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Writing about the "Other": Israel in Recent Iraqi Novels

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Abstract
Writing about Israel is extremely rare in the Arab world. For many in the Arab World, Israel is the ultimate "Other". This article will discuss several recent Iraqi novels in which part or the entire plot takes place in Israel. The books were written by leading Arab Iraqi novelists and were published by publishers in Iraq and the Arab world. Despite their small number, the books originate from a significant change in Iraqi intellectual life, especially after 2003: the emergence of a new literary generation "The Generation of the 1990s" (*ǧīl al-tisʿīnāt*), challenging the basics of Iraqi national culture. The article will explore this development from the point of view of the "Other": an Israeli scholar.

Keywords
Iraq, Israel, Iraqi literature, Edward Said, Jews, Liberal thought

Résumé
Il est extrêmement rare d'écrire sur Israël dans le monde arabe où, pour beaucoup, Israël est l' « autre » absolu. Cet article va aborder plusieurs romans irakiens récents dans lesquels l'intrigue entière est située en Israël. Ces ouvrages ont été écrits par des romanciers irakiens arabes majeurs et ont été publiés par des éditeurs en Irak et dans le monde arabe. En dépit de leur petit nombre, ils résultent d'un changement significatif dans la vie intellectuelle irakienne, particulièrement après 2003, avec l'émergence d'une nouvelle génération d'auteurs, « la génération des années 90 » (*ǧīl al-tisʿīnāt*), remettant en cause les bases de la culture irakienne nationale. Nous explorerons ce développement du point de vue de l'« autre »: celui d'un universitaire israélien.

Mots clés
Irak, Israël, littérature irakienne, Edward Said, juifs, pensée libérale

With the exception of the Palestinians,[1] writing about Israel is extremely rare in the Arab literary world. In literary circles all over the Arab world, writing about Israel is perceived as a step toward admitting the legitimacy of the

[1] Few Palestinian writers, living in Israel and writing Hebrew, show impressive familiarity with Jewish Israeli culture and reality, among them Anṭūn Šammās, Sayyid Qašūʿ, Ayman Siqsaq and ʿAlāʾ Ḥlayḥal (in Arabic).

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Jewish state and a betrayal of Pan Arab and territorial national identity. In the eyes of those writers, the boycott goes two ways: some, like the prominent Egyptian novelist, ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī, strongly oppose the translation of their novels to Hebrew. Those who defied the taboo have had to pay a heavy personal and professional price: boycotted by their friends and colleagues, rejected by publishers and shunned by the media.[2] Therefore, one can safely say that writing about Israel in the Arab world is the ultimate taboo and Israel is the ultimate "other".

This article will discuss several recent Iraqi novels in which part or the entire plot takes place in Israel. The books were written by leading novelists and were published by publishers in the Arab world. Despite their small number, the books originate from a significant change in Iraqi intellectual life, especially after 2003: the emergence of a new literary generation "The Generation of the 1990s" (*ǧīl al-tisʿīnāt*), challenging the basics of Iraqi national culture. In fact, as I will argue later, these developments are behind the motivation to write about Israel and also explain the relative calm with which these books were accepted. As an Israeli scholar, reading the books and being the "other", I could appreciate the courage of breaking the taboo, but also disagree, and sometimes condemn, the disposition and conclusions of some of the writers.

Setting the Ground: Change in Iraqi Intellectual Life

The Iraqi intellectual Ḥaydar Saʿīd refers to the post Saddam period as "The End of the Culture of the National State" (*nihāyat ṯaqāfat al-dawla l-waṭaniyya*), by which he means that the national state in its former version should be discarded and substituted by a totally different "national state". By so doing, Saʿīd defines the project facing Iraqi intellectuals at present. The previous national state rested on several tenets: artificial homogeneity, a personality cult, a strong state, anti sectarianism (which often served as a vehicle for anti Shi'ism), but also xenophobia and virulent hostility to Israel. To make the new national state in Iraq completely different according to Saʿīd, one has to eliminate those tenets and replace them with their opposites: federalism, decentralization, democracy, heterogeneity, a more accommodating national identity, pluralism. Unlike most other liberals in the Arab world, Saʿīd does not stop when reaching the issue of relations and attitudes to Israel. In an article entitled "Miṯāl al-Ālūsī: The Don Quijote of Iraqi Secularism" and published in the

[2] Such an example is the Egyptian novelist ʿAlī Sālim, who visited Israel in the 1994 and published a travelogue on his journey. ʿAlī Sālim, *Riḥla ilā Isrāʾīl*, Cairo, Madbūlī, 1996.

Iraqi daily newspapers *al-Aḫbār* and *Awān* in September 2008, Saʿīd condemns the automatic identification of Iraqi patriotism with hostility to Israel. Why should Iraqi patriotism be measured by hostility to Israel? Clearly, in his mind hostility to Israel is part of the old national discourse that should be discarded. He further claims that: "The question of relations with Israel is a sensitive one, which has not been given serious thought in Iraq".[3]

Miṭāl al-Ālūsī is an Iraqi MP who visited Israel twice after 2003 to promote and to call for an Iraqi-Israeli alliance against Iran. The article condemns the show of unanimity in the Iraqi parliament who voted to cancel Ālūsī's immunity on the grounds of doing something "unconstitutional". Nevertheless, it also criticizes Ālūsī for embarking on the initiative prematurely. In short, Saʿīd believes that Iraq needs to change the previous hostile attitude to Israel, as part of the construction of a new national culture and discourse, but this should be done gradually.

