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Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*

LITAL LEVY

AS IS WELL KNOWN, the long arm of the Arab-Israeli conflict reached far beyond the geographical borders of Palestine. Prior to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, somewhere between 700,000 and 850,000 Jews lived in inveterate communities spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. By the end of the century, all the historic Jewish communities of the region (with the partial exceptions of Morocco and Iran) were to meet a single fate—dislocation and dispersal—effectively vanishing with nary a trace left in their countries of origin. These were indigenous communities (in some cases, present in area for millennia) whose unique, syncretic cultures have since been completely expunged as a result of emigration—whether to Israel, where they were subjected to a systematic program of deracination and resocialization, or to the West, where in most places “Jewish” was more or less synonymous with “Ashkenazi” and the concept of Jews from the Arab world was (and remains) little known or understood. The disappearance of the Jewish dialects of spoken Arabic, of written Judeo-Arabic, and, more recently, of the last generation of Jewish writers of literary Arabic, all silently sound the death knell of a certain world—that which S. D. Goitein dubbed the “Jewish-Arab symbiosis,” and that which Ammiel Alcalay sought to recapture in his groundbreaking book *After Jews and Arabs*.¹

This essay is concerned not only with this displaced population and its

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1. See S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History of Their Social and Cultural Relations*, 3rd ed. (Mineola, N.Y., 2005), and Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1993).

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lost history but principally with the evocation of both subjects through a concept gaining increasing acceptance and purchase in academic discourse, namely, the “Arab Jew.” Numerically, the total population of Middle Eastern and North African Jews prior to 1948 hovers under the million mark, and this is perhaps one of the reasons its historic experience has been so eclipsed by the cataclysmic events that befell European Jewry in the twentieth century. Yet due to its historic location betwixt and between things “Jewish” and things “Arab,” this population’s symbolic importance belies its small numbers. Whichever way you look at it, the not-so-simple fact of Jews who are Arab or Arabs who are Jewish raises all sorts of problems and possibilities ripe for exploration, interpretation, and manipulation—and people are beginning to notice. Paradoxically, even as so much of Arab Jewish language, culture, and historic memory slips away like gossamer threads carried off on the wind of a quickly receding past, the reappropriation—some might even say the commodification—of the “Arab Jew” (now as a largely symbolic figure) accelerates in kind. The renewed interest in the figure of the Arab Jew and in the lost Arab Jewish past is perhaps best evidenced by the multilingual swell of documentary films, memoirs, novels, and even cookbooks-cum-community histories (which I call “culinary nostalgia”) produced by Arab Jews and their descendants (primarily from Iraq and Egypt) in recent years.² At the same time, as Emily Gottreich points out

2. The texts in question are too numerous to list here in full. Some recent English-language memoirs include Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem, 2007); Lucette Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (New York, 2007); Marina Benjamin, *Last Days in Babylon: The History of a Family, the Story of a Nation* (New York, 2006); and Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin, Tx., 2004). Numerous other memoirs and a small number of novels by and about Arab (as well as Iranian) Jews have been produced in Hebrew, Arabic, French, and English. For recent “culinary nostalgia,” see Chantal Calbrough, *A Pied Noir Cookbook: French Sephardic Cuisine from Algeria* (New York, 2005); Rivka Goldman, *Mama Nazima’s Jewish Iraqi Cuisine* (New York, 2006); and Poopa Dweck, *Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews* (New York, 2007). On the topic, see also Carol Bardenstein, “Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles,” *Signs* 28.1 Gender and Cultural Memory (Autumn 2002): 353–87; and Nefissa Naguib, “The Fragile Tale of Egyptian Jewish Cuisine: Food Memoirs of Claudia Roden and Colette Rossant,” *Food and Foodways* 14.35 (2006): 35–53. A few notable documentary films include *Nana, George, and Me* (dir. Joe Balass, USA, 1998); *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection* (dir. Samir, Switzerland, 2002); and *Salata Baladi* (dir. Nadia Kamel, Egypt, 2007). An impressive number of documentary films on Iraqi and Egyptian Jews (many made by second-generation Mizrahim) have come out of Israel in the 1990s and 2000s.

in her essay, the political capital of the Arab Jew has not gone unrecognized by activists from either right or left.³

The term “Arab Jew” was in fact reclaimed by scholars such Ella Shohat, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and Yehouda Shenhav as part of a political project of intervention into the normative terms of Zionist discourse.⁴ This project evolved from a history of Mizrahi activism, which began as a protest movement responding to the discriminatory economic, social, and cultural treatment of “Mizraḥim” (non-European Jews) in Israel.⁵ Shohat’s pivotal 1988 article “Sephardim in Israel”⁶ emerged at a moment of symbiotic activity between activism and scholarship, but the past decade or so has witnessed what Moshe Behar calls the “academization of the Mizrahi cause.”⁷ Although scholarly research on the history of Jews

3. For scholarship from the left, see the body of Shohat and Chetrit’s work (also n. 6, below) as well as Joseph Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 100 (Summer 1996): 53–68.

4. Their radical use of the term also facilitated its more recent adoption by politically centrist scholars such as Sasson Somekh, who placed it in the title of the English-language version of his memoir, which he called *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (although, interestingly, not in the original Hebrew, which is simply titled *Bagdad, etmol*, i.e., “Baghdad, yesterday.”) See Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday* and *Bagdad etmol* (Tel Aviv, 2004). Of the generation that actually came of age in the Arab world, Somekh and Shimon Ballas are probably the two most prominent figures to publicly call themselves “Arab Jews.” See Alcalay’s interview with Ballas, “At Home in Exile,” in Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* (San Francisco, 1996).

