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Author(s): Ella Shohat

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## THE INVENTION OF THE MIZRAHIM

ELLA SHOHAT

*This essay examines the paradoxical effects on Arab Jews of their two, rival essentialist nationalisms—Jewish and Arab. It shows how the Eurocentric concept of a single “Jewish History” cut non-Ashkenazi Jews off from their origins, even while the Zionist idea that Arabness and Jewishness are mutually exclusive gradually came to be shared by Arab nationalist discourse. The emergence of a new, hybrid identity of Mizrahim, as a product both of Israel’s assimilationist policy and of resistance to it, is discussed. Finally, the author proposes an interdisciplinary framework—Mizrahi studies—as a way of going beyond hegemonic Zionist discourses while at the same time making a strong link to the Palestinian issue.*

A RECENT NEWS ITEM CONCERNING ISRAEL inadvertently points to some of the ambiguities and aporias of Mizrahi identity since the advent of Zionism. The article claimed that the Institute for Biological Research in Israel was developing a biological weapon, a kind of “designer toxin” or “ethnic bullet” tailored to attack Arabs only. (First conceived during the apartheid era in South Africa as a pigment-based weapon to be used against blacks, it was reconfigured as an ethnic, gene-based weapon by Israel.) The report, unconfirmed but relayed in the London *Sunday Times*, mentioned in passing that the research involved Iraqi Jews.<sup>1</sup>

What is of interest here is the symptomatic implications of a relatively “minor” aspect of the article, the alleged choice of “Iraqi Jews,” in terms of some of the paradoxes of Arab Jewish identity in Israel. (By “Arab Jews” I refer to people of Jewish faith historically linked to the Arab Muslim world.) On the one hand, the Israeli establishment regards Arab Jews as irremediably Arab—indeed, that Iraqi Jews were allegedly used to determine a certain toxin’s effect on Arabs suggests that for genetic/biological purposes, at least, Iraqi Jews *are* Arabs. On the other hand, official Israeli/Zionist policy urges Arab Jews (or, more generally, Oriental Jews, also known as Sephardim or Mizrahim) to see their only *real* identity as Jewish. The official ideology de-

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ELLA SHOHAT is professor of women’s and cultural studies at the City University of New York-Graduate Center. Among her books are *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (with Robert Stam), and *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*.

The author would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Neelan Tiruchelvam, director of the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka, member of parliament, and a leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front. A profoundly peaceful man who worked on constitutional reforms to alleviate Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict, he was targeted and killed by a suicide bomber on 29 July 1999.

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nies the Arabness of Arab Jews, positing Arabness and Jewishness as irreconcilable opposites. For Zionism, this Arabness, the product of millennial cohabitation, is merely a Diasporic stain to be “cleansed” through assimilation. Within Zionist ideology, the very term “Arab Jew” is an oxymoron and a misnomer, a conceptual impossibility.

### ISLAM, MIZRAHIM, AND ZIONIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Zionist historiography pays little attention to the history of the Jews in the Muslim world. Indeed, the Israeli establishment has tried systematically to suppress Sephardi-Mizrahi cultural memory by marginalizing this history in school curricula. Standard history books include only a few pages on the history of Islam, the Arab world, and the Judeo-Islamic symbiosis. Little mention is made, for example, of the fact that major Sephardi texts in philosophy, linguistics, poetry, and medicine were largely written in Arabic and reflect specific Muslim influences as well as a Jewish-Arab cultural identity. When Zionist history does refer to what might be termed “Judeo-Islamic history,” the narrative usually consists of a morbidly selective “tracing the dots” from pogrom to pogrom as evidence of relentless hostility toward Jews in the Arab world, reminiscent of that encountered in Europe. The notion of the unique, common victimization of all Jews everywhere and at all times, a crucial underpinning of official Israeli discourse, precludes historical analogies and cultural metonymies, thus producing a Eurocentric reading of “Jewish History,” one that hijacks the Jews of Islam from their own geography and subsumes them into the history of the European-Ashkenazi shtetl.

Official Zionism’s selective reading of Middle Eastern history makes two processes apparent: (1) the rejection of an Arab and Muslim context for Jewish institutions, identity, and history; and (2) the subordination of Arab Jews to a “universal” Jewish experience. Zionist history texts undermine the hyphenated, syncretic culture of actually existing Jews, rendering the non-Jewish side of the hyphen nonpertinent. This unidimensional categorization, with all Jews being defined as closer to each other than to the cultures of which they have been a part, is tantamount to dismembering a community’s identity.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, in the case of Middle Eastern Jews, the Euro-Israeli separation of the “Jewish” and “Middle Eastern” parts has ideologically facilitated the actual dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Muslim world, while pressuring the Oriental Jews in Israel to realign their identity according to Zionist Euro-Israeli paradigms. My point is not to idealize the situation of the Jews of Islam, but to suggest that Zionist discourse has undermined comparative studies of Jews in the Muslim world in relation to other minorities.

