

## **SASSON BECHOR: MY LIFE IN IRAQ AND ISRAEL**

### **Introduction**

My presentation will deal with Iraq as I experienced it 60 years ago, before leaving for Israel in 1951. I was never able to set foot in Iraq again. The Iraq of those days was very different from the Iraq of today. I will deal with the life of Jews in Iraq from the time of the Babylonian exile, and my personal experience of living as a Jew in an Arab Moslem country during the first 18 years of my life.

I was born in 1932 in Amara near the southern Iraqi city of Basra. At the age of four, my family moved to Bakuba, then a picturesque town about 30 miles north of Baghdad. At the age of seven we moved to Baghdad, where we stayed until we immigrated to Israel in 1951.

### **Brief history of Babylonian Jewry:**

Following the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the first Solomon temple by the Babylonians in about 586 BCE, the last king of Judea, together with the Jewish leadership, the aristocracy, priests, soldiers and thousands of other Jews were exiled to Babylon, leaving behind in Judea mostly the poorest people.

Approximately 50 years later Babylon came under the rule of ancient Persia. In the Year 538 BCE, the Persian King Koresh issued a decree allowing Jews to return to Palestine to rebuild the temple. Some Jews did in fact return under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah and started to build the second temple, but most Jews elected to remain in Babylon under the Persian rule.

It is a historical irony that today the Iranian president Ahmadinajad is threatening to annihilate Israel and the Jews while his ancient Persian ancestors saved the Jews from certain extinction soon after the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

The Jews who remained in Babylon established famous schools of Jewish learning, built synagogues to replace the temple in Jerusalem, and codified communal and religious practices, which became known a few hundred years later as the Babylonian Talmud. They also adopted pragmatic rules such as “the law of the land is the law” and that Jews must abide by the laws of the land in which they lived. This pragmatic approach enabled them to survive as a minority in a foreign land. The Babylonian Talmud became the accepted standard of Jewish religious practices and the basis of Jewish law throughout the Jewish world until this day.

Soon after the rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Baghdad became the center of the Islamic World, which encompassed all of the Middle East, Persia and Central Asia, North Africa and most of Spain.

Under the early Muslim rule in Spain Jewish culture and institutions flourished to a large degree, culminating in what has become known as the golden age of Judaism.

The condition of the Jews worsened in later years after the rise of a more radical fundamentalist Islamic movement, which was, many years later, followed by the inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the year 1492.

At this point I would like to note that contrary to the present state of affairs between Muslims and Jews, the Ottoman Muslims, together with the Dutch, were the first to open

their doors and welcome Jews fleeing the inquisition and persecutions in Christian Europe.

Keeping the long historical Turkish friendship with the Jewish people in mind, I hope that Mr. Erdogan, the current Turkish Prime Minister, remembers Turkey's long traditional friendship with the Jewish people by refraining from his frequent attacks and belligerent statements against Israel following Israel's recent incursion into Gaza, in an attempt to protect its people from rocket attacks into Israel by Hamas..

The Ottoman Empire ruled Iraq for several hundred years until after WWI.

The Ottomans gave autonomy to all ethnic groups within the Empire, granting freedom of worship and freedom to conduct their own community affairs, within the framework of the Ottoman rule.

During the Ottoman rule the Jews in many ways lived in relative peace and prosperity. However In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a period of upheaval and a weakening of central control in the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in some local rulers who were often not friendly to the Jews. During this period many Jewish merchants emigrated to other countries, first to India, then to the Far East (Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Burma), and later to England. Some families became very wealthy and prominent, such as **the Sassoons** in India and later in England, **the Hardoons** in Shanghai, and **the Khaddouris** in Hong Kong, and these wealthy Jews maintained contact with and provided financial support for Jewish institutions in Iraq. To this day there are remnants of these Baghdadi Jewish communities in the Far East, as my wife and I found a few years ago during our trips to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore.

