, collected from the British National Archives, that discuss Zionism and Communism in Iraq.

The main contention of this article is threefold. First, a parallel study of Jewish women’s participation in the illegal Zionist and Communist movements of Iraq reveals that racializations, rather than a single racialization, occurred within the community during the early to mid-twentieth century. Second, as opposing descriptions of Zionist and Communist participation show, British imperial *whiteness*, longed for by Iraqi Zionists and eschewed by Communists, stood out in Iraq’s race constellation. Imperial whiteness began with European Jews and was passed along to the Zionist emissaries Iraqi Jews encountered. The concept of imperial whiteness speaks to a reality wherein Zionists were indebted to nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses of scientific racism as well as to British imperial assistance to actualize their stated goal of a racially homogeneous national homeland. The omnipresence of whiteness is never explicitly stated, yet it buoys Iraqi Zionism. A nuanced look at Zionist whiteness is possible because “as a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination, but that is true of all texts, not just those that take

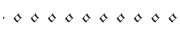


such matters as their explicit subject matter” (Dyer 2000: 544). Communist Jews implicitly denounced such whiteness and the divisiveness of race overall through their commitment to the movement’s accounting for human difference in a non-discriminatory way. Third, because race always comes to matter alongside other social differences, such as gender, I also use a gender analysis.

Indebted to the theorizing of scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti (1996) and Joan Wallach Scott (1999), a gender analysis is indispensable because “all aspects of human society, culture, and relationships are gendered,” wherein gender is “based on perceived differences between the sexes and . . . is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (6). Although a gender lens could certainly be applied to sources authored by men, and men too are circumscribed by patriarchy, this article does so with respect to sources from women. In this way the article shows how women are doubly affected by discourses of racialization and prescriptions that subordinate them. Without didactically saying so, the primary sources I examine in this article contain gender and race as meaningful categories of social difference (and can thus be read with these lenses in mind), because Iraq as a burgeoning nation-state in the shadow of colonial rule did. This fact is understood because, as Valentine M. Moghadam (2013: 25) writes, “state-building has been a highly gendered phenomenon, in that notions of gender — of masculinities, femininities, and appropriate roles for women and men — are often central to state-building projects and to constructions of national identity.” Yet Moghadam notes that gender is not the only “fault line” along which nation-state building occurs and is careful to name this social difference’s intersection with class, ethnicity, religion, and age as crucial. In the remainder of this article, following a historical overview preceding a discussion of each, I offer a narrative of women’s racialized and gendered participation in Zionism and Communism in a way that privileges an interplay between narrative and theoretical grounding. I discuss Zionism’s relationship to race and imperial whiteness specifically at length. The words of Zionist women show that a longed-for imperial whiteness took root in the country with Zionism. Communist women’s articulations and actions showcase the ways that they and Communists broadly rejected imperialism and imperial whiteness.

Women and Zionist Imperial Whiteness in the Iraqi Milieu

Zionist activity began in Iraq in the 1940s as emissaries were sent there to encourage its growth (Meir-Glitzstein 2004: 8). Among the most prominent emissaries, including Shemariah Guttman, Yehoshua Givoni, and Yehoshua Baharav, all were of eastern or central-European extraction and had lived in Palestine for a number of years. Clothed in European suits and nearly ignorant of Jewish religious laws and tradition, the emissaries were intriguing figures for Iraqi Jewish youth (64). Even the Iraqi-born emissaries, Ezra Khadoorie and Shlomo Hillel, had lived in Palestine, where they were imbued with European ideals and political Zionism before returning



to Iraq. This Palestinian background lent Khadoorie and Hillel eminence because it, as Esther Meir-Glitzenstein insists, “gave them a Western aura” (64). Even though the emissaries were men, because of the mixed-gender nature of Zionist education in Iraq, their presence undoubtedly had an impact on women. This manifested itself in, among other ways, Zionist women recognizing the emissaries and their ilk as kinds of white saviors.

The Zionist movement in Iraq was always relatively minor. Its members were not often in the political, communal, or socioeconomic mainstream. Around two thousand Jews participated in Zionist activity at its height in the 1940s. Roughly one-third of Iraq’s Zionists were women (Meir-Glitzenstein 2004: 116). Many of these women joined the movement because of its egalitarian and social justice message (116). Particularly for women of lower socioeconomic status, Zionism encouraged opportunities for work outside the home and for mixed-gender socialization (117). For example, Almoslino (1998: 19)—who was born to a poorer family in Mosul, emigrated to Israel with fellow Zionist youth and not her family in August 1947, and eventually served as an Israeli Parliament member and minister of health—said that as an adolescent, prior to joining the Zionist movement in Iraq, “I didn’t know how to read Hebrew. Again and again it was said to me that girls weren’t [supposed to] learn the Torah.” The patriarchal worldview dictating that girls should be prevented from learning Hebrew and the Torah was of course markedly different from the Zionist worldview. Per Zionist dictate, men and women both learned Hebrew (which was no longer exclusively the language of religious tradition but had become the language of the Zionist community and would become that of the Israeli state) in the name of encouraging community.

