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*ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the immigration of Iraqi Jews to Israel in the early 1950s and examines the manner in which the Israeli State has used this immigration to offset the claims of the Palestinian national movement. It also sheds light on actions taken by WOJAC (World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries) to further Israel's national interests, as well as on how these interests were challenged and re-formulated by WOJAC's non-Israeli members. The history of WOJAC serves as an example of the anomalous relationship between nationality and ethnicity in the Zionist context. Lastly, this article underscores the conspicuous compartmentalization of "the Palestinian question" and the "Mizrahi question" within Israeli political and intellectual discourse.*

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## **Introduction**

The histories and memories of Jews from Arab lands have been used in the political arena (national and international) in order to offset the claims of the Palestinian national movement regarding three issues: legitimate rights over the land (Palestine/Israel), the right of return (Zchut Ha'Shiva) and compensation for the Palestinian refugees of the 1948 War. This paper focuses on the third claim (an extended discussion of the other two claims and their histories are presented elsewhere. See: Shenhav, forthcoming) and reveals how the State of Israel constructed linkages between Jews-from-Arab-lands and the Palestinians, as well as how its "national accounting theory" became embedded in state practices. The State's theory of national accounting is examined through the prism of several events, including the

peace treaty with Egypt in the 1970s, the Gulf War in 1991, and the interim agreements with the Palestinians in the late 1990s. In addition, this paper examines WOJAC's (World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries) response to state theory and action. Analysis shows that WOJAC's efforts to legitimize practices of the State paradoxically and unintentionally resulted in the deconstruction of the theory behind these practices. Not surprisingly, the epistemological vantage-point from which this de-construction was possible was provided by non-citizen Jews, members of WOJAC living outside of Israel.

Let me begin with a telling story that took place in Israel in January 1952, about half a year after the official conclusion of the operation that brought Iraq's Jews to Israel. During this year, two Zionist activists, Yosef Basri and Shalom Salah, were hanged in Baghdad. They had been charged with possession of explosive materials and throwing bombs in the city center. According to the account of Shlomo Hillel, a former Israeli cabinet minister and Zionist activist in Iraq, their last words, as they stood on the gallows, were "Long live the State of Israel." (Hillel, 1985: 342) It would have only been natural for Iraqi Jews in Israel to react to the news of this hanging with outrage. On the contrary, however, the mourning assemblies organized by leaders of the community in various Israeli cities failed to arouse widespread solidarity with the two Iraqi Zionists. In fact, the opposite was true. A classified document from Moshe Sasson, of the Foreign Ministry's Middle East Division, to then Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett maintained that many Iraqi immigrants, residents of the transit camps, greeted the hanging with the attitude: "That is God's revenge on the movement that brought us to such depths" (2). The bitterness of this reaction attests to an acute level of discontent among the newly arrived Iraqi Jews. It suggests that a good number of them did not view their immigration as the joyous return to Zion depicted by the community's Zionist activists. Rather, in addition to blaming the Iraqi government, they blamed the Zionist movement for bringing them to Israel for reasons that did not include the best interests of the immigrants themselves.

Even if it does not represent the reaction of the entire Iraqi community in Israel, this historical document certainly attests to a problematic element in the primordial perspective of nationalism espoused by the Zionist movement since its inception. (Smith, 1986) This perspective deems nationalism to be the awakening of an ancient ethnic force, engendered by a primeval need to belong to a national framework. Zionism, according to Anthony Smith, is a particular case of such nationalism, and, more specifically, a characteristic case of “diaspora nationalism.” More than a mere academic model, the concept of diaspora nationalism also serves as a yardstick of Zionist historiography and praxis. Through its prism, Zionism viewed the Jewish communities around the world as inherently part of the Jewish national identity in Israel. Israeli encyclopedias and textbooks describe what is known in the Zionist epos as “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah” (which brought Iraq’s Jewish community to Israel in 1950-1951) as a “rescue aliya” (aliya, literally translated as “going up,” is the standard Israeli term to denote immigration to Israel) that saved persecuted Jews who yearned to return to their ancient homeland, after enduring ethnic repression and discrimination (3).

The story of how Iraq’s Jews were brought to the newly established State of Israel provides an opportunity to reexamine the essence of the connection between ethnicity and nationalism. (Smith, 1986; Armstrong, 1982) Developments surrounding the “nationalization” of Iraq’s Jews reveal how problematic it is to apply the thesis of primordial Zionism to them as an ethnic group, as well as to other Jewish groups in Europe and the Middle East. From the complex sequence of events in which the Iraqi Jews were brought to Israel, I have chosen to deal with one specific episode that has not yet been recounted: the fate of the property of Iraq’s Jews, and its connection to the property of the Palestinian Arabs who were expelled or who fled in 1948.

This article focuses on two intersecting claims that faced the Israeli government between 1948 and 1951. One was the demand, put forward by the United Nations and the governments of the United States and Britain, that Israel compensate the 1948 refugees for property that had been impounded by the State’s Custodian of Absentee Property. The other was the

expectations of former Iraqi Jews that they would be compensated for their property that had been frozen by the Iraqi government in 1951. I will draw on archival sources to show that the Israeli government turned this bind into a system akin to double-entry accounting with regard to the two categories of property – that of the 1948 Palestinian refugees and that of the Iraqi Jews – in an effort to neutralize the claims of both. The Government of Israel cited the injustice that the Iraqi government had done the Jews of Iraq in order to explain its refusal to compensate the Palestinians, but told the Iraqi Jews in Israel to apply to that same Iraqi government for the restitution they sought.

This logic of accounting was propounded by exploiting circumstances; it was not necessarily a deliberate scheme. However, when implemented as a *raison d'état* it enabled the Israeli government to “legitimately” absolve itself of responsibility for compensating the Palestinian refugees (4). Moreover, Israel’s nationalization of the identity and property of Iraq’s Jews in its relentless drive to articulate Jewish nationalism served as a bargaining policy with which to deny Palestinian nationality. This article confirms that the Jews of Iraq became an instrument in a decision-making process from which they were excluded and which rested on basic assumptions they did not necessarily share. Furthermore, I draw on another source of archival data in order to document how WOJAC responded to the theory employed by the Israeli State. WOJAC strove to facilitate the linkage between the property of Iraqi Jews and the property of the Palestinian refugees. But, as it turned out, the organization’s non-Israeli members challenged these assumptions and developed a form of resistance against them.

The present case shows that the transition from (Jewish) ethnicity to nationalism is neither natural nor self-evident. While naturally concerning itself with the tension between “ethnicity” and “nationalism,” this paper’s empirical description will also shed light on the manner in which Israel played an active role in the Middle Eastern arena. Throughout its analysis, the Israeli government is conceptualized as a political broker acting to construct “national interests” and “ethnic categories” in order to fulfil its own objectives (*raison d'etat*). State political actors formed a common Zionist identity for

Jews of very different backgrounds, and simultaneously formed a common identity of opposition for all “Arabs”. This paper demonstrates that by relating to the property of each group as collective, rather than individual, the State assisted in constructing these antagonistic categories of national identity.

I begin with a contextual background, which lays down the major parameters within which the drama described by the empirical material took place. This will be followed by an analysis of the emigration of Iraq’s Jews in the context of the ongoing theoretical debate over the question of nationalism. I will then present an empirical description of the actions taken by the Israeli Government vis-à-vis the Jewish property and the Palestinian property in question. Finally, I will describe the various voices raised by WOJAC members in the course of the discussion surrounding the compensation issue.

### **A Tale of a Community Between Iraq and Israel**

During the period 1949-1951 – when the drama described in this article was played out – approximately 130,000 Jews lived in Iraq, constituting 3 percent of the country’s population. The largest community was in Baghdad, followed by Basra; together, these two cities accounted for some 75 percent of the Jews in Iraq. Three decades earlier, the supplanting of the Ottoman Turks in the Middle East by the French and the British during World War I had engendered two significant developments in the region (5). First, a potent Iraqi nationalism rapidly emerged as the Iraqis realized that the British had not come as liberators. The immediate result was an Iraqi uprising against the occupation in 1920. Iraq gained independence in 1932, and four years later the perpetrators of a military coup seized power in the country. Until 1941, when the revolt of Rashid Ali al-Kilani failed, Iraq was under the sway of a powerful nationalism that did not balk at forging ties with Nazi Germany in order to throw off British influence. Second, Zionist activity in the Middle East became more extensive, although in Iraq intensive activity did not begin until World War II. The interaction between these two social forces – Zionist nationalism and Iraqi-Arab nationalism – shaped the life of Iraq’s Jews and finally transformed it beyond recognition.

In June 1941, following the flight of the pro-Nazi Rashid Ali and just prior to the British forces' reentry into Baghdad, the city's Jews were brutally attacked by Iraqi nationalists. The assault, known as the farhud, left some 250-300 people, mostly Jews, dead or injured. The Iraqi government, under Nuri Sa'id, did not shirk responsibility: eight of the assailants, including army officers and policemen, were sentenced to death. Following the 1941 attack, Zionist leadership began contemplating means to "Zionize" Iraq's Jews and perhaps organize the immigration of part of the community to Israel. The Va'ad Leumi (National Council) of the Yishuv – the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine – disseminated an exaggerated and distorted account of the farhud, and Yishuv institutions described the event as a calamitous massacre, and even as a Holocaust. (Tsimhoni, 1989) The assessment of Yishuv leaders was that the impact of the farhud would be to intensify Zionist feelings among Iraq's Jews, and that this momentum should be exploited to bring the community to Palestine. The first Zionist emissaries operated as soldiers of the British Army and as representatives of Solel Boneh, a construction company owned by the Histadrut federation of labor in the Yishuv, which had won public tenders in Iran and Iraq.

Although the Zionist movement's immediate interest in Iraqi Jewry was triggered by the farhud, it had other causes as well, which were not necessarily related to the well being of the community. Iraq was an important station in the land transfer of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, who had reached the Soviet-Iranian border. In order to secure their entry into Palestine, it was essential to have permanent assistance along a route on which Iraq and Iran were major stations (Meir, 1973). The Zionist movement in Europe therefore maintained that it was essential to establish a Zionist center in Iraq. A second reason for taking an interest in Iraqi Jewry presented itself when the leaders of the Yishuv grasped the scale of the Holocaust and realized that European Jewry was cut off: to improve the Jewish demographic balance in Palestine. (Meir, 1993) Like Jews from other Islamic countries, the Jews of Iraq were considered a key population reservoir that could tilt the demographic balance in Palestine in the Jews' favor. The geographical

proximity between Iraq and Palestine was considered an exploitable advantage: "It is easier [for us] to get there... and for them, too, it is easier to reach the Land of Israel."<sup>(6)</sup>

The possibility that Iraq's Jews could remain in their native land – the so-called "Iraqi option" (Qazzaz, 1991) – was rendered unfeasible by two reasons that were not unrelated. One reason that the Jews were compelled to leave was the surging Pan-Arab and Iraqi nationalist movements (Shiblak, 1986). Israel's establishment in May 1948 was a boost for the Iraqi nationalists, and the practice of Zionism was outlawed in July 1948. Jews in the civil service were dismissed, and the entire Jewish community was placed under surveillance. The situation was aggravated by Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id's co-optation of the right wing nationalist party Istiqlal into the government. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry informed the State Department in Washington that the Government of Iraq was concerned about the inroads being made by Communism and Zionism among the Jews. (Shiblak, 1986: 70) The second reason that the Jews were compelled to leave was the activity of the Zionist movement in Iraq and the establishment of the State of Israel, which resulted in the Jews irrevocable identification with Zionism. Indeed, the activity of the Halutz movement in Iraq caused many local Jews to be perceived as Zionists, and hence as a fifth column. The actions of the Zionist movement in Iraq forged a reality that, in retrospect, justified its own presence there. As Ben-Tzion Yisraeli, an emissary of the Jewish Agency in Iraq, foresaw in 1943, "They [the Iraqi Jews] are liable to be among the first to pay the price for our enterprise in the Land of Israel..."<sup>(7)</sup>

