

A History and Analysis of Iraqi Jewish Emigration to the United States

Marcus Helble, Class of 2021

Purpose

The initial goal of my research this summer was to investigate the Jewish community of Iraq, whose roughly 2,600 year long existence came to an abrupt end in the mid-twentieth century. My grandfather left Iraq in 1948 only years before slightly over 120,000 of nearly 140,000 Iraqi Jews emigrated en masse to Israel as a result of increasing anti-Jewish government action and a variety of other factors beyond their control. My grandfather, like slightly over 10,000 other Jewish citizens of Iraq, settled in the United States. Intrigued by his story and decision to come here, I set out to explore Iraqi Jewish emigration to the United States and determine why those like my grandfather chose the United States as their new home. In the process I hoped to understand my own family history as well as shed new light on a highly understudied group in Jewish Studies in the United States.

Methods

I devoted the first couple weeks of my research to reading the available literature on the Jewish community of Iraq. After gaining a broad understanding of the history of this group, I transitioned to focusing on the events that led to mass emigration from Iraq. Using the analysis of the studied literature I began to formulate a series of questions that I later used in a series of interviews of Iraqi Jews living in the United States and in analyses of various memoirs written by members of the same community. The questions aimed at analyzing the background of these community members before their emigration from Iraq. Themes visible in the interview guide include geographic background in Iraq, socioeconomic status, educational experience, political affiliation, religious devotion, relations with non-Jewish communities, and connections outside of Iraq among others. Following the creation of this interview guide I traveled to Boston and New York to conduct interviews. These interviews included more formal one-on-one sit-down interviews of friends of my grandfather, relatives, and community leaders as well as phone interviews and more informal discussions at two synagogues which serve Iraqi Jewish Americans. In New York my visit to the Center for Jewish History provided a variety of memoirs and interviews of community members which I analyzed focusing on the same themes highlighted in my interview guide. Upon return from New York I began the more personal aspect of the project, investigating the remaining documents of my grandfather's that remained after his death.

Results

The result of my research included a more academic paper analyzing and detailing the patterns of Iraqi Jewish migration to the United States, a chart comparing the different responses gained in the interviews, and a brief narrative on the life of my grandfather. I found that Iraqi Jews who left for the United States belong to at least three distinct groups that reflect important community developments at the time. Those who arrived in Iraq before 1950, the year which marked the beginning of mass migration to Israel, came directly and reflected the western-oriented education many middle and upper class Iraqi Jews received at the time. Many of the migrants, like my grandfather, arrived in the United States to study at accredited institutes of higher education. The second group of Iraqi Jewish emigrants arrived several years after leaving Iraq for Israel. Their eventual departure for the United States from Israel indicate the difficulties the young state faced in providing for the influx of migrants in the 1950s as well as the hardships Jews from Islamic countries endured in a European-dominated state. The final group of Iraqi Jewish migrants to the United States arrived after living in a range of nations in the Far East and Europe, many escaping fierce oppression in Iraq and growing nationalism. Finally, I found that the majority of American Iraqi Jews today reside in New York and Los Angeles and have assimilated into society while protecting their heritage in cooking, language, and visits to synagogue.

Faculty Mentor: Idriss Jebari

Funded by the Ellen M. P'78 and Herbert M. Patterson '42, P'78 Research Fellowship