### **Iraq in the modern era.**

Iraq became a British mandate after WWI, and became independent in 1932. After independence it was headed by a king or a regent from the Hashemite family (cousins of the Jordanian rulers) until they were overthrown by a coup in the early 1960s. This first coup was followed by several other coups until Saddam Hussein came into power.

### **Jews in Iraq from 1932 until 1952.**

Initially under the first king's rule conditions were favorable for the Jews, but in the mid-1930s they worsened with the rise of Nazism and Arab nationalism, including the conflict in Palestine,. Arab nationalism and Germany's interest in Arab oil led to a natural alliance.

The pro-Nazi cleric Haj Muhammed Amin Al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and leader of the Arabs in Palestine, met with Hitler and other Nazi officers to plan the extermination of the Jews of Palestine and other parts of the Middle East. The Mufti recalls in his memoirs that Hitler gave him a free hand to solve the Jewish problem in Palestine and in other Arab lands. Al-Husseini, in a speech on Radio Berlin, openly voiced support for the "final solution" and became the first Arab leader to call openly for the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands, some eight years before there was a single Palestinian refugee.

The situation of the Jewish community in Iraq deteriorated markedly during the late 1930's and early 1940's. Anti-Semitism became rampant and persecutions and frequent arrests of Jews became common. On a few occasions there were public hangings of Jews accused of being spies for Zionist causes or sometimes as Communist sympathizers. These hangings were watched by thousands of cheering spectators in public squares. I painfully remember being a witness to one of those hangings of Jews accused of Zionism or Communism (it did not make a difference what the charges were as long as those

“criminals” were Jews). Seeing Jews being hanged in a public square was always a cause to declare a public holiday and a cause for celebration.

In early April 1941, a coup led by a pro-Nazi junta came to power. And they immediately began inciting the masses against the Jews. On June 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 1941 during the Jewish holiday of Shavuot mobs of thousands of agitated Muslims began a two-day pogrom, led among others by “Al-Futua”, a youth organization based upon the Hitler youth model. The pogrom which became known as the “Farhud” (loosely translated as “pogrom” or, “Violent dispossession”, in Arabic) resulted in about 180 Jews massacred and hundreds injured, many women were raped, people were mutilated and countless Jewish homes, shops, and synagogues were looted and destroyed. Not even infants were spared, and in the most ghoulish act of all, some pregnant women were slit open and left to die in agony. Two days later, British forces invaded Baghdad and restored the old anti-Nazi regime to power.

The Farhud was a tremendous psychological blow to the approximately 140,000 Jews of this ancient community and this was the beginning of the end of the Jewish Babylonian Exile. Soon after the Farhud, many Jews began seriously considering leaving Iraq and never looked back.

Successive governments continued to harass and persecute the remaining Jews, and the situation deteriorated further due to events related to the tensions between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. The persecution of Jews was becoming increasingly intolerable, and many Jews were looking for a way to leave Iraq. In the late 1940s a lot of Jews were being smuggled out of Iraq to Palestine (then under the British mandate) through the dangerous route of the Syrian desert, but mostly through Persia, where they were later smuggled into Palestine and into the subsequent state of Israel. About twenty thousand Jews managed to flee Iraq in this fashion during the 1940s. Fortunately, most of those smuggled out of Iraq in this fashion were later reunited with their families and relatives after the mass departure of the majority of the remaining Jews from Iraq in 1951.

The rest of the Jews in Iraq were waiting for an opportunity to leave Iraq. Suddenly in 1950 the Iraqi government passed a law in the Parliament in one day which granted the Jews permission to leave the country legally provided that they register their intent to leave, renounce their Iraqi citizenship, and leave the country never to return.