Shortly after his government assumed power, in January 1949, Nuri Sa'id toyed with the idea of deporting the Iraqi Jews to Israel. However, the British ambassador in Palestine warned him that such an act could have serious unanticipated repercussions. Israel, the ambassador explained, would welcome the arrival of cheap Jewish labor and would demand that in return the Arab states resettle Palestinian refugees. (Tsimhoni, 1991) In February 1949, the Foreign Office instructed the British ambassador in Baghdad, Sir

Henry Mack, to caution Nuri Sa'id against expelling the Jews, as this would adversely affect the position of the Arab states. (Shiblak, 1986)

In March 1950, Iraq enacted a denaturalization law – valid for one year – that enabled the Jews to leave the country after renouncing their citizenship. In total, more than 100,000 Jews were brought from Iraq to Israel between May 1950 and June 1951, all of them by air. Some 60,000 were brought to Israel during the last three months of the operation, between March and June 1951, but only after their property had been impounded by the government. Thus, an entire community, which had been strongly attached to its native land, was uprooted, and its right – and the right of the individuals within it – to decide its own fate was appropriated. (Swirski, 1995) Moreover, the community was deprived of its economic rights and of the right to decide where to live and what nation to be a part of. More significantly, perhaps, the collective memory of a community was appropriated and transplanted into a different narrative – the Zionist narrative – which the Iraqi Jews played no part in creating. According to the Zionist narrative, Iraq's Jews constituted a community under virtual siege, and their transfer to Israel was a "rescue aliya." That narrative posits a natural, harmonious connection between (Jewish) "ethnicity" and (Zionist) "nationalism." I turn now to a brief theoretical discussion of the connection between these two categories, in which I will argue that the case of Iraq's Jews illuminates the problematic nature of the primordial approach of nationalism, as it is depicted both in academic research and in Zionist historiography.

### **Nationalism, Modernism and the Jews of Iraq**

For some years, a fascinating debate has been taking place in academic literature over the question of modern nationalism. One approach holds that the sources of nationalism are primordial. (e.g., Smith, 1986; Smith, 1995) Nationalism, the proponents of this view argue, is the result of a natural, sui generis process of coalescence involving collective loyalties and identities, which has always characterized human communities. (Smith, 1995) "Ethnic" identity is said to have undergone a modern reworking into national ideology.



This approach posits a direct, unidirectional relationship between ethnicity and nationalism: the renewal of ethnies, the desire of the group's members to return to the "ethnic" homeland. In Smith's conception, Zionism was a form of "diaspora nationalism" which renewed its ethnies in the common territory of the Holy Land. Jews have survived as an ethnic group since the time of Ezra, have regarded themselves as belonging to the sacred soil, and have always invoked ancient symbols -- such as the Torah scrolls, the menorah, fasting, and the rituals of kosher food -- as unifying collective emblems. Gellner dubs this model the "Sleeping Beauty syndrome", referring to the revival of a latent, dormant, primeval force. (Gellner, 1990)

Other scholars, however, maintain that nationalism is a distinctly modern phenomenon, a functional substitute for pre-modern categories and a mechanism of mobilization in the hands of political elites. (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1990; Gellner, 1983; Kedourie, 1970). Hobsbawm, for example, refuses to regard a connection with the past as relevant to modern nationalism. Thus, bringing Jews to Palestine has no connection with an ancient yearning for Zion among Jewish communities in the various diaspora communities. Jews, rather, came to Palestine due to the activity of Zionist functionaries and intellectuals who both engaged in the "engineering of nationalism" and "invented" the tradition of the past, by overlaying it in national colors. The national symbolism of Zionism, including the appropriation of the past to serve its purposes, was forged by modern intellectuals such as Max Nordau and Ben-Zion Dinur. (Ram, 1996; Pappé, 1996) History and mythology, this conception holds, are organized and tailored to meet present needs. (Hobsbawm 1990) As Uri Ram put it succinctly, "The 'national past' is an image that is forged in the present, and the 'national present' is an image that rests on the past...Nationalism is a collective consciousness of identity that refines materials from the past to meet the needs of the politics of the present." (Ram, 1996: 129) If primordialists insist on the need to trace the ancient historic bond between the heritage of Iraqi Jewry and the Zionist state of Israel, modernists ask why and how the State of Israel adopted (or

appropriated) the heritage of Iraqi Jewry into its being and its national ideology. (Pappe, 1996)

The description of the means by which Iraq's Jews were brought to Israel presented in this paper clearly shows that it is essential to distinguish between "Jewishness", as an ethno-linguistic category, and Zionist nationalism, as propounded by European Jewish intellectuals from the end of the nineteenth century. Zionism, it should be kept in mind, was meant as a response to the distinctive conditions and problems of Eastern European Jews, not to the situation of Jews in Arab lands. The Zionist elite was always European, and its idiosyncratic outlook subsequently gave rise to Jewish-nationalist ideology in Palestine. The Jewish community of Iraq preserved all their ethnic symbols across generations of existential continuity. Indeed, the Jews in Iraq expressed a primeval, albeit abstract, yearning for Zion. Still, they were as remote from political Zionism as east is from west. The majority refused to view themselves as Zionists and opposed the Zionist movement, which began to penetrate Iraq beginning in the 1930s for its own social, economic, and political purposes. I hold that the empirical description below should be seen as the concrete manifestation of the heavy price paid by an ethnic community that moved/was moved from an "ethnic" state of being to a "national" state of being.

The primordial version mobilizes the ethnic in order to create the "national." In the case of the Iraqi Jews, the encounter of the ethnic with European-Zionist nationalism illustrates the tension as well as the contradiction between these social categories. It proves that different ethnic groups are not homogeneous, and that a monolithic perception of their national affiliation is misplaced. The nationality of Iraq's Jews was "forged" in the press of the Zionist enterprise together with the appropriation of the community's place, territory, and yearnings. The contradiction between the "ethnic" and the "national" in the creation of a "nation state," and the question of who gains and who loses in that process, lies at the center of our discussion.

The analysis that follows is based on documents located in the Israel State Archive and the Central Zionist Archive. I will begin by recounting the discussions held by the Israeli government about bringing Iraq's Jews to Israel; I will then turn to a description of how the government maneuvered the question of Jewish and Palestinian property. The attitudes and desires of the Israeli government, with regard to both types of property, will provide a more striking dramatization of the gap between the primordial version of "diaspora nationalism" and the historical reality – or, in other words, the long road and the heavy price entailed in the transition of Iraq's Jews from ethnicity to nationalism. I hope to demonstrate that government action regarding property-matters had tremendous ramifications in terms of identity construction. By defining Iraqi Jews as Israeli citizens (including those who never immigrated to Israel), the Israeli government was able to deny the right of Palestinians to reparations, and, at a later stage, to return to Palestine.

### **The Israeli Government and Iraqi Jewry**

Police Minister Behor Shitrit was the first, in March 1949, to raise the question of the "situation of Iraq's Jews" in the cabinet.<sup>(8)</sup> Shitrit said he was worried about the situation of the Jews in Iraq after Zionism had been outlawed; at one stage, he proposed that the property of Israeli Arabs be held hostage for Jewish property in Iraq. This idea, however, was rejected out of hand by the Israeli Foreign Ministry. (Segev, 1984: 96) In September 1949, Shitrit again raised what he called "the problem of the Jews in the Arab lands" in the cabinet. He asked whether the Foreign Ministry had taken steps to assist them: "... I would like to know if there is any way to abet their rescue...if it is possible to arrive at some agreement on a 'transfer' [emphasis added] in terms of both property and people, and to take up the matter with the UN institutions and inform the world..."<sup>(9)</sup> In this discussion, Sharett for the first time spoke about Jewish property in the Arab countries. He cited the absence of a peace treaty with Iraq as the reason for his negative attitude toward possible cooperation with the government in Baghdad:

To address at this time the question of transferring the property of Jews to Israel – that would be naive. We are talking about an agreement, about establishing peace, and we are not budging – will we suddenly succeed in

removing the question of the Jews from that framework and getting the Arab states to accept an agreement regarding the Jews who reside in those countries? I am not blessed with that kind of diplomatic skill! Such thinking is quixotic.(10)

For the sake of balance, Sharett did not forget to point out that hundreds of families had arrived in Israel from Egypt and were being provided with housing by the government. It was apparently not by chance that Sharett linked these new arrivals with Palestinian property in Israel: "I met one of these families which had already settled in one of the abandoned villages – people who had come from Egypt just a day or two before." Sharett's linkage of Jewish property and Arab property, here presented only associatively, would in time be developed into an ideological thesis and official practice of the Israeli government.

In July 1949, the British, fearing the decline of their influence in the Middle East, put forward a proposal for a population transfer, and tried to persuade Nuri Sa'id to settle 100,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq. A letter sent by the British Foreign Office to its legations in the Middle East spoke of an "arrangement whereby Iraqi Jews moved into Israel, received compensation for their property from the Israeli government, while the Arab refugees were installed with the property in Iraq." (Shiblak, 1986: 83) The British Foreign Office believed that "the Israeli government would find it hard to resist an opportunity of bringing a substantial number of Jews to Israel". (Shiblak, 1986: 83) In return, Nuri Sa'id demanded that half the Palestinian refugees be settled in the territory of Palestine and the rest in the Arab states. If the refugee arrangements were indeed fair, he said, the Iraqi government would permit a voluntary move by Iraqi Jews to Palestine. Under the terms of the plan, an international committee was to assess the value of the property left behind by the Palestinian refugees who would be settled in Iraq, and they would receive restitution drawn from the property of the Iraqi Jews who would be sent to Palestine. (Tsimhoni, 1991) Even though internal documents show clearly that the plan was known to various levels of the Israeli administration, Israel immediately rejected it out of hand. "In my eyes," Ben-Gurion said, "all the talk about an exchange is strange. Clearly, if the Iraqi Jews are able to

leave, we will receive them and we will not ask questions about an exchange or not an exchange - about property or about an absence of property.”(11)

Israeli sources claimed that “Iraq is casting an eye on the Jewish property” and that Baghdad had floated the transfer idea as a trial balloon (12).

Nevertheless, Behor Shitrit reiterated his transfer proposal. In response to various rumors, he wrote explicitly to the Finance Minister: “If an official proposal is made to our government about a population exchange, we should accept the offer...”(13) Ben-Gurion and Sharett understood the “heavy price” Israel would have to pay if it entered into concrete agreements with Baghdad: allowing the return of the 1948 Palestinian refugees and/or compensating them for their property. Sharett told the British ambassador to Israel that Israel would agree to take in the Jews of Iraq just as it would any other Jewish community, but would not agree to receive them as destitute DPs. (Tsimhoni 1991)(14) The ambassador reported that the a population exchange was acceptable to Israel in principle, but that the idea of exchanging 100,000 homeless (Palestinian) refugees for 100,000 (Jewish) refugees who would leave their assets behind was read in Israel as mere extortion. (Tsimhoni 1991) However, rumors about a possible population exchange with Iraq persisted,(15) forcing the government to clarify its stand. At a meeting, government ministers pressed the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister for information.(16) Sharett responded:

On the question of a population exchange, it was reported in the press, purportedly citing the spokesman of the Survey Group, that the Prime Minister of Iraq has allegedly made such an offer. We asked the Survey Group about the truth of this report. We received an official reply that in the course of a conversation Nuri Sa'id had ‘thrown out’ an idea along the lines of a possible exchange of Iraq's Jews for the Arab refugees... Agreeing to this would mean, in my opinion, our agreement to have the property of Iraq's Jews confiscated by the Iraqi Treasury in return for the Arab property we have confiscated here, and then we assume responsibility for compensating the Jews of Iraq on account of the Arabs' property, as against the Jews' property there. That would create a dangerous precedent with regard to Egypt and other countries. It could also be construed to mean that every Arab country undertakes to accept refugees only to the extent that it has Jews.