5. As I understand and employ the term, “Mizraḥi” refers to a collective identity created in Israel to distinguish the totality of Asian, African, and Southeastern European Jews from the population of Eastern, Western, and Central European Jews, who are collectively referred to as “Ashkenazim.” For more on the history of Mizrahi activism, see Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Ha-ma’avak ba-mizraḥi be-yisra’el: Beyn diku’i le-shibbur, beyn bizdabut le-alternativa, 1948–2003* (The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative, 1948–2003) (Tel Aviv, 2004), and *Mizraḥim be-Yisra’el: ‘Iyun bikorti meḥudaḥ* (Mizraḥim in Israel: A New Critical Study), ed. H. Hever, Y. Shenhav, and P. Motsafi-Heler (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 2002). Unfortunately, these studies have not been translated. For an English-language study, see Sami Shalom Chetrit, “Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29.4 (2000): 51–65.

6. See Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35.

7. I take the expression from Moshe Behar, “Mizraḥim, Abstracted: Action, Reflection, and the Academization of the Mizrahi Cause,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37.2 (2008): 89–100. Behar also alludes to a perceived tension between scholarship and activism, which in his view has “afflicted Israel’s critical Mizrahi circles in the last decade,” the cost being “the abstraction of the Mizraḥim and

in the Middle East and North Africa has of course been carried out by scholars in Israel, Europe, and North America for several decades, it has been conducted largely in isolation from the Mizraḥi issue and its scholarly outgrowth. These historical researches (many of which are informed by an uncritical reliance upon the “tradition”/“modernity” dichotomy)⁸ have generally been local both in scope and perspective. They have not connected the dots, so to speak, to form a broader picture of Middle Eastern Jewish modernity; nor have they asked the types of questions that would make their subject matter relevant to nonspecialists.⁹

Both the methodological divide and the absence of dialogue between the more critical but content-thin praxis of the Mizraḥi scholarship versus the more contextually rich but positivistic approach of the historians have limited the development of this inchoate, emerging field. To borrow an expression from Hans Jauss, I argue that any history of Arab Jews is the “prehistory of a post-history”: the history of Arab Jews in the period predating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and postcolonial reconfiguration of the Middle East now necessarily doubles as the “pre-history” of Mizraḥim in Israel.¹⁰ As Behar notes, Shohat and others (such as Chetrit and Shenhav) are aware of the pre-1948 (“pre-Israel”) histories of Arab Jews and see the importance of connecting the Arab Jewish past to the Mizraḥi (“in-Israel”) present.¹¹ However, in contrast to other “first wave” scholarship such as feminism/women’s studies or African American studies, in the Mizraḥi case the movement from activism to scholarship over the last two decades did not initiate a process of historic recovery. Instead, it produced a narrative of subjective presence constructed around

their struggle” (90). See also Behar’s article “Palestine, Arabized Jews and the Elusive Consequences of Jewish and Arab National Formations,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 13.4 (2007): 581–611.

8. For an excellent discussion of this “tradition/modernity” problem in scholarship on Arab Jews, see Daniel J. Schroeter and Josef Chetrit, “The Transformation of the Jewish Community of Essaouira (Mogador) in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*, ed. H. Goldberg (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 99–116, esp. 100–102.

9. One important exception to this general observation is Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif., 1998).

10. “Prehistories are always discovered *ex eventu* as *prehistory* of a *post-history*.” Hans R. Jauss, quoted in Manuel M. Martin-Rodrigues, “Recovering Chicano/a Literary Histories: Historiography beyond Borders,” *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 796–805; quotation from 797. Originally in “Der Leser als Instanz einer neuen Geschichte der Literatur.” *Poetica* 7 (1975): 325–44.

11. Behar, “Mizrahim, Abstracted,” 96–97.

a trope of absence: the absence of Arab Jews from history, from Israeli public discourse and culture, from the Hebrew literary field.¹² The resulting “negative presence” derives in large part from its authors’ nonengagement with sources written in Arabic, which are critical to the recovery of the Arab Jewish past. Ultimately, this body of scholarship effected a historical revision of the Zionist narrative (itself a worthy endeavor) rather than a direct recuperation of Arab Jewish history and culture.¹³ Thus, while the pioneering work of the “first wave” opened the discourse on *mizrahīyut* and made it possible to even speak of the “Arab Jew,” its perspective remained largely inscribed within the hermeneutic circle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is not to minimize the importance of its critical intervention but rather to suggest a way to move the discourse into other historic contexts and epistemological frameworks.

Scholars of literature and culture might question the utility of historicizing the Arab Jew.¹⁴ After all, the symbolic potential of the Arab Jew to disrupt the ideology of separation between Jew and Arab has been amply demonstrated in literary studies.¹⁵ Is there not a certain advantage

12. See, for instance, Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel,” 8 (where Shohat refers to the “theft of history”) as well as idem, “Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews,” *Social Text* 21.2 (2003): 49–74, reprinted in her *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, N.C., 2006). Similarly, Yehouda Shenhav writes: “With the transformation of Middle Eastern Jews into ‘Mizrahim,’ i.e., the ‘Oriental’ Jews of Israel, the pre-1948 history of these communities was forgotten, or as some Jews may argue, intentionally submerged.” See Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif., 2006), 14.