Ḥaydar Saʿīd is very influential among the young generation of Iraq intellectuals still living in Iraq. In their eyes, he captures and reflects their ideas and the spirit of the age.[4] This generation, also called "the generation of the 1990s" (*ǧīl al-tisʿīnāt*), is made of young Iraqi intellectuals, born in the 1960s and 1970s, whose formative experiences were marked by wars (most of them served in the army), dictatorship, sanctions and isolation from the rest of the world.[5] Like other generations of Iraqi intellectuals, this generation defined itself vis-à-vis previous generations, especially the generation of the 1980s. The latter was torn between exile and collaboration with the regime. In general, it was also torn between competing ideologies: Baʿṯism and pan Arabism on the one hand, communism on the other. In comparison, the generation of the 1990s was not bound by those ideologies. It saw their demise and considered them responsible for the fate of Iraq. The mood of this generation is best captured by the word "loss" (*ḍayāʿ*), in the sense of being lost and looking for a new way out. Therefore, with the demise of existing ideologies, this generation was looking for a new ideology, that would be significantly different from the old ones. This is what Ḥaydar Saʿīd is doing when writing about "the end of

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[3] Ḥaydar Saʿīd, *Siyāsat al-ramz: ʿan nihāyat ṭaqāfat al-dawla l-waṭaniyya fī l-ʿIrāq*, Beirut, al-Muʾassasa l-ʿarabiyya, 2009, p. 89. In this article I will use the following articles from Ḥaydar Saʿīd's book: "Fī muʿāraḍat al-wāqiʿiyya", p. 9-15, "Almānyā ḥulm ʿirāqī", p. 17-28 and "Miṭāl al-Ālūsī Dūn Kīḫūṭī l-ʿilmāniyya l-ʿirāqiyya", p. 89-95.

[4] Personal communication with some of these intellectuals. Saʿīd is a frequent guest in political talk shows on various Iraqi TV channels and participant in documentaries on Iraq.

[5] No definitive work has been published on this generation yet. For an interesting, albeit biased, account of this generation, written by one of its leading figures see: ʿAlī Badr, *Maṣābīḥ Ūrušalīm*, Beirut, al-Muʾassasa l-ʿarabiyya, 2006. First chapter.

the culture of the national state". As I will later show, this is also what ʿAlī Badr is doing in his novel on Edward Said.

Other writers, not living in Iraq nor members of this circle, were motivated to change views on Israel by their rejection of Baʿṯist ideology and education. Dictatorships, especially those of the ideological kind, often breed their own antidotes. If Israel, under the Baʿṯ, was the "personification of evil", and the Baʿṯ was lying on everything, why should this be true? When Naǧm Walī was young, during the 1970s, he was intrigued by this issue. Later, when he left Iraq to settle in Germany, the curiosity led to an uncontrolled attraction and finally a series of visits to Israel and a book.[6] Similar reactions to Baʿṯist brainwash can be traced in other novels. One exceptional novel is ʿAbd al-Karīm al-ʿUbaydī's "The Flies and the Emerald" (*al-Ḏubāb wa-l-zumurrud*), published in Iraq.[7] This novel is considered one of the purest expressions of the generation of the 1990s. It is basically concerned with the denunciation and repudiation of the Baʿṯ. One of the main motives in this denunciation is the rediscovery of aspects hidden by the Baʿṯ. Šafīq, one of the main figures (a positive person) wants to immigrate to Israel and have an Israeli nationality.[8] Šafīq may be more depressed than his friends but, despite this extraordinary dream, he is not presented as a lunatic.[9] That the generation of the 1990s was thinking about changing views on Israel is also shown in ʿAlī Badr's novel: ʿAlāʾ Ḫalīl, an Iraqi intellectual and a product of that generation, who admires the Neo Conservatives and envisions a truly democratic Iraq, expects the future Iraq to sign peace with Israel.[10]

The origins of this debate are in Iraq. It was born out of the experiences of people who suffered the onslaught of Iraqi history in the 1980s and 1990s. Though echoes of the debate were heard from the Iraqi Diaspora, the main artery was in Iraq. However, there are similarities between this debate, especially with regard to the questions of orientation and Israel, and the more celebrated debate between Edward Said and the Iraqi expat intellectual Kanaan Makiya.[11] Like Walī, Makiya visited Israel several times. He published a book

[6] Naǧm Walī, *Masāʾ El Lev HaʾOyev* (Journey into the Heart of the Enemy), Tel Aviv, Poalim, 2009, p. 17-20. A similar reflection on Baʿṯi education and Israel is to be found in ʿĀtī l-Barakāt, *Nubūʾat al-ġuyūm* (The Prophecy of the Clouds), Cologne, al-Ǧamal, 2004, p. 8.

[7] ʿAbd al-Karīm al-ʿUbaydī, *al-Ḏubāb wa-l-zumurrud*, Baghdad, Mesopotamia, 2011.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[9] Reviewing the novel, the novelist Naṣīf Filk accused the Baʿṯ of "making people follow illusions like immigrating to Israel", thus missing the genuine attraction to Israel, described in the novel.

[10] *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 56. The writer detests this figure and he will later be discarded from the plot.

[11] This is referred to in the first part of *Maṣābīḥ*.

about Jerusalem, "The Rock" (referring to the "Dome of the Rock"). He was accused by Edward Said of preparing the American invasion as well as cooperating with the Baʿṯ in the 1970s.[12]

Another ingredient of the cultural background to the change is the new approach to the bitter fate of Iraq's Jewish community. The Jews were the first community to be completely wiped out from Iraq. This fact is very pertinent after 2003, when other communities are facing the same fate. The loss of the Jews is lamented as the first major blow to the pluralism that characterized life in Iraq. For many Iraqi intellectuals who later became the victims of Baʿṯi totalitarianism, the public executions in Baghdad and Basra of Jewish dignitaries in 1969, attended by many, were an act that heralded the installment of the "Republic of Fear". A growing number of Iraqi novelists place Iraqi Jews in their novels.[13] In some cases, that will be discussed later, the Jews are at the center of the plot. Thus the writers are obliged to confront the Jewish immigration and occasionally follow their Jewish protagonists to Israel.