Sharett was concerned about a possible future claim for compensation by Iraq's Jews, should the Israeli government agree to a transfer deal. The possibility of extricating the Iraqi Jews together with their property was lost in the accounting logic that he

developed: “This would be a dangerous precedent vis-à-vis other countries. We will be confronted by tens of thousands of people who will arrive, naked and destitute, demanding that we give them property. This could entangle us in an inextricable impasse...”

The transfer idea, it should be noted, was not alien to Zionist thinking; it was manifested in both praxis and ideology both before and after the Iraqi Jews were brought to Israel. (17) The Israeli government’s disregarding of the transfer proposals was thus motivated by instrumental rather than moral considerations. The government believed that officially agreeing to a transfer – despite the opportunity it presented in terms of bringing Jews of Iraq to Israel – would create a “dangerous” precedent.(18) According to a government, there were three times as many Palestinian refugees as there were Jews in Arab states: there were thought to be no more than 200,000 Jews (the possibility of bringing the Maghreb Jews to Israel had not yet arisen).(19) The government in Israel feared that by agreeing to a population exchange resting on a numerical basis, Israel might have to repatriate the “surplus refugees.” Indeed, the Morton plan under the auspices of the United Nations called for the settlement of thousands of such “surplus” refugees in internationalized Jerusalem.(20) This possibility, combined with the information that Egypt was refusing to take in Palestinian refugees, deterred the Israeli government. The Foreign Ministry maintained that only if Iraq agreed to absorb 300,000 to 400,000 Arab refugees in return for the Iraqi Jews could Israel contemplate accepting the transfer agreement.(21) However, that possibility was deemed far-fetched. Fearful of having to cope with a “surplus” of Palestinian refugees, the Israeli government preferred to forgo an agreement for the departure of Jews who found themselves trapped inside Iraq because of the activity of the Zionist underground, the 1948 War, the establishment of Israel, and the rise of Iraqi nationalism. By spurning the transfer, Israel simultaneously gained economically. The Palestinians’ abandoned property remained in the hands of the State’s Custodian of Absentee Property, while Iraq’s freeze of Jewish property could be invoked as a “successful” excuse to justify the nationalization of Palestinian assets. The property of the Iraqi Jews, if brought to Israel in exchange for Palestinian

property, would have remained in the possession of its individual owners and would not have been taken over by the government as “national capital.”

Agitation surrounding the possibility of a population exchange only faded in March 1950, with the enactment of the Iraqi denaturalization law that enabled Jews to leave Iraq after renouncing their citizenship. Pressure for the law’s enactment was exerted by Prime Minister Tawfiq al-Suwaidi, a graduate of the French-Jewish Alliance network of schools. His many Jewish friends included the leader of the community, Yeskail Shemtob, and the Zionist emissary Mordechai Ben-Porat, who were also instrumental in getting the law passed. In addition to giving up their Iraqi nationality, those who left under the law waived their right to return to Iraq again in the future. The law was to remain in force for one year, and mentioned nothing about property.(22)

However, the passage of the law itself did not induce Jews to register for emigration. Indeed, the question of what motivated Iraq’s Jewish population to leave en masse remains unresolved (the subject is discussed in Meir, 1997). We do know that on April 8, 1950, a fragmentation grenade exploded near a Jewish café in Baghdad, and that in the wake of the incident there was a huge rise in the number of candidates for emigration, from 150 to about 23,000. Over the next year or so, until June 1951, four similar explosions occurred at sites associated with Jews. To date, we do not have clear evidence indicating who planted these bombs.

The rate at which the emigrants were brought to Israel fluctuated from month to month, in accordance with guidelines issued by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency’s Immigration Department. Quotas were generally low, owing to the simultaneous arrival in Israel of Jews from Eastern Europe. This left the anxious Jews of Iraq waiting their turn in a sort of limbo, having already renounced their citizenship and, subsequently having been stripped of their property. In Israel there were protests at the mere trickle of arrivals from Iraq. Officials reported to the Foreign Minister in November 1950 that the Iraqi community in Israel was “complaining at the discrimination against the Mizrahi communities in immigration quotas to Israel.”(23) Three stormy

demonstrations against the government in Israel led to a promise to raise the figure from 5000 to 6500 Iraqi immigrants per month.

In Iraq itself, local Zionist activists had seized control of the community after the leadership lost control of events. The young militants, enthralled by Zionist nationalism, were highly critical of the community's leadership, which found their approach to be in error. They branded the leader of the community, Rabbi Sasson Kadourie, a "traitor and a collaborator" with the Iraqi authorities, and according to some reports beat him and boycotted him. (Meir, 1993: 205) Under this pressure, Rabbi Kadouri and the entire community council resigned; the new leader, Heskail Shemtob, was willing to cooperate with the activists. (Meir, 1993; Swirski, 1995; Shiblak, 1986) Having taken over local leadership, the young Zionists also tried to gain control of emigration registration.

In April 1950, following the enactment of the denaturalization law, attempts were made on behalf of the State of Israel to extract Jewish property in Iraq unilaterally. Ezra Danin, an adviser to the Foreign Ministry's Middle East Division, reported that he had been requested by the Prime Minister to trade the property of Israeli Palestinians – those listed as "present" and "non-absentees" - who "will want to leave" because "they have not been able to adapt to the Jewish state" – for the property of the Jews in Iraq. (Benziman & Mansour 1992) The proposal, put forward by Ben-Gurion and Sharett, constituted a program for the planned transfer of "present" Israeli Arabs. Z. Lief, an adviser on land and borders in the Prime Minister's Office and an ardent activist in efforts to organize a transfer of Israel's Arabs, had already moved to implement the proposal with very little success.(24)

In September 1950, after the organized departure of Jews from Iraq had begun, and with the Israeli government no longer feeling threatened by an explicit transfer agreement, Sharett acknowledged publicly that the Iraqi proposal had been a genuine diplomatic option.(25)



From here, we move to the heart and soul of the human and political drama surrounding the Jewish property in Iraq and the Palestinian property in Israel.

### **Jewish Property, Palestinian Property, and *Raison d'État***

By March 1951, a year after Iraq's Jews had been given the opportunity to leave, about 105,000 Jews had registered to emigrate, though only 35,000 had actually left. The rest, having renounced their citizenship, waited. On March 10, Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id submitted a bill to the Parliament and the Senate to impound and freeze the property of Iraq's Jews, who were the richest in the Middle East.<sup>(26)</sup> To prevent transactions from being carried out in the period between the bill's enactment as law and its implementation, the Finance Ministry shut down the country's banks for three days, and the police worked to ensure that the legislation was carried out. Stores owned by Jews were sealed, vehicles and other items were confiscated, and the homes of merchants and jewelers were searched. (Gat, 1989)

The Iraqi parliament's passage of the freeze law on Jewish assets came as a gift from the gods to the Israeli government, as it relieved them of the need to make a formal declaration of support for a population exchange, and all that this entailed. Henceforth, it would be possible to characterize any such exchange of property and population as spontaneous. Sharett briefed the cabinet on the law and its implications: "...The question that arises is what we can do. Approaches to England and France are possible, of course, but...they could say: You took the property of the Arabs who left Palestine and entrusted it to a custodian - they are doing the same."<sup>(27)</sup> Sharett continued to develop the government's approach, but implications regarding Arab property remained indecisive and inchoate:

There is tremendous excitement within the Baghdad community [in Israel]. I will probably receive a delegation from them today. They will undoubtedly advise that we confiscate the property of all Arabs in Israel and give these people the property of the Arabs, which is in the possession of the state. I do not have to explain to you – you understand the problem this gives rise to...

Neither Sharett nor Ben-Gurion viewed this as a realistic option. In its place, a logic of accounting was formulated:

There is another possibility: a declaration on our part that all this will be taken into account in the payment of compensation in a final settlement, etc. Let us say that, if for the time being we have not abandoned the principle of payment of compensation, we declare that we will deduct the value of this property...

On March 19, Sharett apprised the Knesset of the government's reaction to the decision by the Iraqi parliament to freeze Jewish property. In his statement, Sharett officially and unequivocally fused the two accounts into a single equation, as he had already proposed to the cabinet:

The Government of Israel... views this episode of plunder in the spirit of the law as the continuation of the malicious regime of dispossession that has always prevailed in Iraq vis-à-vis defenseless and helpless minorities... By freezing the assets of tens of thousands of Jews who are immigrating to Israel – today stateless but citizens of Israel immediately upon their immigration – the Government of Iraq has opened an account between it and the Government of Israel. We already have an account with the Arab world, namely the account of the compensation that accrues to the Arabs who left the territory of Israel and abandoned their property... The act now committed by the Kingdom of Iraq... forces us to link the two accounts... We will take into account the value of the Jewish property that has been frozen in Iraq with respect to the compensation we have undertaken to pay the Arabs who abandoned property in Israel.(28)

With this decision – which in one fell-swoop turned the private capital of Iraq's Jews into “national capital” – the Israeli government nullified any possible alternative of independent compensation.(29) The Foreign Ministry informed the Palestine Conciliation Commission that the Government of Israel was committed to contribute toward a resolution of the refugee problem, but added: “It will be unable to honor that commitment if in addition to its other commitments to absorb new immigrants it will find itself having to undertake the rehabilitation of 100,000 Iraqi Jews.”(30)

Sharett's statement, which linked the frozen Jewish assets in Iraq with the property of the Palestinians and seemed to hold out the promise of compensation for the Iraqi Jews, was aimed at both the Iraqi Jews and the international community. It was necessary to send a message to the Iraqi Jews, as they had assailed the Zionist activists for doing nothing to salvage the community's property. The statement – the implications of which Sharett

would later disavow – had the intended effect of assuaging the concern of the Iraqi Jews, but also of generating high expectations among them. They were now convinced that they would receive restitution from the Israeli government for the property that they were leaving behind. According to a cable from the Zionist emissaries in Iraq,

Sharett's statement in the Knesset generated a very positive response among both the Jews and the Arabs. The Jews believed that they now had something to rely on, and this went a long way to relieving their state of depression... Jews whose property has been frozen are asking us whether it will be necessary to present documents in Israel proving their ownership of the frozen property, and if so how to forward these documents.(31)

S. Kahane, of the Foreign Ministry's Middle East Division, cautioned Sharett that "we have to take into account that the registration of claims may generate illusions among the new immigrants and that they are liable to demand that the Government of Israel pay them compensation from the funds of the [Arabs'] abandoned property..."(32) The chairperson of the "Movement of the Jews of Iraq and the East in Israel," insisted that the government pay compensation immediately to the Iraqi immigrants, utilizing the Arab property in Israel which was managed by the Custodian of Absentee Property.(33) In a bland reply, the Foreign Ministry assured him of "the Government of Israel's consistent concern for the fate of the property of the Jews in Iraq."(34) However, at the same time the Ministry sent an internal memorandum to the Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office explaining that the registration of property claims had the sole purpose of creating a bargaining chip regarding the Palestinian issue. The memorandum added that it was crucial to uphold the principle of collective compensation and not individual payments, as many of the refugees were demanding. "We will not, then," the author of the document noted, "be able to take the opposite approach with the Iraqi immigrants without opening the gates to a flood of private claims from tens of thousands of Arab refugees who once owned any property in the Land of Israel." In short, the Foreign Ministry's proposal – which was put into practice – was to transform the Iraqi immigrants into hostages of the Israeli government.(35)