Jews faced various crossroads following life-altering events in Iraq, like the end of the British Mandate and later World War II. Another of these events was the Farhud, the anti-Jewish pogrom of June 1–2, 1941. Many Jews saw the Farhud as an aberration to a relatively peaceable existence in Iraq. Still, for fewer Jews, the Farhud activated prior and overarching associations and fears. Such a psychological response encouraged these Jews to have altogether separate conceptions of their future, including their place in Iraq.

About the connection between her turn toward Zionism and the Farhud, a young HeHalutz member named Carmela Sasson—who was born in Baghdad, spent some of her childhood in Basra, and came of age under the guidance of her single mother back in Baghdad after her father died unexpectedly—wrote: “How did I used to feel before joining the Movement? I clearly remember my feelings while hearing the far away screams of my Jewish sisters during the night of Shavuot. However, these feelings quickly passed since I thought there was no hope for Jews in a world full of deception; a world where the strong swallows the weak” (Bibi 1988: 403). In this conception the Farhud’s violence and betrayal was evocative of not just



trauma but also despondency. The pogrom did not merely strip Sasson of her sense of security in the state; it also confirmed her suspicions and assessment of Jews' place in the world and thus Iraq. In her introspection as to why she joined Iraq's Zionist movement, Sasson continued:

I thought that all Jews in the world were like the Jews in Baghdad — egoistic and weak. I was certain that I wasn't the only one who felt this, but that it was also felt by all young, self-respecting Jews. . . . Then our brothers from the Land of Israel came to rescue us from subjugation and to tell us about the Zionist idea, including the difference between Jews in the diaspora and Jews in the Land of Israel. (Bibi 1988: 404)

Sasson's conception of the Jewish people is parochial and pejorative. She shows that there exists a taxonomy of Jews where Jews in the diaspora (including her) are different and oppressed vis-à-vis superior and more fully actualized Jews in Israel. The distinction she employs between the Jews of Baghdad and the "brothers from the land of Israel" is, in a sense, artificial. These "brothers" were not likely indigenous members of Palestine's Jewish community but European-born Jews who had spent formative years in Palestine engaged in Zionist activity. It is, in actuality, their fluency in Zionism that sets them apart.

The Zionist movement in Iraq worked to engender a proud and cohesive sense of Jewish identity through the study of Hebrew, Jewish history, and Jewish colonization in Palestine. Yet Sasson's opinions did not place her in conceptual or literal opposition to the movement. In fact, it was likely her critique of middle- and upper-class Jews (who neglected their coreligionists in the Farhud) that political Zionist thought used to encourage her membership. This is because "egoistic and weak" was, in so many words, how political Zionism portrayed Jews generally and how Zionist emissaries understood Jews in Iraq specifically. When mentioning the Zionist education disseminated, specifically its emphasis on "the difference between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in the Land of Israel," Sasson is referencing the discourses that spawned these possible "egoistic and weak" conceptions. Sasson's linkage between her perception of Jewish inferiority, particularly in relation to a traumatic event like the Farhud and her seeing Zionism as the answer to this inferiority, was not a uniquely Iraqi Jewish phenomenon, of course. This calculus was exemplary of political Zionist thought generally and was indebted to racial logics. In other words, Sasson's descriptions, in the way that they homogenized Jews according to seemingly immutable and inherited qualities, were indicative of Jewish racialization — a process adopted by Jews themselves beginning in the early twentieth century that was in genealogical relation to sciences of race and racialization constructed by non-Jewish Europeans beginning in the nineteenth century (Efron 1995: 126). Before turning to further examples of this kind of racialization employed by other Jewish women in Iraq, I want to lay out its contours.

That there are biological markers distinct, identifiable, and inheritable enough to taxonomize individuals into hierarchized groups was an insistence born out of nineteenth-century non-Jewish European thought. It then became an insistence internalized by European Jews and specifically political Zionists. To understand the discourses certain Jews began subscribing to and propagating, it is first necessary to comprehend that scientific (or pseudoscientific) conceptions of race developed toward racist ends. Within this nineteenth-century European paradigm, and, as Tanya Maria Golash-Boza (2015: 23) writes, in “an age of emancipation from slavery and liberation from colonial powers,” as well as the rise of industrial capitalism, scientific racism emerged. Golash-Boza defines scientific racism as “the use of science or pseudoscience to reproduce and/or justify racial inequalities” (23), and it was this facet of race that Jews encountered and took up.