The master narrative of universal Jewish victimization entailing the claim that the “Jewish nation” faces a common “historical enemy”—the Muslim Arab—requires a double-edged amnesia with regard both to Judeo-Islamic history and to the colonial partition of Palestine. False analogies between the Arabs and Nazis, a symptom of a Jewish-European nightmare projected onto

the structurally distinct political dynamics of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, have become a staple of Zionist rhetoric. In a historical context of Middle Eastern Jews experiencing within the Muslim world a history utterly distinct from that which haunted the European memories of Ashkenazi Jews, and in a context of the massacres and dispossession of the Palestinian people, the conflation of the Muslim Arab with the archetypical (European) oppressors of Jews downplays the colonial-settler history of Euro-Israel itself.

The neat division of Israel as West and Palestine as East also ignores some of the fundamental contradictions within Zionist discourse itself.<sup>3</sup> Central to Zionism is the notion of a return to origins in the Middle East. And although Jews have often been depicted in anti-Semitic discourse as an alien “Eastern” people within the West, the paradox of Israel is that it presumed to “end a diaspora” characterized by ritualistic nostalgia for the East, only to found a state ideologically and geopolitically oriented almost exclusively toward the West. For the roots of Zionism can be traced to the conditions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, not only as a reaction against anti-Semitism but also to the rapid expansion of capitalism and of European empire building.<sup>4</sup> Theodor Herzl called for a Western-style capitalist-democratic miniature state to be made possible by the grace of imperial patrons such as England or Germany, while David Ben-Gurion formulated his visionary utopia of Israel as that of a “Switzerland of the Middle East.”

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The same historical process that dispossessed Palestinians of their property, lands, and national-political rights was intimately linked to the process that dispossessed Arab Jews of their property, lands, and rootedness in Arab countries while uprooting them from that history and culture within Israel itself. But while Palestinians have fostered the collective militancy of nostalgia in exile, Arab Jews, trapped in a no-exit situation, have been forbidden to nourish memories of having belonged to the peoples across the River Jordan, across the mountains of Lebanon, and across the Sinai desert and Suez Canal.<sup>5</sup> The pervasive notion of “one people” reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before the State of Israel.

The fact that the “Orientals” have had closer cultural and historical links to the presumed enemy—the “Arab”—than to the Ashkenazi Jews with whom they were coaxed and coerced into shared nationhood threatens the conception of a homogeneous nation akin to those on which European nationalist movements were based, while it also threatens the Euro-Israeli self-image, which sees itself as an extension of Europe. The taboo around the Arabness of the Eastern Jews has been clearly manifested in Israeli academic and media attacks on Mizrahi intellectuals who refuse to define themselves simply as Israelis and who dare to assert their Arabness in the public sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Fearing engulfment by the East, the Euro-Israeli establishment attempted to repress the “Middle Easternness” of Mizrahim as part of an effort to Westernize the Israeli nation and to mark clear borders of identity between Jews as Westerners and Arabs as Easterners. Arab Jews were urged to see Judaism and Zionism as synonyms, and Jewishness and Arabness as antonyms. Thus Arab Jews were prodded to choose between anti-Zionist Arabness and a pro-Zionist Jewishness. This conceptualization of East versus West has important implications in this age of the “peace process,” since it sidesteps the fact that the majority of the population within Israel is from the Middle East—Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as Mizrahim. Peace as it is now defined does not entail a true democracy in terms of adequate representation of these populations or changing the economic, educational, and cultural stratifications within Israeli society.

### THE APORIAS OF NATIONALISM

In 1998, the same year as the genetic experiments referred to above, the Arab writer Elias Khoury convened a conference in Beirut on the Nakba of 1948 that included a panel on Arab Jewish perspectives. All the Jewish participants on the panel were highly vocal critics of Zionism. While some, such as Shimon Ballas, live in Israel, others now live elsewhere—Simone Bitton lives in Paris, I live in New York. Other invited Arab Jews, such as the Moroccan Abraham Serfati, had never been to Israel at all. Khoury’s invitations continued an ongoing, if intermittent and unofficial, dialogue. Nevertheless, some Syrian-backed groups in Lebanon opposed the invitations to the point that many of the Arab Jews were either advised not to attend or themselves decided not to go for fear of their safety.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the same year that official Israel found Arab Jews to be genetically Arab, some Arabs found them—even those with strong anti-Zionist credentials—to be “insufficiently” Arab. Here we find an ironic victory for Zionism, since putatively anti-Zionist Arabs seem to have absorbed the Zionist position that all Jews must, in their heart of hearts, necessarily be Zionist. For the Arab opponents of Khoury’s invitation, Arab Jews are always and everywhere genetically Jewish and ideologically Zionist, regardless of historical origins, cultural affinities, political affiliations, and even professed ideologies. Thus have Arab Jews been caught up in the crosscurrents of rival essentialist forms of nationalism.<sup>8</sup> As long as the political discourse, whether in Israel or in the Arab world, remains essentialist-nationalist, there is little political and scholarly place for Arab Jews or Mizrahim critical of Zionism.

With the birth of nationalism, a whole new process began. Arabness and Jewishness were formulated as nationalist concepts in historically unprecedented ways. At the height of imperialism, liberation from racial and colonial oppression could be formulated only along nationalist lines. In order to merit the end of colonial rule, third world nations had to be invented according to definitions supplied by the often Eurocentric ideologies of the nation

as a coherent unit. The nation-state was the “logical result” of the definition of the nation as one people with one language and one culture (often including religion, even if not always declared as such) living on a demarcated land.