An Israeli Reading Novels on Israel

Being an Israeli reading these Iraqi novels turns the Edward Said's (hence Saidian) perception of the "other" upside down.[14] I am the "other" ' but I am not the typically Saidian sort of "other": oriental, religious, feminine and weak. In my case, knowing me or knowledge of the Israelis is not always used to subjugate and control. Sometimes it is used to understand and come to terms with. Even when used in the Saidian way, using knowledge of Israel as political power, as in ʿAlī Badr's book,[15] the use is rather subversive and challenges the predominant culture of boycott and ignorance with regard to Israel.

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[12] For Kanaan Makiya's relevant views see: Kanaan Makiya, *Cruelty and silence:War, Intifada and the Arab world*, London, Penguin, 1994[2].

[13] A brief sample is: Ḥamza l-Ḥaṣan, *al-Aʿzal*, Beirut, al-Intišar al-ʿarabī, 2007. Saʿdī l-Māliḥ, *Fī ntiẓār faraǧ Allāh al-qahhār*, Beirut, al-Fārābī, 2006, ʿĪsā l-ʿĪsā, *Ǧamarāt al-ʿišq,* London, Tawa, 2011, and others.

[14] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, Penguin, 1995[4]. Especially p. 31-73.

[15] ʿAlī Badr, following Said, refers to the theory of the "other" toward the end of his book. He totally accepts Said's assertion that the definition of the "other" is a step in the definition of "self", without which it is impossible to achieve genuine pluralism and multiculturalism. He blames the Jewish Israelis for failing to do so with regard to the Arabs. *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 331-2. Badr is not applying this principle on himself when it comes to Jewish Israelis.

Heavily influenced by Said, very little was written on Middle Eastern, let alone Iraqi, literature from the perspective of the Western "other" and nothing was written on the subject from the Israeli point of view. In Israel, and, to a certain extent, the rest of the Western World, the study of literature and the discourse on the "other" is more concerned with the presentation of the "other" in Israeli literature. In other words, the question is "how we write about the other?" and not how the "other" writes about the Israelis and Israel. That "other" is primarily the Arab, but also non hegemonic sectors in the Jewish society: oriental Jews, Ultra orthodox Jews, Settlers, Russian Jews and formerly also women. Recently, there is a growing number of Hebrew writers representing the "other" and challenging mainstream views.[16] As such, this trend in Israel is more concerned with the domestic scene. Furthermore, by adopting the western Saidian discourse on the "other", it totally misses the overwhelming silence on Israel, but also the scant writing, in the surrounding Arab world, as the most obvious example of a culture defining itself by using the "other". Israelis are simply not used to thinking about themselves as "others". They seem to have lost this quality when they settled in Israel and aspired to be "normal".

Reading books about one's own people and country, written by occasional visitors or even, as is the case with one of the Iraqi novels, by authors who had never been here, is an odd experience. It is not surprising that the total number of such books translated to Hebrew (from any language) is null and none had been a best seller.[17] Of all the books by Arab writers on Israel, only ʿAlī Sālim and Nağm Walī were translated to Hebrew and published in Israel.[18] While Sālim's book, which is more critical of Israel and rather condescending, was praised by Israeli critics, reactions to Walī were mixed: ex-minister of education turned writer and reviewer, Yossi Sarīd, published a very negative review in Israel's leading literary supplement, accusing Walī of ignoring the Palestinian plight and showing Israel in a too positive way. Similar allegation could

[16] Examples are: Sami Shalom Shitrit, Ronit Matalon and Sami Bardugo for oriental Jews, Sayyid Qašūʿ and Ayman Siqsaq for the Arabs, Yokhi Brandes and Naomi Regen for religious Jews, Alex Eppstein for Russian Jews as well as many others, each one representing his sector. For studies of Hebrew literature and Israeli culture and their view on the "other" see: Yohay Oppenheimer, *Meʿever Lagader: Yitzug HaʿAravim BaSafrut HaʿIvrit ve Hayisralelit*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 2010.

[17] I am excluding here some Jewish American writers who are either half Israelis or visit Israel very often and write about it. They are not occasional visitors and their familiarity with Israel is noted.

[18] The Hebrew version for Sālim's book is: ʿAlī Sālim, *Masāʾ LeYisrael*, Jerusalem, Keter, 1995.

be glanced in more supportive reviews.[19] In all cases, the Israeli critique was more concerned with the domestic debate and the approach to Israel, than with the value of such a book and with what brought an Iraqi (or Egyptian) writer to visit Israel and write about it for the Arab world.

The Israeli "other", reading about himself and looking at his reflection in the novel-mirror, has to undergo a certain process. After the initial embarrassment, passing the inevitable pedantic search for factual errors,[20] he (for purposes of grammar I will only use the masculine form later) has to ask himself what does the writer think about me? what does he see in me? and later, what purpose does it serve? The "other" as a reader, has the capacity to assess how familiar the writer is with his life and, by consequence, whether he is truly accepted for what he is.

