

A View from the Arab World: March 3-9, 2004

By Rami G. Khouri, in Beirut, Lebanon

Iraqi Jews, cement trucks, and Mideast citizenship rights

One of the more fascinating aspects of the evolving situation in Iraq relates to that country's past and future relationships with Jews and Israel, especially the repatriation and return of citizenship and property rights to tens of thousands of Iraqi Jews who left the country in the period 1930-1975.

The repatriation issue surfaced in recent months when the American-appointed Iraqi Governing Council debated whether to allow the return of Iraqi Jews who live abroad as citizens of other states, mainly Israel. The consensus in Iraq now seems to reject this option, because it raises the possibility of Israelis returning to live as Iraqi citizens. While that should be an unexceptional phenomenon in normal times, these are

not normal times: most of the Arab world and Israel have been locked in a bloody confrontation for some three-quarters of a century. The core of the Arab-Israeli conflict ? the creation of the state of Israel at the expense of the displacement and exile of the Palestinian Arab community ? remains unresolved. Much of the suffering that Iraqis endured at the hands of their

recent violent regimes was grotesquely rationalized by the former Iraqi police state on the basis of the struggle against Israel. And rabidly pro-Israeli American individuals and institutions in the neoconservative movement in Washington were key movers behind the war for regime change that has brought Iraq to its difficult situation today.

The issue is a live one, with the US government-run Coalition Authority in Baghdad and Iraqi Jewish groups in the US already discussing the possibility of repatriating former Iraqi Jews. The issue is complicated by conflicting narratives about why the Iraqi Jews left. Historical evidence supports both

camp's arguments: that Iraqi officialdom harassed and killed Jews in order to make them flee, and that Zionist groups keen to attract Jews to the new state of Israel violently provoked Iraqi Jews to hasten their mass departure

for Israel. Iraq's indigenous Jewish community numbered around 120,000 in 1948, but is virtually nonexistent today. Natural growth over the years now

sees Israelis of Iraqi origin numbering around 300,000-400,000.

The flip side to this question has all the subtlety of a cement truck: if

Iraqi Jews have the right to repatriation to their ancestral land of origin,
what does this mean for Palestinian refugees who also demand recognition of

their right to return to their homes and land in Palestine, now the state of Israel? What is the most appropriate, legal, moral, and decent way to handle this issue of the rights of Jews who left Iraq? Can it be decided in

a manner that avoids charges of anti-Semitism against the Iraqis, and also charges of double standards and national or racial superiority complexes against Israelis and Jews? Here are some thoughts on possible guidelines:

Pluralistic populations are powerful, productive, and desirable, and deeply anchored in indigenous Middle Eastern traditions. Jewish citizens of

Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Syria and other Middle Eastern lands enrich those societies, just as Christians and Muslims enrich Israel, Japan and China. We are better, stronger societies when we count assorted religions and ethnicities among our citizenry, provided that all enjoy equal individual liberties and privileges, and majority rule protects minority rights.

The issue of Iraqi Jews cannot and should not be considered in isolation.

The specificity of uprooted and exiled Iraqi Jews, Palestinian Arabs, Kurds, Turkomens, Armenians, Christians, Druze, or other displaced and violated minorities in the Middle East should be considered within a wider, comprehensive legal and moral framework. The resolution should offer universal principles that are evenly applied to all aggrieved parties, so that we avoid the ugly burdens of both pro-Jewish exceptionalism or anti-Jewish racism. This is not just a Jewish rights issue; it's a citizenship rights issue.

The universality and morality of the law should be the guiding principles

for a resolution, rather than the force of political or military power at any moment in time. If Israel and the US feel particularly triumphant right

now, and attempt to force Iraq to repatriate its Jewish sons and daughters without addressing equally valid repatriation claims by others in this region, the process will backfire, and lead to greater anti-American and anti-Israeli actions. You can bet that the Turkomens, Kurds, and Armenians,

among others, are watching this debate very closely.

A fair resolution should strike a realistic balance between absolute justice and relative, or attainable, justice ? between what is perfectly right in the abstract and what is politically realistic today. This will require balancing the right of exiled people to return to their ancestral lands with other options ? statehood, compensation, repatriation,

restitution, and others ? that adequately redress their legitimate grievances. The key to success is that the exiled communities and individuals themselves must have the main say in defining this balance, once

their rights are acknowledged in principle. The acknowledged rights and options must be offered to all claimant communities, if they are to have lasting meaning and validity to any of them.

History is a dynamic process that moves forward, not a static one, or a regressive one that moves backwards. The resolution of this issue ? redressing the legitimate grievances, claims, and pains of exiled, brutalized Middle Eastern minorities ? should not aim to return to a glorious or mythical past. It should aim to acknowledge and heal the pains of the past, and enforce rights grounded in law. This should happen ideally

in a manner that allows all parties to transcend the hurts of history, and move forward together on the basis of humane citizenship rights ? above all,

citizenship rights that treat all people in this region equally, not preferentially.

The people of the Arab world would do well to grasp this issue and address it quickly and forthrightly, in order to bring more law and morality to bear on resolving issues that plague us throughout this region.

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