As noted, Sharett's Knesset statement was also intended as a message to the great powers. Although in the past he had vehemently opposed the transfer option, the frozen property in Iraq afforded him a golden opportunity to lock in a closet the skeleton of the Palestinians' rights. Even though Sharett himself knew that the plundered Palestinian property was vastly more valuable than the estimated worth of the Jewish property in Iraq, he nonetheless allowed the Foreign Ministry to "release" exaggerated appraisals of the respective worth of the two accounts. In a cable to the Israeli legation in Paris, Walter Eytan noted (Sept. 16, 1951): "The mutual release of frozen deposits should include Iraq...The value of the frozen deposits of Arabs in Israel is estimated at five and a half million pounds, whereas the value of the frozen deposits of the Jews in Iraq is at least twenty million and perhaps even thirty to forty million."[\(36\)](#)

On March 27, 1951, Sharett met with U.S. Undersecretary of State G. McGhee, in the presence of the U.S. ambassador to Israel.[\(37\)](#) Sharett reasserted the Israeli government's promise, and enlisted the German reparations to Israel as a possible source for enabling its implementation. On May 1, 1951, the United States announced that, if the Israeli government were to take positive action to accelerate the transfer of the frozen property of the Palestinian refugees, it would be possible to approach Baghdad with a similar request.[\(38\)](#) In its reply, the Government of Israel rejected the comparison, but reiterated its readiness to pay restitution for the "abandoned property" as part of a peace agreement.[\(39\)](#) Britain, too, maintained that the Iraqis' impounding of Jewish property was not an original idea: Israel had set the precedent. No attempt to effect a settlement would be useful, the British believed, unless Israel either released the refugees' property or paid compensation. (Gat, 1989)

The Israeli government's creation of the linked property account was a singular act – something of a historic milestone – that constructed a zero-sum equation between the Jews of the Arab countries and the Palestinians in Israel. The political theory that underlay the Israeli government's construction of that equation rested on a system of moral, diplomatic, and economic

assumptions that resulted in a practice of nationalization and naturalization riddled with contradictions. The Government of Israel automatically assumed that the Jewish ethnicity of the Iraqi Jews meant that they harbored a Zionist orientation. It “endowed” them de facto with that particular form of national identity before they had any intention of immigrating to Israel, and certainly without having obtained their consent. The Foreign Ministry was aware that the Iraqi Jews could not be considered refugees and, still less, citizens of Israel.<sup>(40)</sup> The process of nationalizing and naturalizing the Iraqi Jews – while they were still in Iraq – was collective rather than individual. The parties in question were not consulted. As Sharett put it, “I said that we will not rely on the free choice of the refugees, but that this is a question of an agreement between states.”<sup>(41)</sup> On the basis of this naturalization, the Israeli government “appropriated” the property of all of Iraq’s Jews in order to utilize it – rhetorically, symbolically, and judicially – as state property in every respect. Files in the State Archive containing the correspondence of the Foreign Ministry on the property of Iraq’s Jews bear the revealing title “*Protection of Israeli Property.*”<sup>(42)</sup>

As soon as the immigration of Iraqi Jews was concluded, the Israeli government turned its back on the new arrivals. The Foreign Ministry objected to the establishment of a special ministry to register their claims deriving from their frozen property. Sharett maintained that his statement in the Knesset had not been a commitment to compensate the Iraqi Jews. What he had meant, he explained, was that “the value of the Jewish property that was frozen in Iraq will be taken into account when the time comes to discuss compensation. That time has not yet come, there is no knowing when it will come, and the entire matter will be worked out in due course.” (Gat, 1989: 137)

Sharett’s declaration that the question of Jewish property in Iraq would be taken into account in the future was put to an empirical test several times: in 1951 at the end of the wave of immigration; in the mid-1950s; in the 1970s, during the peace-talks with Egypt; during the Gulf War; and at the present, within the context of peace negotiations with the Palestinians. In 1951 a

government commission was established to document Jewish property left in Iraq. The documentation was carried out while immigrants were still in transit camps. Archival documents show that the commission was not created out of concern for the property of Iraqi Jews; rather, its report was to be used by the Israeli government as a buffer in the face of future claims for compensation resulting from the nationalization of Palestinian property by Custodian of Absentee Property. Thus, in an attempt to conceal this manipulation, the officials who drew up the document establishing the commission wrote:

It is proposed not to announce, at least for the time being, that registration of personal claims is being carried out with the aim of deducting the value of the Jewish property frozen in Iraq from the payment of compensation for abandoned Arab property.<sup>(43)</sup>

In 1955, public pressure forced the establishment of another commission to register the claims of Iraqi immigrants. The commission sent a report, dated December 17, 1956, to the Foreign Ministry, which ignored it. (Gat, 1989: 221) The officials suggested that registration should be carried out by an extra-governmental body in order to avert a situation in which the government would have to assume responsibility vis-à-vis the Iraqi Jews. On the eve of the commission's establishment in October 1955, the Prime Minister ordered that Iraqi immigrants presenting their claims not be asked about movables they had left behind, since "their registration is liable to conflict with our policy of restitution to the Arab refugees, which is confined solely to immovables."<sup>(44)</sup> MK Shlomo Hillel, who had been one of the leading Zionist activists in Iraq, was involved in making this decision, which constituted one of the government's most cynical acts in its treatment of the Iraqi community in Israel.

The equation of counter-balancing claims adduced by the Government of Israel was put to a third empirical test during the peace-talks with Egypt. When Shlomo Hillel, speaking in the Knesset in 1979, raised the issue of a connection between the peace treaty and the Jewish property in Arab countries, Prime Minister Menahem Begin gave a non-committal response: "... The problem of the Jewish property that was plundered in the Arab states, not

just in one country, has been and will be raised in all the discussions. It has also been raised and will be raised in our talks with Egypt, as we have agreed to the establishment of a claims committee in which each side will put forward its claims. When the day comes, we will submit our claim for the return of the illegally taken property.” (Hillel, 1985: 325) The Government of Israel created the equation but ignored its practical implications. The government also failed to assume responsibility for compensating one or more of the sides in the transfer equation. Shlomo Hillel, too, grasped the great fraud of the property equation, even with respect to the Palestinians:

...If the day comes when the Arab refugees will consent to accept compensation from Israel for their abandoned property, we will not be able to tell them that, in fact, matters between us and Iraq have already ‘been worked out’ – in other words, that Iraq plundered the property of the Jews who lived there and the former Iraqi Jews received in return the property of the Arabs who left the State of Israel. For Iraq is among the Arab states that did not take in refugees, and it is very doubtful that the refugees will view it as a party to any sort of deal. (Hillel, 1985: 324)

The theory of national accounting surfaced again with even greater intensity in the 1970s, due to fears associated with the rise of the Palestinian national movement. In 1975, the newly-established World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) argued that Palestinian refugees should not be allowed back into Israel, since an involuntary population exchange had already taken place in the Middle East. Speaking at the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1977, Mordechai Ben Porat stated that “the problem of the Arab and Jewish refugees in the Middle East can find its practical solution only within the framework of de facto exchanges of population, which have already taken place.” In the following sections, I describe in more detail the history of this organization and its position vis-a-vis the claims of the Palestinian national movement. The case of WOJAC provides an instructive opportunity to observe how territorial boundaries and citizenship statuses challenge the coherency of national claims, as well as the link between ethnicity and nationalism.

## **WOJAC and the Anomalous Relationship between the “National” and the “Ethnic”**

### *The foundation of an ‘ethnic’ organization.*

The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) functioned for approximately 25 years (1975-1999). In 1975, then vice-chair of the Knesset, Mordechai Ben-Porat summoned representatives of the various associations of Jews from Arab countries to a meeting in Tel Aviv. There, it was decided to establish WOJAC.

Throughout its existence, the organization was supported by the Foreign Ministry and the Jewish Agency. As Efraim Evron a senior member of the Ministry explained: “The [Foreign] Ministry played an important role not only in establishing the organization, but also in encouraging it and providing it with assistance for the continuation and intensification of its activities.” (23/3/78) During the years of its existence, WOJAC held international conventions in Paris (1975), London (1982), and Washington (1987), as well as four conventions in Israel; it also established branches in various locations around the world, including New York, London, Rome and Zurich. WOJAC ceased to function in July 1999, due to the termination of Foreign Ministry and Jewish Agency support.

WOJAC was extremely conscious of documentation; all conventions were recorded and transcribed, Executive meetings were summarized in print, and the organization produced hundreds of documents, including letters, booklets, books and articles. This rich collection of material was stored in an office in Tel Aviv, and at the beginning of 1998, the process of moving it to the Central Zionist Archives began. At this point I approached the organization’s Executive and requested access to the material. A copy of the entire archive was placed at my disposal in March 1998. Recall, that standard CZA’s references did not exist yet. Hence, unlike the citation system used above, in the references pertaining to WOJAC I use dates and names only



Ben-Porat, who became one of the leading forces behind WOJAC, had an impressive record of Israeli public service. He had worked in the “organization for illegal immigration” (*ha-Mosad l’Aliya-bet*) and had been the primary architect of the operation to help Jews leave Iraq and immigrate to Israel. In 1950-1, he served as the head of the Or-Yehuda Council, and established and chaired the Center for the Heritage of Iraqi Jewry. He had been a Knesset member for years, and later served as Minister without portfolio in the government of Menahem Begin and as a Mosad emissary to Iran.<sup>(45)</sup> Some WOJAC activists were MAPAI Knesset members, like Matilda Gez, Ben-Tziyon Halfon, and Menahem Yedid. Later, other activists joined the organization, including Shimon Avizemer (Association of Yemenite Immigrants), Ora Shveitzer, Malka Hilel-Shulevitz and Prof. Ya’akov Meron (an official of the Ministry of Justice).<sup>(46)</sup> At points, WOJAC included researchers and academics, such as Dr. Maurice Roumani (who was also the organization’s Executive Director), Prof. Yehuda Nini, Prof. Shimon Shitrit, Dr. Shalom Zaki, Prof. Shmuel Moreh, Dr. Nissim Qazzaz and Prof. Rafael Yisrael.

Despite its support of WOJAC, the Israeli Government was less than enthusiastic about the establishment of the organization. When Mordechai Ben-Porat approached then Foreign Minister Yigal Alon in 1974 (Rabin’s first government) and told him about the idea of establishing the organization, Alon openly expressed his concern that it would be an “ethnic organization.” We know you and trust you, Alon told Ben Porat, but what will happen if it falls into the hands of someone who exploits it for ethnic mobilization? (Personal interview with Mordechai Ben-Porat, 16/3/98; see also the 2nd Convention of the World Executive, 11/9/79, p.10) Yigal Alon was troubled primarily because the organization was established at a gathering that included representatives of the associations of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries.<sup>(47)</sup>

Moshe Dayan, Foreign Minister in the government of Menahem Begin and a personal friend of Ben-Porat, did not share Alon’s fears of an ethnic organization. Still, he requested that the tone of activities be kept moderate: “I’m keeping you on the back-burner until the time comes when I need you.”

(Ora Shveitzer, 4th National Convention, 16/12/93, p.62) In an October 1977 address to the United Nations, Dayan used a draft of a text prepared by Ben-Porat in order to insert “the rights of Jews from Arab countries” into negotiations with the Arab states. During Dayan’s term as Foreign Minister, a coordinating committee between WOJAC and the Foreign Ministry was established.