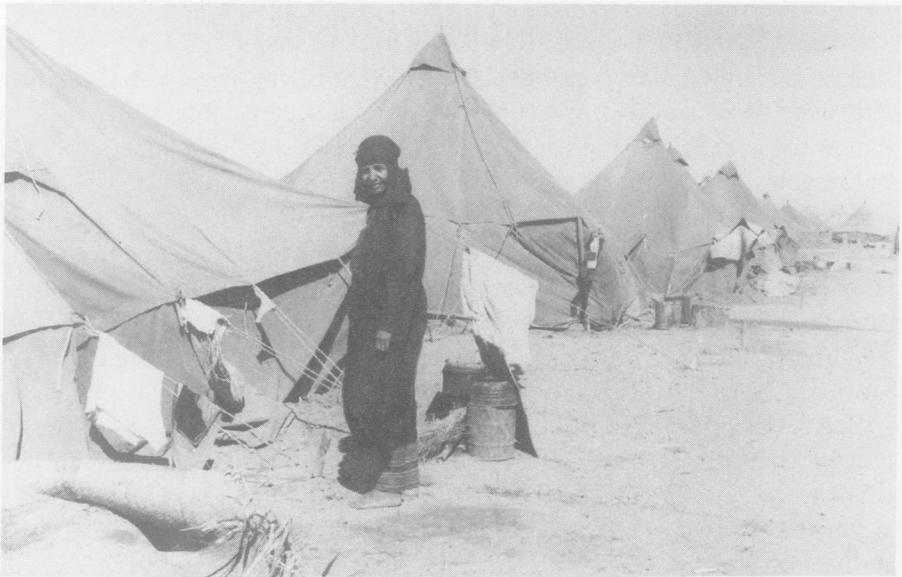
On a *realpolitik* level, this was a “reasonable” response to colonialism. Unfortunately, however, formerly colonized people have often fallen into the very same conceptual traps that oppressed them during colonialism. For the Arab Muslim world, liberation from Europe has also marked the end of the overarching Muslim geocultural civilization in which identities and power were defined differently. The place of all protected religious minorities gradually shifted with the introduction of colonialism and nationalism. The fragile position of Assyrians in Iraq, whose identities and loyalties have been constantly tested, is eloquent in this regard. The place of Jews, similarly, was never completely secure, even if on a superficial level they were part of the great Arab nation and even if some Jews were among the leaders of the anticolonial struggle.

But what made the Arab Jewish story more complicated than that of other minorities in the Arab Muslim world was the gradual rise of another nationalist movement, Zionism, which asserted claims of pan-Jewishness. For some Arab Jews, tempted by the image of a place where “we” would no longer be a minority, that promise sounded liberatory. Many were exhilarated by the messianic belief that Jews had reached a new religious dispensation. Others, such as communists and some religious leaders, expressed violent opposition to Zionism. My father tells me that in the late 1930s, his high school teacher, the brother of Hakham Sasson Khdhuri (the religious head of the Baghdadi community), reported about his visit to Palestine. Recounting the disdain he encountered from European Jews, and describing what he regarded as their “non-Jewish” ways, he warned the young students not to go to Palestine, because the “Jews there are not like us.” This concept of “Jews not like us” was only dimly understood at the time, since people like my father and his classmates had had little contact with “different” (European) Jews, alien to their own Middle Eastern Jewish norms.

Zionist ideologues, for their part, had always shown an ambivalent attitude toward the Jews of the East precisely because of their non-Ashkenazi “otherness.” In their texts and congresses, European Zionists consistently addressed themselves to Ashkenazi Jews and to the colonizing empires that might provide support for a national homeland, while rejecting the non-Ashkenazis as “savage” and “primitive.” At the first Zionist Congress, they opposed “Levantization,” the “tainting” of the settlements in Palestine with an infusion of “Levantine Jews.”

At the same time, however, Zionists saw the economic and political necessity of attracting and occasionally even forcing “Jews in the form of Arabs”<sup>9</sup> to the “Land of Israel.”<sup>10</sup> From the early days of Zionism, non-Ashkenazi Jews were seen as cheap labor that had to be maneuvered into immigrating to Palestine. Creating a Jewish national homeland required,

along with the purchase and the expropriation of Arab land, the creation of a de facto Jewish population on the land—whence the need for Mizrahim. Even during the 1950s, Zionist officials showed ambivalence about the mass importation of “Levantines.” But once again, demographic and economic necessity forced the Zionist hand. The rescue fantasy concerning the “Jews of the Orient,” in other words, masked Zionism’s own need to rescue itself from economic and political collapse. While presenting Palestine as an empty land to be transformed by Zionist enterprise, the founding fathers presented Mizrahim as passive vessels to be reshaped by the revivifying spirit of Promethean Zionism.<sup>11</sup>



**A Yemeni woman stands next to her tent in a transit camp in Israel, December 1949. (Photo courtesy of Ella Shohat)**

The case of Arab Jews, as a community on the “margins” of opposing nationalisms, also suggests that nationalism itself is never simple. The very concept is contradictory, since nationalism is inevitably the site of competing discourses, a feature that characterizes both Zionist Jewish and Arab nationalism despite the differences in their historical origins and their opposite relationships to Western colonialism and imperialism. Quite apart from the historical and ideological ambiguities of nationalism—the slippage between the original meaning of nation as racial group and its later meaning as politically organized entity, and the oscillation between nationalism’s progressive and regressive poles—nationalism changes its valence in different historical and geographic contexts. A proactive European nationalism, such as Nazi Germany’s *lebensraum* ambitions against its neighbors, cannot be equated with reactive nationalisms like those in the Arab world, a case where nation-

alism is not directed against neighbors but against the hegemonic power of European colonialism.