First Category: Israel as a Shelter for Iraqi Jews

"The Lovers from Mesopotamia" (*ʿĀšiqān min bilād al-rāfidayn*) is a novel of letters by the exile writer, Ǧāsim al-Muṭayr from 2003.[21] It tells a love story between Rachel and Ǧurǧī, a Jewish couple from Basra. Rachel and her family left Iraq after the 1941 anti-Jewish riots. The family eventually settled in Israel whereas Rachel refuses to join them and remains in Iran. Ǧurǧī, an Iraqi patriot who joins the Communist Party, decides to remain in Iraq, despite the mounting danger. Neither of the two protagonists moved to Israel, yet at least one family did. From what we know, Rachel's family settled in Yaffo and suffered a drastic decline in their standard of living. However, this is not a novel about Iraqi Jews in Israel, and Israel has a minor role in the plot. It is mainly about the Jews as Iraqi patriots and their attachment to Iraq as their homeland. The author apologetically bemoans the loss of Jewish community in Basra. Exceptionally, this book was reviewed in the Israeli press. The reviewer, an eminent scholar of Iraqi origins Prof. Sasson Somekh, focuses on the dedication of an Iraqi novel to Jewish characters and the placing of the Jewish plight at the center of the plot. He rightly notes that the Jews are portrayed as

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[19] For Yossi Sarīd's review see: Haaretz Sfarīm, 11/3/2009. For more positive reviews, albeit on less important platforms, see: www.nuritha.co.il (8/6/2009) and Dr Yohay Sela, www.mideast.co.il (14/3/2009).

[20] One such example from ʿAlī Badr's book is that one of the Jewish Israeli characters adds chopped liver to his Tshulent and eats it all with Gefilte Fish… *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 171.

[21] Ǧāsim al-Muṭayr, *ʿĀšiqān min bilād al-rāfidayn*, Beirut, al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya li-l-ʿulūm, 2003.

not differing from other Iraqis and even the Zionism of some members of Rachel's family is taken to be the reaction to anti-Jewish violence and not an anti-patriotic act or an act stemming from conviction. Somekh does not refer to the parts in the novel about Israel.[22] Israel is portrayed as a miserable substitute to Iraq and not much is written about it or about the future it offered for the immigrants.

Other novelists placed Israel in a more central place and actually followed their Jewish protagonists there. "On the Waters of Babylon" (*ʿAlā ḍifāf Bābil*), by another exile Iraqi writer, Ḫālid al-Kištaynī, follows his protagonist, the Jewish Baghdadi physician ʿAbd al-Salām Sāsson to Israel.[23] In this novel the author, who, as far as I know, never visited Israel, is more concerned than the previous novelist with Dr. Sāsson's life in the land of the Jews. Dr. Sāsson receives an abandoned Arab house in Tiberias. One day, a stranger knocks at his door who turns out to be the original Palestinian owner of the house. Dr. Sāsson is happy to accept him and in exchange, the Palestinian shows him where they hid a treasure which they share. He is not allowed by the Israeli authorities, who do not appreciate his professional experience from Iraq, to pursue his work as a gynecologist and works as a military physician. When he treats POWs, he met an Iraqi soldier related to a chapter in his past. He helps him out of the camp and out of the country on his way back to Iraq. To a certain extent, Kištaynī appreciates the Zionist state for its willingness and capacity to absorb Jewish refugees and provide them with the home and security they lacked so much.[24] However, he also makes clear that Dr. Sāsson belongs more to Iraq. Culturally, he is an "Arab Jew" and as such, an outsider in Israel. He constantly seeks the company of Arabs and the writer enjoys reminding him of his Arab and Iraqi origins. However, unlike other Jews in Iraqi novels, he will not be back. Yet again, this novel is more about the loss of pluralism and the rise of bigotry in Iraq, not excepting the bigotry of Arab nationalism. In one of the scenes, describing the enthusiastic mob cheering the troops on their way to Palestine in 1948, the crowd starts by shouting "Long Live Free and Arab Palestine, Death to Israel!" then "Death to Zionism!" and finally "Death to all the Jews!".[25] This is a rare example connecting anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism and condemning both. Not being particularly fond of Zionism, Kištaynī is probably condemning the Iraqi people at the time, for not distinguishing between the two. He may also

[22] Sasson Somekh, "Zug Ohāvim Me'Eretz Ha'Naharāyim", *Haaretz*, 9/4/2004.
[23] Ḫālid al-Kištaynī, *ʿAlā ḍifāf Bābil*, Beirut, Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 2008.
[24] He even writes that. Kištaynī, *Bābil*, p. 175.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

condemn, as we learn from another novel, the militaristic zeal to go to war in Palestine.[26]

Naǧm Walī's latest novel, "Angels of the South" (*Malāʾikat al-ǧanūb*) follows the same lines.[27] Set in the southern town ʿAmara, the novel describes the rather peaceful coexistence between Jews, Moslems (both Shi'a and Sunna) and Sabeans, before the late 1940s. With the escape of the Jews in 1951, the town loses its charm and the shadows lurk. Some Jews remain, one of them is the physician Daʾūd Ǧabbāʾī/Gabbai who even threatens to reveal the secret of the escape route. He will eventually be executed by the Baʿṯ in Basra in 1969. The writer clearly identifies with the Jews who remained, despite their bitter end. Two persons immigrate to Israel and the writer follows them there. The first and not a major character is Šlomo Mašʿal, who left Iraq to Palestine in the 30s, joined the Mossad and returned to ʿAmara under cover of an American engineer, to organize the Jewish escape. Mašʿal is driven by the will to revenge the murder of his uncle. He is not a positive figure in the novel. The other person is Naʿīm, who is not a Jew, he is a Sabean. Mašʿal takes him to Israel and we follow his absorption: first he lives in Haifa, then in a Kibutz and finally he settles near the shrine of Ezra (ʿUzayr) in Samaria.[28] Like Mašʿal, he also returns, on a secret mission, to Iraq. However, Walī is not so interested in their success in Israel as much as he enjoys sending them back to Iraq. Israel is no more than a shelter, a transit, on their way back. By chosing the Sabean Naʿīm as his hero and bonding him to the Jews in various ways, Walī reminds us that the novel is about the protection of pluralism in Iraq and that the fate of the Sabeans might be similar to that of the Jews.