As Nadia Abu El-Haj details, the discourses and methodologies of “racial science” constructed first by European Christians toward anti-Semitic classificatory ends were harnessed by certain Jewish Europeans for two reasons: first, as a response to and denunciation of this particular kind of anti-Semitism, although not the kind of response that would genuinely challenge the biological determinism that “race science” was indebted to (Abu El-Haj 2014: 68); second, as a way to bolster burgeoning Jewish nationalism, inspired by Jews’ supposed distinctiveness all via “biological-cum-racial terms” (69). Most important for current purposes, then, are the specific Zionist Jewish nationalists who assimilated the concept of race into their ideology. Abu El-Haj, speaking about this political Zionist ideology, clarifies:

One powerful stream within it became increasingly invested in the concept—if not always the science—of race. As Zionist activists sought to realize Jewish settlement in Palestine, many came to articulate a racial self-definition of the Jews. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the link between biology, national self, and soil in Jewish national thought became ever more influential and robust. (67)

Currents of these Zionists’ conception of race rippled outside Palestine and outside Europe where they originated and could be found in Iraq. A discernible current within their racial conceptions that merits interrogation is an indebtedness to imperial whiteness. Imperial whiteness, as employed here, is informed by Radhika Mohanram’s (2007: xx) delineation of how, during the nineteenth century, Britain constructed itself as white within a culture of imperialism, vis-à-vis its imperial subjects in places like India. In the colonial adjacent site of Iraq, this process would be replicated along not only a British-Iraqi axis but also a British-influenced Zionist/non-Zionist axis.

Because political Zionism was implicated in British colonialist projects, it was also implicated in their racial logics. The political Zionism Jews encountered in Iraq brought with it an awareness of an idealized and constructed archetype of white



racial identity that was reconstituted vis-à-vis a perceived other. Given this aspect of reconstitution in particular, imperial whiteness is always a kind of longing for whiteness that contains variations of being not quite white. Especially instructive for laying bare the race consciousness of these political Zionists, Daniel Boyarin's (2000) *Unheroic Conduct* deftly interrogates what he calls semicolonialist Zionist logic along with its longing for imperial whiteness. In his formulation, British colonizers were meant not just to be emulated but to be replicated in kind. This replication included reproducing "their" whiteness — how they established their dominance via constructing a white racial identity in contradistinction to those they colonized, whom they rendered other and nonwhite.

Paralleling Abu El-Haj's (2014) delineation of the tie that bound European Christian conceptions of race and Jewish identity, Boyarin asserts that Zionism shares a lineage with liberal European Christianity's thoughts on Jewish emancipation wherein the Jewish problem is not biological. It is, rather, circumstantial, lived, and reconstituted through oppressive Christian dictate and a refusal by Jews to abandon a primitive and "Oriental" lifestyle (Boyarin 2000: 279). Furthering his argument, as well as the connection between Christian and Jewish Zionisms and between Zionism and colonialism, Boyarin insists that it was the Christian Zionist assessment of Jews that captured the attention and sympathy of Theodor Herzl, a foundational figure in Zionist thought and the Zionist movement. Per the characterization of Boyarin, Herzl understood himself to be part of a Jewish civilizing mission (280). Boyarin comes to this understanding through a study of Herzl's diaries and texts like *The Jewish State*, works that show his persuasion by the Christian Zionist understanding that Jewish alterity lay in their environment. Although Herzl first suggested this mission would be best executed through conversion away from Judaism, it was the colonization of a part of Africa or of South America and finally of Palestine that he eventually determined to be most effective for becoming like other peoples. One of the specific sought-after hallmarks was whiteness via colonization (302).

Max Nordau, a close associate of Herzl, added further texture to the condemnation of diasporic Jews with his notion of muscular Judaism. Per his calculus, the diasporic Jew of the ghetto was effeminate, anemic, and degenerate. Nordau had "internalized the negative and pathologizing interpretation of Jewish manhood of the anti-Semites and thus saw Zionism as the solution" (Boyarin 2000: 277). An enlivened, more "muscular" Jew was Nordau's ideal archetype (77). Such idealization was in line with the political Zionism of the time, in particular Herzl's thought processes, because it saw one of the movement's goals as "the corporeal rebirth of the Jewish people" (Presner 2010: 1). Although this particular archetype trafficked heavily in the masculine and was male centric, as the previous articulations show and further examples below will also unpack, the concept of Jewish degeneration, on the one hand, and Zionism as a conduit for regeneration and redemption, on the

other, was taken up by women too. Redeeming the “degenerate” Jewish body had to do not only with masculinizing it but also with whitening it. Women, as agentive actors committed to Zionism, as well as agents of reproduction, encouraged both.

While Herzl’s words have been centered by Boyarin here so far, the paradigm to which they speak does not start and stop with Herzl alone. Indeed, the entirety of the state of Israel’s Ashkenazi founders’ relationship to Britain and tactics in Palestine is also an illustration of the kind of theorizing done by Herzl. For instance, according to Dafna Hirsch (2009: 598), writing about Jews in Palestine during the British Mandate, race may not have constituted a “primary signifier of Jewish collective identity in Palestine,” but given that many of the most powerful and influential Jews at that time were from eastern Europe, where other factors such as religion and territorial concentration engendered Jewish national consciousness, “nevertheless, the language of race was not uncommon in the Yishuv.” Indeed, these Jews were influenced by race science and burgeoning eugenics discourses wherein “‘race’ served different purposes, according to the context in question. In some contexts, ‘race’ was mainly used to establish Jewish unity, while in others it was used to establish diversity and hierarchy among Jews” (593). In terms of this latter-mentioned diversity and hierarchy, the immigration of many European Jews to Palestine and the concentration of social and political power in their hands allowed for the portrayal of Mizrahi communities, including Iraqi Jews, as “primitive, superstitious, ignorant, neglectful of their children, passive, lacking drive and the will to change—in general, as an essentially different type, physically and mentally, from the immigrants from Europe” (601). Iraqi Jews encountered all of this multifaceted race discourse through the Zionist emissaries they met, through the Zionist education they had, and finally upon their arrival in the pre- or early state of Israel.