But in the case of Zionism, the oppressive and liberatory poles are intermingled with an unusual density of contradiction. Zionism fought Nazi anti-Semitism at a geographical remove. It saw itself as national liberation from European anti-Semitic oppression, but at the same time it was itself responsible for the oppression of Palestinians, and, in a different way, of Arab Jews. Zionism founded one nation while destroying another nation, gathering Jews *from* the four corners of the globe while at the same time dispersing Palestinians *to* the four corners of the globe. The Mizrahim were included, at least in later stages, in Zionism's national project (though in a subordinate and ambivalent position), while the Palestinians were constructed as the perennial enemy that had to be expelled, or at least disempowered, for the Jewish nation to exist.

For Palestinians, nationalism has been a means of combating the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Yet what both Jewish and Arab nationalisms have shared, in discursive terms, is the notion of a single, authentic (Jewish or Arab) nation. They both have assumed that the "national" is produced by eliminating the foreign, the contaminated, the impure, so that the nation can emerge in all its native glory. In the name of national unity, contradictions having to do with class, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, region, sexuality, language, and so forth tend to be erased or glossed over.

The rigidity of these paradigms has produced the Arab Jewish tragedy, since neither paradigm has room for crossed and multiple identities. While Arab nationalism paid lip service to respecting the diverse ethnic and religious minorities, in fact many groups, for example Assyrians, Berbers, Copts, Kurds, Nubians, and Turkomans, have been subdued by a norm that was hegemonic and essentialist, ultimately a Sunni-Muslim-Arab notion of what a "real" Iraqi or Egyptian should be. But in the case of Jews, because of the aggressive advance of Zionism, Arab Jewish identity was always intensely "on trial" in a way that was not true of the other minorities. All the minorities faced the insecurity engendered by marginalization, but Arab Jews had to face as well the basic question of final allegiance: were they ultimately loyal to the hegemonic threat, the "Zionist entity," or to their "local" nations of residence? Did religion outweigh nation? Did they accept the Zionist equation of religion and national allegiance—i.e., Zionism as the expression of the religious desire of all Jews? Did they ever have a choice even to reflect on this choice, or the power to make such a decision? The rigidities of these two antagonistic nationalisms inscribed Arab Jews within two very restrictive and conflicting narratives, neither of which had space for their newly invented contradiction.

The Zionist idea that Arabness and Jewishness are mutually exclusive gradually came to be shared by Arab nationalist discourse, placing Arab Jews on the horns of a terrible dilemma. The other dimension of Zionism's displacement of Palestinians was the displacement of Arab Jews from the Arab



world, which took place, for the most part, without a conscious or comprehensive understanding of what was at stake and what was yet to come. Most Arab Jews, for example, could never fully foresee what the impossibility of return to their countries of origin would mean. (The official term “*aliya*”—ascent—does not capture the complexity of Arab Jewish displacement, just as the term “immigration” does not account for the impossibility of return.) The displacement of Arab Jews forms part of a more general process of the formation of third world nation-states, which often involved a double process of joining diverse ethnicities and regions previously separated under colonialism while at the same time partitioning regions and peoples within new regional definitions (e.g., Iraq/Kuwait) and cross-shuffling populations (India/Pakistan). I am not arguing, as Zionists often do, that what occurred was a mere “population exchange” that justifies the creation of Palestinian refugees since “we” were displaced too. But critiquing this Zionist argument should not prevent a thorough study of the wrongs done to Arab Jews.

What is needed, then, is a more complex analysis of the circumstances that forced the departure of Arab Jews. Such an analysis would have to take into account a number of factors: the secret collaboration between Israel and some Arab regimes (e.g., Nuri al-Sa’id’s in Iraq), with the background orchestration of the British; the impact of this direct or indirect collaboration on both Arab Jews and Palestinians, now cast into antagonistic roles on opposite sides of the political and ideological border; Zionist attempts to place a wedge between the Jewish and Muslim communities, for example by placing bombs in synagogues to generate panic on the part of Jews;<sup>12</sup> the Arab nationalism that failed to make a distinction between Jews and Zionists and that did little to secure a place for Jews; and Arab Jewish misconceptions about the secular nation-state project of Zionism, which had almost nothing to do with their own religious community identity. Arab Jews left their countries of origin with mingled excitement and terror but, most importantly, full of Zionist-manipulated confusion, misunderstanding, and projections. Old-fashioned messianic religiosity was co-opted into a secular nationalist movement. At times, even Arab Jewish Zionists (who condoned what they themselves called “cruel Zionism,” the need to use violent means to dislodge Jews from exile) failed to grasp this distinction and certainly never imagined the systematic racism that they were about to encounter in the “Jewish” state.<sup>13</sup>