Despite the minor misgivings, it was generally accepted that WOJAC had been established as a tool to assist the State of Israel and the Israeli Foreign Ministry in the national arena. (Meeting of the WOJAC Actions Committee, 11/3/76, p.13) Upon the establishment of WOJAC, Ben-Porat posited that the State of Israel had not made effective use of the past of Jews from Arab countries, and argued that this past was instrumental in the political arena in which Israel was active. The organization’s Executive formulated three major political assertions, all of which were intended to offset the main three claims of the Palestinian national movement;

- One) that of the historic nature of a Jewish national and religious presence in the Middle East;
- Two) that the Middle East had witnessed a de-facto mutual population exchange of Arab refugees and Jewish refugees; and
- Three) that the property of these Arabs and Jews could be counterbalanced due to the population exchange.

These three positions, which were formulated in the mid-1970’s, gained additional validity after the peace treaty with Egypt and the beginning of the debate regarding the Palestinian refugees. According to the members of WOJAC’s Executive, these assertions would enable Israel to argue for the legitimate rights of the Jews in the Land of Israel (the historic nature of the Jewish presence in the Middle East), against the legitimacy of a Palestinian right of return (de-facto population transfer) and for the denial of Palestinian demands for compensation for property that had been confiscated by Custodian of Absentee Property. Members of the organization’s Executive established a direct linkage between the establishment of WOJAC and activities of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Years later, Dr. Jaques Barnes declared: “We are the Jewish answer to the PLO...to the right

of return...that is why we exist.” (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16/12/93, p.48)

*WOJAC and the Zionist collective memory*

Ben-Porat argued numerous times in various ways that one of the primary factors motivating the establishment of the organization was the need to incorporate the history of the Jews of Arab countries into the national collective memory: “I am not comparing what we experienced – the Jews of Arab countries - to the experience of our brothers in Europe. We were luckier. Still, the pain is felt by all of us together, and our subject should have been utilized.” (2nd Convention of the World Executive, 11/9/79, p.4a) Later, when it became clear that WOJAC had not become an attractive organization for purposes of Israeli foreign policy, Dr. Jaques Barnes complained: “We were not able to find anyone who would use [our] issue as they used the Holocaust.” “When someone comes to the State of Israel,” he continued, “he is taken to see the Holocaust...regrettably, WOJAC’s issue is never raised, and, when it is raised, it is abandoned very quickly.” (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16/12/93, p.47) In other words, just as “the Holocaust” (which was referred to frequently in the discussions of WOJAC) was “an issue”, the Jews of Arab countries had “an issue” as well.

WOJAC’s work focused on imagining the past and making use of this imaginary past for the crystallization and establishment of Jewish nationalism in the Middle East. Explicit regard for issues of memory was present throughout the discussions of WOJAC, due, among other reasons, to the involvement of professional historians in the organization. At the third National Convention, one of the leaders of the WOJAC Executive, Shlomo Tusia-Cohen, explained that “History was meant to eternalize a situation for [the sake of] memory.” (3rd National WOJAC Convention, 5/4/90) Another example of this approach was the proposal of Prof. Dan Sagra of Stanford University to take on conscious, explicit work geared towards shaping memory:

There is practically no accumulation of collective memory on the subject. Such a situation calls for a concentrated effort in the elaboration of easily

remembered messages such as rhymes, rhythms, metaphors, cliches, paradoxes, parodies...For instance, cliches like 'the forgotten million' are not only effective carriers of powerful messages but are also valid responses to the unchecked attempts of the PLO to substitute images of suffering Palestinians for those of persecuted Jews in the Western public's consciousness and unconsciousness. (3rd National Convention, 5/4/90, p.33)

Sagra proposed a rhetorical "tool-box" for a struggle in the arena of culture. (Swidler, 1986; Gieryn, 1983; Latour, 1987)

These new versions of the past put forward in WOJAC conventions ruptured the coherency of the traditional Zionist narrative and threatened to blur the distinctions between the internal ethnic sphere and the external national sphere of action. In this respect Yigal Alon's fears regarding the ethnic issue were not without foundation. Immediately following the establishment of WOJAC, a short struggle erupted between Eliyahu Eliashar and Mordechai Ben-Porat as to the actual need for such an organization. David Siton, Chairman of the "Committee of Jerusalem's Sefardic and Eastern Communities," wrote Ben-Porat in July 1975, expressing wonder as to why Ben-Porat had not invited a representative of this community to WOJAC's founding convention. Siton pointed to the work of Eliyahu Eliashar, President of the community, on issues of Jews from Arab countries, as well as the fact that the journals "*Hed Hamizrakh*" and "*B'Ma'aracha*" had also demanded that Eastern Jews be involved in the political negotiations, including the issue of compensation for property. Siton even sent along Eliashar's book "Living With Palestinians" (*Lekhiyot im Falastinim*) in order to illustrate his points.<sup>(48)</sup> He demanded the inclusion of his organization in a joint-effort with WOJAC. (9/7/75) Ben-Porat was alarmed by the "ethnic context" of this exchange and informed Siton that "members of the general council...strongly object to existing under the umbrella of the Committee of the Sefardic Community." (28/7/75)

In response, Eliashar wrote in *Ha'aretz* that "the organization that was founded today to address this issue is a government organ. Its expenses are paid by the Foreign Ministry, and it will deal with the issue according to the guidance of the same establishment that refused to fulfill the demand that

Jews from Arab countries be included in information dissemination....”

(28/11/75) Eliashar continued: “The establishment has placed the issue of the compensation that we must demand from the Arab states at the top of the organization’s agenda on this subject - as if all other complaints have been settled, and the only issue left is the financial one...” In a letter to the editor of *Ha’aretz*, Ben-Porat expressed great surprise at Eliashar’s attack and stated that the compensation thesis was only a lowly-ranked addition to the priorities of WOJAC. He explain that, according to the list of priorities determined by the organization, its goals were: (1) to explain that a population exchange had taken place; (2) to explain our right to this land from the perspective of Jews from Arab countries as well, based on a presence of thousands of years in the Middle East; and (3) “To publicize the harsh living conditions of the ‘Jewish refugees’ that were absorbed despite the difficulties facing the country.” Ben-Porat was hurt by the fact that Eliashar regarded members of WOJAC as “...representatives of the establishment worthy of ridicule.” In contrast, Executive members, including Ben-Porat, saw in WOJAC “...an independent, political body that will represent the issues of Jews from Arab countries in Israel and throughout the world, in all negotiations and all peace agreements.”<sup>(49)</sup> They regarded WOJAC as a body that was to function in the national-political arena, and not in Israel’s domestic arena. WOJAC members offered the past of Jews from Arab countries as natural “raw material” with which to imagine and justify Jewish nationalism in the Middle East. Employing ‘nationalist’ arguments and not ‘ethnic’ arguments that lead to internal divisions, WOJAC made a stubborn effort to be incorporated into mainstream Israeli collective action.

These exchanges between Eliashar and Ben-Porat reflect the fundamental contradiction that lies at the base of the Zionist logic that adopted ethnicity as the foundation for national Jewish identity, but rejected the same ethnicity due to its divisive nature. Jewish immigrants from Arab countries endowed Jewish-Israeli nationalism with tribal legitimacy (reunification of the twelve tribes). Due to their past and their traditional value system, however, these immigrants remained the “others” of the Israeli collective - ‘close’, but still ‘foreign’. This

complexity reflects the hybrid status of Jews from Arab countries and the problematic nature of distinguishing between the 'external' (i.e. the national and international arena) and the 'internal' (i.e. the ethnic arena). It was within this complex ideological context that WOJAC functioned, and the conflict with Siton and Eliashar lent credence to the Foreign Ministry's reservations about the organization and its emerging 'ethnic' discourse.

The story of WOJAC – an organization that functioned in domains with fluid boundaries – is far from homogenous. The organization does not speak in one voice, rather in a number of voices. While attempting to construct a Zionist historical narrative, these voices simultaneously challenged this narrative and created its own antithesis. As a "community of memory", WOJAC did not function within a well-constructed site with a known trail; it functioned, rather, as a heterodox, creating a spontaneous challenge to the familiar established algorithms of the rule of collective memory.<sup>(50)</sup> WOJAC put forward new versions of the past that ruptured the coherency of the traditional Zionist narrative and threatened to blur the distinctions between the internal ethnic sphere and the external national sphere of action. Representing this spectrum of voices enables us to challenge existing teleological national narratives and to bring their 'objective possibilities' to the surface.<sup>(51)</sup>

As argued above, in the process of imagining the past of Jews from Arab countries, WOJAC put forward three Zionist political assertions. Each one of these assertions was meant to serve the political interests of the State of Israel. But, as will become clear below, each one disrupted the Zionist dialogue and deconstructed its traditional basic assumptions. This unintentional deconstruction was an obstacle for the further survival of WOJAC. In the next section I will present the voices which pertain to the property question alone.

#### *WOJAC and the compensation question*

When WOJAC began functioning in the 1970's, it adopted the theory of "accounting" developed by the Israeli Government during the 1950's. This theory forestalled any possibility of individual claims for compensation, and

made use of the assets of Jews from Arab countries as if they were state-property, at the disposal of the State of Israel. According to this theory, the submission of private property claims of individuals to the Egyptian Government (within the auspices of the peace agreement) would weaken the State in future negotiations with the Palestinians. When WOJAC demanded compensation for the property of Jews from Arab countries, it did not mean the monetary compensation of Jews from Arab countries themselves. It was advancing, rather, a demand for rights to this property, in order to transfer them to the State of Israel and subsequently use them to counterbalance claims made by the Palestinian refugees against Israel. In the words of the attorney Shlomo Tusia-Cohen:

We believe that the day will come when [the sides] will sit down to discuss the claims of refugees and Arabs that were displaced, in a practical, decisive manner. A counter-claim for property left in the Arab countries will already exist, as a sort of counterbalance that will be [in place] when the time comes to meet. (3rd National Convention, 5/4/90)

Or, as WOJAC Chairperson Oved Ben-Ozer declared: “We are deeply convinced that the State of Israel – as the defender of the life, rights and interests of Jews throughout the world – has full moral right to be charged with responsibility for the property left by Jews in their countries of origin.” (18/7/93) According to his argument, the State of Israel represented not only its own citizens, but the entire Jewish people. The dowry that WOJAC offered the State of Israel was free-use of the property of all Jews from Arab countries (not just those who were Israeli citizens) in order not to compensate the Palestinians for the injustice done to them in the 1940’s.

In this equation of deterrence – between Israel and the Palestinians – WOJAC refrained from quoting exact figures regarding estimates of the value of Jewish property left in Arab countries, and, if such estimates did exist, they were kept secret. The fear was that monetary estimates would induce the PLO to make estimates of its own that would become established as “facts” with which to reckon. Moreover, it was also feared that mutual announcements of estimates would cause the parties to enter into a competition for the higher estimate, and to therefore quote astronomical

figures. A number of times, Ben-Porat himself proposed implementing a policy of financial vagueness. In 1976, he explained: “Even today, we have neither the documents nor a good foundation in order to establish how much property we left in the Arab countries. It is also my opinion that we do not need to make special efforts to obtain numbers or estimates. There is no need for it. I am not saying that we do not need to seriously begin – not to begin, rather to intensify – the already existing registration. The Legal Department and the Ministry of Justice began registration, and before that a few other registration efforts had been undertaken.” (Seminar with the Center for Information, 1/2/76)

In November 1992, WOJAC drafted a letter to Jews from Arab countries in preparation for negotiations with the Palestinians. In part, the letter read as follows: “In light of the political developments, compensation for Jews from Arab countries is likely to be brought up for discussion in the near future. In order to facilitate our organization’s preparation, we have decided to turn to the public...” (Internal letter, 16/11/92) But, due to the policy of vagueness regarding property value estimates, the organization’s Executive changed its mind and called off the initiative. Ben-Porat expressed his reservations about exact figures with the following warning: “We must be careful about numbers, gentleman. People can talk privately, but the Executive of the organization must not come out with numbers at the present time.” (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16/12/93) WOJAC members were concerned that their concrete estimates would encourage Palestinian counter-claims, and that these would become part of the agenda at a time when, and in a situation for which, Israel would be unprepared. It was, therefore, an equation of mutual deterrence, as Ben-Porat confirmed: “It is better to leave it as an overall illusion.” We know for certain that, until today, a serious process of registration of this property has not been undertaken, and that estimates kept in the safe of the Ministry of Justice (the Division of Arab Law) are based on the registration of 3,000-4,000 families at most.”