Within two to three months about 90% of the Iraqi Jews registered under this law, renounced their citizenship and became stateless. Within a few months the government suddenly passed another law to freeze the assets of all the Jews who had registered to leave the country, meaning they could not withdraw money from bank accounts or sell any assets or personal property. The net result was that when the Jews left Iraq they left all their assets and businesses behind, never to be recovered. The situation became desperate and there was a lot of pressure from outside Iraq to let the Jews leave to a neutral country. Eventually the government agreed to let them leave on an airlift of charter flights arranged by Jewish organizations around the world, initially via Cyprus and later unofficially directly to Israel. It was urgent to get the Jews out as quickly as possible before pressure from the Arab world would force the Iraqi government to stop the airlift. Within a few months about 120,000 of the 130,000 Jews who were still in Iraq were successfully airlifted out of Iraq and into Israel in the framework of “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah”.

The few thousand Jews who elected to remain in Iraq as Iraqi citizens continued to suffer abuse and torture, persecution, arrests and imprisonment for bogus reasons, and occasionally there were more public hangings of Jews. On January 27, 1969, radio

Baghdad announced that the fourteen traitors caught “red-handed”, had been condemned to death and had already been executed. The bodies of the fourteen men executed in Baghdad had been transported to the city’s main plaza, Liberation Square, for the public to view. Nine of the fourteen men hanged from the gallows that day were Jews. The French newspaper Le-Monde gave the following description of the “occasion”: “more than a million demonstrators are estimated to have taken to the streets in answer to the calls broadcast over the radio to treat this day, January 27, as a national holiday.”

Most of the Jews who stayed behind were well to do. Over the years they managed to liquidate some of their assets and bribe their way out of Iraq. Most went to England, the rest to the U.S., Israel and other countries. Today there are less than a dozen Jews, left in Iraq. Thus ended the 2,500 years of Jewish Babylonian exile.

The Hebrew Bible in Psalms relate that when the Jews were exiled to Babylon after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, they hung their harps upon the willows, sat down by the rivers of Babylon, wept and vowed “if I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither” And from then onward they never lost their faith, never became severed from their roots and never abandoned their hope and aspirations of returning to Jerusalem and to the Land of their ancestors.

The Jewish community in Iraq was the oldest in the Diaspora and while in exile it held closely to its religious traditions and heritage for 2,500 years. The community not only survived against all odds for thousands of years but also created survival tools for other Jewish communities throughout the world to this day.

### **My personal life experiences in Iraq**

Although Jews of Baghdad could live anywhere they chose, the close-knit Jewish community usually preferred mostly Jewish neighborhoods, occasionally in close proximity to Christian neighborhoods and on the eastern side of the Tigris River. Relations between Jews and Muslims were generally cordial, but sometimes uneasy. Young Muslims displayed a lot of animosity towards young Jews, who were very afraid of venturing into Muslim neighborhoods for fear of being stoned or beaten. I had my share of such incidents and had to run for my life on a few occasions when I inadvertently wandered into a Muslim neighborhood.

Inter-religious socializing was very rare, except for occasionally attending festivities of Muslim neighbors when invited, especially during weddings and events of circumcision of young Muslim boys at the age of thirteen..

Of the approximately 130,000 Jews in Iraq in the late 1940s, about 100,000 lived in Baghdad, with smaller communities in Basra, Mosul and other towns. Jews were about one sixth of the total population of 600,000 or so in Baghdad at the time. The total population of Iraq then was about six million, vs. more than 27 million today. Today the population of Baghdad alone is over six million.

Jews were very traditional in their practice of Judaism, similar to the modern Orthodox among American Jews, but with less emphasis on ritual or special dress. They kept kosher in a less strict manner than Ashkenazi Jews, but adhered strictly to the observance of the Sabbath and practiced all Jewish holidays. Even in Israel, I never experienced the warmth of Jewish communal life and the joyous celebration and atmosphere of the Jewish holidays that I did in Iraq, and I miss this very much even today.

Jews were mostly self-employed as merchants, traders and shopkeepers. Some major

markets, while very lively and vibrant on the Muslim Sabbath of Friday, were in many areas shut down and quiet on the Jewish Sabbath. Jews were in many respects indistinguishable from other groups in appearance, but generally the women were more modern in their dress than Muslim women. Intermarriage was a taboo and almost nonexistent. A Jew had to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim and, of course a Muslim could not convert to any other religion. Such incidents were very rare in any case.