13. For example, in the introduction to his book *The Arab Jew*, Yehouda Shenhav argues that the study of the Arab Jews should indeed begin outside the context of the State of Israel, but he moves what he calls the “terminus a quo for the historiography of the Arab Jews” back less than ten years in time, to the 1942 encounter of European Zionist emissaries with Iraqi Jews under the auspices of a British colonial project (24). Shenhav’s interest in Arab Jews as historic subjects thus remains a function of their intersection with Zionism and their instrumentality in deconstructing its hegemonic historic narrative and suppositions.

14. I am aware of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique of historicism in *Provincializing Europe*, but what Gottreich and I are trying to do by way of “historicizing” does not situate the Arab Jew within a progressive narrative of political modernity originating in Europe. Rather, it explores the idea of the Arab Jew within understudied historic contexts. See *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J., 2000), esp. 5–23.

15. For the Arab Jew in literary studies, see Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*; idem, *Keys to the Garden*; Gil Anidjar, “Our Place in al-Andalus”; *Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters* (Stanford, Calif., 2002); idem, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford, Calif., 2008); Lital Levy, “Exchanging Words: The-

in keeping the Arab Jew a free-floating, figurative signifier? Why pin it down, trap it in the gilded cage of literalism? While as a scholar of comparative literature I am hardly one to discount the power of a symbol, I believe that endowing the Arab Jew with historic depth can only enhance its symbolic command. I arrived at this realization from the adjacent field of Hebrew literary studies, having grappled with the problem of working on contemporary Mizraḥi writing without recourse to Arab Jewish intellectual and cultural history.¹⁶ Indeed, I believe it is particularly important for scholars from literature and cultural studies to understand that in using the term “Arab Jew,” they cannot assume the historic existence of a pristine Arab Jewish subject whose holistic identity was shattered by colonialism, Zionism, and Arab nationalism. In other words, post-Zionist discourse did not “recuperate” the idea of the Arab Jew so much as it (re-)invented it (a point that will become clearer in due course). To put a spin on Albert Memmi’s oft-quoted formulations, I would say that in 2008, if we are now “Arab Jews,” it is not because we once *were* Arab Jews. Rather, we are “Arab Jews” because of what is at stake in defining ourselves as such today.¹⁷

Given this conviction, the main question I want to ask here is “Whither the Arab Jew?”: that is, in what direction(s) and using which methodologies ought the discourse on the Arab Jew to proceed?¹⁸ To my mind, the lacuna requiring the most urgent attention is the question of Arab Jewish identity prior to 1948. By this I mean both the question of how identity

matizations of Translation in Arabic Writing from Israel,” *Comparative Studies of South Africa, Asia, and the Middle East* 23.1–2 (2003): 106–27; and Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton, N.J., 2007).

16. This was the situation about five years ago at the time I began my dissertation work. Since then, Reuven Snir has published an important book as well as a veritable torrent of articles on the topic of Iraq Jewish writing in Arabic. See Snir, *Araviyut, yabadut, tsiyonut: Ma'avak zehuyot bi-yetsiratam shel yehudey 'irak* (Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A contest of identities in the works of Iraqi Jews) (Jerusalem, 2005). Additionally, Lev Hakak published a weighty volume on Hebrew writing in Iraq: *Nitsaney ba-yetsira ba-'irit ha-hadasha be-bavel* (The budding of modern Hebrew creativity in Babylon) (Or Yehuda, 2003).

17. Memmi writes: “Yes, of course, we were Arab Jews, or Jewish Arabs, in our customs, our culture, our music, our cooking . . . Jewish Arabs—that’s what we would have liked to be, and if we have given up the idea, it is because for centuries the Moslem Arabs have scornfully, cruelly, and systematically prevented us from carrying it out. And now it is far too late for to become Jewish Arabs again.” See Albert Memmi, “What Is an Arab Jew?,” in *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago, 1975), 19–29; quotation from 20.

18. I thank Moshe Behar for this formulation.

was experienced and expressed by Jews in the Arab world and the secondary question of whether there is any historic currency to the term “Arab Jew” itself. It might be useful to elaborate on some of the concepts of identity I will be utilizing for the purposes of this discussion. Ascriptive identity refers to those aspects of identity that we don’t choose for ourselves but that place us within certain categories, such as gender and ethnicity. Self-ascriptive identity, which is also sometimes called affiliative identity, denotes our own choices in affiliating with a larger collective or community. Thus far, the discourse on the Arab Jew has coalesced around a concept of identity loosely assumed to be predicated on the experience of Arabness.¹⁹ For this reason, I think that it is also important to distinguish between an understanding of identity as *lived experience* versus an *ideational process* formulated and circulated in discursive terms. While I do not presuppose a stark dichotomy between the two (to the contrary, I see identity as being formed dynamically through their interaction), distinguishing these two aspects will help clarify some of the problems inherent in the discourse on the Arab Jew. The next two sections of this essay will elaborate on these concepts through a diachronic comparison of invocations of the term “Arab Jew” followed by a brief overview of modern Arab Jewish identity in the *masbriq*.

