

Jonathan Sciarcon. *Educational Oases in the Desert: The Alliance Israélite Universelle's Girls' Schools in Ottoman Iraq, 1895-1915.* Albany: State Univ of New York Press (SUNY), 2017. 196 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-6585-2.

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Scholarship on Jews in the Ottoman Empire has been growing in both quantity and quality in recent years. An increasing number of scholars are sharing new aspects and new perspectives on this non-European community's unique reactions to modernity and nationalism. The many facets of the Ottoman Empire require distinct areas of focus and acknowledgment of the many differences between the different parts of the empire.

Educational Oases in the Desert is a microhistory, telling the story of the girls' schools in Iraq in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book focuses on the school in Baghdad and compares it to the smaller schools created in the early twentieth century in other Iraqi cities such as Hilla, Basra, and Mosul. These schools were founded by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), a Paris-based Jewish organization that founded dozens of primary schools throughout the Middle East. While the pedagogical empire created by the AIU has received broad treatment before, this book narrows its focus to a specific time period and locale, allowing for a more nuanced look at the interplay between girls' schools, issues such as gender and education, and concepts of Westernization, cultural transplants, and agents of change.[1]

The agenda of the AIU in establishing schools was clear and unequivocal: to modernize and Westernize the Jews of the East. The graduates were not only to dress as Europeans and adhere to European norms of manners and personal hygiene but also to be familiar with the European cultural canon and to develop vocational skills. It was first implemented in schools for boys opened in different parts of the Ottoman Empire in 1864-65. Scholars such as Aron Rodrigue have analyzed the ways through which teachers and graduates who later became teachers absorbed the values and cultural norms promoted by the schools and the broader effects of Westernization on Turkish communities.[2] This book introduces a specific subset of gender-based pedagogical and cultural goals present in Baghdad-area schools.

The first girls' school in Baghdad was established in 1893 as an alternative to non-Jewish schools. Drawing on archival material from the AIU, *Educational Oases* tells the story of this school from the perspective of the women sent to run it: Parisian women who arrived in Baghdad with educational agendas they wished to implement. The school taught Arabic, French, and Hebrew and, during the period discussed in the book, introduced sewing lessons as a form of vocational training. School enrollment increased

through the years, even attracting non-Jewish students from the city's elite: in December 1899, 132 students were enrolled in the school and by December 1913, 788 were enrolled.

How did the AIU schools adapt their mission to "modernize" and "Westernize" the local communities based on gender? The girls' schools aimed to produce graduates who would conform to the model of modern Western femininity, not only in dress and manners but also in delaying the age of marriage to what was accepted in Europe and adopting French culture and language. The boys schools' wished to create "polished" and "cultured" Jews and that project would only succeed if the graduates had potential marriage partners who shared these values. Personal hygiene, fashion, and social skills are often mentioned in the reports that were sent to Paris.

A significant mission was the fight against underage marriage. Reports indicate that girls as young as twelve years old rejected the dominant culture and marriages that had been arranged between them and older men in favor of the educational and moral teachings they received in the AIU schools. The book mentions other interesting angles, such as the interaction of the headmistresses with others—for example, rabbis. Aron Rodrigue wrote that in general, rabbis and headmasters of AIU had difficult relationships.[3] In this book, there are accounts of rabbinic criticism of the AIU schools but also of rabbis who invited the AIU to open a school in their communities and saw these schools as a positive development in the fostering of Jewish identity. It would be worthwhile for future scholars to concentrate on this interesting and important relationship and the different models of rabbinic reactions to the AIU.[4] The book also touches on interactions with the Ottoman authorities and their different reactions to the schools. Different Ottoman officials had different approaches to the idea of a French-Jewish school as an agent of change in their community: some hindered the growth of the schools and oth-

ers sent their Muslim daughters to learn in them. Some of the supportive policies were based also on the changes the revolution of the Young Turks brought to the empire. These are just two examples of significant opportunities for future research that are provided by this book.

Educational Oases in the Desert is one more building block in the larger and growing edifice of scholarship on Iraqi Jewry and Arabic-speaking Jews in general. It presents another point of view from which to analyze the encounter of these communities with modernity, secularism, Zionism, and Arab nationalism. While the book focuses primarily on the point of view of AIU administrators sent from France to run these institutions, future research might provide a better sense of local perspectives, such as those of students, on the interactions with these agents of change.

Notes

[1]. For example, Michael M. Laskier, *The Alliance Israelite Universelle And the Jewish Communities Of Morocco 1862-1962* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of The Alliance Israelite Universelle, 1860-1939* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), and *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[2]. Aron Rodrigue, "Jewish Society and Schooling in a Thracian Town: The Alliance Israélite Universelle in Demotica, 1897-1924," *Jewish Social Studies* 45 (1983): 263-286, and "The Beginnings of Westernization and Communal Reform among Istanbul Jewry 1854-1865," in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), 439-56.

[3]. Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries*, 105.

[4]. For more on this, see Shaul Regev, *Ha-Yachas la-Haskala be-Kerev ha-Rabbanim be-Bavel: Rabbi Yosef Haim ve-Rabbi Shimon Agasi, Mehkarim be-Toledot Yehudei Bavel ve-Tarbutam* (Or-Yehudah: Merkaz Moreshet Yahadut Bavel, 2002), 97-118. An important article on this issue is Yaron Ben Naeh, “‘Halo anachnu Ansheiha-Mizrach nikri'im umah lanu ule-Darchei ha-Tzarfatyim ha-Alizim': Ma'avak al Zehut ba-Kehillat Bagdad 1890-1914,” *Zemanim* 135 (2016): 8-21.

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