Having established the relationship between political Zionism and imperial whiteness, let us return to Iraq. It is the paradigm of political Zionism as *inheritor* of a Christian Zionism so tied to Christian self- and British imperialist interest and whiteness that the previously quoted text from Sasson (where she deemed Jews egoistic, weak, sometimes lacking self-respect, subjugated, and diasporic) harks back to. This is the case even though Sasson herself could have only personified a Christian Zionist stance given that an exclusively Christian Zionist identity was not embodied by individual Iraqi Jews. When the events of the Farhud aroused in Sasson her worst judgments and fears of Jews not just in Iraq but beyond, she was as critical, in tone and content, as the Zionism Boyarin describes and Herzl espoused. Furthermore, how she resolves such feelings and the trauma of the pogrom for herself is revealing. When she says that she thinks that Zionism and her brothers in Israel will save Jews in Iraq, she is placing a difference between these two “types” of Jews. This dichotomization foregrounds the possibility that aspects of Herzlian Zionism came to fruition in Israel. Sasson sees the Ashkenazi Jews there not only as white but also as white saviors.



Sasson's words, like Boyarin's descriptions of Herzlian Zionism, suggest that some of the hopes of white saviorship were already coming to fruition. The Jews in Israel and specifically the emissaries to Iraq (most of whom were Ashkenazi) were already seen — and already saw themselves — as white. This is noticeable when Sasson says that her brothers from Israel would come to Iraq and save Iraqi Jews from their subjugation by telling them about the Zionist idea. Per this logic, Iraqi Jews themselves are not quite white yet but have the potential to be so. However, Zionism is the gateway through which they must pass. In a further fulfillment of Herzlian Zionism, this process is also gendered, given that Sasson specifically says that “our brothers” will save Iraqi Jews. According to her calculus, the new male Ashkenazi settler colonizers in Palestine are the conduit for the whiteness of, in this case, Iraqi Jewish men and women. Thus Jewish identification with Zionism was also an identification with a kind of whiteness and white racialization. The prototype of this whiteness may have initially been male, but its orbit was meant to encompass women, albeit anxiously. The anxious quality was a function of women's status as literal progenitors (and thus progenitors of whiteness), which circumscribed their racial status (Mohanram 2007: 27). In response to the precarity of women's whiteness a generalized awareness of women's proximity to men and men's whiteness loomed large.

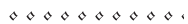
Two months after May 14, 1948, when Israel declared its own statehood, Iraq's government declared Zionism illegal. Practice of or sympathy for Zionism brought with it the possibility of interrogation, imprisonment, death, or hard labor.² Generally speaking, simply being suspected of Zionist activity was grounds for arrest. Some Jews came to see this as a form of persecution.³ In the atmosphere of increased suspicion enabled by Israel's declaration of statehood, letters from Israel/Palestine addressed to Jews in Iraq were evidence enough to call these Jews' loyalty to Iraq into question. The passages Levy devotes to a police interrogation that her father and grandfather experienced at the hands of Iraqi authorities, as well as the paranoia this instance catalyzed for the rest of her family in Iraq, reveal the difficulties Iraqi Jews underwent. Levy (2001: 67) asserts that Iraqi authorities detained her father and grandfather because of letters the former received from his brother Rachamim, who had immigrated to Palestine several years prior and lived in the kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek.

The effects of this questioning were not confined to Levy's father and grandfather, however. They rippled through the family and took on gendered dimensions. While the two men were undergoing police interrogation, Levy's mother, spurred by speculation circulating in their Jewish neighborhood, began purging the family home of all paraphernalia that could possibly register as Zionist. This cleansing included removing Stars of David from prayer shawls; literature from the underground Zionist movement *Tenua* (literally, Movement), which counted Lulu (Levy's aunt) as a member; letters from Lulu's Zionist friends in Palestine; pictures of and

letters from her uncle Rachamim; and materials that could be put toward violent ends, such as her uncle's gun and ingredients for Molotov cocktails (Levy 2001: 66). Following questioning about the content of various letters from Palestine, Levy's father and grandfather were sent to a detention center. On that same day the instincts of Levy's mother were proved keen, because police were sent to thoroughly search the family home (67). What this experience in its aggregate did for the family was increase their feelings of persecution and Zionist group solidarity. In effect, the instance shows how individual Zionists implicated and propagated the movement and its whiteness to their family members — sometimes intentionally and sometimes optically or in the eyes of authorities. If this example is one of a mostly external imposition, other illustrations from Levy can reveal how Zionist imperial whiteness was more consciously accumulated.