THE “ARAB JEW” IN COMPARATIVE HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

The growing attention commanded by the idea of the Arab Jew has raised questions as to its historic “authenticity.” In his own discussion of the validity of the term “Arab Jew” as a category of identity, the Israeli scholar Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin argues that

the issue at hand is not whether the Jews in Arab countries saw themselves as Arab Jews or identified with Arab nationalism. Most of them identified themselves as Jews, but certainly not in opposition to Arab culture, to which they belonged quite organically. “Arab-ness” was not an identity; it was a cultural-linguistic reality, expressed first and fore-

19. E.g., the collocation “millennial ‘Arabness’” as in the following: “We Arab Jews . . . crossed a border and ended up in Israel, but our millennial ‘Arabness’ did not thereby suddenly cease.” See Ella Shohat, “The Invention of the Mizrahim,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29.1 (1999): 17. In a later essay, however, Shohat argues for a “historically situated definition of identity” with an eye to the “processes and discourses that enabled . . . identity transformation” and notes that her past usage of the term “Arab-Jews” (presented here with a hyphen) “was not intended to suggest a reductive and essential Jewish or Arab identity.” See “Rupture and Return,” in *Taboo Memories*, 336.

most through language, but also through a deep sense of belonging that persisted long after their immigration to Israel.²⁰

While I am sympathetic to Raz-Krakotzkin's viewpoint, I find that his language reveals the inherent difficulties and dilemmas of discussing Arab Jewish identity. Raz-Krakotzkin is arguing that whether Arab Jews were really "Arab" is largely a matter of semantics, because even if they didn't think of themselves in such terms, their lived experience (what he calls their "cultural-linguistic reality") was Arab in essence. But simply saying that "Arabness" was a "reality" rather than an "identity" is not a way out of the problem of defining the Arab Jew; it merely substitutes one problematic term for another. Furthermore, how do we discuss "reality" in the past? If in the future the study of self-representation could be connected in detailed and specific ways to the study of material existence, social practice, institutions, and so on, we would then approach a truly interdisciplinary picture of Arab Jewish life in different times and places, one that could capture the dialectic of life and language implicit in the concept of identity. Until such time, however, I find the most tangible and useful sources for discussing Arab Jewish identity in how Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals envisioned, spoke, wrote, and argued about Arabness.²¹

Given my discursive focus, the question I ask is not whether Arabic-speaking Jews were really "Arab" but how the construction of Arabness served the needs of its Jewish exponents at different historic moments. Or, to put it another way: what kind of political and cultural work has the concept of the "Arab Jew" performed at different times? For a number of Jewish intellectuals before the creation of the State of Israel (and even for some time thereafter), Arabness was in fact a self-ascriptive identity. We might begin this discussion with a small number of late nineteenth-century Jews who were active in the *nabḍa*, or modern Arabic renaissance. I start there not because there is no basis for discussing Arab Jewish identity in earlier periods (I am certain there is, and I eagerly await studies thereof), but because this period was a moment of profound, accelerated change for the region as a whole: one in which longstanding

20. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Perspective," in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. I. Kalmar and D. Penslar (Brandeis, Mass., 2005), 175.

21. I am well aware of the trade-off, which is that a discursive focus limits the discussion of Arab Jews to a small group of intellectual elites, those with access to education and channels of influence in the public sphere. For the time being, however, I believe it is the best place to begin.

structures of social organization began to erode and new forms of organization, authority, and identity emerged to replace them. The modern Arabic renaissance, or *nahḍa*, was largely a search for identity impelled by the need to redefine self and society in face of European economic and military ascendancy and colonial penetration. This was a process explored through two complementary channels, one being Arabic linguistic and literary revival and the other, Islamic reform. As I have argued elsewhere, although in this period the basis of identity in the Middle East remained primarily communitarian in nature (that is, people self-identified as members of an ethno-religious community), the *nahḍa* not only engendered a language-based, regional Arab identity common to all Arabic speakers but facilitated alliances of like-minded, progressive (self-perceived “enlightened”) individuals across communal lines.²² This, in my view, is what enabled Jewish intellectuals to begin imagining themselves as “Arab” when being “Arab” meant aligning oneself with a religiously pluralistic collective. Of course, being “Arab” did not come at the expense of being “Jewish” but was an additional form of affiliation connected to a common experience with non-Jews in the emerging public sphere. In this sense, I situate the emergence of modern Arab Jewish identity within the broader regional experience of modernity.

The *mashriq* is of central importance to this discussion because it is there that the *nahḍa* was centered, first in Beirut and later, Cairo; and because it was in the *mashriq* that modern Arab identity was formulated and popularized. As such, although the *maghrib* did have a much larger Jewish population than the *mashriq*, the *mashriq* provides the clearest historical expression of modern Arab Jewish identity. Historically, with a few notable exceptions, Jews were not seen by either themselves or by others as Arab, which in any case was a category of identity still very much in flux throughout the late nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. In Iraq, for example, through at least the first half of the twentieth century, the term was not used in everyday parlance; rather, identity was formulated as a matter of ethnic or religious affiliation (such as Shi’i, Kurdish, or Yazidi).²³ Similarly, in Egypt of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, most people thought of themselves as Egyptian

22. See Lital Levy, “Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863–1914” (Ph.D. dissertation, U.C. Berkeley, 2007).

23. Numerous elderly Iraqi Jews have brought this point to my attention (and have specified that it pertained to Iraqi society in general and not just to the Jewish community therein). According to my interlocutors, to the extent that the term “Arab” was used, it would have referred to nomadic Bedouin.

rather than Arab.²⁴ So was there ever a widespread Arab Jewish identity, in those terms? No, because the historic moment in which Arab identity became popularized and naturalized across the Arabic-speaking world was also the same moment in which Jews began emigrating from those lands en masse—and, in fact, the two phenomena are not entirely unrelated.

