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A Tale of Three Brothers: Ezra, Me'ir, and Hayyawi Sawda'i and the History of an Iraqi Jewish Cinema Business

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In Iraq, like elsewhere in the region, cinemagoing became a popular form of leisure in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ The emergence of permanent indoor and outdoor cinemas during this period gave rise to new consumption practices, ways of inhabiting the city, opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs, and the creation of a leisure and entertainment economy that was both modern, international, and Iraqi. In the early 1930s, three Jewish brothers, Ezra, Me'ir, and Hayyawi Sawda'i, began transforming their family's wealth from one based in regional trading to a modern cinema business. During the period of British colonial rule, Iraq was forcefully integrated into a global, Western dominated market economy and the brothers tried their hands at several import and local businesses before eventually finding their niche in entertainment. They rented movie theaters, built cinemas, established themselves as prime importers of foreign movies, and left a deep imprint on the Iraqi film industry.

The construction of cinema houses in Iraq and the new commercial and public forms of leisure which they created relied on the global circulation of media products, technology, expertise, and capital. This was not unique to Iraq. As described by Laura Fair in her work on cinema entrepreneurs in early twentieth-century Tanzania, “local businesspeople mobilized vast local, regional, and transnational networks to meet local demand.”² What Fair calls “cinematic capitalism” was a global and modern industry, but, as Fair reminds us, business cultures everywhere are always “historically situated and socially constructed.”³ The Sawda'i family and its cinema business, this article argues, reveals the importance of Iraqi Jewish and other minority family businesses in the first several decades of Iraqi cinema, the role of minorities in the production of Iraqi popular culture, and the intersection of the colonial, local, regional, and international networks of capital, expertise, and technology that created and shaped cinema during the first half of the twentieth century and tied Iraq to Europe, the US, India, and the rest of the Middle East. As a result, this article also sheds light on the intersection of cinema culture and local Iraqi and indigenous capitalism through the history of the Iraqi film industry and the families who created it.

The Sawda'i family became involved in all aspects of the cinema industry: they constructed several of Iraq's first and largest movie theaters, imported films from abroad, distributed films to Iran and elsewhere in the region, dubbed foreign films into Arabic and Persian, produced documentaries, and created Iraq's first production company and film

¹ Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 197.

² Laura Fair, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

studio, which trained a future generation of technicians and made the first Iraqi movie, *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* (‘Aliya and ‘Issam) in 1948. The Sawda’i family’s successful cinema venture was the result of both opportunism and a willingness to take on financial risk. Of equal importance, however, were its local Iraqi sociocultural capital, networks, and connections, which allowed family members to strike up important business partnerships. When the brothers turned to cinema, they were able to mobilize networks connected to Iraqi Jewish and Christian families. These local networks of Iraq’s emerging economy of leisure, in turn, tapped into and actualized the transnational circulation of films and cinema infrastructure. The combination of these, as well as the family’s relationship with the British and connections to American production companies, allowed them to accomplish several “firsts” in Iraqi film and cinema history. In addition, the family’s turn to cinema, as we will see, combined several fields of Jewish interventions in Iraqi society—the cultural sphere on the one hand and the business community on the other.

In her study of Jews’ involvement in trans-hemispheric ostrich feather commerce, Sarah Abrevaya Stein describes a period from the 1880s to WWI when Jewish family firms were some of the most important dealers, wholesalers, manufacturers, and feather handlers in cities across the globe. Stein shows how Jews

brought certain elements of human capital to the ostrich feather trade; background in like industries, contacts of kith and kin within and across sub-ethnic diasporas and political and oceanic boundaries, copacetic relations with the reigning authorities, geographic mobility, and, no less important, economic need.⁴

Writing specifically about Greek and Jewish minorities in the Egyptian economy, culture, and society, Najat Abdulhaq analyzed the role and interrelation of minorities and entrepreneurship. Moving beyond nationalist and colonial determinations, Abdulhaq demonstrates that “Egyptian Jews as well as Egyptian Greeks were a fully integrated component of Egyptian society” and came to play a dominant role in the private sector due to their pre-existing transnational and local minority networks.⁵ Writing about the same period in Egypt, Robert Vitalis demonstrated that while Egyptian business elites, including minorities, had many internal rivalries, rather than alignments, they were also powerful competitors to British neo-colonial economic endeavors.⁶ The Sawda’i family and other Iraqi Jewish cinema entrepreneurs brought similar elements to the Iraqi cinema industry. However, in Iraq, as the Sawda’i family business demonstrates, local minority networks and connections were just as important as geographic mobility and family and diaspora connections outside Iraq.

When members of the family, alongside most of Iraq’s Jewish community, began leaving Iraq in the 1950s, they were cut off from many of these local networks and business

⁴ Sarah A. Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 5–6, 17–18.

Ibid., 17–18.

⁵ Najat Abdulhaq, *Jewish and Greek Communities in Egypt: Entrepreneurship and Business before Nasser* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 3–4, 203–6. For an example from the Indian context, see Michael O’Sullivan, *No Birds of Passage: A History of Gujarati Muslim Business Communities, 1800–1975* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023). For more on the history of capitalism and Jewish merchant class in Iraq, see Joseph Sassoon, *The Sassoons: The Great Global Merchants and the Making of an Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2022); Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes, and of its Communists, Ba’thists, and Free Officers* (London, UK: Saqi, 2004), ch. 9; Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq 1900–1963: Capital, Power and Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), chs. 2–3.

⁶ Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 104. For more on the history and invention of the category of minorities in the modern Middle East, see, for example, Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Laura Robson, ed., *Minorities and the Modern Arab World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

partnerships. As a result, their cinema business only briefly survived the family's migration to New York, Tehran, and Tel Aviv—the three cities in which most of the Sawda'i is settled. However, as this article argues, the Sawda'i family's slow migration, which included several returns to Iraq and departures from Israel, demonstrates that individual, personal, and family histories challenge the narratives of rupture often used to characterize the history of Iraqi and Middle Eastern Jewish communities. The reverberations of the creation of the state of Israel and the Nakba, and of Zionism and Arab nationalism more broadly, were felt by all members of the family, as evidenced by their willingness to take on financial risk and invest large amounts in Iraqi popular culture during a period traditionally considered a low point in Iraqi Jewish history. This complicates nationalist and deterministic narratives of belonging and situates the Sawda'i brothers at the center of a period in modern Iraqi history that is only fully legible if we release its actors from their communal identities and affiliations. Several recent works on the history of Jews in the modern Middle East have provincialized Israel and Zionism, thereby making it possible to write this history in a way that centers, in the words of Christopher Silver, “entanglement and enmeshment” rather than demise and decline.⁷ Although they are today largely forgotten, the Sawda'i brothers pioneered several aspects of the Iraqi cinema and film industry. As such, their story is an important addition to the history of Iraq beyond the confines of Jewish history.