Levy begins the description of her childhood neighborhood by differentiating between the Zionist and Communist families. For example, she notes that the Shahrabani family was Zionist, with the sons being members of the Zionist Underground in Baghdad. Next to the Shahrabanis was the Ezer family, which was Communist. Levy is sure to mention that the father of this family was a tailor in the Muslim sector of the city and draw the conclusion that “perhaps because of his closeness to Muslims, he was an ardent advocate of coexistence with Arabs” (Levy 2001: 62), which is a conclusion she remembers gleaning as a child from adults in her life. As this article's section on Communism shows, closeness with other Arabs, especially Muslims, is often portrayed as a harbinger of Communist sympathies. In both of these examples, it is striking that it is the family unit where Zionism and Communism are generated and passed down. This is in fact the case with Levy and her family as well. After narrating the families in her neighborhood, Levy muses, “I think I was already a Zionist at that point. I believed in the merit of it” (62), and she continues to describe how as a child she came to believe in the merit of Zionism by learning of the movement from her aunt, who lived with them. About this aunt and the Zionists she associated with, Levy says: “My aunt Lulu was a member of the Tenua, i.e., the underground Zionist movement in Baghdad. She would bring members of the Movement to our house where together they would learn and sing songs in Hebrew” (62). Levy's continued description of her Zionist aunt and this aunt's cohort provides an account of not only socialization into Zionism but the process of acquiring whiteness by extension. This acquisition included, among other things, observation of and being in community with other Zionists, performing the movement's language (Hebrew), and risking exposure while doing all this in private. Referring still to the Hebrew songs, she writes, “I loved these songs and even knew how to sing some of them,” (62) which reveals that even in her observational stance she was no passive bystander.

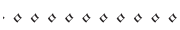
While Levy does not explicitly say that it was whiteness that was sought after, she does not have to. Her references and idioms are evocative of whiteness in and of



themselves because they are race affirming and because imperial whiteness loomed large within the details of Zionist racial logic. For instance, in the same descriptions of her Zionist aunt and friends, Levy (2001: 62) notes, “I used to [hang around] the room they met in and listen to them reading Hebrew texts — a language that was not foreign to me despite the fact that I didn’t understand its words.” Her insistence that the knowledge of Hebrew she possessed as a Jew was inextricable from her Jewishness in a way that attaches her to the Zionist Jews she observes is a variation on the calculus of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Zionists, specifically the anthropologists among them, who “could detect in the Jewish race a purity and perfectionism brought about by the laws of racial heredity” (Efron 1995: 173). Her purported innate intimacy with Hebrew despite her literal paucity bespeaks discourses of Jewish homogeneity wherein certain common denominators are the birthright of all Jews.

Not singularly race affirming for its own sake, this language contained the Zionist prescriptions of restoration through the “whiteness” promised by an ethnically homogeneous national homeland. Levy (2001: 62) herself underscores this reality through the reverence with which she speaks about Zionism in Palestine: “I’d hear the words of the guides about the Land of Israel and kibbutzim. These words touched my heart. After all, my uncle Rachamim had immigrated to Israel before I was born and, in his letters, he would also tell us about life in the Kibbutz where he lived.” Such words and associations were not fleeting for Levy. Personalizing and internalizing the guides’ words about Israel, specifically the Zionist kibbutz settlements there, put her in communion with what Zionist race theorists took to be the coda of their race affirmations: the primacy of a national homeland (Efron 1995: 173). Indeed, following the late nineteenth century, when “the terms and concepts of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ were often used interchangeably, for Zionists, the notion that the Jews were a race had significant implications for the perceived legitimacy of their nationalist movement” (Gribetz 2013: 144). In this way, Zionism’s insistence on a homeland in perpetuity is always racialized. It is racialized imperially white because it is a simulacrum of British imperial efforts that were methodologically indebted to whiteness.

The snapshot Levy provides of her Zionist aunt and fellow Tenua members distills the processes of Zionist and imperial whiteness acculturation. In her description, it is not only Lulu and the other Tenua members who learn Hebrew and read Zionist literature together. Levy too is socialized into Zionism, and as she describes this process, she further underscores the aforementioned possibility that there was a learning curve and hierarchy to Zionism. Furthermore, the process of becoming Zionist — finding belonging in a new, not exclusively Iraqi community and homeland, adopting a new language, and in this journey moving along a racial trajectory toward whiteness — once taken on by a few family members (in this case, Lulu and Rachamim to start), goes on to speak for the entire family. This circumstance was



both imposed by Iraqi state authorities with their suspicions and fostered through family relations. It included not only explicit Zionist education but also relationality: adopting Zionism through community. Insofar as imperial whiteness constituted Zionism, this process was also racializing. This racialization has been obscured by the fact that the process was never meant to be recognizable; it was meant to be taken for granted, unquestioned, and naturalized, as is the wont of racial construction.