At the same time, however, from the 1920s through the 1950s, as the concept of Arab identity permeated the public sphere, the collocation “*al-yahūd al-‘arab*” (the Arab Jews) did enjoy a period of currency in which it was employed by both Jews and non-Jews in the Arabic press. Jewish writers and intellectuals in Egypt and Iraq mobilized the term to express either a cultural or a political affinity with the Arab collective. For example, in two articles from 1937, the Egyptian Jewish newspaper *al-Shams* (the Sun, 1934–48) used “*al-yahūd al-‘arab*” to refer to Jewish writers in al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia) such as Samuel the Nagid (ibn Naghrīla); the second article describes the “Golden Age” of al-Andalus as “that blessed *nabḍa*” (*baḍbihi al-nabḍa al-mubāraka*) and draws explicit parallels with “the contemporary *nabḍa*” (*al-nabḍa al-ḥadūtha*).²⁵ At other times the term was used for explicitly political purposes. In summer 1938, a group of Iraqi Jewish doctors and lawyers released a statement to the press in which they declared themselves “young Arab Jews” (“*naḥnu shabāb al-yahūd al-‘arab*”) who supported an Arab Palestine.²⁶ Similarly, in 1936, the Iraqi Jewish educator, writer, and translator Ezra Ḥaddād quipped, *Naḥnu ‘arab qabla an nakūn yahūdān*, “We are Arabs before we are Jews.”²⁷ In literature and history, the term was employed by the Egyptian Karaite

24. On Egyptianism, see Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930* (New York, 1986). My general understanding is that in Egypt the term “Arab” takes on different meanings according to the context in which it is used. For many Egyptians, the term “Arab,” when employed in (explicit or implicit) distinction to “Egyptian,” connotes residents of the Arabian Peninsula.

25. See “Min dhikrayāt ‘ahd al-‘arab fī-l-andalus: dīwān al-ra’īs shmū’īl” (Memories from al-Andalus: The *Diwan* of Samuel the Nagid), *al-Shams* (March 25, 1937), 3, and “al-Udabā’ al-yahūd al-‘arab fī-l-andalus: ṣafḥa rā’i’a min ta’āwun al-‘arab wa-l-yahūd” (Arab Jewish Writers in al-Andalus: A Glorious Page in Collaboration of Arabs and Jews), *al-Shams*, May 27, 1937, 3. The last paragraph of the latter piece presents Arabic literature as a mediating point for cooperation between Jews and Arabs.

26. Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian, and Pro-Facist Inclinations, 1932–1941* (London, 2006), 45.

27. Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture* (London, 1985), 219.

Murād Farag in his 1929 book *al-Shu'arā' al-yabūd al-'arab* (The Arab Jewish Poets), which traces the history of Jewish participation in Arabic literature. In fact, Farag uses the single term *'arab* (Arabs) interchangeably to refer to Arab Muslims and Arab Jews, depending on the context of the particular sentence.²⁸ Such examples demonstrate the ways in which Jewish writers in interwar Egypt and Iraq selectively described themselves or other Jews (past or present) as “Arab” or as “Arab Jews” in order to emphasize that Jews were historically and currently part of the Arab collective—to invent a timeless Arab Jewish presence in history, or if you will, a usable Arab Jewish past.²⁹ This was a discursive strategy that should be read historically, in light of the situation of Jews in those countries at those particular moments. The authors of those statements identified with the national project and sought to convince others that Jews could belong organically to an Arab nation. As with any statement of identity, their words reflect their own circumstances rather than a timeless truth and should not be read out of context as proof that there were always “Arab Jews.” This is not to suggest that the lived experience of Jews in the region had no bearing on their concept of the Arab Jew but rather to make a point about their discursive imaginings and uses of the past.

At this point I would like to suggest that historicizing the term “Arab Jew” also entails a comparative historicization of its past and present exponents. In certain ways, the evocation of Arab Jewish identity by contemporary Israeli intellectuals bears striking similarities to the precedent set by their forebears, the intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s. There are also important differences. Let us begin with the similarities. In both cases, a small number of Jewish intellectuals who are not representative of the mainstream declare themselves “Arab.” In both cases, the declaration is made at a moment in which this Arabness is contested, which is to say, the statement issues from a perspective of marginalization. Both

28. Murād Farag, *al-Shu'arā' al-yabūd al-'arab* (The Arab Jewish poets) (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-raḥmāniyya, 1929). In referring to Arab Jews, the book contains a considerable amount of slippage between terms such as *al-yabūd al-'arab*, *qawm al-yabūd*, *al-irā'īliyyān*, *al-umma al-irā'īliyya*, and *banū irā'īl*. I believe that this *potpourri* of appellations reflects the historic moment of the text, written in a period of transition when the term *'arab* had become widely used but had yet not acquired anything approaching a fixed or definitive meaning.

29. To be clear, I do not mean to deny the actual participation of Jews in Arab culture and public life at different historic moments. When I say “invent,” I refer only to the *conceptualization* of this past as a coherent, continuous, and teleological narrative.

groups are responding to political pressures, reenvisioning their own present through an imagined past continuity. While the earlier group of intellectuals used a romantic vision of the past to secure the historic place of Jews in Arab history, contemporary intellectuals often invoke the experience of the earlier generation to contextualize or legitimate their own declaration of Arabness.³⁰ Clearly, in both cases their appropriation of Arabness is a political move.