Situated simultaneously at the periphery and crossroads of Middle Eastern, South Asian, European, and US film production and distribution, Iraq's early cinema industry was transregional and transnational. As scholars such as Claire Cooley have argued, purely national narratives tend to write out the involvement and contributions of those with hybrid identities.⁸ Deborah Starr's recent work on the life and films of Togo Mizrahi, a Jewish noncitizen of Egypt, further complicates notions of national cinema. Despite his prolific career, several Egyptian “critics and cinema historians alike have often resorted to ascertaining the nationality of filmmakers and actors as an index for determining whether to consider a film ‘Egyptian.’”⁹ In Iran as well, a country in which the Sawda'i family established connections through both business and marriage, many early film importers and cinema owners “were emigres and merchant members of diasporic communities who, by virtue of their trade and travels were informed of the latest technological devices and gadgets outside Iran.”¹⁰ Unlike Togo Mizrahi and the cinema entrepreneurs of Tehran's diasporic communities, the Sawda'i family were Iraqi citizens.¹¹ Like Togo Mizrahi, however, their Jewishness and the fact that all members of the family eventually left Iraq has partially obscured their role in the Iraqi cinema industry.¹²

⁷ Christopher Silver, *Recording History: Jews, Muslims, and Music across Twentieth-Century North Africa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 14. See also Orit Bashkin, “The Middle Eastern Shift and Provincializing Zionism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 577–80; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Alma Rachel Heckman, *The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); Lior Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Hanan Hammad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, The Jewish Muslim Star of Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

⁸ Claire Cooley, “Soundscape of a National Cinema Industry: Filmfarsi and its Sonic Connections with Egyptian and Indian Cinemas, 1940s–1960s,” *Film History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 56.

⁹ Deborah A. Starr, *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 5.

¹⁰ Golbarg Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6, 13–25.

¹¹ For a recent study of the politics of citizenship, legal and national belonging, and Jews in the Middle East, see Jessica M. Marglin, *The Shamama Case: Contesting Citizenship across the Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹² In the limited scholarship on the history of early cinema in Iraq, with few exceptions, the role of Iraqi Jews in the first four decades of the cinema industry has been largely ignored. See Shafiq Mahdi, *Sinamat al-Iraq* (Baghdad:

Several studies have shed light on cinema as a form of popular culture in the Middle East. These studies have creatively and critically analyzed films and their production and reception in varied national contexts, thereby yielding important insights about the relationship between culture and identity.¹³ However, as argued by Kaveh Askari, there has been a tendency to focus on the experience of film, including its elements of distraction and astonishment, and to favor textual and representational analysis at the expense of materially and archivally grounded cinema history.¹⁴ Filmmaking requires materials and equipment and is always embedded in several material and production cultures. This article draws on recent approaches to cinema histories in and of the Global South that highlight materiality, the transnational flow and movement of technology, labor, and film canisters across vast distances in regions of the world shaped simultaneously by colonial and capitalist modernity.¹⁵

Corporate Archives and Family Histories

As no films were produced in Iraq until the late 1940s, cinema in Iraq was entirely imported in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ While theaters in Iraq screened films from Europe, Egypt, India, and elsewhere, already in 1927, 60% of films imported to Iraq came from the US.¹⁷ Due to Hollywood's large share of the Iraqi market, the archives of American film studios and distributors contain large collections of correspondence with and letters from distributors and exhibitors in Iraq, including the Sawda'i family. While the archives of American film studios hide certain parts of the history, and while they were established to preserve the interests of the corporations that created them, "they preserve the voices of the received correspondence, sometimes even more thoroughly than what was sent out."¹⁸ In addition, as demonstrated by Ross Melnick, because Hollywood companies meticulously studied the political and economic situation of the countries in which they operated, communicated with local US embassies, and established contacts with host governments, citizens and local businesses, the records of the US Embassy in Baghdad

Mawsu'at al-Turath al-Sha'bi al-'Iraqi, 2015); Ahmad Fayyad al-Mafraji, *Fannanu al-Sinama fi-l-'Iraq* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1981); Mahdi 'Abbas, *Kitabat fi al-Sinama al-'Iraqiyya* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'amma, 2006); Azhar al-'Abidi, *al-Sinama fi-l-Mawsil* (Mosul: al-Majmu'a al-Thaqafa, 2017); Qahtan al-Mallak, *Nas min Baladina* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Adib al-Baghdadiyya, 2001); Shakir Nouri, *À la recherche du cinéma irakien: histoire, infrastructure, filmographie 1945-1985* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1986); Elizabeth Bishop, "Politics of Cinema in Hashemite Iraq," *Oriente Moderno* 93 (2013): 101–26; Jabbar Audah Allawi, "Television and Film in Iraq: Socio-Political and Cultural Study: 1946–1980" (PhD dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1983). For studies of the role played by multinational petroleum companies in the construction of cinematic images of Iraqi oil-driven modernity and modernization, see Mona Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq: Oil, Cinema and the Modern City," *Urban History* 43, no. 4 (2016), published on scalar: <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/index>.

¹³ Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017); Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Middle East Documentation Center, 2002).

¹⁴ Kaveh Askari, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 11–15.

¹⁵ Kaveh Askari and Samhita Sunya, "Introduction: South by South/West Asia: Transregional

Histories of Middle East–South Asia Cinemas," *Film History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 2–5; Cooley, "Soundscape of a National Cinema Industry," 43–74; Robert Jackson, "Introduction: Global Migrant Media," *The Global South* 13, no. 2 (2019): 1–5; Ghenwa Hayek, "Lebanese Cinema Between 'the African Unknown' and 'the Streets of Beirut'," *The Global South* 13, no. 2 (2019): 5–29.

¹⁶ Askari, *Relaying Cinema*, 14–16.

¹⁷ NARA II, RG 59, Country File Mesopotamia, 1920–1939, T1180, roll 9, "Motion Picture Industry in Iraq," Dec 1, 1927; Nolwenn Mingant, *Hollywood Films in North African and the Middle East: A History of Circulation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022), 45.

¹⁸ Askari, *Relaying Cinema*, 16. See also, Mingant, *Hollywood Films in North Africa and the Middle East*, chs. 1–3.

and its correspondence with the US Department of State provide crucial information about the history of cinema in Iraq.¹⁹

Such archives, of course, cannot substitute for Iraqi sources and voices. However, when read alongside the Iraqi press, accounts by Iraqis involved in the industry, works by Iraqi historians, and the family papers of the Sawda'i family, which include photographs and unpublished memoirs, located, like the Iraqi Jewish community itself, across countries, continents, and languages, they mitigate the inaccessibility and precarious nature of Iraqi cinema archives. Moreover, as noted by Salma Siddique, private and family archives and memoirs have the potential to avoid “the careful orchestration of and ideological organisation that characterizes official historical narratives in any nation state.”²⁰ Focusing on the multiple connections that made up the Sawda'i family business, including their ties to the US, Iran, Turkey, the British, and many other parts of the region, helps further challenge the national cinema and linguistic frameworks so often used to study cinema.