Even though the examples mentioned until now come from the Baghdad context — and Baghdad was indeed the epicenter of Zionist life in Iraq — Jews in other Iraqi cities were brought into the Zionist fold as well. For instance, Almoslino, who was born in Mosul and joined Zionist circles there in her teens, insists in her memoir that although the Farhud broke out in Baghdad, its effects were felt in her hometown too. The Farhud certainly did not encourage all Jews to become Zionists, but it is noteworthy that, at least according to Almoslino’s recollection, the gravity of it resonated beyond Baghdad. With the Farhud, she claims to have realized that the Jews were not as secure in Iraq as she once thought. Following the Farhud and feeling unaccepted by her non-Jewish classmates, Almoslino (1998: 21–22) narrowed the scope of her social interactions, a choice that she says allowed Zionism to flourish within her.

Like the other women cited, Almoslino does not have to use explicitly racialized language to reveal the racialized aspects of Zionist participation. Her expressed turn away from majority-Iraqi society and toward a more insular community of Jewish Zionists is her first step toward a process of racialization. It is also not coincidental that years later, in her memoir as a member of the Labor Party in Israel, she wrote, “The Zionist spirit was in the blood [of Mosul’s Jews]. They thought a lot about the land of Israel, and in every house, there was a donation box for the Jewish National Fund” (Almoslino 1998: 18). Here Almoslino, drawing on an emphasis on Judaism as inherited and homogeneous, attempts to portray Zionism as possibly similarly inheritable. Even in retrospect, Almoslino’s insistence reveals that she considered it feasible to characterize her reality in such a way, in the name of reinforcing Zionism as a state-building project. Such a worldview not only bolstered Zionism but further divided Zionists from other Iraqi Jews. Despite staunch insistence for a defense of political Zionism, and by extension imperial whiteness, many Iraqi Jews resisted such dictates. This article will now turn to the Communists among them.



The Women Who Choose Communism: Rejecting Whiteness and Embracing an Iraqi Jewish Future

The ICP was established in 1934. Orit Bashkin (2012: 142) places Jewish participation in Iraqi Communism as spanning from 1941 to 1951. It was both the ideological and actionable aspects of Iraqi Communism that attracted Jews. Several scholars note that the role the Soviet Union played in defeating Nazism increased

Jewish sympathies for Communism (Berg 2005: 5). Moreover, many Jews held generally leftist beliefs and wanted to see their country rid of British colonial influence (Bashkin 2012: 145). This included freedom from domination within an international capitalist system that many Iraqis felt Britain had ushered them into (143). Related to this and more practically speaking, Communism was also a way for Jews to stake their claim to Iraq's future.

Meir estimates that the city most populated by Jewish Communists was Baghdad, where there were several hundred. Between thirty and fifty Jewish Communists could be found in Iraq's southern cities, such as Basra, Amarah, Kut, and Nasiriyah. Only a few Jews participated in Communist activity in Iraq's northern cities (Meir 1993: 101). Referencing Jewish women in particular, Meir asserts that there were fewer Jewish women than Muslim but more Jewish women than Christian. He also asserts that Jewish women's participation in the ICP was more pronounced than Christian women's (103) even though Christian women were thought to participate more freely in Iraqi public life than Jewish women. The respectively smaller numbers of Jewish participation overall are not an indication of their influence in the party. It might in fact be a better indication that a greater number of Jews were committed to working within the Iraqi state rather than in opposition to it. Still, drawing on the analysis of Hanna Batatu, the preeminent historian of Iraq, Meir reiterates that the quality of Jews in the party is more representative of their place and impact in it than their quantity. In particular, Jews left their mark in the party in the League for Combatting Zionism and in the women's sector (103). Broadly speaking, the types of actions in which Jewish women took part in the party included establishing and maintaining women's cells, serving on women's committees, and acting as couriers to distribute literature and money. They also suffered imprisonment for their Communist activities.⁴

In the winter of 1948, after the United Nations resolution to partition Palestine and during the Iraqi populist uprising known as the Wathba (Leap), Agassi (2001), a second-year law student, took part in elections at her college to name a student council. As she recalls the events from the day these elections took place, she foregrounds the apprehension felt by Jewish students in her cohort. According to Agassi, many Jewish students were concerned that members of the right-wing Istiqlal (Independence) Party might obtain all seats on the student council. Their anxieties were stoked by assumptions that as a right-leaning party, the Istiqlal Party would be hostile toward Jewish students and eventually force Jews to leave the college.

While Agassi herself was initially skeptical that the Istiqlal Party possessed such an oppositional attitude toward Jews, she soon obtained a pamphlet from this party that stated that one of their goals was to "encourage and disseminate Islamic and Christian education"—"not Jewish," she adds (Agassi 2001: 7). Agassi considered the omission of Jews from the party's platform intentional and worrisome.

When leftists won the majority of student council seats, she was relieved, she says, but not before she reveals the conundrum she faced with leftist politics in Iraq generally. She notes that while mulling over her voting options, she felt trapped. She worried that if the right-wing party won and her Jewish classmates were correct in their assessment, Jews at the college would be in danger. Yet she also worried about voting for the leftist student council members, because “I’m against the Right, so I need to support the Left, which is represented by Communist candidates, and I’m not Communist” (7). Her collapsing of “leftist” with “communist” might have something to do with the Wathba, which included demonstrations, all meant to oppose Iraq’s signing a treaty with Britain that had suggested continued British influence. Sasson Somekh (2007: 134) says that while many leftists took part in these protests, Communist leftists specifically led many of them, and Bashkin (2012: 14) notes that this leadership role demonstrated the power Communists had. If Agassi had already learned of this newly arising impact of Communists in Iraq, as her words suggest, it could likely be part of the reason that she felt her choice to be so momentous.