Now for the differences. From the late 1920s through the mid-1940s, Jewish intellectuals who promoted the concept of the Arab Jew were making this claim on behalf of their communities, as vanguards of the integrationist project. This was a historic moment in which the perceived Arabness of Jews might be challenged, but the incorporation of Jews into the Arab collective—not only as a matter of citizenship but as a matter of popular or collective consciousness—was still a viable possibility. For a 1930s Iraqi Jewish intellectual such as Ezra Ḥaddād or Anwar Sha'ul to declare himself and his community “Arab Jews” was a statement that presumed a certain historic essence yet ultimately was directed at the present and future status of Jews in the Arab world. If we envision the statement as a kind of old-fashioned scale with past and future as weights placed on either end, we find the scale would lean toward the future.

Today, when a contemporary intellectual such as Ella Shohat or Sami Shalom Chetrit declares, “I am an Arab Jew,” the political and ontological dimensions of this statement are quite different. First of all, the statement is articulated from a position of exile; as Gottreich notes, none of the figures who currently call themselves “Arab Jews” are living in Arab countries (and most never have). Second, although Shohat and Chetrit in particular may be envisioning an alternative future in which Arab iden-

30. For example, see Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel,” and *idem*, “Reflections of an Arab Jew,” first published in *Performance Journal* 5 (Fall–Winter 1992): 8, reprinted in *Nasawi News and Arts Quarterly* (1999) and widely distributed on the World Wide Web. In “Reflections of an Arab Jew,” Shohat writes: “Our history simply cannot be discussed in European Jewish terminology. As Iraqi Jews, while retaining a communal identity, we were generally well integrated and indigenous to the country, forming an inseparable part of its social and cultural life. Thoroughly Arabized, we used Arabic even in hymns and religious ceremonies.” Shohat’s use of the third-person plural is revealing: a sentence such as “we were generally well integrated and indigenous to the country” anachronistically situates her as the speaker within the history of the Jews of Iraq (Shohat herself was born in Israel) and implies a kind of seamless or transparent connection between “Arab Jewish” identity as formulated by Mizraḥim in Israel and their “pre-Israel” history.

tity could be reincorporated into Israeli identity and culture, this vision of the future is neither part of an existing political program nor does it seem to be the main motivational thrust of their declaration. Today, the statement is more a reconception or reclamation of past experience (a back-projection) than it is a project aimed at the future (a forward-projection); hence we find that the proverbial scale now tips toward the past. Finally, it is not a statement of affiliation with the terms of national identity, as in the earlier period, but rather a statement of *dis*association or *un*affiliation with a national project—a rejection of the Eurocentric terms of Israeli national identity. Or perhaps, paradoxically, Arab Jewish identity today is a statement about its own impossibility, about the unbridgeable gap between the unfulfilled wish or desire embedded in what one calls oneself and the ascriptive identity assigned one by normative or hegemonic social forces. Consider Ella Shohat's essay "Reflections of An Arab Jew," which states:

I am an Arab Jew. Or, more specifically, an Iraqi Israeli woman living, writing and teaching in the U.S. Most members of my family were born and raised in Baghdad, and now live in Iraq, Israel, the U.S., England, and Holland . . . For Middle Easterners, the operating distinction had always been "Muslim," "Jew," and "Christian," not Arab versus Jew. The assumption was that "Arabness" referred to a common shared culture and language, albeit with religious differences.

Shohat begins with the simple, unequivocal, and powerful declaration "I am an Arab Jew" yet immediately qualifies it with a statement that has "Arab" nowhere in it but instead contains a list of places: Iraq, Israel, the United States. To this list, England and Holland are then added. Already, we are made to understand, being an "Arab Jew" is not ever about simply being an Arab Jew—it is about being something other, less, more than an Arab Jew. It is, in a way, about the impossibility of fulfilling the declaration, "I am an Arab Jew." The sense of loss that accompanies the ontological declaration is therefore not only about a lost past but about a lost unity of identity and self, of a signifier seamlessly fused with its signified—once we were Arab Jews, now we are exiles with fractured and multiple identities. But was "being" an "Arab Jew" ever really that simple? As I believe the great discursive effort shown by previous generations of Jewish intellectuals demonstrates, the answer is a qualified "no." No, it was not that simple; but it was also not impossible, for neither were

Jewishness and Arabness perceived in oppositional terms, as they are today.³¹

THE CONTOURS OF MODERN ARAB
JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE *MASHRIQ*

This final section outlines Arab Jewish identity as it emerged through *mashriqi* Jewish involvement in modern Arab thought, culture, and politics, an experience I would demarcate into two distinct phases. The first, from the final decades of the nineteenth century through the end of the Ottoman Empire, was based in Beirut and Cairo, while the second, from 1920 to the early 1950s, took place mainly in Baghdad and Cairo. The earlier phase, which I investigated in my dissertation, is a crucial moment for the question of the Arab Jew for two reasons. First, it enables us to reconstruct self-ascriptive Arab Jewish identity in a context mostly autonomous from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Second, this was a period of intense and explicit negotiation with modernity for both Hebrew and Arabic cultures as they underwent concurrent processes of revival, in the guises of the movements now known as the Hebrew *haskalah* (“enlightenment”) and the Arabic *nahḍa* (“renaissance”). The coequality of these two movements enabled Arab Jewish intellectuals to reimagine their identities and redefine themselves through a vocabulary of modernity and enlightenment that was at once culturally specific and yet common to both Hebrew and Arabic, Judaism and Islam. Through their participation in the progressive and reformist discourses of the *nahḍa*, a small but deeply engaged group of Jewish intellectuals in Beirut, Jaffa, and Cairo sought to inscribe themselves and their communities into the emerging Arab collective. They included not only the well-known writer and agitator Ya‘qūb Ṣanū‘, often referred to by his nom de plume “Abū Naḍḍāra,”³² but other Beirut- and Cairo-based intellectuals such as Esther and Shim‘on Moyal, Salīm Zakī Kūhīn, Nissim Makūl, and the Egyptian Karaite jurist and scholar Murād Farag. These prominent figures, who