Baghdadi Jews who had emigrated to India and the Far East often sent emissaries to Baghdad to bring occasional groups of potential Jewish brides and grooms. My grandmother was sent to India, but fortunately for me, she did not like what she saw and returned to Iraq.

Almost all Jewish children went to private and communal Jewish schools maintained by the local Jewish community and contributions from wealthy Baghdadi Jews living abroad, with only symbolic tuition and fees charged. The curriculum was secular in accordance with the Dept. of Education requirements, with minimal religious studies. There were separate schools for boys and girls. The language of instruction was Arabic, the national language of Iraq. Jews spoke Arabic in their daily life, and used Hebrew only as a language of prayer. Schools and classes were very large and discipline was very strict. Teachers had a lot of prestige, instilled fear and respect among students and frequently used punishment such as hitting the hand with a ruler or giving a lengthy dose of homework assignments as a form of punishment.

The educational system consisted of six years of elementary school, three years of intermediate school and two years of secondary schooling, with each stage followed by uniform national examinations. There were some totally French language Jewish schools operated by the Alliance Francaise Israelite, some English only Jewish schools, and vocational or artisan Jewish schools. Few Jews attended university, but those who did went to public higher learning institutions or studied abroad.

There were some very wealthy Jews living very comfortably in nice and very elegant neighborhoods in the northern area of Baghdad, but most were lower middle class or bordering on poverty and lived in central Baghdad. Families were quite large, often with six or more children per family. My family was near the lower end of the economic scale. My father had a small grocery shop in Baghdad, and my mother worked as a seamstress to supplement our income while at the same time raising a household of six children. I was the oldest child in the family and had to work after school from an early age. After elementary school, and throughout all of my school years afterwards, I always worked during the day while attending schools at nights. This was the case while completing high school in Iraq in Arabic and later in Israel in Hebrew, undergraduate studies in Israel in Hebrew, graduate studies in the US in English, and preparing for and passing the CPA exams in Georgia. I am proud to have accomplished this while living in three countries, with three different cultural and religious systems and in three different languages.

### **Customs, Housing and Living Conditions**

Most large Jewish families were poor. Usually two or more families shared a building with several rooms around a central courtyard, with communal toilet and washing facilities and with each family having a single room with perhaps a small annex for cooking. My family of eight lived in a one-room facility without electricity or refrigeration until the mid-1940s.

Needless to say that there was no privacy to speak of in such a small crowded space. To this day I am amazed how couples manage to “sneak in” so many kids in such a crowded

and confined living conditions.

One or two kerosene lamps provided lighting. I never had any toys as a child and, of course, no radio, television, games, smart phones, texting, or other gadgetry of any kind. Winters were very cold and summers very hot. In the summer families generally slept on the roofs of houses under the open sky. Generally, two children shared a bed and beds were lined up adjacent to one another. Each family member had a weekly bath and change of clothes before the Sabbath (thank God for the Sabbath). Once a week a professional washerwoman washed our clothes and hung them to dry in the sun. My mother had to first wake up at dawn to heat water on a stove and prepare the clothes for the wash. As there were no refrigerators, and as soon as the children went to school, mothers had to go to the market and buy all perishable ingredients for that day's cooking, then prepared the food for the children when they returned from school. As the oldest child, after I returned from school, I had to take my father's lunch to him at his shop. My mother struggled to find "free time" to do her seamstress work and get her products to the market for sale.

Despite the crowded and difficult living conditions, generally families were happy because of their cohesiveness and interaction with each other and with other families in the neighborhood, and the proximity of extended families.

As dating and contacts between the sexes was very limited, marriages were usually arranged with the help of professional matchmakers, with mothers taking an active interest in making the "necessary" background checks and facilitating contacts with prospective mates for their children, as direct dating was uncommon until the late 1940s and even then only on a very limited basis.