Agassi has more on her mind than personal loyalties. She adds, “If I wasn’t already a Communist, why would I cause trouble for my grandfather, who was a member of the Iraqi Parliament and sympathetic to the royal family and regime, if he were to [have to] say that his granddaughter is a member of an illegal party?” (Agassi 2001: 7). Her calculus is noteworthy because it is representative of those younger Jews who were deeply committed to Iraq and their place in it but could not find simple solace in subscribing wholesale to bifurcated political decisions. Because of her grandfather’s close relationship with the British and Iraq’s ruling monarchy, Agassi was forced to support the status quo by default. This support, however, was not without a kind of agony, because her Jewish peers were sure that certain elements in the country did not care to envision a future with Jews in it.

Parallel to the Zionist process containing a racial logic that was indebted to whiteness and propagating this through proximity and exposure to this whiteness, the Jews of the ICP were exposed to racial logics in a similar fashion but to different ends. Their increased participation in the Iraqi public sphere and interactions with Muslims and Christians solidified them as Iraqis and tied them to Iraq to an extent that their Zionist coreligionists could not have experienced in as unmediated a way. In fact, by the very nature of the goals of Communism and Zionism — one positionality understanding the Iraqi Jewish future as comprised of a proletariat and non-British-ruled Iraq and the other seeing the Jewish future in the perceived security provided by the imperial whiteness of Zionism and the fulfillment of Zionist ideals in Israel — Jews of these separate affiliations would not have found themselves on the same trajectory. As Bashkin (2012: 143) writes, the ICP was a party that “adjusted to the Iraqi milieu by advocating an anti-sectarian and anti-tribal vision and a struggle shared by all religions and ethnicities.” Thus it would not have had a

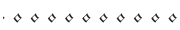


commitment to racialization as encouraging group solidarity and acting as a beacon in the way Zionism did. In its rejection of British imperialism, its characterizing of Zionists as “agents of reaction and imperialism” (Meir 1993: 227), and its attempts to at least not make religion or ethnicity a barrier for entry to the party, the ICP can be understood as it was idealized by the Jews of Iraq: as striving to end capitalist exploitation and imperialism specifically for nonelites, irrespective of any social differences. Jews with an affinity for the party would not have then possessed the Zionist longing for British imperial whiteness.

Communal and familial proximities were important catalysts for engendering political affinities and racialization within the realm of Zionism. As mentioned above, Levy considered one of her neighbors to have Communist sympathies because of his work in the Muslim sector of Baghdad. The communal and relational intimacy Levy suggests when describing her neighborhood and neighbors is the kind of intimacy that reads as implicitly responsible for spawning affiliations throughout the Communist Party in more cases than one. For instance, legal testimonies from Jewish Communist women, often written or transcribed following their arrest and acquittal on charges of Communism, reveal interpersonal dynamics that stoked the movement's spread.

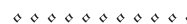
One such legal testimony from a woman named Doris Shaul is a case in point. Born in the southern Iraqi city of Amarah, Shaul moved to Baghdad at around thirteen years of age to live with her older sister, Anisa. In her own words, she identifies as sympathetic to Communism and details some of her experiences in the party. Both Anisa and Doris's niece Saida Mishal—who later converted to Islam—acted as conduits for her Communism. Per Shaul's distinction, Mishal imbued her with Communist rhetoric, and Anisa taught her Communist principles more prescriptively. Perhaps because she herself could not read well during her introduction to Communism, Shaul comes across as a faithful interlocutor to her sister and niece. Listening intently, she absorbed the messages Mishal passionately espoused, such as “The status of workers and the fellahin affects the country so we have to address it” and, regarding her role within the movement, “Your behavior should be good and you should learn well because a girl is measured by her behavior” (Meir 1993: 276). Situated within Communism in this way, Shaul is doubly burdened. Her responsibility lies not only with all workers (an expectation of all Communists) but also with herself as a woman—an expectation faced particularly by those gendered female. This double burden was not especially Shaul's, nor was it imparted exclusively to women. While in Shaul's case it was primarily the women of her family who were conduits of Communism, brothers and husbands acted in this capacity for other women.