Multiple forms of labor, including that of whom Debashree Mukherjee describes as “cineworkers,” such as actors, film operators, people who occupied the ticket booths, and helpers on film sets, were essential to the construction and smooth operation of cinemas and film production.²¹ However, due to the nature of both the archives of Hollywood production companies and elite family and business archives, with few exceptions, the stories of the many people who worked for the Sawda'is are absent from this article. Similarly, while Baghdad obviously cannot serve as a stand-in for Iraq as a whole, the limited number of archival sources available and the general scarcity of scholarship on the history of cinema in Iraq makes it difficult to write the history of cinema outside Iraq's largest urban centers. At the same time, however, since Baghdad was central to film exhibition, production, and distribution across Iraq, it is an obvious place from which to begin the exploration of this history.

Iraqi Jews and Cinema in Iraq

In the early years of the twentieth century, middle, middling, and upper-class Iraqi Jews—educated in both Jewish and non-Jewish schools—began playing a more pronounced role in the state's new institutions and economy, facilitating a more direct integration into the Iraqi national project and public sphere.²² In tandem, Iraqi Jews began to more actively participate in the consumption and production of public leisure.²³ In addition to cinema, Iraqi Jews were prominent consumers, producers, investors, and proprietors of Baghdad's new sites and institutions of leisure, such as cafés, theaters, bars, and nightclubs.²⁴ The careers of the Jewish al-Kuwaiti brothers, Salih and Da'ud, are emblematic of Jewish involvement in Iraqi musical life. During her long career, the Iraqi Jewish singer Salima Murad became a national diva and one of the first female singers to appear on Iraqi radio. Many lesser-known Iraqi Jews, including female nightclub dancers and singers, also contributed to

¹⁹ Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 19.

²⁰ Salma Siddique, *Evacuee Cinema: Bombay and Lahore and Partition Transit (1940–1960)* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 14–15. See also, Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

²¹ Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 11.

²² Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 67–84; Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 185–90.

²³ Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 60–61.

²⁴ Sami Zubaida, “Entertainers in Baghdad, 1900–1950,” in *Inside Out: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Eugene Rogan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 212–30; Amin al-Mummayyiz, *Baghdad Kama 'Arifituha: Shadharat min Dhikrayat* (Baghdad: Dar Afaq 'Arabiyya li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr, 1985), 276–93; Yosef Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbuti Hevratit shel Yehudey 'Iraq me'az 1830 ve 'ad Yemenu* (Tel Aviv: Naharayim, 1989), 316–19, 332–33, 427; Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 108.

modern Iraqi leisure and cultural production.²⁵ In addition, Iraqi Jews actively took part in Iraq's literary life. They visited literary salons and libraries, wrote works of fiction and poetry in Arabic, ran publishing houses, and contributed to numerous newspapers, journals, and magazines.²⁶ The Sawda'i family actively participated in many of these endeavors and became well-connected to Iraqi cultural, political, and economic elites. The Iraqi Jewish community was socially, economically, and politically diverse. While some Iraqi Jews were part of the upper echelons of Iraqi economic elites, others belonged to the poorest classes of Iraqi society. Politically and religiously, Iraqi Jews spanned the entire political spectrum and supported diverse political projects, secular as well as religious, including Iraqi nationalism, communism, socialism, and, for a minority, also Zionism.²⁷

Like elsewhere in the Global South, where many early exhibitors were engaged in other forms of international trade and business before turning to cinema, in Iraq, a small number of individuals and families with ties to existing import networks and emerging capitalist industries came to dominate the industry.²⁸ On the evening of July 26, 1909, the first silent film was shown outdoors in Baghdad. In 1911, the place became known as Cinema Baluki, named after the Jewish merchant who imported the equipment and films. Cinema Baluki was the first permanent movie theater in Baghdad.²⁹ Beginning with the owner of Cinema Baluki, who specialized in importing sewing machines, several Iraqi Jews invested in film exhibition infrastructure and technology and came to play a prominent role in Iraqi cinema and filmmaking.³⁰ In 1920, an Iraqi Jewish merchant invested in the construction of Cinema Central and began importing silent films from Europe. Cinema Central, one of the first permanent indoor theaters in Iraq, was located on al-Rashid Street, marking the beginning of a process that turned the area into one of Baghdad's main entertainment hubs.³¹ Al-Rashid Street was also the location of several Jewish-owned cafés, stores, business, and the Jewish Shammash high school.

Throughout the following three decades, many more cinemas appeared across the city and country and, as a result, transformed earlier forms of colonial, non-commercial, itinerant, and mobile film exhibition into private and commercial models.³² In 1947, there were 71 movie theaters in Iraq.³³ In 1954, there were 105 cinemas in Iraq with a seating capacity of 80,090, including 47 open-air theaters.³⁴ In 1957, there was a total of 137 outdoor and indoor cinemas in Iraq.³⁵ Iraqi Jews owned and operated more than half of Baghdad's cinemas. Outside the capital, Iraqi Jews, including the Sawda'i family, were proprietors of theaters in Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, al-Hilla, Nasiriyya, and Ba'quba.³⁶

²⁵ For a detailed study of the al-Kuwaiti brothers and the role of Jews in Iraqi music, see Dafna Dori, *The Brothers al-Kuwaiti and the Iraqi Song 1930-1950* (PhD Dissertation, University of Uppsala, 2021); 'Ali Nasir Kanana, *Falak an-Nass fi al-Ghina' al-'Iraqi* (Köln: al-Kamel Verlag, 2016); Yeheskel Kojaman, *The Maqam Music Tradition of Iraq* (London: Self-published, 2001); 'Abd al-Karim al-'Allaf, *Qiyyan Baghdad fi al-'Asr al-'Abbasi wa-l-'Uthmani al-Akhir* (Baghdad: Matba'at Dar al-Tadamun, 1969), 222-58.

²⁶ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 185-90; Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, chs. 1-3; Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), chs. 1-3.

²⁷ Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 15-57.

²⁸ Fair, *Reel Pleasures*, 89; Pelle Valentin Olsen, "al-Qahira-Baghdad: The Transnational and Transregional History of Iraq's Early Cinema Industry," *Arab Studies Journal* 29, no. 2 (2021): 9-10.

²⁹ Mahdi, *Sinamat al-'Iraq*, 12; Allawi, "Television and Film in Iraq," 186-87.

³⁰ A. D. Firdus 'Abd al-Rahman Karim al-Lami, *al-Hayyat al-'Ijtima'iyya fi Baghdad* (Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-Mawsu'at, 2017), 325-26; 'Abbas Baghdadi, *Li-Alla Nansa Baghdad fi al-'Ishrinat* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya lil-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1998), 109.

³¹ Wahid al-Shahiri, "Shari'a al-Rashid wa al-Sinima," in *Shari'a al-Rashid*, ed. Basil 'Abd al-Hamid Hamudi (Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-Mawsu'at, 2003), 229.

³² Olsen, "al-Qahira-Baghdad," 14-16.

³³ Allawi, "Television and Film in Iraq," 204-5.

³⁴ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950-1954, box 5489, Ireland to DOS, "Motion Pictures Iraq," October 13, 1954.

³⁵ Allawi, "Television and Film in Iraq," 204-5.