The Arab-versus-Jew binarism has placed Arab Jews outside the Arab world and has called up some historical memories of Arab Muslim hostility to Jews-as-Jews. The fears, anxiety, and even trauma provoked by chants of “*idhbah al-yahud*” (“slaughter the Jews”) are still a burning memory for my parents’ generation, who lived the anti-Zionist struggle not as Zionist occupiers in Palestine but as Iraqi Jews in Iraq and as Egyptian Jews in Egypt. And while those chants can be seen as directed at “the Zionists,” one cannot overlook the way they marked the psyche of Jews in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. At the same time, with the pressure of waves of Ashkenazi Zionist immigration, and the swelling power of its institutions, the distinction between Jews

and Zionists was becoming ever more tenuous, to the benefit of European Zionism. The situation led the Palestinian Arabs to see all Jews as at least potential accomplices of Zionism. Had the Arab nationalist movement maintained the distinction between “Jew” and “Zionist,” as even some Zionist historians have recognized, it might have won Arab Jewish support for the anti-Zionist cause.<sup>14</sup> Thus the idea of a homogenous “Jewish Nation,” even when articulated by Arabs from a presumably anti-Zionist perspective, ironically ends up reproducing the very Zionist discourses that it opposes, specifically the Zionist claim to speak on behalf of all Jews.

### THE MAKING OF MIZRAHI IDENTITY

Political geographies and state borders do not always coincide with “imaginary geographies,”<sup>15</sup> whence the existence of “internal émigrés,” nostalgics, rebels—that is, groups of people who share the same passport but whose relationship to the nation-state is conflictual and ambivalent. Within Israel itself, precisely because it was the state (Israel) that created the nation (Jewish), the Mizrahi belonging to the nation became a state project in which the whole educational and social apparatus was mobilized. Yet despite the efforts to transform Arab Jews into Israeli Jews, Mizrahi affiliation with Euro-Israel is complex, ambivalent, and at times skeptical, even contingent.

In a roundabout way, the Mizrahim as an “imagined community” are a Zionist invention.<sup>16</sup> By provoking the geographical dispersal of the Jews from the Muslim world, by placing them in a new situation on the ground, by attempting to reshape their identity as simply “Israeli,” by disdaining and trying to uproot their Easternness, by discriminating against them as a group, Zionism obliged Arab Jews to redefine themselves in relation to new ideological polarities, thus provoking the aporias of an identity constituted out of its own ruins. Jews in the Muslim world always thought of themselves as “Jews,” but their Jewishness was assumed as part of the Judeo-Islamic cultural fabric. With Zionism, that set of affiliations changed, resulting in a transformed semantics of belonging. But the delegitimization of Middle Eastern culture has boomeranged in the face of Euro-Israel: out of the massive encounter that has taken place between Jews from such widely separated regions as the Maghreb and Yemen emerged a new overarching umbrella identity, what came to be called “the Mizrahim.”

The term began to be used only in the early 1990s by leftist non-Ashkenazi activists who saw previous terms such as *bnei edot hamizrah* (“descendants of the oriental ethnicities”) as condescending; non-European Jews were posited as “ethnicities,” in contradistinction to the unmarked norm of “Ashkenaziness” or Euro-Israeli “Sabraness,” defined simply as Israeli. “Mizrahim” also gradually replaced the term “Sephardim” (literally referring to those of Spanish origin), which was also used oppositionally up until the late 1980s. Apart from its inaccuracy, “Sephardim” can be seen as privileging links to Europe while slighting the East. The newer term

"Mizrahim" (literally "Easterners" or "Orientals") references more than just origin; it evokes the specific experience of non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. "Mizrahim" took on some of the resistant quality of the black/white discourse established by the Black Panther movement in the early 1970s, itself a proud reversal of the Ashkenazi racist epithet *shvartze khayes* (Yiddish for "black animals") and an allusion to the black liberation movement in the United States. "Mizrahim," I would argue, condenses a number of connotations: it celebrates the Jewish past in the Eastern world; it affirms the pan-Oriental communities developed in Israel itself; and it invokes a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab Muslim East. All these emergent collective definitions arose, as often occurs, in diacritical contrast with a newly encountered hegemonic group, in this case the Ashkenazim of Israel.

If there had been no State of Israel, my family and I would probably still be in Baghdad, living as one minority among many ethnic and religious communities (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kurds, Shi'a, Turkomans, etc.) in a Sunni-Muslim-Arab dominant society. Or we might have become refugees from dictatorship, like so many exiled Iraqis today. But without Zionism, we would not have faced the dilemma of Arab versus Jew. Instead, my family, refugees from Iraq, passed through Israel and ended up in the United States, immigrants seeking refuge from, among other things, Euro-Israeli racism. For Mizrahim, Israel has not been conducive to success. Many families who led prosperous lives in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, or Tunisia witnessed a descent in Israel, their children becoming dropouts, drug addicts, prostitutes, hustlers. While the majority of Jews in prison are of non-Ashkenazi origin, the majority at the university (students and professors) are Ashkenazi. In a short period, the identity of Arab Jews has been fractured, their life possibilities diminished, their hopes deferred.