31. On the changing valences of “Jewishness” in the pre-1948 (“pre-Israel,” Arab world) and post-1948 (“in-Israel”) contexts, Shohat aptly and succinctly observes: “The Jews within Islam thought of themselves as Jews, but that Jewishness formed part of a larger Judeo-Islamic cultural fabric. Under pressure from Zionism, on the one hand, and Arab nationalism, on the other, that set of affiliations gradually changed, resulting in a transformed cultural semantics.” See “Rupture and Return,” in *Taboo Memories*, 334.

32. The nickname came from the eponymous title of his newspaper *Abū Naḍḍāra Zarqa*, The Man with the Blue Glasses.

ran their own newspapers, published books, and moved within influential Arab circles, were joined by a number of occasional Jewish contributors to the popular Arabic cultural journals. In this instance the formation of a modern Arab Jewish identity can be directly attributed to the broader negotiation of Arab modernity.

In counterdistinction to the second (twentieth-century) phase, at this point Arab Jewish identity was not connected to a national project, as there was not yet a national question to speak of. To the extent that there was an element of protonationalism, as in the case of Egypt (indeed, a cause represented by *Ṣanū*), it was focused on contesting European intervention and penetration, not on forming independent nations outside of the Ottoman framework. For reasons explained in the previous section, the term "*al-yahūd al-'arab*" (the Arab Jews) was not used, except when referring to Jewish tribes in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia.³³ Rather, both Jewish and non-Jewish writers of Arabic referred to Arab Jews in terms such as "*al-ṭā'ifa al-īsrā'īliyya*" (the Israelite sect or community), "*al-īsrā'īliyyān*" (the Israelites), "*banū isrā'īl*" ("the Children of Israel"—a Qur'anic collocation), and even "*al-umma al-īsrā'īliyya*" (the Israelite people or nation, *umma* being an Islamicate term for nation as religious community).³⁴ "*Al-yahūd*," the Jews, was also used, although the variations of "Israelite" were more common. These many variations only serve to illustrate how fluid and nonbinding were concepts of identity during this period.

With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Arab nationalism, the formation of Arab Jewish identity entered a new phase. During the interwar period, the torch of Jewish participation in modern Arabic letters was decisively passed from Cairo to Baghdad, where it was picked up by a bevy of young Iraqi Jewish intellectuals captivated by nascent Iraqi patriotism. Their pioneering short stories and cultural journals were at the forefront of modern Iraqi print culture.³⁵ Along with their

33. For example, the cultural journal *al-Hilāl* used the term "*al-yahūd al-'arab*" in this context in the article "Al-yahūd fi bilād al-'arab" (The Jews in Arab Lands), *al-Hilāl* 12.3 (November 1, 1903): 85–86.

34. The usage of this term by figures such as Murād Farag and Esther Moyal seems to naturalize Arab Jews into an Arabo-Islamic discursive frame of reference. For the evolution of the term "umma" in modern Arabic discourse, see Ami Ayalon, *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East* (New York, 1987), 21–27.

35. These included figures such as Murād Mikhā'īl, Mir Baṣrī, Shalom Darwish, Ya'qūb Bilbūl and Anwar Sha'ul. See Nancy Berg, "Jewish Writers of Modern Iraqi Fiction," in *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany, N.Y., 1996), 29–39; Reuven Snir, "'We Are Arabs before We Are Jews': The Emergence and Demise of Arab-Jewish Culture in Modern Times," *Electronic Journal*

Iraqi and Egyptian Jewish counterparts in music and film, this group of intellectuals embodies the final and defining moment of the modern Arab Jewish experience.³⁶ Additionally, of no less (and arguably greater) importance than Jewish contributions to Arab culture was the participation of twentieth-century Egyptian and Iraqi Jews in nationalist, communist, and anticolonial causes.³⁷

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of Arab Jewish identity in this second period is the appearance of Arabic-language Jewish newspapers across the *mashriq*, most notably in Baghdad, Cairo, and Beirut. Such newspapers included *Isra'el / Isrā'īl / Yisra'el* (Cairo, 1920–39);³⁸ *al-'Alam al-Isrā'īlī / L'Univers israélite* (The Jewish World; Beirut, 1921–46);³⁹ *al-Ittihad al-Isrā'īlī* (Jewish Unity, or the Jewish Alliance; Cairo, 1924–30); *al-Miqbāḥ / ba-Menorab* (The Candelabra; Baghdad, 1924–29);⁴⁰ and *al-Shams* (The Sun; Cairo, 1934–1948).⁴¹ Jews from throughout the region contributed letters, stories, and features to all these newspapers, developing and promoting a shared identity as *yahūd al-sharq* or *yahūd al-'arab* (Eastern or Arab Jews), as distinct from the worldwide Jewish community, the Ashkenazim, or the (Ladino-speaking) Sephardim. The development of an Arab Jewish identity was never the explicit goal of any of

of Oriental Studies (EJOS) 8. 9 (2005): 1–47; and idem, *'Araviyut, yahadut, tziyonut: Ma'avak zehuyot bi-yetsiratam shel yehude 'irak* (Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism).