In 1999, when interim negotiations with the Palestinians were underway, another attempt was made to register Jewish property. This time, the effort



was a joint-initiative of the Prime Minister's Office and the World Sefardic Federation. This body formulated a property registration questionnaire and sent thousands of copies to synagogues of Mizrahi Jews in North America, Europe and Israel. The form was accompanied by the following explanation: "As representatives of Jews from Arab countries, we request that you take part in the completion of an essential project, the goal of which is to gather information about Jewish property in Arab countries. This information will serve as the basis for counter-claims in the future final negotiations between Israel and the Arab states."<sup>(52)</sup> The Palestinian reaction to this effort was quick to emerge. In response to the form distributed by the Federation, Daud Barakat, the Palestinian coordinator for negotiations on the refugee issue, asserted: "There is no linkage. Israel will need to negotiate directly with Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt. We do not represent these states."<sup>(53)</sup>

#### *Cracks in the National Accounting Theory*

The sharpest challenge to the property thesis, however, came from within WOJAC, from members who were not Israeli citizens.<sup>(54)</sup> Three of them, Prof. Yehezkel Hadad from New York, Rafaelo Falah from Rome and Na'im Dangur from London, gave voice to a different opinion than that of the Executive, at times responding in open rebellion. They argued that the State of Israel had no right to use Jewish property in Arab countries for its own political purposes, by covering-up the fact that some claimants were not Israeli citizens. The arguments of these non-Israeli Jews are reminiscent of Dr. Nahum Goldman's protests to Ben-Gurion regarding the German reparation payments (*ha-Shilumim*), when he asked the Israeli Prime Minister to not speak in the name of the Jewish people, rather only in the name of the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion regarded Israel's claims against Germany as an opportunity to establish the State's sovereignty not only over its own citizens, but over the entire Jewish people as well. These arguments are also similar, in certain respects, to the voices of Jews living in Europe (primarily Eastern Europe) that opposed the representation of their interests by WJRO (World Jewish Restitution Organization), which was established by the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Agency.<sup>(55)</sup>

The issues of rights and citizenship came to a head at WOJAC's fourth national convention in 1993. Yihezkel Haddad expressed his position on the question of citizenship: "We have a problem that there are close to one million Jews from Arab countries that live outside of the State of Israel...some of them came to Israel and then left the country, giving up their Israeli citizenship. Others went directly – like the Algerians, who all went to France. These people also have rights, and the State of Israel cannot control this issue..." (4th National Convention, Tel Aviv, 16/12/93, p.36) Haddad had already experienced a run-in with WOJAC members in 1978, when he met with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat on his own initiative, contrary to the position of WOJAC (Haddad had, at that point, been a member of the organization's Executive). Haddad wanted to take advantage of the momentum of the peace process with Egypt in order to create a new reality. Because of this visit, Haddad was reprimanded by the WOJAC Executive. (Executive meeting, 1/6/78) Haddad reconciled himself to this rebuke, and tried to justify his actions by explaining that he had not actually met with Sadat about the issue of compensation, rather in order to obtain his principled acknowledgement of the rights of Jews from Arab countries in their countries of origin. Haddad's explanation did not satisfy the Executive; he left the meeting angrily, and the Executive subsequently resolved to dismiss him from the forum. (Protocol of Executive Meeting, 20/8/78) In 1999, when the issue was again raised in preparation for final status agreements with the Palestinians, Haddad repeated: "[Israel] has no legal right to represent the Jews from Arab countries that live outside of Israel, and it has no right to link our claims to those of the Palestinians."(56)

Na'im Dangur, a resident of London and also a member of WOJAC, began to publish sharp criticism of WOJAC's thesis of counterbalancing claims in the early 1990's. He accused Israel of making cynical use of the property of non-Israeli Jews in order to further aims that were not their own. In an August 1993 letter to Ben-Ozer, Dangur stressed that Israel had no right to treat this property as if it were its own. After receiving no response, Dangur warned that he intended to consult attorneys both inside and outside of Israel. (Letter from

Dangur, 16/8/93) And, in fact, a month later he contacted WOJAC by means of an Israeli attorney:

The December 1993 WOJAC convention is approaching, and Mr. Na'im Dangur needs to present your stance before the Jews from Arab countries in England and other parts of Europe sufficiently prior to the date of the convention. This is in order to enable them to decide upon steps to take at the convention, and so that Mr. Na'im Dangur will be able to determine his position as an individual and as a representative of the Jews from Arab countries that are not Israeli citizens. (29/9/93)

In another letter to the WOJAC Executive in October 1993, just before the upcoming convention, Dangur wrote the following: "The Jews have an argument for the division of assets in the Middle East...WOJAC must make it clear that compensation will be paid to individual Jewish refugees and will not be used solely to counterbalance the claims of the Palestinians." (5/10/93). Dangur asked to speak at WOJAC's fourth national convention, and there he voiced his criticism of the fact that the interests of Jews of Arab countries were being subordinated to the interests of the State. WOJAC Chairperson Shimon Avizemer tried to prevent Dangur's active participation in the convention. (1/11/93) In December 1993 (that is, directly following the initiation of talks with the Palestinians) in his journal *The Scribe*, Dangur reiterated his unequivocal stance:

We fear that, in an effort to reach a quick settlement regarding compensation, Israel will toss-in the Jewish claims in order to counterbalance the Palestinian [claims]...WOJAC...has always served as a tool of the Israeli Government...*They have no authority to negotiate with our rights in our countries of origin* (emphasis added). (p.4)

In response to claims of Israeli officials that the Government had invested many billions in the absorption of the Jews of Arab countries, and therefore had the right to make use of their property, Dangur retorted sharply: "They certainly did not invest those billions on me."<sup>(57)</sup> When WOJAC Chairperson Oved Ben-Ozer announced the dissolution of WOJAC on 14/7/99, Dangur responded: "I am sorry to hear about the dissolution of WOJAC. This step was unavoidable, as, for the past 15 years, WOJAC has unjustifiably feigned

acting in the interests of Jews from Arab countries, while it was actually a mere tool in the hands of the Israeli Government.”(58)

Rafaelo Falah, a member of WOJAC, a resident of Rome and President of the World Association of Libyan Jews, was another rebel within the organization. Falah met with Libyan President Mu’amar Kadaffi in February 1993, in the presence of former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti.(59) Falah reported that Kadaffi intended to set up a joint commission consisting of representatives of Libya and Italian Jews that had left Iraq, in order to discuss the issue of paying monetary compensation to Libyan ex-patriots for property that they had left in the country.(60) On this occasion, the Libyan Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad ‘Ali Ya’ush stated: “There is no room to establish linkage between Palestinian compensation and compensation for Jews that left the Arab countries in which they lived.”(61)

WOJAC was furious with Falah’s actions and denounced them. WOJAC Chairperson Oved Ben-Ozer wrote: “It cannot be that a member of the organization can undertake political activity on his own initiative with no prior coordination, especially when the issue in question is so central to WOJAC’s work - that is, compensation for the Jewish property which was left in the Arab countries...” Ben-Ozer continued, stressing that “the principle that has guided WOJAC since the beginning of its work – and this was the main issue - is the future security of the State of Israel, without which the Jewish people has no future.” “Peace treaties,” he asserted, were the highest priorities at that point, “and must be promoted before dealing with any other issue.” (Letter to Yosef Ben-Aharon, 25/7/93) Ben-Ozer offered no further clarification of this statement.

As the December 1993 convention approached, Falah was cautioned to avoid using the podium to encourage individuals to meet with leaders of Arab countries. Falah seems to have adhered to this warning, and early in the convention he tried to eliminate the impression of a contradiction between “world Jewry” and the “Zionist position,” as both were equally geared to the “Jewish vision.” (16/12/93, p.20) Falah continued in a reconciled tone: “I never

accepted the separation created by a passport...our ideological homeland, regardless of passport, is Israel.” In an effort to defend his personal meeting with Kadaffi, he further tried to explain how his actions did not imply a contradiction: “Don’t think if someone shakes Arafat’s hand, or Kadaffi’s, or tomorrow even Saddam Hussesin’s, that he plans to sell his Judaism.” (16/12/93, p.24) Falah’s words reflect confusion in his conception of religion, nationality and citizenship. It also induced an uproar in the hall, which was already charged with tension. It seemed to convention participants that Falah was attempting to indirectly voice criticism on the issue of counterbalancing claims, and they therefore tried to silence him. The argument flared, and Falah brought up the letters of reprimand from the WOJAC Executive that he had received after his meeting with Kadaffi.

It is important to note that Falah was also a member of the World Sefardic Federation, an organization with complex relations with WOJAC due primarily to the fact that the latter did not want to be identified as an “ethnic” organization. Falah continued, announcing that the World Sefardic Federation would soon visit the Arab states and suggesting the coordination of the trip with the WOJAC Executive:

It will be bad if...there will be no coordinated policy of the Jews from Arab countries.” (p.29) “I am one member of a large delegation that is supposed to visit King Hasan, President Mubarak, maybe the President of Tunisia, with whom I am presently working, and maybe King Hussein as well...it will be very bad if WOJAC will not be represented. (p.31)

Leon Taman, the president of WOJAC, feared that Falah was suggesting a possible merger with an “ethnic organization” and asked him to step down from the podium. At the conclusion of these attacks, Mordechai Ben-Porat rose to respond to the criticism of the organization by the three rebels and a number of non-Israeli Jews. In his response, Ben-Porat strove to simultaneously preserve the Pan-Jewish character of the organization, as well as its unequivocal connection to the State of Israel.

We have among us members, members of the World Executive, that are not citizens of the State of Israel. They, of course, fully support the State of Israel and surely hope, as we Israelis do, that, despite everything, the Government

will not be harmed...This is also in the interest of the State of Israel and its security...What does one of our people, living somewhere in the world, gain when he receives some form of compensation, if the security of the State of Israel is compromised?...We are speaking both as Israelis and as Jews from Arab countries - both of these things. (4th National Convention, Sheraton Hotel, Tel-Aviv, 16/12/93)

Ben-Porat had two reservations regarding the separation of Jewish and Israeli interests. Firstly, such a separation threatened to weaken Israel's political position of not being represented by diaspora Jews, rather only by Israeli citizens. Secondly, it had the potential to create a Palestinian analogy, which would open the door to similar individual claims by members of the Palestinian diaspora. Yehezkel Hadad confirmed this: "...As a person living in the diaspora...I want to point out the dangers of raising the arguments and rights of Jews that do not live in Israel. This was brought to my attention by Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin in private conversations, and by Yossi Hadas and Moshe Raviv as well, in extremely private conversations. They fear that our persistence regarding the diaspora issue could open a Pandora's box that would allow all the Palestinians living outside of the country to make similar claims." (4th National Convention, Tel-Aviv, 16/12/93, p.41)

Another test of WOJAC's stance took place during the Gulf War in 1991. Prof. Yoram Dinshtein, President of Tel-Aviv University and an expert in international law suggested taking advantage of the opportunity by adding-on compensation claims of individual Jews for property confiscated in Iraq in the 1950's. Both the Foreign Ministry and WOJAC were opposed to this proposal because it threatened to weaken Israel's negotiating position. Dinshtein later explained:

The missed opportunity came with the Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War... I suggested attempting...on such a festive occasion, to include at least some of the Jewish claims... (not) Israeli citizens, but there was most certainly a reasonable chance of adding claims of citizens of the coalition countries that fought against Iraq.... The opportunity was missed." (p.140) "We had a chance then of including at least part of the compensation owed to the Jews of Iraq... and, as you know, opportunities do not repeat themselves. (p.141) (Tel Aviv, 16/12/93)

The battle over property rights was not, and is not, an economic battle alone. Possibly, it is not an economic battle at all, as the majority of participants in the discussions and debates clearly recognized the extremely slim chances that Arab countries would compensate its former citizens. It was a symbolic process that reflected the complex relationship between “Jewish identity” (*Yehudiut*) and “Israeli identity” (*Israeliyut*). The distinction between these two poles, which actually represent the transition from a “Jewish people” to an “Israeli” people, was blurred by the classical conception of Zionism. The power of Zionist practice and historiography was derived from the non-historical use of both of these poles, which nourished and validated one another, in a process of obfuscation and clarification. The objection of non-Israeli Jews to the symbolic use of their property was regarded by the Israeli Foreign Ministry and WOJAC as both threatening the jurisdiction of the State and sharpening the distinction between the two poles.