A bizarre example of the connection between Iraqi Jews in Israel and their "homeland" Iraq can be seen in the novel "Waiting for Farağ Allāh al-Qahhār" (*Fī ntiẓār faraǧ Allāh al-Qahhār*) by the Iraqi Christian writer Saʿdī l-Māliḥ.[29] This is a short historical novel, forging a narrative out of the series of massacres that dot Iraqi history in the 20th century. The narrator meets the ghosts of the victims of past massacres: Assyrians, Kurds from "Anfāl" (the 1988-9 Baʿṯi campagn against the Kurds), Shi'a from the 1991 Intifada, but also Jews who died in the *Farhūd* of 1941. Later, he meets the ghosts of Jews who died naturally in exile. One of them tells him of a mysterious man who used to come to

[26] Ḫālid al-Kištaynī, *Ḥikāyāt min Baġdād al-qadīma: Anā wa-ǧaddatī*, London, al-Ḥikma, 2006. Especially p. 234.

[27] Naǧm Walī, *Malāʾikat al-ǧanūb*, Dubai, Kaleem, 2009.

[28] This place was undoubtedly chosen to connect Naʿīm with the more famous shrine in al-ʿUzayr near ʿAmara.

[29] Saʿdī l-Māliḥ, *Fī ntiẓār*.

his grave in Canada and pray in a strange language. He turned out to be Šimʿon bar Yoḥāy, the famous Jewish saint buried in Mount Meiron in Israel. He convinces the Jewish doctor to come to Israel. In Israel he does not speak the language and has no friends. Then he sees another figure convincing him to return to Iraq, the land of his ancestors, and he complies. In Iraq he meets his friend, the Jewish poet and intellectual Anwar Šāʾūl who shows him the way to the "promised land" but refuses to name that land or join him. The doctor loves Iraq, but is not sure if Iraq is his "promised land". The strangest encounter is with the ghosts of two Iraqi Jews from Ramat Gan,[30] victims of the "Scud" missiles launched by Saddam Hussein on Israel during the Gulf War of 1991. They tell him they used to look at the falling missiles and pray that they will take them back to Iraq.[31] The Jews in this novel serve two purposes: they are an indispensable part of the chain of massacres leading to the loss of Iraq's pluralism and threatening other communities. They are also used, unlike any other community in the book, to illuminate the ambivalence to the homeland, Iraq, a feeling that the writer, being an exile himself, also shares.

In 2009 the academic journal *Masārāt*, published in Baghdad, issued a special issue on the Jews of Iraq. While most of the volume was about Jewish life in Iraq before 1951, one article discussed the absorption of Iraqi Jews in Israel. The article was rather critical of "Zionist discriminatory patterns" allegedly applied against the Iraqi Jews, but also includes a (rather dated) list of influential Iraqi Jews in many fields in Israel.[32] The same volume published excerpts from Naǧm Walī's travelogue, describing parts of his journey to Israel. This was the only publication of this book in Iraq and the Arab World.[33]

In novels of this category, Israel does not occupy an important role. Discussion of life in Israel is short. Non Iraqi Israeli Jews hardly appear in these novels.

The novel is concentrating on the Iraqi Jew, forced to leave the "land of his ancestors" (Iraq) who ends up living in Israel. The writers are not so interested in the absorption and the life their Jewish hero had in Israel. The Jew is more of a symbol than a real person. He represents the purest form of Iraqi patriotism. Therefore, he cannot be at home away from his "homeland" and desires

[30] A city near Tel Aviv and home to a large Iraqi Jewish community.

[31] Saʿdī l-Māliḥ, p. 84-91.

[32] Dr. Ḥaḍr Mazhar al-Badr, "Fī l-intimāʾ al-waṭanī li-yāhud al-ʿIrāq", *Masārāt*, 13 (2009), p. 54-65.

[33] Naǧm Walī, "Riḥla ilā qalb al-ʿaduww", *Masārāt*, 13 (2009), p. 126-59. Another excerpt was published in another Iraqi journal *Tattoo*, published in Baghdad by al-Madā publishers, a well known publisher.

to return to Iraq. Against all odds, these Jewish figures, dead or alive, often manage to return.[34]

The writers who write about the Jews, and by consequence about Israel, all agree that the deportation of the Jews of Iraq in 1951 was a grave mistake, depriving the country of its most capable men. Many still remember with horror the public executions of Jewish dignitaries in Baghdad and Basra in 1969, announcing the establishment of the "Republic of Fear" from which they suffered later. For them, the Jews are necessary to reconstruct an alternative historiography based on pluralism. Therefore, they are taken back to Iraq. For this reason, the writers, following this instrumental use of the Jew, cannot genuinely accept a disconnection between the Iraqi Jew and Iraq, let alone a successful absorption in Israel. By doing so they would admit that the deportation was good for the Jews and inadvertently support those who deported the Jews. Returning to the writing about the "other", these novels are less relevant than the coming ones. The authors are not writing about non Iraqi Jewish Israelis. The "otherness" of Iraqi Jews is either stressed, to serve the purposes of a pluralistic Iraq, or blurred to make him an "Arab Jew" and as Iraqi as any. In any case, the Iraqi Jews in these novels are orbiting an Arab Iraqi sun.[35]