Mizrahi identity, then, is on one level a Zionist "achievement," one which marks a departure from previous concepts of Jewishness. Although there had been a kind of regional gēocultural Jewish space from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, where Jews traveled and exchanged ideas, it was always within the aegis and in dialogue with the larger Islamic world,<sup>17</sup> a world where the Ashkenazim were on the "margins." But within that world, identities were contingently defined by hyphens. In Iraq multiple definitions were used: Baghdadi Jews (in contrast with the Jews of other cities), Babylonian Jews (to mark historical roots in the region), Iraqi Jews (to mark national affiliation), and Arab Jews (in contradistinction to Muslim and Christian Arabs, but also marking belonging to the greater Arab nation). "Sephardiness" was not part of the Iraqi Jewish self-definition insofar as it referred to the Jews of Spain (*Sepharad* in Hebrew) who retained their Spanish even in Bulgaria, Egypt, Morocco, or Turkey. Zionism, however, ruptured these assumptions about Jewishness.

The "Arabness" of the Mizrahim not only threatened the Zionist ego-ideal fantasizing Israel as a prolongation of Europe "in" but not "of" the Middle East, it also embodied the perceived reminiscence of an "inferior" Diaspora

Jewishness. (This attitude was at times expressed toward Ashkenazi newcomers as well.) The immigrants from the third world, particularly from Arab Muslim countries, provoked “anti-Jewish” feelings in the secularly oriented Sabra culture both because of the threatening idea of the heterogeneity of Jewish cultures and because of the discomfiting amalgam of “Jewishness” and “backwardness.” The Eurocentric Israeli openness toward Western culture, then, must also be understood within the relational context of a menacing heteroglossia, as a reaction against the vestiges of shtetl-Diaspora culture as well as a projected penetration of “alien” Levantine Jews.

Deliberate government policy favored the “modernization” of “primitive” Easterners into “civilized” Israelis. As Mizrahim arrived in Israel, violent measures were taken to strip them of their heritage: Yemenis were shorn of their sidelocks, religious artifacts were stolen by Zionist emissaries (with false promises of return), babies were kidnapped, at times literally snatched from their mothers and sold for adoption to Ashkenazim. Mizrahim under the control of Ashkenazi religious authorities, meanwhile, had to send their children to Ashkenazi Orthodox schools, where they learned the “correct” forms of practicing Judaism, including Yiddish-accented praying, liturgical-gestural norms, and centuries-old Polish sartorial codes favoring dark colors. (Here lie the partial origins of the Shas party.) Although the Mizrahi “aliya” to Israel is described by official ideology (and sometimes seen by Mizrahim themselves) as a return “home,” in fact this return, within a broader historical perspective, can be seen as a new mode of exile. For the Arab Jew, existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of colonial ambivalence. The assimilative project has partially “succeeded,” at least in terms of dismantling a vast civilization of the Jews of the Muslim world. And along with the trauma of geographical exile, there came another exile—from one’s own self and community as one had known it.

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Exile for Mizrahim can even take the form of estrangement from one’s own body. Dominant media in Israel have disseminated the hegemonic aesthetic inherited from colonialist discourse, rendering homage to ideals of whiteness and non-Semitic looks. The hegemony of this Eurocentric gaze explains why darker women in Israel dye their hair blonde, why Israeli TV commercials are often more suggestive of Scandinavia than of a non-European majority country, and why women undergo cosmetic surgery to look more European. (I am not suggesting that Ashkenazim are not also inferiorized by these hegemonic ideals.) The mythical norms of Eurocentric aesthetics come to inhabit the very intimacy of self-consciousness.

Mizrahim in Israel were made to feel ashamed of their dark, olive skin, of their guttural language, of the winding quarter tones of their music, even of their traditions of hospitality. Children, trying desperately to conform to an

elusive Euro-Israeli Sabra norm, were made to feel ashamed of their parents and their Arab countries of origin. At times Mizrahim were mistaken for Palestinians and arrested or beaten. Since Arabness led only to rejection, many Mizrahim became self-hating. In a classic play of colonial specularity, the East came to view itself through the West's distorting mirror. Indeed, if it is true, as Malcolm X said, that the white man's worst crime was to make the black man hate himself, then Mizrahi internalized self-hatred means that the Establishment in Israel has much to answer for. (In fact, Arab-hatred when it occurs among Mizrahim is almost always a disguised form of self-hatred. Mizrahi hostility toward Arabs, to the extent that it does exist, is very much "made in Israel." The kind of *selbst-hass* that sometimes marked the post-Enlightenment Ashkenazi community has never been a part of Jewish existence in the Muslim world; for the Mizrahim, *selbst-hass* of themselves as Orientals had to be "learned" from the Ashkenazim, who themselves had "learned" it from the Christian Europeans.) Thousands of Ashkenazi "wannabes" have rejected their Arab origins and mimic Sabra Europeanized speech patterns, body language, gestures, and thinking.

Mimicry, however, is only one dimension of the Euro-Israeli colonization of the Mizrahi mind. Occupying contradictory social and discursive spaces, Mizrahi identity, like all identities, is dynamic, mobile, less an achieved synthesis than an unstable constellation of discourses. Growing up in Israel, for Mizrahim, has involved shuttling back and forth between conflictual cultures, split between the "private" sphere of home and neighborhood and the public sphere of Euro-Israel. Young Mizrahim made sure that the Iraq or Morocco of home was invisible at school, work, in buses or streets, repressing all that was theirs while being induced to emulate those who oppressed them. At the same time, they continued family traditions, entering a space both collective and private—inaccessible to Euro-Israelis.