36. E.g., the Kuwaytī brothers, Salima Pasha (Murād); Dahūd Ḥusnī, Togo Mizraḥi, Laylā Murād.

37. For more on Egyptian Jewish communists in particular, see Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

38. Founded and edited by Albert Mosseri; from 1933 to 1939, edited by his widow Mathilde Mosseri. The Hebrew edition ran through 1923, the Arabic edition through 1933. In an edition from August 13, 1920, *Israel* listed its distributors in twelve countries; locations included Palestine, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Cyprus, Basra, England, Paris, Brussels, and Salonica. See also Hagar Hillel, *"Yisra'el" be-kabir: Iton tziyoni be-mitsrayim ba-le'umit, 1920–1939* ("Yisra'el" in Cairo: A Zionist Newspaper in National Egypt, 1920–1939) (Tel Aviv, 2005).

39. Founded and edited by Selim Mann.

40. Initially edited by Anwar Shaul; from 1925, ed. Salman Shina (1899–1978), a lawyer and the founder and secretary of the Baghdadi Hebrew literary society (*al-jam'iyya al-isrā'īliyya al-adabiyya*). Cf. Orit Bashkin, "Al-Miqbāḥ (1924–1929) — A Jewish Iraqi Newspaper" (Hebrew; M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1998), and idem, "The Lamp, Qasim Amin, Jewish Women, and Baghdadi Men: A Reading in the Jewish Iraqi Journal *Al-Miqbāḥ*" (unpublished paper for Ninth Mediterranean Research Meeting, Montecatini Terme, Italy, March 12–15, 2008).

41. Edited by Sa'd Ya'qub Malki. See Victor Nahmias, "'Al-shams'-'iton yehudi bi-mitsrayim, 1934–1948" ('Al-Shams: A Jewish Newspaper in Egypt, 1934–1948), *Pe'amim* 16 (1983): 129–41.

these papers, which saw themselves at various times as advocates of their communities, of global Jewry, of the Zionist project, and in the Egyptian and Iraqi cases, of national independence. Yet regular features on the role of Jews in Arab civilization, history, and literature filled their pages, creating a “usable past” for this newly defined *ethnie*.⁴² Concurrently, the ideological and political orientations of the various *masbriqi* Jewish communities were debated in the press, as we see for instance in the repeated calls in the Cairene Jewish newspaper *al-Shams* for “*tamṣīr al-yahūd*” (the “Egyptification” of the Jewish community), through such means as the teaching of classical Arabic in Jewish schools.

Thus, if the rise of a Jewish press in Arabic was primarily an expression of the integrationist dynamic in the Jewish communities of the *masbriq*, along the way it implicitly helped create a regional Arab Jewish identity. In aggregate, these periodicals served as a forum for members of different communities from Baghdad to Alexandria to share their views and imagine a broader community of Jewish Arabic speakers bound by regional, cultural, and linguistic affiliations. The editors’ and writers’ impulse to reinvent themselves as a *linguistic* community with a distinct historic legacy reflects the success of the *nabḥa* and the first phase of Arab nationalism in promoting a modern Arab identity for all Arabic speakers. At the same time, their enthusiasm for the vehicle of the Jewish press reflects its own success as a transnational and translingual phenomenon of Jewish modernity.

Finally, although the length of this essay does not permit me to discuss the literary dimensions of this phenomenon in detail, it should be noted that many of the first short stories by Jewish writers in Arabic also appeared in the pages of the Jewish press. These were complemented by the aforementioned features on notable Arab Jewish literary personalities of the past. The Arabic-language stories and poems of Jewish authors may not constitute a major literary phenomenon in and of themselves, but they do provide evidence of an explicit and active affiliation with Arab culture. As such, they suggest an alternative historical backdrop for the reading of Mizraḥi literature in Israel, particularly of works by the first generation of writers from the Arab world such as the Iraqi-born Sami Michael.⁴³ These, then, are the contours of modern Arab Jewish identity and its myriad discursive expressions in the *masbriq*.

42. For instance, we find articles in *al-Shams* on historic Arab Jewish personalities such as Maimonides, the preIslamic Arabian Jewish poet al-Samaw’al, the Jewish poets of Muslim Spain, and even Ya’qūb Ṣanū’.

43. I explore this topic at greater length in a forthcoming article, “The ‘Pre-history’ of Mizraḥi Literature: An Alternative Perspective on Hebrew Literary Historiography,” to appear in *Prooftexts*.

Through a comparison of these three historic moments—the late nineteenth century, the interwar period, and the present—we can discern something of the shifting valences of Arab Jewish identity. Each of these moments was unique in its constellation of circumstances, and thus the relevance or instrumentality of the idea of the Arab Jew was also new and different in each. But there is an element of continuity insofar as each successive generation invoked the memory of the previous one as part of its own negotiation of identity. While this brief study, along with Emily Gottreich’s work on the *maghrib*, does not answer the question “Who is an Arab Jew?,” our dialogue may act as a point of departure for answering the question “Who has imagined herself (or been imagined by others) as an Arab Jew, and why?” Future research of the multifaceted history of Arab Jewish modernity—currently awaiting fuller recovery through such diverse avenues as literature, the press, religious court records, state and community records, and other archival materials—stands to radically alter the study of Arab Jews in historical, sociological, and cultural contexts. Further, it offers a way to break through the conceptual limits of modern Jewish and Arab identity and culture, allowing us in turn to fruitfully complicate our understandings of “Jewishness” and “Arabness” as separate and independent trajectories of modernity.