³⁶ 'Ali Mahdi 'Ali, "Shari'a al-Rashid wa al-Sinima," in *Shari'a al-Rashid*, ed. Basil 'Abd al-Hamid Hamudi (Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-Mawsu'at, 2003), 100; Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 439; NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950-1954,

The Beginnings of an Iraqi Jewish Family Business

The three eldest Sawda'i brothers, Me'ir, Ezra, and Hayyawi, grew up in a large house built by their grandfather, Eliyahu Ruben, in the old Jewish quarter of Baghdad. Me'ir, Ezra, and Hayyawi were the eldest grandsons from Eliyahu's second marriage (Fig. 1). They were brought up by their grandfather and, as young adults, joined his business. Eliyahu was a merchant who made his fortune through caravan trade with Syria and Iran, carrying goods from Aleppo to Baghdad during the winter and from Isfahan to Baghdad in the summer. When the caravan business, which transported goods by camel, gradually became obsolete due to the emergence of railroads, automobiles, and trucks, the brothers persuaded their grandfather to sell his camels and instead import sugar and tea to Iraq.³⁷ However, as we will see, the pre-colonial business connections established by their grandfather in Iran were re-activated when the Sawda'i brothers turned to the movies. In addition to the Sawda'is, several other Iraqi Jewish cinema entrepreneurs also operated in Iran as directors and distributors. Among the most prominent were the director and actor George Ovadia and the 'Aizar family, who owned King Ghazi Cinema in Baghdad as well as several hosiery shops in New York.³⁸

When Eliyahu passed away in 1926, a long legal battle over inheritance ensued between the Sawda'i brothers and Eliyahu's children from his first marriage. The three brothers were accused of embezzlement and jailed for three months. With their inheritance locked in a long and drawn-out legal battle, the brothers began looking for new business ventures. Me'ir, the most entrepreneurial of the three, started a short-lived business importing radios to Iraq. Many of Me'ir's business adventures, which included a poultry factory, a sugar factory making sugar from beets, and a transport company, were relatively short-lived. In the late 1920s, the three brothers began importing automobiles from Europe and put their younger brother, Na'im, in charge of the showroom in Baghdad. The business failed, however, during the economic crash of the 1930s, when many buyers were unable to pay and repair and service facilities in Baghdad were inadequate. Using sand from the banks of the Tigris, the brothers also started a brick factory, The Iraq Sand-Lime Brick Company Ltd., when Me'ir returned from a business trip to Berlin where he was introduced to the technique, which he hoped would replace the traditional Iraqi method of making bricks from clay (Fig. 2).³⁹ The brothers mostly failed to obtain contracts and eventually sold the brick factory to Hassan Makhzumi, a Muslim Syrian businessman who, because of his friendship with Baghdad's mayor, was able to secure lucrative public contracts.⁴⁰ When the brothers turned to cinema, they were able to mobilize and tap into different networks connected to Iraqi Jewish and Christian families prominent in the leisure and entertainment business.

Like other entrepreneurs around the globe, the Sawda'i brothers turned to cinema at a time when the crash of the early 1930s had brought them close to bankruptcy. Because of the crisis, they were offered a cheap deal to rent Cinema Central on al-Rashid Street.⁴¹ In her study of filmmaking in colonial Bombay, Debashree Mukherjee argues that "unlike most emerging film production centers of the world, Bombay's production ecology established itself without structured support either from the state or local financial institutions." This made early cinema in India a "decidedly speculative space of opportunity as well as crisis" during a period characterized by "financial, material, and industrial precarity – open,

box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures – theater equipment – Iraq," April 18, 1950; Maurice M. Sawdayee, *The Baghdad Connection* (self-published, 1991).

³⁷ Maurice Sawdayee, *The Immigrant: From Baghdad to New York* (unpublished memoir), 4. I would like to thank Jordan Salama for our many conversations about his family's history and for sharing Maurice's unpublished memoir with me.

³⁸ Askari, *Relaying Cinema*, 63–65.

³⁹ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 22, 23–25; Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 439; Mahdi, *Sinamat al-Iraq*, 167; al-Mummayyiz, *Baghdad Kama 'Ariftuha*, 122–24.

⁴⁰ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 23–24.

⁴¹ NARA II, Record Group 59, Entry A1 205A, Central Decimal Files, 1910–1929, "Business Visit to the USA of Mr. Bahjet Georges," September 24, 1926.



Figure 1. The Sawda'i Family in Baghdad, early 1950s. Me'ir, Ezra, and Hayyawi, from left to right, are seated in the middle. Courtesy of Kamal and Jack Sawda'i.

therefore, intense speculation and entrepreneurial excitement.”⁴² Unlike Bombay, Baghdad never became a global center of film production. However, as in Bombay, the Iraqi cinema industry developed without state or government support. Me'ir, who already had an interest in the movies, convinced his brothers that Cinema Central would be a good investment. Hayyawi Sawda'i, the youngest of the three, raised the necessary capital with the help of his friend Elias Danus, who belonged to another Jewish family of cinema entrepreneurs. The Danus family provided the necessary funds in return for a share of the profits from Cinema Central. In late 1932, the theater reopened as a partnership between Elias Danus and the Sawda'i brothers.⁴³

In the middle of the 1930s, the Sawda'is ended their partnership with the Danus family and lost the lease on Cinema Central. Around the same time, the Danus family, in partnership with another Jewish family, the Shohets, established Cinema al-Zawra' on al-Rashid Street. The Shohet family already owned Cinema al-Watani, which they built in 1927.⁴⁴ Once again, it was Hayyawi who secured the financial backing that allowed the brothers to continue and expand their business. In 1934, together with Antun Massih, a member of a wealthy Christian family (Antun's brother, Joseph, owned a large arak distillery), the Sawda'i brothers began a new partnership.⁴⁵ With their new business partner, the Sawda'is built Cinema al-Rashid in Baghdad and began importing and distributing films from the US and Europe. Near Cinema al-Rashid, a new outdoor, open-air venue, also called al-Rashid, was built to facilitate screenings at night as well as during the hot spring and summer months.

⁴² Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle*, 4, 20.

⁴³ Interview with Kamal Sawda'i and Jack Sawda'i, Ramat Gan, Israel, February 1, 2023; Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 25–26.

⁴⁴ Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 439.

⁴⁵ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 41–42; Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 363.

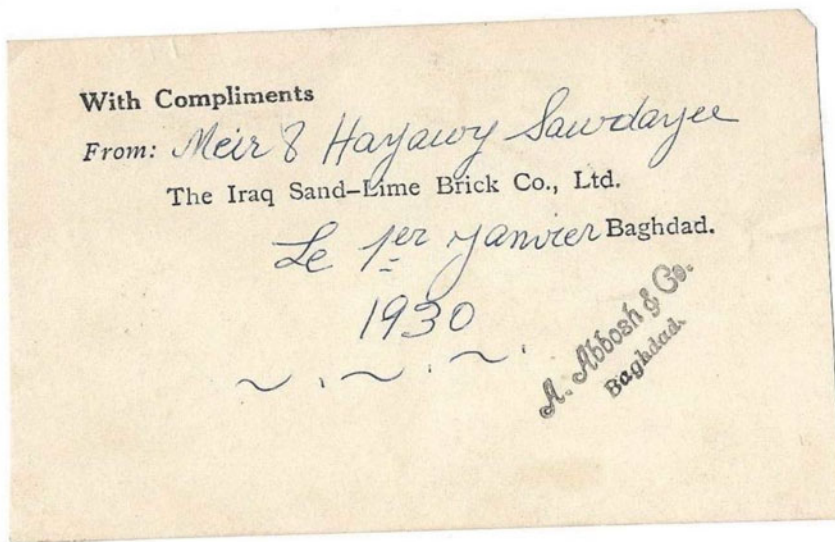


Figure 2. The Sawda'i brick factory in Baghdad, 1930. Courtesy of Kamal and Jack Sawda'i.