Second Category: Writing about Israel

Comparing with the number of novels from the first category, the number of books on Israel, in which Israel is the main subject, is much smaller. The two writers who wrote such books, Walī and ʿAlī Badr, are important Iraqi writers, with some influence beyond the Iraqi literary sphere.[36] Walī's book, "Into the Heart of the Enemy", is a travelogue, based on one of his first travels to Israel and Badr, who had never been to Israel, wrote a "novel within a novel" in which he hides the fact of not being in Israel by a quite impressive show of knowledge of terms from modern Israeli culture. Walī's book was a part of a campaign to promote his views on Israel: following the book, he appeared on

[34] It is interesting to compare that to books written by Iraq-born Israeli writers describing their immigration to Israel. While debating the heavy question of leaving Iraq, none contemplates a return. A very good example is Elī Amir, *Mafriaḥ HaYonim*, Tel aviv, Am Oved, 1993[4].

[35] In Kištaynī's book there is an outstanding sentence coming from a Muslim taxi driver: "Islam is an Arab religion forged in the Arab Peninsula and not in Iraq. But your religion the Jews, is purely Iraqi (*diyānatukum ʿirāqiyya ṣamīma*), and it was forged in Iraq and not in Palestine", Kištaynī, *Ḥikāyāt*, p. 109. For more on the Iraqi novel and the Jews see: Ronen Zeidel, "The Iraqi Novel and the Jews", forthcoming.

[36] Walī is a journalist who contributes to leading Arab newspapers and Badr is one of Iraq's best selling novelists.

the most prestigious Arab stages and expressed his opinions. The book had four versions in Arabic, Hebrew, English and German. Only the Hebrew and German versions were published as a book, Walī could not find an Arab publisher for his manuscript.[37] Furthermore, Walī visited Israel three more times later.

Walī is a journalist. He is curious. He travels in Israel looking for interesting people and stories through which the phenomenon of Israel, intriguing him, can be interpreted. He meets Arabs and Jews, Iraqi Jews and non Iraqi Israelis, scholars and laymen and writes about their life stories. He writes about everything: from the status of Israeli Arabs to the meat factory in Kibutz Mīzra, specializing in pork. At the introduction he declares that he "wants to tell what he saw",[38] as if this releases him from prejudices on Israel. But the Israel he is describing, without summarizing it in his book, is a pluralistic mosaic of many groups, all living in a democracy that gives them the right to express freely and to be what they want.

Walī constantly contrasts that with the Arab world and Iraq, but also with the Arab intellectual world with its conformity. On a visit to the Golan, near the border with Syria and Jordan, they were stopped by a woman officer of the Israeli army who was quite friendly. Walī, who as an Iraqi is afraid of anyone wearing uniform, was surprised and in the book he immediately compares that to the Arab world: imagine what would have happened had the same situation happened in the Syrian side. He concludes: "We might be taken to one of the countless prisons of the Syrian Baʿṯ".[39] It looks like Walī was anticipating harsh criticism from his Arab peers and that added to his motivation to visit Israel and write about it.[40]

ʿAlī Badr's book, "The Lanterns of Jerusalem", differs significantly from Walī's. It is a novel, which, like some of Badr's other novels, contains another novel, seemingly written by Ayman al-Maqdisī—who no doubt is the author himself—a Palestinian intellectual, born and raised in Iraq. Maqdisī, who studied in Columbia and met Edward Said there, writes the novel, on Said's life, when Iraq is about to be occupied by the Americans. He writes the novel to show his generation, the aforementioned "generation of the 1990s", the "right way" to follow. As previously mentioned, this generation suffered a deep feeling of loss. For Maqdisī (and Badr), Edward Said is an exemplary figure: both western and eastern, peace loving, intellectual and a Palestinian refugee ceaselessly campaigning for the "right of return" and, as such, the

[37] Information disclosed to the author by Walī, 22 May 2012.
[38] Walī, *Masāʾ*, p. 11.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 162-3.
[40] See for example: *Ibid.*, p. 10.

personification of the victim. He wants to write the Palestinian equivalent of Joyce's "Ulysses" with Said as Leopold Bloom and Jerusalem as Dublin.[41] What emerges is a combination of Joyce with Ġassān Kanafānī's "The return to Haifa"[42], one of the best known Palestinian literary pieces in which a Palestinian couple returns, after 1967, to their hometown, Haifa, to retrieve a baby they lost while rushing to the port in 1948. Edward Said is back in Jerusalem, walking the streets of his childhood both physically and by the "stream of consciousness". He meets an Israeli couple, Yael (a man) and Esther, who embody the Jewish Israelis. Yael is a tourist guide who recites the Zionist ideology. He betrays Esther, having an affair with an American tourist. Esther, who in her turn befriends Said, is a Holocaust survivor, who would rather be somewhere else and not in Israel. The structure of the plot is rather thin and most of the novel (within the novel) moves with Said's consciousness from place to place in Jerusalem, from period to period in the city's history, constantly stopping on the Jewish attack on Talbiya, Said's neighborhood, that led to his escape in 1948. The third part of the book is made of Maqdisī's comments on the novel and serves Badr to clarify his stances on several issues.