Family festivities such as marriages and circumcisions (among both Jews and Muslims) were important and big affairs. Bar Mitzvah celebrations were very small and birthdays and anniversaries among all religious groups were mostly ignored or rarely celebrated. This explains why so few people of that era, if any, know or care about personal events such as birthdays or anniversaries. My adopted birthday of Dec.10 is only an approximate guess. My year of birth 1932, however, is certain.

Baghdad was a very pleasant city and had many lovely neighborhoods with a lot of parks and recreation areas, especially along the Tigris River. There were promenades along the river and activities included swimming and picnicking. I especially miss the grilled fish cooked fresh along the banks of the river on pleasant summer evenings. Many crowded cafes lined the area along the Tigris. In the late 1940s Baghdad was going through a westernization process, which resulted in the opening of western-style hotels, nightclubs and cabarets, and movie theatres and even a big red light district (which we frequented as teenagers after night school, as sightseers only, I might add!). Common activities of teenagers included cycling, swimming, socializing with other teens of the same sex or going to the movies.

There were ample health facilities, including hospitals and clinics in the Baghdad area, including one big Jewish Hospital. The government supported these institutions and fees were minimal. There were many private clinics and medical practices as well.

Until the 1930s most transportation was by horse and buggy, which was replaced by an extensive public bus system throughout Baghdad in the mid-1940s. Inter-city transport was mostly by bus and by very slow trains. Mobility away from home or travel to other areas of the country was rare. Throughout my entire life in Iraq I left Baghdad only three times on very short trips.

I finished elementary and intermediate school in Baghdad, but three months before completing high school, we left Iraq for Israel in March 1951, with very minimal belongings and an egg sandwich in hand for each person. When leaving Iraq, Jews were searched thoroughly to prevent them from taking any of their possessions with them, except for the clothes they were wearing and basic minimal items for personal use.

The American invasion of Iraq created a lot of excitement and hope among Jews of Iraqi origin that they might soon be able to visit the land of their birth, but unfortunately it does not appear that this will ever be feasible.

At this point I would like to mention here that following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, some Jewish books and artifacts were rescued and transferred later to the National Archives and Records in Maryland for their restoration. As an act of ultimate “Chutzpah” and “Hypocrisy”, the Deputy Culture Minister of Iraq later demanded the return of what remains of Iraqi Jewish heritage, documents, priceless Hebrew prayer books, some exceedingly rare, personal memorabilia and ancient Torah Scrolls.

Apparently, sarcastically speaking, Iraqi Officials believe they should keep the Jewish archives in Iraq because it is vital that Iraqis know their history and be made aware that Jews lived in their country for thousands of years, some twelve centuries before Islam, or maybe they envision opening a Jewish Museum in Baghdad where they can recount their shameful treatment of Jews?

### **Arriving in Israel**

Around the same time that Iraqi Jews were being airlifted to Israel, there were hundreds of thousands more Jewish refugees from other Arab lands such as Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, as well as Jews from Persia and Turkey. Many people do not realize that there were some 800,000 Jewish refugees who had lost their property, homes and businesses in Arab countries and who were forced to leave their countries of birth after the 1948 war, where they had lived for many centuries. Israel received the majority of these Jewish Refugees and provided them with the means and conditions to become integrated in the Israeli society. At the same time, Jews also came to Israel from Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Greece and other countries, as well as from displaced persons camps in Cyprus and Europe.