Meanwhile, the myth of the melting pot promoted by Euro-Israeli ideologies was in fact taking place in the 1950s and 1960s, but not in the ways the dominant Euro-Israeli institutions foresaw and imagined. In the working-class neighborhoods, far from the prying eyes of the Establishment, we Mizrahim of Arab or Turkish or Iranian origin acquired new multiplicities, the product of a new historical encounter of cultures. We quickly learned expressions and foods from other "Oriental" countries. While experiencing delegitimation by Euro-Israel, we were also marginally connected to the Arab world that knew little of our new existence. In Mizrahi neighborhoods in those years, we listened to Umm Kulthum on the radio, as well as to Arab music from our various countries of origin. The Iraqis, for example, continued to listen to Nazim al-Ghazali, and in the age of television, especially since the 1970s, when Mizrahim en masse began purchasing TV sets, we viewed Arabic programs and films from within our cramped living rooms.

Hybrid identities cannot be reduced to a fixed recipe; rather, they form a changing repertory of cultural modalities. Mizrahi popular culture has clearly manifested a vibrant dialogue with Arab, Turkish, Greek, Indian, and Iranian

popular cultures. Despite the separation from the Arab world, Mizrahi culture is nourished through the enthusiastic consumption of Egyptian, Jordanian, and Lebanese television programs, films, and music video performances that rupture the Euro-Israeli public sphere in a kind of subliminal transgression of a forbidden nostalgia. In fact, some Mizrahi music is produced in collaboration with Israeli Palestinians, while musical groups such as the Moroccan-Israeli Sfatayim traveled back to Morocco to produce a music video sung in Moroccan Arabic against the scenery of the cities and villages that Moroccan Jews have left behind, just as Israeli-born Iraqi singers such as Ya'aqub Nishawi sing old and contemporary Iraqi music. This yearning for a symbolic "return to the Diaspora" results in an ironic reversal of the conventional narrative of "next year in Jerusalem," and a reversal of the biblical expression that substitutes "Babylon" for "Zion": "By the waters of Zion, where we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Babylon."

### RECONCEPTUALIZING IDENTITY: TOWARD MIZRAHI STUDIES

What is called for, I think, is a new field of inquiry: Mizrahi studies, alongside and in relation to Palestinian studies. This field would critique and even bypass the founding premises of Orientalist representation and Eurocentric discourse. It would, at one level, critique the folklorization and exoticization of Mizrahim within Zionist discourse, its self-idealizing narrative of rescue and the concomitant demonization of Arab Muslim culture. Such studies would interrupt the modernizing narrative in which anthropology renders Mizrahim as living "allochronically" in another "time," in which sociology attempts to explain Mizrahi criminality, in which political science avoids the relationship between the Mizrahi and Palestinian issues, and so forth. This interdisciplinary field would relocate the issues in a much wider geographical and historical perspective.

At another level, Mizrahi studies would intervene at the point of convergence of multiple communities and disciplines. Rather than demarcate neatly fenced off areas of expertise, it would cross the geographical, historical, and disciplinary borders erected by the nationalist conceptualization of identities and Eurocentric disciplinary formations. Such an interdisciplinary framework would transcend purist notions of national identity to make room for proliferating differences within and beyond nation-states. We Arab Jews, for example, crossed a border and ended up in Israel, but our millennial "Arabness" did not thereby suddenly cease. Nor did it remain static in a previous historical incarnation. How could we change our language, our cuisine, our music, our ways of thinking overnight? Certainly, we have been changed. But to see Mizrahim as simply Israeli would be like seeing African Americans, despite their complex, conflictual, and miscegenated history, as simply Americans. At the same time, to expect Mizrahim to be simply Arab would be like reducing African Americans to simply Africans.

To address the Mizrahi case, one cannot simply proscribe an either/or paradigm of Jewish versus Arab identity, even though it was the two opposing nationalist movements that have shaped Mizrahi identity over the last half century. And certainly the hegemonic structures and conceptual frameworks generated over the past century cannot easily be vaporized. One can no longer deal today with subaltern identities such as Mizrahim or Palestinian citizens of Israel (or the larger Middle Eastern diaspora) on the basis of purist definitions of identity that often end up becoming ahistorical and even oppressive schematizations. Given the displacement of Jews from the Arab Muslim world and their contemporary presence largely in the “West” (Israel, France, Great Britain, the Americas), it is more than ever impossible to collapse a complex, layered culture into a simplistic division of East versus West or Arab versus Jew. Diasporic identities are not homogeneous. Often, displacements are piled onto earlier displacements. For Arab Jewish communities, the traumatic move to Israel came in the wake of the partition of Palestine, a process over which they had no control and in which they, like the Palestinians, were the objects and not the subjects of history, even if this objectification for Palestinians took a different, infinitely more violent form. (This is not to suggest that once in Israel Mizrahim have not been part of this violence against Palestinians.)

