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Remembering the Destruction of Iraqi Jewry



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One of history's most devastating pogroms is also one of its least well-known. A historian analyzes how it happened, and why its origins have such troubling resonance today.

Seventy-five years ago, on June 1, 1941, a massive pogrom broke out against the Jews of Iraq. Committed by Muslim mobs influenced and incited by Nazi propaganda, it has come to be called the Farhud, and it remains the primal trauma of Iraqi Jewry, beginning the process of oppression and violence that ultimately forced the ancient community to emigrate *en masse*, most of them to Israel.

The Farhud killed hundreds of Jews and wounded thousands. The cruelty reached its height during a massacre in Baghdad. Interviews I have conducted with survivors paint a picture of inhuman violence. Children were murdered and the legs of babies were cut off because the Iraqi Jews placed bracelets on their children's legs to ward off evil spirits and track their movements by attached bells. Pregnant women were raped in front of their husbands.

Jewish property was looted and Jewish homes burned to the ground. "The destruction itself was enormous," future Israeli president Yitzhak Ben-Zvi reported to the Jewish Agency in 1941. "From 2,000-3,000 were left without a means of making a living. ... The damage to property is valued at a million Palestinian pounds. This amount is not exaggerated."

In contrast to popular myth, however, the Farhud did not break out spontaneously, but in fact was well-organized. Ezra Levi, a witness to the events, showed me photographic evidence that several days before the Farhud, Baghdad Jews noticed that Arab names had been written on Arab-owned shops, apparently to ensure that only Jewish businesses were looted.

A government committee was appointed to investigate the events, and its report stated that there were two major sources of incitement that led to

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the pogrom: The work of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem; and Nazi propaganda broadcasts by Radio Berlin. This continuing incitement against the Jews legitimized their murder.

The committee's report was quite accurate. After he fled to Iraq to avoid arrest by the British, the Mufti began to disseminate Nazi propaganda in the name of the Palestinian cause, Arab nationalism, and Islam. He exercised a strong influence on government and military officials to the point that orders were issued from his home. His entourage also disseminated anti-Jewish propaganda at all levels of Iraqi society. The money the Mufti received to aid wounded Palestinians was wasted on this propaganda effort. It has even been claimed that he possessed a secret code in order to maintain communications between him and Germany. Together with this, he brought Syrian and Palestinian nationalist teachers to Iraq in order to indoctrinate their students with debased propaganda against the Jews.

The Mufti arrived in Iraq in October 1939. In Baghdad, he agitated against the pro-British Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said. He eventually became involved in a conspiracy led by Iraqi army officers who sought to replace al-Said with former Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. They also sought to overthrow the pro-British prince regent Abd al-Ilah of Hejaz.

The coup was set in motion in April 1941, after the Mufti began to advocate nothing less than a holy war against the British and called for Arabs throughout the Middle East to rebel against British rule. The coup ultimately failed after the British succeeded in reconquering the areas that had fallen under al-Gaylani's rule and breaking the siege of a British air force base at Habbaniyah.



Violence in Iraq before the Farhud. Photo: Etniel Margalit Collection

The central role played by the Mufti in the attempted coup is undeniable. He had collected loyalists from the Iraqi army and the ruling regime. In Baghdad, he became the public face of anti-British and pro-German agitation. At the time, Iraq was fertile soil for such endeavors. It was a center of Arab nationalism. Pan-Arab nationalists from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt all came there and, together with native Iraqis, founded movements whose goal was Arab unity and the expulsion of the British. Exploiting this, the Mufti succeeded in turning the Palestine conflict into a fundamental issue in Iraqi circles. As a result, Iraq took a stronger interest in the Palestinian Arab cause than any other Arab nation. In addition, many army officers were intent on freeing their country from dependence on Britain, and there was a strong pro-German underground embraced by many politicians. The Mufti's anti-British and anti-Jewish ideas easily conquered hearts and minds.

At the time of the coup, the Mufti was working to deepen ties between the Arabs and the Axis powers, first and foremost Nazi Germany. For example, he was heavily involved in advancing German air shipments to the forces loyal to al-Gaylani that were fighting the British. The ultimate goal was to turn Iraq into a German wedge between the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent and a base for enhancing Nazi influence and power in

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the Middle East. The Mufti's time in Iraq was also used to continue the battle against the Palestinian Jews and advance personal ties with Germany and its leaders.

It is a fact that the Mufti and his followers were largely responsible for the Farhud. In part, the motivation appears to have been self-pity. In his memoirs, the Mufti blames the Jews for the failure of the coup against al-Said and, between the lines, justifies the Farhud.