Upon arrival in Israel, Jewish refugees from Muslim countries, and to a lesser extent from Europe, were placed in tents in one of the “transit camps” dotting the countryside, in miserable conditions. The immigrants were taken by trucks, herded like cattle, not buses which were scarce and luxurious, to one of these tent camps where whole families, from infants to elderly to pregnant women (my mother gave birth to a seventh child two weeks after arriving to the tent camp). Whole families were crowded into huts or tents, one per family, with narrow iron cots, straw mattresses and blankets. Winter rains turned the camps into seas of mud. Families were given simple dishes and cooking utensils. As food was very scarce, each family was given ration coupons for food. My family of eight, nine two weeks later, like tens of thousands of others, lived in a tent with a dirt floor. Cooking was done in the open air near the tent, weather permitting, or inside the tent in bad weather. Toilet facilities and showers were communal and primitive and were located on the far edges of these camps and reaching them required waiting in long lines in all kinds of weather.

The trying physical conditions in the camps, coupled with the natural anxieties about the future, the culture shock of being lumped together with many people from different

cultures, habits, outlooks and backgrounds, speaking a myriad of languages, created a lot of bitterness among the newcomers.

After almost a year of living in a tent, we were moved to more solid housing, a hut with a cement floor and aluminum or wood siding, where we stayed for another three years or so. There was a divider in the hut, which allowed families to cook on one end of it. Hygiene facilities were again communal and outside the hut.

The horrible conditions in the tents were very difficult for Jews from Iraq, some of whom had left their homes in Baghdad and, sometimes within hours, found themselves installed in a tent or a hut somewhere in a remote and seemingly forsaken “transit” camp.

In 1956, five years after arrival in Israel, my family managed to buy an apartment in southern Tel Aviv, where my family stayed until my parents passed away forty five years later.

Since I was eighteen years old when I arrived to Israel, I was given a choice to enlist in the Army immediately or a year later. I chose the former, and within less than two weeks I was in uniform and assigned to basic training. In my company were soldiers speaking many languages, none of them Hebrew. During our service in the army we learned Hebrew and managed to overcome our cultural, linguistic and other differences. I served two years in the Army and after the Army I was unemployed for three years, except for a few days of day labor here and there picking oranges and cotton, digging for potatoes, or employed in public works in forestation. I did not get my first real job until 1956, when I was hired as a technician trainee for a new electric power plant.

While unemployed I took correspondence courses to complete my high school diploma, this time all in Hebrew. In Iraq, I studied all subjects in Arabic, my native language. Because I had not completed high school in Iraq, I had to do all my high school courses over again in Israel and prepare for the national matriculation exams as a prerequisite to attending university. After getting my high school diploma, while working full time, I studied as an evening student at the Hebrew University for an undergraduate degree in economics and statistics. While studying for my degree, I worked full time for five years as a power plant operator. After completing my BA, I worked as an economist for Tel Aviv Municipality until I left Israel for the United States in 1966.

As much as I love Israel, I cannot end without mentioning the many problems of interethnic conflicts between Jews of different origins, income disparities, educational differences, stereotypes attributed to each ethnic group and the feeling of discrimination that I felt as an “Oriental Jew” of Middle-Eastern origin with a culture that was perceived as inferior by many European Jews in the early years of the country. Today, a lot of these differences have faded to a large degree, partly through the process of cultural assimilation, the rise in power and influence of Jews from Arab lands and the widespread intermarriage between European and Middle Eastern Jews (I have been happily married to one of these Ashkenazi Jews for the last 46 years).

I am pleased to add that many of the people who spent their childhood as refugees in the transit tent camps in the early fifties today occupy important positions in government, army, academia and business in Israel.

However, difficult those early years were, there was also a lot of excitement emanating from the pioneering spirit and the multiplicity of languages, cultures and backgrounds. People cared deeply about building a new Jewish country and reviving the ancient Jewish homeland and the Hebrew language after thousands of years in exile.