Walī's interest in Israel has two origins: his interest in the Iraqi Jews and his reaction to Baʿṯi brainwashing that produced in him a curiosity to discover the "forbidden fruit"—Israel. When he visited Israel in 2007, he was working on his last novel *Malāʾikat al-ğanūb*. In Israel, he searched for Iraqi Jews who enjoyed talking with him about their lives in Iraq and about their yearning to Baghdad. These parts of the book appertain to the first category of writing. He was particularly searching for the whereabouts of a Jewish doctor from ʿAmara, Walī's hometown, who saved his life as a child. This may be a personal obsession, but when writing about the Jewish contribution to Iraqi culture, Walī is lamenting this loss as an Iraqi intellectual caring for the loss of pluralism in contemporary Iraq.

The second reason is more interesting. He testifies that Israel intrigued him from a very young age, mainly because it was always mentioned by the politicians and their propaganda. The young Walī, instead of accepting Baʿṯist propaganda, questioned it and tried to find an answer. He considers anti-Israeli rhetoric to be an essential part of the "cultural ruin" brought about by Arab

[41] *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 14, 244-5.

[42] *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 308. Badr admits that the personality of Esther in his novel was influenced by the Jewish woman, also a holocaust survivor, in Kanafānī 's book. Ġassān Kanafānī, *ʿĀʾid ilā Ḥayfā*, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-abḥāṯ al-ʿarabiyya/Muʾassasat Ġassān Kanafānī l-ṯaqāfiyya (« Silsilat aʿmāl Ġassān Kanafānī », 17), 1969.

nationalist ideology.[43] In that point, Walī, the exile in Germany, who does not belong to the "Generation of the 1990s", shares the views of Ḥaydar Saʿīd, quoted in the beginning. If that is the case, Walī decides that "he does not know anything", in other words, that he would forget everything he thought he knew, before his first visit to Israel.[44]

Unlike Walī, Badr, who never visited Israel, already knows a lot about it. Whereas Walī is a journalist, reporting on what he sees, Badr is an ideologue, anxious to show his generation the way toward progress. Thus, he cannot have doubts, only certainties. The novel should be read as a manifesto. With this manifesto, he tries to reform Arab nationalism rather than do away with it. He declares: "Because Israel was created by…the novel…one has to deny it (*takḍiba*) with a novel".[45] Accordingly, Edward Said "was the most dangerous war on Israel. More dangerous than all our previous failed wars (*al-ḥurūb al-fāšila*)".[46] However, like Walī, his motive is above all, internal Iraqi. Here again, Israel is not an end in itself. Walī and Badr both write about Israel but think about Iraq.

For Walī, the Israelis are a mosaic of sectors and individuals. He does not try to generalize on them or reach the "essence" of the Israeli. He lets them speak with very little comments, thus showing that they are the subjects of the book and not the writer/traveler and his opinions on them. This is not the case in Badr's fiction. In a fiction, the figures are not speaking their own mind, they say what the writer puts in their mouths. Badr's Israelis are not as socially diverse as Walī's: all are of the Ashkenazi elite. There are no Iraqi Jews in Badr's Jerusalem, which, strangely, makes his book the most "Israeli" of all. But it is what those Jews say that reflects upon Badr's willingness to accept or understand them. Badr writes that the Jews "are in Filasṭīn…but their spirit is somewhere else".[47] They have no real connection to the land. The holocaust survivors among them ended up in Palestine without choosing to be there and would rather be elsewhere, like Esther. Even Yael, who constantly (unlike most normal Israelis) speaks about history as something that gives the Jews hold on the land, actually realizes that history has no existence and cannot be resurrected.[48] Like Kanafānī, of all the Jewish Israelis, Badr sympathizes most with women survivors of the holocaust. However, he rejects the holocaust as a justification for a hold on Palestine. Large parts of the novel are a refutation of

[43] Walī, *Masāʾ*, p. 19. Walī explains his motivation to visit Israel in p. 15-25.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[45] *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 264. A similar sentence appears in p. 63.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 264.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Israeli culture, especially the novel, for its role in constructing the national narrative. The Israelis and their novelists are accused of symbolically eliminating the Arabs from the landscape.[49] Not even the post-Zionists and the "New Historians" are spared: Badr accuses them of siding with the politicians they condemn.[50] In his own words: "There is an insupportable racialism . . . in Jewish Israeli culture toward the Arabs".[51]

Badr is trying to turn things upside down: to write a novel in which the old will overcome the new.[52] His impressive, if dated and tedious, show of familiarity and knowledge in Israeli culture, counters, in the Saidian sense, the orientalist's knowledge of the "orient". Also Saidian is a large paragraph at the end on the definition of the "self" through the definition of the "other", which is the best way to pluralism.[53] Unfortunately, Badr fails to define the (Israeli) "other", let alone accept him as he is and in Israel. Paradoxically, he turns himself into an "orientalist" just like those western orientalists that Said condemned throughout his career.

Finally, Walī and Badr differ in writing about the Palestinians and the conflict. Walī chooses not to be in the Territories and instead get to know the "other Israel", where he met Arabs and Jews and was surprised by the scope of liberty enjoyed by the Arabs residents in Israel, that he compares with the lack of liberty in the Arab world. He often criticizes Palestinian politics and Edward Said for being motivated by personal interests and so on. In general, he prefers to leave the subject of occupation to "my partners for peace, the Israeli intellectuals". Unlike many others, Badr included, he will not preach, for he knows from Iraq that, being on the occupying side, they are those who are best suited to condemn the occupation.[54] Badr on the other hand, tirelessly bashes at Israeli intellectuals and writers, especially Amos Oz, David Grosmann and A.B. Yehoshua, accusing them of eliminating the Arabs from their novels and representing official Israel.[55] In his novel, the Palestinians are at the center: Edward Said, Amāl, his childhood friend, the national poet Rāšid Ḥusayn, who died in exile, the survivors of the occupation of the village Umm al-Zeinat, south of Haifa and others. Interestingly, almost all are Palestinians from Israel and Jerusalem and none from the Territories. This is not coincidential: Badr is confronting the core of the conflict, the existence of

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 313. He names Ilan Pappe, Benny Moris, Tom Segev among others.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 315.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 331-2.
[54] Walī, *Masāʾ*, p. 11.
[55] *Maṣābīḥ*, p. 63, 66, 146-7, 175, 182, 201, 310, 313, 314, 316.

