

## Jews of Iraq: Background Information

The first Jews arrived in Iraq in the 6th century BCE after being exiled to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar. By 220 CE Iraq had become the center of Jewish scholarship and development and remained that way for the next 500 years. When the Arabs conquered the region in 638, Islam became the official religion and Arabic the official language. In 720, Jews experienced persecution forbidding them to build synagogues, which caused some to flee.

During the period from 1058-1900, Iraq was conquered, in succession, by the Turkish, the Mongols, the Turkish and then the Persians. During this period Jews were often treated as “dhimmis” and were subjected to poll taxes and other discriminatory laws. At this time the Jewish population ranged between 40,000-80,000.

The British Mandate of Iraq began in 1918 and the Jews played a central role by helping to develop the judicial system and postal service. In addition, Jews held positions in Parliament, which led to some resentment by non-Jewish Iraqi citizens.

However, the situation changed drastically when Iraq gained its independence from the British and Rasheed Ali became Prime Minister. In 1932, Ali welcomed Nazi propagandists into Iraq which led to hatred against Iraqi Jews. Jews faced discrimination, harsh laws and quotas for employment which were set to exclude Jews from government positions. On June 1-2, 1941 the Farhud, “violent dispossession,” broke out killing nearly 300 Jews, injuring more than 2,000 and leaving \$3 million in damaged property. During the next 10 years, Jews endured random outbreaks of rioting and violence. More than 15,000 Jews fled Iraq from 1941-1951.

In 1948, Iraq participated in a war against Israel. With 130,000 Jews living in Iraq at the time, Zionism was added to the Iraqi criminal code, punishable by death. As a result, 1,500 Jews were imprisoned, tortured and stripped of their property. Between the years 1949-1951, Jews were given permission to leave Iraq under the condition that they renounced their citizenship. 104,000 Jews were evacuated in Operation Ezra and Nechemia. Another 20,000 Jews were smuggled out through Iran.

Emigration was banned in 1952 with 6,000 Jews remaining in Iraq. Jews continued to experience severe persecution, arbitrary arrests, and economic isolation. In 1969, 9 Jewish men were publicly hanged in Baghdad and Basra after the government discovered an alleged “spy ring.” Following these events, Jews no longer felt safe in Iraq and in the 1970’s Jews were allowed to quietly leave the country.

Today less than 10 Jews remain in Iraq.

Taken from: <http://jimenaexperience.org/iraq/about-jimena/past-and-present/>



## For More Information

- About the Iraqi Jewish Community
  - [The Iraqi Jewish Experience](#), JIMENA
  - [The Jewish Community of Baghdad](#), Beit Hatfutzot
  - [The Jews of Iraq](#), Mitchell Bard, 2008
  
- In the News:
  - [Israeli's from Iraq Remember Babylon](#), Lipka Pelham, BBC, 2007
  - [Baghdad's Last Rabbi to Leave Iraq](#), Ha'aretz, 2006
  - [The Last Jews of Baghdad](#), David Van Biema, Time World, 2007
  
- In the Movies:
  - [Baghdad Twist](#): This short film features a unique collection of archival images, home movies, and family photographs from the Jewish community of Iraq. Baghdad-born filmmaker, Joe Balass, takes the viewer on a journey through the fragmented memories of an Arab exile
  - [Nana, George, and Me](#): an autobiographical video by a young, gay, Iraqi Jewish filmmaker who takes a charmingly unconventional look at three Iraqi Jewish lives: the filmmaker, his 92-year-old Nana, and his 73-year-old friend, George (visit the official website [here](#))
  
- Relevant Jewish Organizations:
  - [Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center](#)
  - [Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa \(JIMENA\)](#)
  
- Additional Reading:
  - Sabar, Ariel. *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for his Family's Past*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2009.
  - Lagnado, Lucette. *Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.
  - Michael, Sami. *Refuge*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
  - Shamash, Violette. *Memories of Eden: A Journey through Jewish Baghdad*. Chicago: Northwestern Press, 2010
  - Yahia, Mona. *When the Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad*. New York, NY: George Brazillier, 2007.