The first direct contract between the Sawda'is and a foreign production company was signed in March 1935. Records and correspondence from the US-based production and distribution company, United Artists (UA), show that in the spring of 1935 the Sawda'i brothers and Antun Massih obtained the rights to exhibit and distribute five used UA prints in Iraq and Iran for a period of twelve months beginning the day the prints were shipped from London.⁴⁶ There was often a substantial amount of haggling and negotiation involved before

⁴⁶ Foreign Correspondence and Legal Files: United Artists Corporation Records, Series 2F, 1930–1953, box 24, folder 2: Persia and Iraq, 1935–1942, "Original agreement between United Artists Export LTD and E. M. Sawdayee Bros. & A.D. Messayeh," Wisconsin Historical Society, The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (WCFTR).

a final contract was signed.⁴⁷ In the spring of 1936, Na'im 'Aizar made an offer on nine UA films for exclusive exhibition and distribution in Iraq. Since UA and many other US production companies treated Iraq and Iran as one territory, the Sawda'is agreed to pay a higher price for the rights to distribute the films in both countries.⁴⁸ In Iraq, importers were often cinema owners and therefore mostly interested in buying films for distribution and exhibition in their own theaters. Other theater owners—such as Isma'il Sharif, who owned Cinema al-Hamra' in Baghdad and smaller houses in al-Hilla, Erbil, Amara, and Mosul, and Habib al-Mallak, who operated cinemas all over Iraq—mostly bought Egyptian and Indian films directly from Cairo and Bombay while covering their need for Hollywood productions from local Iraqi distributors.⁴⁹ At a time when Iran mostly purchased Hollywood prints via Baghdad and not directly from American distributors, for the Sawda'i family and others like them, who already had contacts in Iran, finding buyers across the border was a way to increase profits.⁵⁰

The Golden Years of the Sawda'i Family Business

Throughout the 1940s, the brothers started several new and ambitious projects to expand their business, including the construction of cinemas in Basra and Mosul. By 1949, the Sawda'i family was the single largest importer of Hollywood films in Iraq.⁵¹ According to Me'ir's son, Maurice Sawda'i, and daughter Jaqueline Horesh, the Sawda'is imported 100 used projectors from India during WWII and obtained a lucrative contract to provide films and set up cinemas in British military camps across the country.⁵²

Letterhead on a communication sent to UA in November 1950 confirms that the Sawda'i-Massih company was "Contractors to the R.A.F. & H. M. British Forces Cinemas in Iraq" (Fig. 3).⁵³ The relationship with the British indirectly allowed the family to accomplish several "firsts" in Iraqi film history. The significant profits the Sawda'is gained from their contract with the British allowed them to build one of Iraq's largest cinemas and the country's first film studio. In 1943, the brothers began the construction of Madinat Roxy (Roxy City) on a rented piece of land at the southern end of al-Rashid Street.⁵⁴ Madinat Roxy became the center of the Sawda'i business empire. This modern entertainment complex included not only Cinema Roxy and Cinema Rex, but also the Roxy Nightclub, the Roxy Casino, and an outdoor cinema (Fig. 4). With a seating capacity of 1815, Cinema Roxy was the second largest cinema in Iraq in the late 1940s.⁵⁵ In the early 1950s, when Cinema al-Nujum and Cinema King Ghazi were razed as part of a new urban development project, Cinema Roxy became the largest.⁵⁶ The complex also rented out offices to representatives from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and other US producers and distributors.⁵⁷

⁴⁷ Foreign Correspondence and Legal Files: UA Corporation Records, Series 2F, 1930–1953, box 24, folder 2: Persia and Iraq, 1935–1942, "Unsigned letter," April 17, 1936, WCFTR.

⁴⁸ Foreign Correspondence and Legal Files: UA Corporation Records, Series 2F, 1930–1953, box 24, folder 2: Persia and Iraq, 1935–1942, "Gould to Aiser," April 28, 1936, WCFTR.

⁴⁹ Foreign Correspondence and Legal Files: UA Corporation Records, Series 2F, 1930–1953, box 24, folder 2: Persia and Iraq, 1935–1942, "Archibald to Kelly," June 27, 1939, WCFTR.

⁵⁰ Askari, *Relaying Cinema*, 60; al-Mallak, *Nas min Baladina*; 'Omar Jabir Taj al-Din, *al-Hilla: Lamahat Ijtima'iyya wa Idariyya wa Faniyya, 1858-1958* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'amma, 2012).

⁵¹ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Dorsz to DOS, "Motion Pictures-Entertainment 35 mm – Iraq," April 20, 1950.

⁵² Jacqueline Horesh, *An American from Iraq* (unpublished memoir, 2019); Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 48.

⁵³ Edward Bauser correspondence: United Artists Corporation records, Series 8F, 1947–1950 (bulk 1950), box 2, folder 10: Iran and Iraq, "Ezra Sawdayee to UA," November 20, 1950, WCFTR.

⁵⁴ Interview with Jack Sawda'i and Kamal Sawda'i, Ramat Gan, Israel, February 1, 2023.

⁵⁵ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures – theater equipment – Iraq," April 18, 1950.

⁵⁶ NARA II RG 59, Country File, Iraq, 1955–1959, box 4962, Lawrence to DOS, "Iraq's first modern motion picture theater," June 7, 1956.

⁵⁷ Film Daily Yearbook, 1948, 610; Interview with Kamal Hayyawi Sawda'i, Ramat Gan, Israel, February 1, 2023.

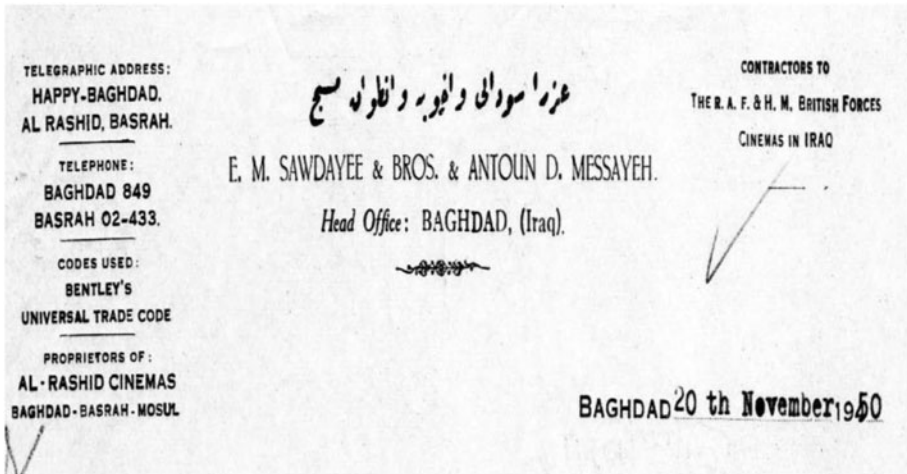


Figure 3. Sawda'i letterhead. The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (WCFTR).