Israel, and is not interested in the occupied territories at all. He knows that Israeli intellectuals are against the occupation and the settlements, but he decided to attack the main stream and not the Israeli political right. Just like the Orientalist descriptions of the Orient that attracted the attention of Edward Said, his Palestinians are timeless: they will always be there and they will always remain what they are.

Conclusion

The reevaluation of writing about the utmost "other" in the Arab world, Israel, is part and parcel of an interesting and sadly unnoticed internal Iraqi debate, that started in the 1990s and is best expressed in the articles of Ḥaydar Saʿīd and in the first part of ʿAlī Badr's novel. The discussion of Israel was an offshoot of wider issues on the orientation of future Iraq: Should it be Iraqi or Arab? Eastern or Western? Federal or centralist? Pluralistic or homogeneous? Should it look forward to an American occupation? Can it accept democracy imposed by American tanks?

The stakes faced by those who write about the Israeli "other" are all too many, with physical annihilation a real option. Therefore, there ought to be many more who secretly share those views, and are too terrified to go public.

Those who were involved in the debate were not many: they were Iraqi intellectuals, based in Baghdad and abroad, mainly (but not exclusively) Shi'a. However, they are the cream of Iraqi intellectual life, with high visibility and frequent access to the media, widely read. It is thanks to them that those ideas, including the discourse on Israel, was disseminated and debated by wider circles. As discussed in the first part of the article, the bulk of this group presents a cohesive philosophy, regarding the future of Iraq, based on the total negation of the previous "culture of the national state". The novels discussed here are only the "tip of the iceberg".

When writing about the long gone Iraqi Jews or about Israel, Iraqi writers write about Iraq. They make it very clear in their books. Iraq which should at present maintain its heterogeneity and not repeat the grave error of sending the Jews away or the Iraq which should look around for models of democracy and find similarities with Israel. It could be the Iraq which should get rid of the militaristic, false and disastrous ideologies of the past or the Iraq that helps redefining pan Arab politics and ideology.

ʿAlī Badr, Walī and the others have a lot in common, something which is often lost when reading their books. They are liberals, or a kind thereof. They aspire for a democratic, pluralist and liberal Iraq, standing on its own. By deciding to write about Israel and immersing in its culture, they were defying

a taboo in Arab cultural life: Walī, who visited Israel and wrote more positively about it, was more defiant and probably too defiant for many Arab intellectuals. Yet Walī owns a German passport and could go to Israel, whereas many others, living in Iraq, simply cannot do that, whether they like it or not.

Beyond the assortment of flat and lifeless stereotypes of Israelis in some of the books, especially Badr's, the "other", reading about himself, can notice two trends, for Iraqi consumption. One is the acceptance of Israel with its impressive achievements, especially in containing so many groups in a democracy. This implies downgrading the Palestinian cause and the substitution of pan Arabism with a stronger Iraqi national identity, based on different lines. The other is the denial of Israel's right to exist, by refuting its formative story. Knowledge of Israeli culture, a breaking of a taboo, is used, in the Saidian sense, as a means of control and to achieve the goal. This implies that the Palestinian cause is re-elevated to be the axis for orientation on account of Iraqi territorial nationalism.[56] Nevertheless, with so many other problems affecting their life, the bulk of Iraqis seem adamant to have a view on either Israel or the Palestinians, which may eliminate some of the obstacles for the internal intellectual debate.

At present, it is not possible to assess which trend is more influential in Iraqi intellectual circles, especially in Iraq. Walī was harshly criticized by Iraqi colleagues. On the other hand, Badr's call in his novel to redirect the "Generation of the 1990s" toward Palestine and take Edward Said as their idol, was rejected by his peers, who continued to write differently. Apparently, most intellectuals of the "Generation of the 1990s" follow Ḥaydar Saʿīd's advice not to rush relations with Israel, but to give it "a serious thinking".[57] Between Walī's enchantment from Israel and its rejection, there still is a large void of ignorance in Iraqi and Arab literature on Israel. Hopefully, the increasing curiosity will lead to better and more profound writing.

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[56] This point should be elaborated in a forthcoming article by Ronen Zeidel on the "Generation of the 1990s". At the meantime, it is worthy to contemplate how Badr treats ʿAlāʾ Ḫalīl, Maqdisī's rival and a supporter, among other things, of Iraqi territorial nationalism. In this context, the most important aspect in Ḫalīl is his narrow horizons and parochialism. He dreams about the West, which he never visited. Therefore, Badr implies that he does not know the West at all. He puts Iraq first, like many of his peers, and despises the Palestinians. He dreams about a "democratic, federal and non Arab Iraq", *Ibid.*, p. 56. A member of the "Generation of Loss", he hates his homeland and wants to leave it, whereas Maqdisī loves the homeland he never had. *Ibid.* p. 22. Here, Badr strikes a point: expressions of contempt for Iraq as a homeland by members of that generation are very often controversial and run counter to their goal of rebuilding it along different lines.

[57] Ḥaydar Saʿīd, *Siyāsat al-ramz*, p. 89.