Today, many of Israel’s top leaders are from families that were forced to flee Arab

countries as refugees and they make up almost half of Israel's Jewish population. At this juncture, I can not help but remember the outrageous Anti-Semitic outburst of Helen Thomas, of the White-House press corps, when she said that "Jews should get the hell out of Palestine and go to where they came from". Really? Where? Does she want the 800,000 Jewish refugees and their offspring who were expelled from Arab countries to join their newly persecuted Christian groups throughout the Arab Middle-East? Suffice to tell the recent case of a single Italian Jew Dr.Gerbi of Libyan origin who, while trying to reopen a sealed Synagogue, was threatened by an angry mob of a few hundred of the newly "liberated" protesters in Tripoli to demand the deportation of this single Jew. The protesters carried signs reading, among others that "there is no place for Jews in Libya". Incidentally, the synagogue in question was sealed since Muammar Gaddafi expelled the country's Jewish community in 1969. It looks like things are not going to change under the regimes of these newly liberated societies following the so called "Arab spring" revolutions. These new revolutionaries will now focus on the Christians, now that the Jews are out of the way and totally cleansed from their midst. As prime examples, look no further than the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt, the ancient Christian communities in Iraq, and others.

This narrative of the Jewish experience is contradictory, of course, to what the Palestinian Authority President Abbas said recently in his speech to the UN General Assembly in his quest for statehood, whereby he said "I come before you today from the Holy Land, the land of Palestine, the land of divine messages, ascension of the Prophet Muhammad and the birthplace of Jesus Christ". Notice that ... you guessed it ... there is no reference at all to Jews, not even that Jesus Christ was a Jew. There is not even a hint that Jews lived in the Holy Land, ever. This formulation of omitting any reference to the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel was not accidental, of course. Uttering the word Jew in that context would have given legitimacy to Jews having had historical connection to the Holy Land and would have refuted the claim throughout the Arab and Muslim world that Jews have no place in the Holy Land.

In conclusion, having lived in both an Arab country and in Israel, I would like to offer my personal assessment about the Arab-Israeli conflict. In my opinion there will be no solution to the conflict as long as the Arabs deny the existence of the Jewish people and their historical connection to the land of their ancestors. The Arabs should also recognize that two refugee problems were created in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine. The plight of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab counties who ended up in Israel and elsewhere should not be ignored. Israel absorbed the displaced Jewish refugees from Arab lands, granted them citizenship, housed them, fed them and cared for them under very difficult conditions. In general, forcefully displaced Jews from Arab lands picked up the pieces of their shattered lives and their hurried departures and moved on. Most went to Israel, but others went to Canada, the United States, France, and other countries.

At the same time the Palestinian Arab refugees, with the exception of those in Jordan, remained in impoverished refugee camps, were refused citizenship and denied hope. They have been and still are being used by Arab rulers and politicians as pawns to further their political ends, and as a tool to promote hatred and incitement against Jews and Israel. A case in point is a recent reported Palestinian Authority policy paper which stipulates that the Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the West Bank will not be granted citizenship in any future Palestinian State. This is no formula for peace. The purpose here of course is to perpetuate the conflict with Israel rather than to live in any peaceful co-existence with it.

I believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict should not be defined unfairly through the prism of

only the Palestinian refugee problem. Calls for going back to 1967 borders as a magic formula for peace, will not lead to peace, as long as Israel's very existence and legitimacy is being questioned by those who are supposed to make peace with it and are very determined to seek its destruction by all means possible. Furthermore, any proposed solution that ignores the changing realities on the ground, disregards Israel's legitimate security concerns and its aspirations for survival as a refuge for the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland, including those expelled from Arab lands, will not bring peace to the region.

**Notes:**

**Copies are available upon request via e-mail: [bechor34@yahoo.com](mailto:bechor34@yahoo.com)**

**Reference resources:**

**Operation Babylon,**

**The story of the rescue of the Jews of Iraq,**

**By Shlomo Hillel**

**Flight from Babylon,**

**Iraq, Iran, Israel, America,**

**By Heskell Haddad**

**Museum of Babylonian Jewry, Or Yehuda, Israel**

**Jimena, Jews indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa**

**The Middle East's forgotten Refugees, a commentary, by Semha Alwaya**

**Letter from a Forgotten Jew, By David Harris, Executive Director of AJC**