Figure 4. Cinema Roxy. Courtesy of Kamal and Jack Sawda'i.

Like their Christian and Muslim counterparts, Jewish reformers and conservatives debated, and sometimes criticized, the secularization and leisure habits of young Iraqis, including cinema going.⁵⁸ However, only the Iraqi Film Censor Committee, which consisted of representatives from the Ministries of Education, Interior, Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defense, the Mayor's office, and the Directorate General of Guidance and Broadcasting, had the authority to cut out scenes or ban films altogether. While films portraying crime, communism, riots, and revolutions as well as films considered immoral or offensive to royalty were frequently censored, films were rarely banned entirely.⁵⁹ The most serious obstacle to the Sawda'i business occurred in the early stages of the Madinat Roxy project. The land the family rented for the project was owned by a *waqf* and construction was delayed by the mayor's office, who put the petition for a building permit on hold, due to objections that it was unethical to build an entertainment complex that included a nightclub and casino on *waqf* land. According to Me'ir's son, after many delays, a discrete payment was made and the permit obtained.⁶⁰ While this story is difficult to verify, the fact that the family was able to move forward with construction suggests that the opposition was not insurmountable.

With the success of Madinat Roxy, the Sawda'i family and Antun Massih created Studio Baghdad in 1946, the first film studio in Iraq. Already in the spring of 1947, *The Motion Picture Herald*, an American film industry trade paper, reported that Studio Baghdad had been created with capital of \$1,200,000.⁶¹ While the Sawda'is and their partners had the capital, the equipment and expertise had to come from abroad. According to *The Motion Picture Herald*, the studio was "built and equipped with materials from England," and "all cameramen, sound recorders and laboratory experts are from England."⁶² A year before the article was published, Me'ir had received a letter from the English director and producer Reginald Fogwell. Fogwell, who had worked as European Director of Publicity for Twentieth Century Fox in London, had learned that the Sawda'is were interested in opening a film studio. In his letter, he offered his expertise and assistance, explaining that his London studio had shut down during the war years and that he would sell his equipment at a low price. A year later, Fogwell arrived in Baghdad with a team of British technicians, including a camera man (his own brother), a sound engineer, and a lab technician. A large warehouse adjacent to Madinat Roxy was turned into a makeshift film studio and the team began recruiting actors from the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts and work on what would become the first Iraqi film, *'Aliya wa 'Issam*. Although working for very high salaries, Fogwell and his team made little progress. According to Me'ir's son Maurice, Fogwell "worked at a very slow pace enjoying the relaxed tempo of a vacationer."⁶³ Eventually, the Sawda'is and their business partner lost their patience and dismissed Fogwell and his team.

While looking for another team of technicians, the Sawda'is went ahead with the project. They purchased a large piece of land next to the al-Rashid military camp, south of Baghdad, and began constructing a real studio. When finished, it housed two large stages, a printing and developing laboratory, offices for staff and actors, a make-up studio, an editing and cutting room, a projection room, and a sound mixing office. At the time, one of the younger Sawda'i brothers, Na'im, was in France receiving medical treatment and the family tasked him with contracting a team of French technicians. Na'im returned to Baghdad with French director Andre Chotin, a cinematographer, a camera man, a sound engineer, and a

⁵⁸ Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 26–27, 61; Pelle Valentin Olsen, "Early Iraqi Cinema and the Archives of Leisure," *Regards* 25 (2012): 133–38.

⁵⁹ Olsen, "Early Iraqi Cinema and the Archives of Leisure," 137; NARA II RG 59, Country File, Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Dorsz to DOS, "Motion Picture Films Censored in Iraq in 1949," May 8, 1950; NARA II RG 59, Country File, Iraq, 1955–1959, box 4962, Larsen to DOS, "Tighter film censorship in Iraq," Feb 15, 1955.

⁶⁰ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 51–54.

⁶¹ *The Motion Picture Herald*, May 24, 1947, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶³ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 56; *The Iraq Times*, April 26, 1947.

makeup artist. Due to considerable unemployment and crisis in the French cinema industry in the aftermath of WWII, the French team was hired for much less than what Fogwell had been paid.⁶⁴ When Andre Chotin and his crew arrived in Baghdad, the filming of *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* began anew. While there had been attempts to produce Iraqi films already in the 1930s, none of these materialized until the late 1940s, when two Iraqi-Egyptian co-productions were completed.⁶⁵ *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* became the first Iraqi production.⁶⁶ However, due to its French director, it has often been disregarded in favor of the second generation of Iraqi films produced in the 1950s, such as *Fitna wa Hasan* (Fitna and Hasan, 1955), *Nadam* (Regret, 1955), *Warda* (1956), *Man al-Mas’ul* (Who is Responsible, 1956), *Sa‘id Effendi* (1957), *Tiswahin* (It is Worth It, 1957), *al-Duktur Hasan* (Doctor Hasan, 1958), and *Irhamuni* (Have Mercy on me, 1958). Most of these films are extant and have received attention from critics, many of whom consider them more truly Iraqi than the films produced in the late 1940s.⁶⁷

A Romeo and Juliette-inspired melodrama about impossible love between a prince and princess from different Iraqi tribes, *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* ends with the tragic death of the two protagonists. Me’ir found inspiration for the film in the very popular Egyptian-produced historical Bedouin drama *‘Antar wa ‘Abla* (‘Antar and ‘Abla) from 1946, which played for several months in Iraq. *‘Antar wa ‘Abla*, an adaptation of the life of pre-Islamic hero and poet from the *Mu‘allaqat*, ‘Antara Ibn Shaddad al-‘Absi, was directed by the Egyptian director Salah Abu Sayf, co-written with Naguib Mahfouz, and produced by Studio al-Ahram. The prominent Iraqi Jewish lawyer, journalist, poet, and editor Anwar Sha’ul wrote the songs and script for *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* based on a poem by the Lebanese *mahjar* poet Qaysar al-Ma’luf (1874–1964) about heroism and tragic love in the Syrian Rula tribe.⁶⁸ The Jewish al-Kuwaiti brothers, Salih and Da’ud, composed the film’s music.⁶⁹ While the director was French, the actors were Iraqi and came mostly from the theater and nightlife. *‘Aliya* was played by ‘Azima Tawfiq and Ibrahim Jalal played ‘Issam. Salima Murad also starred in the movie alongside Ahlam Ibrahim, another Iraqi Jewish singer and nightclub performer. *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* premiered in Cinema Roxy in early December 1949 (Figs. 5–7).⁷⁰

‘Aliya wa ‘Issam was very popular among Iraqi audiences and yielded a significant amount during its first run in Baghdad. However, an Egyptian review of *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam* in *al-Kawakib* (The Stars) complained that several foreigners had been involved in the production and wrongly claimed they were also involved in the writing of the script. The Egyptian reviewer also took issue with the actors’ Iraqi dialect, which he claimed was incomprehensible.⁷¹ Egyptian criticism aside, the fact that the brothers produced their first film in the Iraqi dialect with Iraqi actors, musicians, and writers in 1948, after open war had broken out in Palestine, demonstrates their commitment to Iraqi popular culture, audiences, and tastes. It also shows that the brothers actively sought to shape, through cinema, what it meant to be Iraqi. More importantly, as argued by Bashkin and demonstrated by the brothers’ willingness to invest in several very large cinema and film projects, the early years of the Iraqi state, particularly the 1940s, was a period generally characterized by society’s acceptance of Iraqi Jews and other minorities as well as significant Jewish involvement in and

⁶⁴ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 60.