The fifth column played a large role in the failure of the movement [i.e., the coup attempt] in Iraq. This column was made up of many different forces, the most important of which was the Iraqi Jews. Mr. George Antinous [an Arab nationalist and compatriot of the Mufti] told me that, during the war, Jews employed by the telephone service recorded important and official conversations and sent the recordings to the British embassy in Baghdad. The Jews did the same with the mail and telegraph authorities.

The motivation for the Farhud likely came from this: The Mufti decided to punish the Jews because he believed they collaborated with the British and foiled the coup attempt he led.

Nazi Germany opened its first Arabic-language radio station on April 25, 1939, before the Mufti arrived in Iraq. This was not a coincidence. The Nazis placed great importance on their propaganda in the Arab world, and they knew war would soon break out. When he arrived in Berlin, the Mufti took a major role in Radio Berlin. Millions of Arabs listened to its broadcasts for years. Those working on these propaganda broadcasts included both civilian and military employees, among them writers, translators, academics, and Orientalists.

The stars of these broadcasts were Arab leaders who had immigrated to Germany. The famous head of the station was Yunes Bahri, an immigrant journalist who arrived in Berlin after escaping from Iraq, where he had been sentenced to death for anti-British activities. He had been recruited by Fritz Grobba, the German ambassador in Iraq. Bahri began each broadcast with the famous announcement, "The Arabic Lord Haw-Haw [a prominent British traitor and Nazi propagandist], this is Berlin, hello to the Arabs!"

In the beginning, Radio Berlin's Arabic broadcasts lasted for 45 minutes a day. Before each show, verses from the Koran were recited. After this came a news report, songs in Arabic, and musical selections. After a month, additional news broadcasts were added, as well as shows for Arab students in Berlin dealing with the problems of Arabs in Germany and Europe in general. Later, the broadcasts included Arab writers, public figures, and well-known personalities. The station quickly became extremely popular in the Arab world and from March 2, 1941, it broadcast five times a day until the collapse of the Nazi regime in April 1945.



Haj Amin al-Husseini greets Bosnian Waffen-SS volunteers with a Nazi salute, November 1943.
Photo: Bundesarchiv / Wikimedia

The purpose of these broadcasts was to arouse Arab nationalism in regions under Allied control. To this end, the shows were laden with anti-British, anti-American, anti-Soviet, and especially anti-Jewish propaganda. Arabic Nazi propaganda greatly aided in the spread of radical anti-Semitism to the Middle East, where it found fertile ground due to anti-Jewish traditions in Islam. Bahri, for example, incited against the West in general and the Jews in particular. He would praise and glorify Hitler, the Nazi regime, and the Axis powers. He also claimed that a return to traditional Islam would lead to victory over the enemies of Islam, and that the only way to gain independence was to fight the British and the Jews, the mutual enemies of "Great Germany."

Throughout these broadcasts, Nazi Germany was portrayed as a friend of the Arabs, because it had no colonialist ambitions in the Middle East. These claims sought to foster a sense of solidarity between Nazi ideology, Arab nationalism, and Islam. Bahri in particular employed the most vulgar propaganda:

Oh Muslims! The day of judgment approaches! On that day, the Arab people will not breathe the air of freedom until they annihilate the British and Russian armies, and throw the last Jew into the sea! Arabs, prepare for the day of salvation!

One of the most horrifying documents that I discovered in regard to the Nazi radio broadcasts was a transcript from a show that took place on May 26, 1941, just before the Farhud. In it, Yunes Bahri said to millions of Arabs:

Judaism, made up of Zionism and Freemasonry, found in England a fortress from which it could commit its crimes. The Arabs fought the Jews and expelled them from the Arab peninsula 1,400 years ago. Muhammad was the first who expelled them. The Arabs see in this era what the Jews have done under British immunity. The Jews announced that they want to establish a national home in Palestine, which is an inseparable part of the Arab homeland. The Arabs of Iraq bear witness now to the actions taken by the Jews of Basra in accordance with British orders. The Arabs saw the policy declarations of the British, such as the two latest by Churchill and [Jan] Smuts. Smuts said that he and the British owe thanks to the Jews for their help in the war. This enlisted Jewish hearts in the fight against the Arabs, as they were certain that after the war they would inherit a Hebrew state. ... The Jews everywhere are an abomination. Remember the

words of the Koran: The greatest enemies of mankind are those who believe as the Jews.