In 1947, at twenty-six years of age, Amuma Mistri—who also later converted to Islam—was put on trial for communist activity. Although she was eventually acquitted, she admitted to being a Communist during her interrogation after her



arrest in a Baghdad apartment alongside her brother and other members of the party. Before she was arrested, she cooked and did laundry for the inhabitants of this apartment. In advocating for herself, she revealed that the dwelling was a kind of center for the printing and distribution of Communist material, which she denied having taken part in. Given that her interlocutor was a police officer, there is some likelihood that her deployment of this sort of gendered division of labor was an obfuscating tactic. For instance, she clearly knew to protect the names of all who passed through the apartment by stating that she never learned them. This tactic, however, does not negate that she was physically present at a central location of Communist literature production. In a separate testimony from Ellen Yaakov Darwish, who was acquitted after an appeal and served no jail time for Communist activity, there are discussions of her visiting her husband, Avraham, also a Communist member, in jail. Interrogators questioned Darwish as to whether she transported letters for her husband and other party members. Although she admitted to conveying letters from some Communist prisoners to their family members, she denied doing so for a sustained amount of time or because she was forced to by the party (Meir 1993: 263). Despite her denials, authorities thought that she was guilty of this latter accusation (265). Both Mistri's and Darwish's testimonies show how crucial networks and interpersonal relationships were as well as how committed and like-minded party members were.

Three out of the five Communist women with dedicated profiles in Meir's detailed history and biographical dictionary of Iraqi Jewish Communism — Saida Sasson Mishal, Amuma Meir Mistri, and Marilyn Meir Ezer, who all joined the ICP in the 1940s — eventually converted to Islam. In light of these conversions, the intimacy of Communist relationships as well as the extent to which some Jewish Communist women would implicitly denounce (by way of Iraqi Communism's decidedly anti-imperialist and specifically anti-British policies) the imperial white future promised for them by Zionism take on new dimensions. According to descriptions of these women in Meir's work, their conversions were inextricably tied to their participation in the Communist Party. Mishal, a Baghdad-born former teacher in training, for instance, was once engaged to a Jewish man who was later executed. She then converted to Islam after being sent to prison for communist activity in 1949 and married a high-ranking ICP member named Zaki Khairy. Following this marriage and conversion, she changed her name to Sa'ad Khairy. Mistri, born in the primarily Kurdish region of Mandali, also converted to Islam, changing her name to Amida Mistri after escaping a twenty-year prison sentence following the 1958 coup led by Abdul al-Karim Qasim. Finally, Marilyn, after becoming involved with one-time ICP first secretary Baha al-Din Nuri, gave birth to his son in prison and converted to Islam, marrying Baha al-Din Nuri on her release. Because of the androcentric bent of the ICP, it is not entirely unexpected that commitment to the party included conversion for some. Many of the women's



of space to interrogate her experience and gain distance from it. One then wonders if Agassi's having to triangulate between her experience, the feelings of her mostly male classmates, and her grandfather's expectations stemmed from similar limitations placed on her processing. Under such limitations, the fact that both Levy and Agassi find greater resolution in Zionism takes on new dimensions. Zionism, with its dependency on British support and whiteness, signaled a kind of straightforward resolution that Communism did not. Ultimately, the lack of pointed gender or racial critical engagement in the ICP and the heightened awareness of the privileges of imperial whiteness in Zionism and women's place in it complicated Iraqi Jews' sense of social differences by driving an insurmountable wedge between Jews who sought solace in the potential for racial superiority and those who did not.

Conclusion

Baldwin: I think we can't do anything with it until we understand that the past is the present. And we can't change the past, but we have to change the present. Or, we can only redeem the past by what we do in the present.

— James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race*

This pronouncement comes after Baldwin and Mead argue about the extent to which Israel's racial divisions truly separate Jews from one another. In the heat of this argument, Mead offers, "It's true they haven't quite made it in Israel. But it's a lot better than a cocktail party" (Baldwin and Mead 1971: 193). Disagreeing adamantly, Baldwin retorts, "I was in Israel several times and watched it very carefully. They are not together" (193). The only remedy for such a stalemate, Baldwin is certain, is a present-day reckoning with the reverberations of the past. This article has attempted to do that, in a limited way, by showing the potential range of racial logics operative for Iraqi Jews to shed light on the frameworks some immigrants brought with them to Israel.

The ideologies and proponents of Zionism and Communism I discuss here make known that these two dissident movements can be seen as points of reference for each other. Differing in their assessment of colonialism, their conception of the Iraqi Jewish future, and their relation to nation-state formation, yet informed by the social differences that were fundamental to these phenomena, Iraqi Zionism and Communism were each racialized and gendered uniquely. Thus Iraqi Jews could live together even while ideologically separate. Living together in this way was foreclosed in Israel, because the racial logics of Ashkenazi Zionism did not allow for the possibility of such a recognition. In Israel they were rejected (structurally speaking, as Mizrahim) by the Zionist imperial whiteness that they thought would save them. The hope of Iraqi Zionists was muddled. Some remained perpetually disillusioned as the intractability of their new reality revealed itself, while some used

this spurning to fuel more staunch attempts at assimilation. In this way, Israeli racial logics were puzzling for certain immigrants not only because they marginalized them individually (altering how they saw themselves) but also because they upended how they could relate to others and ultimately how they could imagine themselves within a Jewish community.

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Notes

1. Some seminal works: Shohat 1999; Bashkin 2017; Khazzoom 2008; Roby 2015.
2. Foreign Office 371_75131, 1949, National Archives, London.
3. Foreign Office 371_75182, 1949, National Archives, London.
4. Foreign Office 371_75131, 1949, National Archives, London.

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