⁶⁵ Olsen, “al-Qahira-Baghdad,” 8–23.

⁶⁶ Only a damaged version of the film on YouTube still exists: “*‘Aliya wa ‘Issam*,” YouTube, August 14, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZB5XuJ39l8>.

⁶⁷ ‘Abbas, *Kitabat al-Sinama al-Iraqiyya*, 11; al-Mafraji, *Fannanu al-Sinama fi al-‘Iraq*, 9–10, 30, 40, 75–76; Allawi, “Television and Film in Iraq,” 191–92, 203; Jabbar al-Bahadli, *Baghdad* (Baghdad: Dar wa Maktaba ‘Adnan, 2015), 103–12; Nouri, *Cinema Irakien*, 55–58.

⁶⁸ Anwar Sha’ul, *Qissat Hayati fi Wadi al-Rafidayn* (Jerusalem: Manshurat Rabitat al-Jama’iyyin al-Yahud al-Nazihin min al-‘Iraq fi Isra’il, 1980), 100–1; Qaisar al-Ma’luf, *Tadhkar al-Mahajir* (Sao Paulo: Matba’at al-Manadhir, 1904).

⁶⁹ Me’ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 364.

⁷⁰ ‘Abbas, *Kitabat al-Sinama al-‘Iraqiyya*, 10; Me’ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 364; Dori, “The Brothers al-Kuwaity,” 145.

⁷¹ “Al-film al-‘Iraqi,” *al-Kawakib*, issue 18, July 1950, 59.



Figures 5–7. Poster and promotional material for *‘Aliya wa ‘Issam*. Beirut, Dar al-Furat.

contributions to Iraqi culture, politics, and economic affairs, even if Zionism and xenophobic strands of Iraqi nationalism made such contributions increasingly difficult.⁷²

However, the profits from the film never offset the significant production costs. According to Me’ir’s son, Maurice, the French director—like his British predecessor—deliberately delayed the film by re-shooting scenes over and over again while blaming the inexperienced Iraqi actors and Iraqi climate. The French director was eventually fired and asked to leave. In his unpublished memoir, Maurice recalls that Chotin did not take his dismissal well and decided to take revenge on his Iraqi employers. Before leaving Baghdad, he sent a letter to a local newspaper accusing the family of spying for Israel. The letter was written in French, meaning the editor of the local newspaper could not read it. Thinking it was part of a publicity effort, he brought the letter to the Sawda’is and asked for an Arabic translation. Instead of translating, however, Me’ir invited the editor to preview the film and write a review. Fortunately, for the Sawda’is, the letter was never published.⁷³ In 1949, a year after the creation of the state of Israel and the rise of less inclusive forms of Arab nationalism in Iraq, being accused of spying for Israel would have been potentially disastrous. Nonetheless, both Chotin and the French cinematographer received credits in the promotional material published by Studio Baghdad.

The increasing conflation of Judaism and Zionism remained a threat. In November 1948, the Israeli newspaper *Herut* (Freedom) published a translation of an article from a Jordanian newspaper that claimed to have uncovered a Jewish conspiracy to take over large parts of

⁷² Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 60–84.

⁷³ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 60–65.



Figures 5-7. Continued.

the Middle East, with the Sawda'is' studio as the headquarters of this conspiracy.⁷⁴ These rumors, according to Maurice, were the result of Studio Baghdad's proximity to al-Rashid military camp, one of the largest in Iraq.⁷⁵ Maurice's memoir, which he wrote after permanently settling in New York, contains elements of both exaggeration and embellishment, including stories about clever family members who managed to outwit the dominant powers, often against all odds. In addition, allegations such as those made against Chotin cannot easily be verified. It is certain, however, that the Sawda'i family, because of their connections to Iraq's economic and political elites, was largely shielded from the consequences of these accusations and, in late 1949, when the Iraqi Army wanted to make a documentary about itself, they hired Studio Baghdad to produce it.⁷⁶

In 1949, Studio Baghdad was contacted by Naji Danus, whose family owned Cinema al-Zawra', and the Lebanese actor-director-singer Muhammad Salman to rent their facilities to produce a new feature. As payment, the Sawda'i brothers were promised half of the box office profits. The film, *Layla fi-l-'Iraq* (Layla in Iraq), was co-directed by Salman and the Egyptian director Ahmad Kamil Mursi and starred Lebanese, Egyptian, and Iraqi actors, including 'Afifa Iskandar.⁷⁷ The movie, which premiered in Cinema Roxy in December 1949, flopped; in 1950, Studio Baghdad suspended operations and let most of its staff go. Instead of film production, the brothers turned to dubbing foreign films into Arabic and Persian in hopes of entering the Iranian market and expanding their business to Bahrain and Pakistan. The Arabic version of *'Aliya wa 'Issam* had already been shown in Bahrain and the brothers planned to send a version dubbed in Persian to Iran, the main target of their dubbing business.⁷⁸

In 1951, the brothers rented out their studio to a Turkish director and producer, Lütfi Akad and Hürrem Erman, who brought Turkish actors and technicians to Baghdad and produced two films there: *Arzu ile Kamber* (Arzu and Kamber) and *Tahir ile Zühre* (Tahir and Zühre), both based on stories from *A Thousand and One Nights*.⁷⁹ An Iraqi distributor in Istanbul had recommended the Sawda'i brothers to Hürrem Erman and, after a short trip to Baghdad in 1951, a contract was signed. Antun Massih, who was fluent in Turkish and a graduate of the same elite Istanbul high school as Hürrem Erman, oversaw the negotiations. The contract allowed Akad and Erman to re-use old costumes and props from *'Aliya wa 'Issam*. Antun Massih and the Sawda'i brothers used their contacts in Iraq to hire local extras, workers, and assistants.⁸⁰ The two films were shot at Studio Baghdad and in locations across Iraq over a period of six months, between April and September 1951. When the editing was done, Studio Baghdad dubbed the two films into Persian and Arabic and, in return for the rent, received the exhibition and distribution rights to the two films in Iraq, Bahrain, and Iran.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Herut, November 30, 1948, 1. Similar allegations were also made in an Iraqi newspaper two months earlier, *al-Yaqza*, September 27, 1948.