Today Mizrahim daily live the contradictions of their identity, in a visceral fashion. The accounts of the schism within Israel, which posit a clichéd Right/Left or secular/religious opposition, fail to capture the coiled confusion of Mizrahi identity in the wake of Zionism. Nor do they capture the deep roots of Mizrahi antagonism to the Ashkenazi establishment, the variegated forms of their resistance—sometimes even unconscious, sometimes even politically misconceived, but a resistance that can be found in the crevices of a social system Mizrahim are slowly learning to master, oppose, and change. Even if this hope for change takes what seems like politically “distorted” forms, the question is how we read such forms. Such a reading must avoid the blind spots of the conventional modes of analyzing Israeli politics and society; rigid assumptions about identity do not account for complex cultural formations like the Mizrahim. What is desperately needed for critical scholars is a de-Zionized decoding of the peculiar history of Mizrahim, one closely articulated with Palestinian history.<sup>18</sup> Rather than segregate Palestinian and Mizrahi histories as two unrelated events, we must see their intricate links. This conceptualization does not see the Mizrahi question as simply internal to the study of Israel (as though outside of the question of Arab nationalism) or without implication for the question of Palestine. Making such links serves to “re-orient” the debate, bringing together two absolutely crucial currents of critique within a multiperspectival analysis.

## NOTES

1. Uzi Mahnaimi and Marie Colvin, "Israel Planning Ethnic Bomb as Saddam Caves In," *Sunday Times*, 15 November 1998.

2. On this concept of a relational approach to identity, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994).

3. See Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas, 1989); and Ella Shohat, "Columbus, Palestine and Arab Jews: Toward a Relational Approach to Community Identity," in *Cultural Identity and the Gravity of History: On the Work of Edward Said*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997).

4. For more on the links between European capitalism and the Zionist colonization of Palestine, see Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler State?* trans. David Thorstand (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

5. While Iraqi Jews, for example, had to give up their Iraqi passports to move to Israel, the passports of Moroccan Jews "disappeared" and were recently "discovered" in the state archives.

6. Such attacks were made, for example, on Shimon Ballas after the publication of his novel, *Vehu Aher* [And he is another] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1991), as well as on myself after the publication in Hebrew of my *Israeli Cinema* (Tel Aviv: Breirot, 1991).

7. For a report on this controversy, see the editorial, "Lubnan: Makhatir al-Tatbi' am 'Uqdat al-Yahud?" [Lebanon: The dangers of normalization or the Jewish complex?]; Antwan Gharib, "al-'Aqida al-Yahudiyya Tatadamman al-Itila' 'ala 'Ardina" [The Jewish creed includes the takeover of our land]; Elias Khoury, "al-Suhyuniyya 'Unsuriyya wa Kadhalika al-Hamla 'Alayna" [Zionism is racist and so is the attack on us] in *al-Wasat*, no. 326 (27 April 1998).

8. I hasten to add that I am in no way equating Arab and Zionist nationalism. While historically Arab nationalism was framed in the Middle East/North Africa as part of a third world anticolonial struggle, Zionism, as I have argued elsewhere, was first formulated within Europe, within a

colonial context, resulting in a complex amalgam of colonial practice and liberatory desires, carried out not in relation to the European Christian oppressors of Jews but rather, in a displaced logic, on Palestinian land and against Palestinian people.

9. For Zionist arguments in favor of bringing "Jews in the form of Arabs" to strengthen the hold on Palestine, see, for example, Ya'acov Zrubnvel, *Alei-Haim* [Leaves of life] (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Peretz Library Publication, 1960), and Arthur Ruppin, *Pirkei Hayai* [Chapters of my life] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1968).

10. Ya'acov Tehon from the Eretz Israel Office was one of the first Zionists to propose, in 1908, the importation of Eastern Jews to "replace" the Arab agricultural workers. And Shmuel Yavne'eli, who called for an Eastern Jewish solution for the "problem of the Arab workers," wrote in *Hapoel Ha Tzair* newspaper in 1910 that "The Yemenite of today still exist at the same backward level as the fellahin. . . . They can take the place of the Arabs." Yavne'eli engineered the immigration of more than 10,000 Yemenite Jews before World War I. See his memoir, *Masu' Le Teiman* [Journey to Yemen] (Tel Aviv: 'Ayanot, 1963).

11. Both Zionist and anti-Zionist historiography fail to make the links between the Zionist settlement of Palestine and the Mizrahi question. I began to address this connection in my essay, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims" [*Social Text*, nos. 19–20 (Fall 1988), pp. 1–35, which was republished in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)]. See especially the section: "Hebrew Work': Myth and Reality."

12. See *Haolam Haze*, 20 April 1966; *Black Panther Magazine*, 9 November 1972; Abbas Shibli, *The Lure of Zion* (London: Al Saqi Press, 1986); and G. N. Giladi, *Discord in Zion* (London: Scorpion, 1990).

13. A number of Arab Jewish Zionist activists came to lament that they ever set foot in Israel. Na'im Giladi, a former Zion-



ist activist in Iraq, for example, has become an anti-Zionist activist.

14. Yehoshua Porat, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement 1919–1929* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), p. 49.

15. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

16. The phrase “imagined communities” is borrowed from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

17. For an account of travel in the region, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, see Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

18. For writing that tries to perform this kind of linkage, see Shohat’s “Sephardim in Israel”; *Israeli Cinema*; “Taboo Memories, Diasporic Visions,” in *Hybrid Performance*, ed. May Joseph and Jennifer Fink (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Joseph Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (Summer 1996), pp. 53–68; and *News From Within* 13, no. 1 (January 1997), which is a special issue on Mizrahim and Zionism, with articles by Shiko Behar, Zvi Ben-Dor, and Sami Shalom Chetrit (published by the Alternative Information Center, Jerusalem/Bethlehem).