From their own perspective, however, these non-Israeli Jews were struggling to create a private memory not confined to the frozen narrative of the Israeli “districts of memory” - a memory that had been deported by the State. In other words, an Iraqi Jew living in London or New York announced that he was unwilling to have his personal history told exclusively in the formative language of the State, while, at the same time, he wanted to be part of it. This challenge disrupted the anomaly of Jewish nationalism and its blurring of the distinction between people and nation, and between nation and citizenship. It was a battle over memory.

### **Conclusions**

Following the freezing of Jewish assets in Iraq, the Government of Israel turned this frozen private capital into national capital. Invoking this property, the government put forward arguments, ideas for counter-balancing and juridical claims.<sup>(62)</sup> The Jews of Iraq became hostages – and a fig leaf – of the Israeli government in its efforts to divest itself of responsibility for compensating the Palestinian refugees. Indeed, declarations made by Israel, combined with the registration of property carried out by various committees and the activities of emissaries, created the impression that it intended to

compensate the Iraqi Jews. Warnings regarding the possible consequences of such compensation are contained in internal documents of Israeli government ministries.

A condition of the equation of counter-balancing claims was that the Palestinians' national identity be annulled and that they be categorized as part of a "united Arab nation," which included Iraq and other Arab countries. That approach forged one of the most pungent illusions harbored by Israel in its brief history ("There is no Palestinian people"). The equation of counter-balancing claims cynically constructed the interests of Jews and Arabs as conflicting a priori. The conceptual model that guided the Zionist leadership vis-à-vis the Jews of Iraq, as well as other communities, held that Jewish identity and Zionist identity were one and the same. The national leadership assumed a monopoly over the community and its property, even though neither the one nor the other was located in its territorial domain. This same model is also discernible in the case of the reparations received by the Government of Israel from Germany in the wake of the events of the Second World War.

In the sociology of national movements, this model is termed by Anthony Smith "diaspora nationalism." It conceives world Jewry as a dispersed ethnic community aspiring to return to a territory which it claims as its national home. (Smith, 1995; Tzur, 1997b) Tzur, in his discussion of Zionism as "diaspora nationalism" or a "nationalism of dispersions," maintains that this form of nationalism generates more acute internal conflicts and rifts than is the case among national movements based on the territorial model. While this conclusion is undoubtedly correct, we have to take a step back and argue that it is incorrect to assume a priori that all diaspora communities sharing the same ethnic origin divide their nationalist feelings equally, if at all. Indeed, we can definitely assume (if only as a working hypothesis) that political elites make use of nationalism as constituting rhetoric and practice which nullify the will and the status of peripheral ethnic communities. (Hobsbawm, 1992) In the case of the Mizrahi Jews, such communities may assign nationalism a different interpretation than the one preferred by the center.



The concept of “diaspora nationalism” locates the Jewish ethno-linguistic community within the Zionist narrative, in which it is assumed a priori that the place of every Jewish community is in Israel. This is a retrospective conclusion. It presupposes that the outcome of the Zionist project in the twentieth century is the only possible and desirable historical alternative, and it does not allow the independent existence of a counterfactual option.

However, the present case shows that the transition from ethnicity to nationalism is neither self-evident nor linear, and does not fit Smith’s “diaspora nationalism” model. (see also Tzur 1997a) This conclusion is based on the existence of historical evidence proving that the Jewish community in Iraq did not cooperate with the goals of organized Zionism. The Zionist leadership, intent on realizing its goals and working closely with ambitious local young people, did not hesitate to break the community leadership and replace it with a more pliable alternative. In order to “import” Iraq’s Jews to Israel, Zionism mobilized primeval ethnic sources and translated them into nationalist elements. (Yiftachel, 1995) It treated the Jews of Iraq as a primordial community, not as individuals with autonomous rights. Zionism established an unwritten covenant with the Iraqi Jews, who remained mute regarding their rights and yearnings, and the resulting national ideology was utilized to silence the protests of Iraqi Jews in Israel. (Hertzog, 1984; Herzog, 1985; Yiftachel, 1997)

Turning the private capital of Iraqi Jews into “national capital” served the Israeli government as an ideological bargaining chip. During the 1948 War, much Palestinian property was abandoned and plundered throughout the territory that had comprised British Mandate Palestine. Estimates vary of the value of Palestinian property managed by the Custodian of Absentee Property. Arab sources put it at about \$2.5 billion.<sup>(63)</sup> In a secret cabinet meeting held in November 1951, Sharett disclosed that the UN’s Palestine Conciliation Commission had appraised the worth of the abandoned property of the 600,000 Palestinian refugees at approximately \$1 billion.<sup>(64)</sup> The Government of Israel did not compensate the 1948 refugees. Its argument was that the Jews from the Arab countries were also refugees. Yet,

simultaneously, the Israeli Government was formulating its claims for reparations and restitution from Germany. (Zweig, 1993)

The linkage created between the Arab refugees of 1948 and the Jews of Iraq impaired the ability to critically address the political practices of the Israeli government toward both the Palestinians and the Iraqi Jews. It impaired the ability to question the basic Israeli assumption that the Palestinians are part of a united Arab nation. It impaired the ability to perceive how the freezing of Jewish property in Iraq was used to serve, retrospectively, as a fig leaf for the international manipulation of the issue of compensation for the Palestinians. And finally, it blurred the immoral attitude of the Israeli government toward the Jews of Iraq. A critical analysis obligates us as readers not only to ask why, and under what conditions, was the linkage between the two accounts forged, but also to disassemble the underlying assumptions of that political construct.

The case of WOJAC provides us with a vantage-point from which this linkage can be contested and deconstructed. Although the organization was established by former Zionist activists in Arab countries with the support of the Israeli government, it also generated alternative voices that challenged the legitimacy and validity of the logic of accounting. The reasons for these cracks were not moral, rather purely instrumental. Still, they show how fragile this construction was. Evidently, the challenge came from members of the ethnic group who not living within the same territory, thereby contesting the simple linkage between ethnicity and nationalism.

Along these lines, this study offers a historical junction from which alternative “objective possibilities” to Zionist historiography can be examined afresh. For example, public discourse in Israel is traditionally divided into two incommensurable domains: the “ethnic question” and the “Palestinian question”. The compartmentalization of ethnic and national categories was a construct produced by the Zionist movement and its state apparatuses. As Shafir has explained, Zionism was founded “on a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cross political ones.” (Shafir, 1996:8) The Zionist master narrative had place for neither Palestinians nor

*Mizrahim* (Jews from Asia and Africa). But, while Palestinians possess a clear counter narrative, the Mizrahi story is a fractured one embedded in the history of both groups. (Shohat, 1988) The national conflict absorbed the Jews from Asia and Africa into the monolithic official memory of European Jews against their Palestinian rivals. (Shohat, 1988) The results of this study provide a vantage-point from which the two perspectives and their historical realities can be reconnected. It suggests that the so-called “Mizrahi” historiography should not necessarily be regarded as an “intra-national” ethnic discourse. Rather, it emphasizes the role of European state elites in “orientalizing” both Palestinians and Mizrahi-Jews, in using military might in order to subject one group, and in using the hegemonic mechanism of silencing and exclusion towards the other no less effectively. The story presented in this paper provides us with an opportunity to rescue the story from its Zionist biases and to offer a new historiographical perspective.

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## Endnotes

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(2) Israel State Archives (hereafter ISA) (130) 2563/61 n.d.

(3) E.g. Lissak, 1993.



(4) Yohanan Cohen maintains in Encyclopaedia Hebraica (entry on “The Arab Refugees,” Update Volume for vols. 1-16, cols. 545-550) that “Israel released \$10 million from frozen bank accounts registered to refugees and transferred this amount to the account owners in Arab countries” (col. 548). The text does not make clear when the money was paid, which Palestinians were compensated, and to which Arab countries the funds were transferred. Cohen is apparently referring to deposits of Arabs in Barclays Bank, from which the Government of Israel released 1 million pounds under British pressure in 1954. (Record of the Cabinet Meetings of the Third Government, Nov. 4, 1951) Sharett arranged with Finance Minister Levi Eshkol not to release more funds for the time being. (Sharett, 1978: 331) In an article published in the daily Ha’aretz, Yossi Melman relates that Israel received a fivefold quid pro quo for releasing the Palestinian funds; after Israel returned the money to its rightful owners, Britain agreed to return deposits of 5 million pounds dating back to the Mandate era, which belonged to Jews and were being held in banks in London. (Melman, Ha’aretz, April 20, 1997).

(5) For a discussion of Iraqi Jewry during the late Ottoman period, see Dshen, 1996.

(6) Quoted in Tsimhoni, 1989: 245.

(7) Quoted in Tsimhoni, 1989: 236.

(8) A perusal of the minutes of cabinet meetings from 1949 to 1953 uncovered only one discussion about the Jews of Iraq (Oct. 25, 1949). However, the subject was addressed and commented upon by ministers in 17 other contexts.

(9) Cabinet Meeting Minutes, 35, Sept. 6, 1949.

(10) Cabinet Meeting Minutes, 35, Sept. 6, 1949.

(11) Records of the First Government, Oct. 25, 1949.

(12) To be sure, factions of the Israeli Zionist movement toyed with the transfer idea at the same time. See Schechtman, 1949, cited by Qazzaz, 1991: 298.

(13) ISA, Foreign Ministry (130) 2563/8, Oct. 26, 1949.

(14) There were also qualms in Israel about the arrival of the Iraqi Jews. The Jewish Agency Executive was worried about the growing numbers of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and about the decline in the country's cultural level, as the matter was described. There were also exaggerated rumors about the scale of Communist activity among Iraq's Jews and about the danger that such Jews could pose to the Israeli government. (Tsimhoni, 1991)

(15) See, e.g., Ha'aretz, Oct. 17, 1949.

(16) Records of the First Government, 4, Oct. 18, 1949.

(17) For example, in 1937, at the World Congress of Poalei Tzion, which convened in Vienna, a senior figure in Mapam, Aharon Ziesling, urged that efforts be made to effect a population exchange between Palestine and the Arab states. Ben-Gurion, who took part in the ensuing discussion, did not reject the idea out of hand. Similar proposals were voiced by American Zionists and by local leaders of the Labor movement. Yosef Weitz, for example, wrote in his diary that there was no room for two nations in Palestine, and that the only solution was the transfer of the Arabs. (Shiblak, 1986) In 1948, Joseph Schechtman, a member of the Jewish Agency's actions committee in the United States, published a proposal to solve the refugee problem on the basis of the Greco-Turkish model. (Schechtman, 1949; Tsimhoni, 1991) In the early 1950's, Moshe Sasson, the Vice-consul at the Israeli legation in Athens, worked out a proposal for a population and property exchange involving Israeli Arabs and Libyan Jews. Sasson notes the importance of the plan as a "lesson" for the Palestinian refugees who still sought to reenter Israel. (Benziman and Mansour, 1992)

(18) See an article in this spirit in the Labor movement daily Davar, Oct. 17, 1949: "Is There Any Substance to the Iraqi Proposal?"