Even in broadcasts following the Farhud, Bahri justified the massacre of the Iraqi Jews and claimed that they disseminated propaganda given to them by the British embassy in Baghdad. He added that the Jews committed espionage against the Iraqi army on behalf of the British. These claims, along with those made by other broadcasters, appear to have helped legitimize the Farhud.

German propaganda in the Arab world in general and Iraq in particular sought to create sympathy for Hitler and the Nazis. In order to do so, it engaged in wild anti-Jewish incitement—blaming the Jews for stealing Arab money and causing all the problems of the Arab world.

Nazi propaganda was also disseminated on the streets of Iraq, arousing hatred of the Jews until it caused a deadly explosion in the form of the Farhud. The investigative committee convened by the Iraqi government after the Farhud concluded that Nazi incitement was an enormous influence on Iraq and the central factor in the pogrom against the Jews.

Further evidence that supports the fact that the Mufti was responsible for the Farhud comes from the prime minister of Iraq Nuri al-Said. Details of this come from new evidence: the minutes of a meeting of Jewish Agency leaders in Jerusalem on July 27, 1941, 55 days after the Farhud. In it, Moshe Sharett, head of the political division and later prime minister of Israel, reports on a meeting with Nuri al-Said in Cairo shortly after the Farhud.

He began a serenade that lasted around 25 minutes, and didn't give me a chance to open my mouth. He said, "This is the question of questions—Palestine is a bleeding wound in the body of the Arab people and with England, and it causes disasters to the Jews and the Arabs, and there will be no happiness if this question is not solved. We don't understand this. Your entire movement is against nature, against history, against reality; it won't succeed; it's impossible." When I finally got a chance to speak, he would return to our "original sin"—that we didn't agree to his offer. ... I don't remember at what point he started to talk about the riots in Baghdad and the rumor that that the Arabs were planning riots. ... He said, "Pay attention to the fact that in every place the Jews lived in Arab neighborhoods, nothing happened to them. If there were attacks on the Jews, it was an organized thing, organized by Nazi agents, Arab Nazi agents, and not a spontaneous event that occurred by surprise."

In other words, Nuri al-Said stated that the Arabs were not inclined to attack the Jews, and they did so because of an organization of Nazi agents. Moreover, Sharett recounted, Said also mentioned that "there was a large amount of Nazi propaganda" and that the instigators of the Farhud "returned to Berlin."

"It was connected to the Mufti," Sharett concluded. "He evaded my words because the Mufti was a guest of the Iraqi government."

Sharett's report shows that Nuri al-Said had confirmed less than two months after the Farhud that the riots were organized and executed by the Mufti and his entourage.

It is clear that the Farhud was a Nazi-sponsored event. The State of Israel has received millions of dollars from Germany as reparations for Nazi crimes against the Jews. Accordingly, the survivors of the Farhud deserve similar reparations. But they have not been recognized as survivors of Nazi crimes. For various reasons, Israel and the world in general have not paid nearly

enough attention to the Jews of Arab lands. To this day, for example, the Farhud is not taught in schools.

For more than three years, attorney David Yadid has led a legal struggle with the Finance Ministry to recognize immigrants from Iraq as Holocaust survivors because of the Farhud, holding that they should be paid monthly reparations of at least 2,200 shekels (\$570). Yadid has presented evidence of the collaboration between the Nazis and the Iraqi government, German military aid to Iraq, and anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda disseminated in the media both directly by the Nazis and by those who received support from them, all of which contributed to the Farhud.

In response, the Finance Ministry recommended that the survivors of the Farhud should receive 3,600 shekels (\$940) per year and free medication from the Health Ministry, but this is offered on condition of ending the legal proceedings. The ministry's goal is clear: To get the Farhud's survivors to give up their rights. The State of Israel and the Finance Ministry's Holocaust Survivors Rights Authority are conducting a struggle against recognizing the survivors of the Farhud as victims of Nazism and seek to run out the clock until all the survivors are dead.

Today, 75 years after the Farhud, it is necessary for justice to be done. I myself have aided Yadid's efforts and presented a legal and historic opinion that Nazi activities led to the Farhud. Despite this, ironically, the State of Israel and the Finance Ministry have paid many academics to "prove" that only the Arabs were responsible for the Farhud and the Nazis were not connected to it. Shockingly, Israel has actually whitewashed the role of the Nazis in this tragedy in order to avoid paying the money required should this be proved. It is now necessary to wait for the results of the lawsuit.

Banner Photo: Jewish Museum London 

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The Farhud, Baghdad, 1941. Photo: Jewish Museum London