(19) See, for example, Yedioth Ahronoth, Oct. 28, 1949. Only after the arrival of the Maghreb Jews in Israel did the number of Jews from Arab countries in Israel match the number of Palestinian refugees. Speaking to the 32nd U.N. General Assembly on Oct. 17, 1977, Moshe Dayan, then Israel's Foreign Minister, put the number of Arab refugees at 590,000 and the number of Jewish "refugees" at 600,000, including the North African Jews

(20) Morton, from the British Foreign Office, was the deputy chairman of the U.N. Economic Survey Mission headed by Gordon Clapp. The Israeli press perceived Morton's proposal for the refugees' resettlement as a "trial balloon of the Foreign Office." (e.g., Ha'aretz, Oct. 19, 1949).

(21) ISA (130) 2384/4, Nov. 17, 1949, Memorandum of the Director of the International Institutions Division.

(22) The reasons for the law's enactment remain obscure. The justification offered by the Iraqi government was the growing rate of illegal emigration from the country, resulting in a large-scale property drain and the shrinkage of the economy. Official sources in Baghdad estimated that by the time the law came into force some 3,000 Jews had already left Iraq for Iran, en route to Europe. (Shiblak, 1986) The Baghdad paper al-Sha'ab said the law was necessary and that its passage was "a bold and important act that would put an end to the anarchy" of illegal emigration. (Ha'aretz, March 6, 1950) Others, though, attribute the law's passage to the pressure of the great powers and of world public opinion on the Iraqi government (Raphael 1981), or even to a secret Israel-Iraq agreement. (Shiblak, 1986) Still others dismiss the possibility of such an agreement and argue that Baghdad believed that a large-scale influx of immigrants into Israel would cause the Israeli economy to collapse. (Meir, 1973) Some of these explanations are mutually contradictory, and, as noted, the true cause of the law's enactment is difficult to determine.

(23) ISA, Foreign Ministry (130) 2387/4, Nov. 8, 1950.

(24) In 1950, for example, Zalman Lief proposed moving the residents of the large Palestinian village of Kara, in Wadi Ara, across the border and compensating them for their property. Such ideas were not an isolated phenomenon. (Benziman and Mansour, 1992)

(25) Cabinet Record 67, Sept. 7, 1950.

(26) Yosef al Kabir, one of the notables of the Iraqi community, estimated that at the start of the emigration Jewish property was worth about 90 million pounds, or \$252 million. (Gat, 1989: 128) Danin's estimate was 60 million pounds. S. Kahane, from the Foreign Ministry's Middle East Division, thought the Iraqi estimate of 3 million dinars (\$7.2 million) was too modest. (ISA, Foreign Ministry (130) 2387/4, April 1, 1951) Gat reports that the Iraqi Custodian General estimated the frozen assets to be worth about 5 or 6 million dinars. (Gat, 1989) Claims of Iraq's Jews, as recorded in the Israeli Finance Ministry in 1956, totaled \$49 million in 1950 terms. (ISA (130) 2563/7, Feb. 20, 1956) It should be noted that the value of Jewish assets changed between the start of the migration and the enactment of legislation that froze Jewish assets. The general estimate is that, between May and November 1950, Jews smuggled out of Iraq 8 to 10 million dinars, an amount that represented 15 to 20 percent of the country's entire monetary turnover. (Gat, 1989; Kahane, ISA (130) 2387/4) Even before the Iraqi parliament enacted the freeze law, Teddy Kollek, the Director of the Foreign Ministry's United States Division, told Philip Ehrlich, the legal adviser to the Bank of America, that the property of the Jewish community in Iraq was estimated to be worth several hundred million dinars, and asked for his help in finding a solution. At the end of 1942, the Zionist emissary Enzo Sireni organized a group of wealthy Iraqi Jews to purchase 10 dunams (2.5 acres) of land in Tel Aviv and demanded that Hachsharat Hayishuv, a national corporation that purchased land in Palestine, send maps and organize the transaction. (Bibi, 1988: 157) Similar efforts were undertaken by Sireni's successors, Aryeh Eshel and Meir Shilon. In 1948, before the State of Israel was proclaimed, they sent memoranda to the Jewish Agency requesting the transfer of Jewish property from Iraq to the Yishuv and demanded that a mechanism be established to

oversee this. However, the Yishuv institutions took no notice of these efforts. (Bibi, 1981; Meir, 1973)

(27) Cabinet Records 35, March 15, 1951.

(28) Knesset Record, Third Session of the First Knesset, viii, pp. 1358-1359.

(29) The Director-General of the Foreign Ministry, Walter Eytan, noted in a cable of March 29 that the decision of the Iraqi government had forced Israel to link the two accounts: that of the Palestinians and that of the Iraqi Jews. The following day, the Israeli government forwarded a memorandum in this spirit to the United States government. (Foreign Ministry, Document 88, p. 181).

(30) ISA (130) 2387/4, March 25, 1951.

(31) Foreign Ministry, Document 93, p. 191.

(32) ISA (130) 2387/4, April 2, 1951.

(33) ISA (130) 1963/1, July 18, 1951.

(34) ISA (130) 1961/1, Nov. 20, 1951.

(35) ISA (130) 1963, Oct. 16, 1951.

(36) Foreign Ministry, Document 388, p. 648.

(37) Foreign Ministry, Document 99, p. 199.

(38) Foreign Ministry, Document 150, p. 149.

(39) Foreign Ministry, Document 240, p. 410.

(40) ISA (130) 1963/5, April 24, 1952, Document by Yosef Tekoah.

(41) Record of the Sessions of the First Government, vol. 30, Sept. 7, 1950.

(42) ISA, Foreign Ministry, International Institutions Division (130) 1963/1.

(43) ISA, Foreign Ministry (130) 2563/6I, May 30, 1951. See also document of the Custodian of Absentee Property's Office (130) 2563/5, July 9, 1952.

(44) ISA (130) 2563/7, Oct. 25, 1955.

(45) In partnership with Ben-Porat, the following people were involved with the establishment of WOJAC: Oved Ben-Ozer and Shaul Ben-Simhon (Association of Moroccan Immigrants), Matilda Gez (Association of Tunisian Immigrants), Hayim Goshen and Menahem Yedid (Association of Syrian Immigrants), and David Petel (Association of Iraqi Immigrants). Leon Taman, a millionaire Iraqi Jew from London, headed the organization along with Ben-Porat. Oved Ben-Ozer replaced Ben-Porat upon his resignation from the organization's Executive in 1988, and Shlomo Tusia-Cohen, a well known attorney, in turn replaced Taman after his death.

(46) Meron's membership in the organization attests to the anomaly of its connection with the State, as his activities as Director of the Department of Arab Law at the Ministry of Justice overlapped a great deal with his activities as a member the WOJAC Executive. Meron fanatically guards the documentation of property registration that was performed in Israel in the 1950's, and aside from him, virtually no one else has access to it. Meron even claimed (in a personal interview with me) that he was the one that gave Ben-Porat the idea to establish WOJAC.

(47) The political history of Mapai reveals that the party simultaneously exploited and denied the "ethnic question." (See, for example, Hertzog, 1986)

(48) Eliashar's book Living With Palestinians (Lekhiyot im Falastinim) endorses most of the points argued by WOJAC throughout the organization's existence. This is especially interesting due to the fact that Eliashar headed the Council for Israel-Palestine Peace during the 1970's, in contrast to most WOJAC members who came from the Labor party, Rafi, and Herut.

(49) “Jews from Arab Countries: the Neglect and the Damage.” Yediot Akharonot.” 9/7/76, p.13.

(50) A similar fear was expressed by the Israeli establishment at the end of the 1940's, when survivors and displaced persons from Europe started to arrive in the country. Their stories and memories threatened to disrupt the Yishuv's narrative denying the Holocaust of European Jewry. This, in turn, would open a Pandora's box and challenge the legitimacy of the new Israeli model. For example, see the testimony of survivors in Shever-'Anan (“Cloudburst”), Orna Ben-Dor's documentary film that describes the relationship of the Yishuv to Holocaust survivors, and the silence to which survivors were sentenced.

(51) Representing a full spectrum of voices facilitates a non-deterministic understanding of history and proposes assessing the historical narrative not only according to its “factuality,” but also according to its objective possibilities. This tradition is rooted in the neo-Marxian critique of “history from below” (for example, see Thompson, 1967), post-colonial critique (for example, see Spivak, 1988; Chatterjee, 1986) and post-structuralist critique (for example, see Foucault, 1972). There are three fundamental arguments calling for the representation of alternative voices: moral, epistemological and methodological. The moral argument calls for the representation of alternative voices because this facilitates the existence of alternative democratic options, even if only on the theoretical level. Alternative theories and ideas challenge the dominant predator that is historical necessity, in the words of Yeshaya Berlin. Epistemologically, such a representation enables us to establish a new critical standard regarding the current order and dialogue surrounding it. (Foucault, 1972) Methodologically, such an analysis weakens the teleological nature of historical necessity and facilitates the assessment of “objective possibilities,” in the words of Max Weber. (Weber, 1949; Shenhav, 1999) The concept of historical necessity – which transforms cause into effect and effect into cause – necessarily leads us to a justification of the status-quo. (A sharp satirical critique of the distorted link between cause and effect is found in Voltaire's wonderful book *Candide*. (Voltaire, 1997)

(52) See also Dayan, Aryeh, "Give a Synagogue, Take a Mosque" in Ha'aretz, 23/9/99; Hirshberg, Peter, "Private Property, Keep Out" in Jerusalem Report, 27/9/99, pp.16-23.

(53) Jerusalem Report, 27/9/99, p.17.

(54) The property thesis was also contested by Israeli members of WOJAC, but their arguments were not as fervent. For example, Matlida Gez objected to defining herself and her colleagues as "refugees," and she therefore saw a contradiction between claiming to be a Zionist and simultaneously demanding rights to Tunisian property left in her country of origin: "I stand here with mixed-feelings - mixed feelings, because still, during all these years...the enthusiasm of immigrating to Israel and the privilege that we were given...it never entered our minds to demand our rights and to claim what we left behind..." (National Convention of delegates of the Union of Jewish Immigrants from Arab Countries, 29/5/75, p.3b) The relative calm of this argument, however, paled in comparison to the open rebellion of the non-Israelis.

(55) For a debate between WJRO and the leadership of the Polish Jewish community, see: "WJRO vs. The Jews of Poland." Ha'aretz, 25/10/99, p.1a.

(56) Jerusalem Report, 27 September 1999, p.20

(57) Jerusalem Report, 27 September 1999, p.18.

(58) The Scribe: Journal of Babylon Jewry. No.72, September 1999, p.17.

(59) Yediot Akharonot, 18/4/93.

(60) Yediot Akharonot, 17/12/93.

(61) Hamodi'ah, 16/12/93.

(62) Similar claims regarding the property of Europe's Jews were put forward by both the Government of Israel and Jewish organizations against the



German government and other European governments, in whose territory Jewish property was frozen or appropriated during the Second World War. (see Zweig, 1993; Zweig, 1987)

(63) Encyclopaedia Hebraica, Update Volume for vols. 1-16, col. 548.

(64) Records of the Cabinet meetings of the Third Government, vol. 2, Nov. 4, 1951, p. 34. See also Zweig, 1993 and Yossi Melman's "A Dunam and Another Dunam Are Worth Billions" (Ha'aretz, April 20, 1997).

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