⁷⁵ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 61.

⁷⁶ Me'ir, *Hitpathut Tarbutit*, 363–64; Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 61.

⁷⁷ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 67–68; Olsen, "al-Qahira-Baghdad," 24–25. The film is available on YouTube: "Layla fi al-'Iraq," YouTube, August 14, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYrgj2FYKYE>.

⁷⁸ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Dorsz to DOS, "Motion Pictures-Entertainment 35 mm – Iraq," April 20, 1950.

⁷⁹ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures Iraq," June 18, 1951; Lütfi Akad, *Işıkla Karanlık Arasında* (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2004). I would like to thank Ahmet Gürata for sharing Lütfi Akad's memoir with me and helping to translate the relevant parts from Turkish. Both *Arzu ile Kamber* and *Tahir ile Zühre* are available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Khiw7Z5iQ0>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfRPIyznlQk>.

⁸⁰ Akad, *Işıkla Karanlık Arasında*, 109–11, 115–16.

⁸¹ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures Iraq," June 18, 1951; Akad, *Işıkla Karanlık Arasında*, 115–16; Rıza Kırac, *İzlenmemiş Bir Yeşilçam Filmi: Hürrem Erman* (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2008), 63–68.

While the Sawda'i family did not sell Studio Baghdad until 1967, the studio became inactive after the collaboration with Akad and Erman. In the 1950s and 1960s, alongside most of Iraq's Jewish community, members of the Sawda'i family began leaving Iraq. The family kept importing and distributing Hollywood films, at least until the middle of the 1960s, but their business never regained the level of success it attained in the late 1940s.⁸² However, the training and expertise created by the studio, as well as its substantial cinema infrastructure and equipment, remained in Iraq. Along with the costumes and sets from *'Aliya wa 'Issam*, which were recycled to produce *Arzu ile Kamber* and *Tahir ile Zühre*, most of Studio Baghdad's film development and editing equipment was purchased by Hamaz Surin, an Iraqi with filmmaking ambitions of his own. Hamaz had worked as a security guard for Studio Baghdad during the production of *'Aliya wa 'Issam* and taught himself to use the equipment by observing the British and French crews. His nephew, Shirak Surin, starred as one of the children in *'Aliya wa 'Issam* and later joined his uncle's studio, Studio Hamaz. Shirak--nicknamed *al-miqass al-dhahabi* (the golden scissors) for his editing talents--became one of the most influential Iraqi film editors, working on numerous Iraqi productions and government-sponsored documentaries throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁸³ Other members belonging to the second generation of Iraqi directors, technicians, and actors, including Yas 'Ali al-Nasir, Salah al-Din al-Badri, Yahya Fa'iq, and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Tawfiq, also began their careers at Studio Baghdad.⁸⁴

The End of an Iraqi Jewish Family Business

In her recent study of the effects of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan on pre-national film cultures, Salma Siddique recovers the obscured histories of Hindi-Urdu cinema as they existed in the 1930s and 1940s. Paying attention to minority filmmakers and cinema infrastructure on both sides of the border, Siddique examines the multiple ways in which previous forms of social and professional mobility were curtailed by the violence, large-scale migration, and displacement unleashed by partition.⁸⁵ Unearthing the silenced history of Jewish involvement in the music and recording industry in twentieth-century North Africa, Christopher Silver has recently shed new light on the way in which North African Jews shaped and created modern Arab music as singers, musicians, scouts, agents, producers, and distributors.⁸⁶ Silver demonstrates the extent to which the combined forces of French colonialism, new and competing forms of belonging, Zionism, and Arab nationalisms cast a shadow over and complicated previously shared Muslim-Jewish histories of entanglement, collaboration, and cultural production.⁸⁷

In Iraq, the partition of Palestine and the 1948 creation of the state of Israel had similar effects on the Iraqi Jewish community. Between 1949 and 1951, 123,000 Iraqi Jews immigrated to the newly established state of Israel, the US, Europe, and elsewhere. Already in August of 1950, in a meeting between US distributors, US embassy staff in Baghdad, and Iraqi film distributors and cinema owners, the Iraqi participants estimated, with great concern, that the departure of Iraqi Jews would negatively affect business, as 15–40 percent of their patrons were Jews.⁸⁸ A year later, the same group of distributors and cinema owners reported to the US embassy that their business had indeed suffered a 25–40 percent loss. The group, which included Jews who had not yet left Iraq, explained that Iraqi Jews mostly

⁸² Film Daily Yearbook, 1963, 650.

⁸³ 'Ali Hammud al-Hassan, "Miqass Shirak al-Dhahabi," *al-Sabah*, February 21, 2022, <https://alsabaah.iq/61161-.html> (accessed May 1, 2023); al-Mafraji, *Fannanu al-Sinama fi al-'Iraq*, 23–24.

⁸⁴ Al-Mafraji, *Fannanu al-Sinama fi al-'Iraq*, 9–10, 23–24, 32, 40, 61; Olsen, "Al-Qahira-Baghdad," 26–27.

⁸⁵ Siddique, *Evacuee Cinema*, 3–5.

⁸⁶ Silver, *Recording History*, 5–13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures – Entertainment," August 17, 1950.

patronized cinemas showing American productions, and thus these cinemas had suffered even more.⁸⁹ While these numbers are almost certainly exaggerated and difficult to verify, and while they repeat certain stereotypes about audience preferences, they are indicative of the shock created by the mass exodus of Iraqi Jews, especially in an area of business where Jews had been particularly active.

In 1951, the first members of the Sawda'i family began leaving Iraq. However, unlike some of their family members, Me'ir, Ezra, and Hayyawi did not emigrate. Even in the 1960s, when more family members, including several of their children, began to leave for Israel and the US, the three brothers stayed in Iraq. According to Silver, "as a result of the scholarly emphasis on outmigration to France, Israel, and the Americas, the question of how Jews lived in Morocco during those years has been largely neglected in favor of detailing how Jews left."⁹⁰ Looking at the many North African Jews involved in recording and music who stayed or delayed their departure for personal and economic reasons, Silver instead urges us to approach migration and exile as a multidirectional process that did not happen all at once and was not always final.⁹¹ Focusing on out-migration, other scholars, including Ori Yehudai and Bryan K. Roby, have challenged the Zionist historical narrative by highlighting the social and political realities that led many Jews to leave Palestine, and later Israel, before and after WWII.⁹² The migration of the Sawda'i family followed similar patterns and included more than a decade in Iran, long trips to Europe and the US, and several returns to Iraq and departures from Israel.

While most of the family stayed in Iraq where their political and economic connections allowed them to continue their business, albeit in a more precarious fashion, Me'ir's son Maurice left for Israel in 1951. Through the connection of one of his uncles, Albert Sawda'i, who was also a new immigrant and trying to establish a film studio in Israel, Maurice briefly worked as an assistant film editor on the famous Israeli production *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955), which tells the story of four Israeli soldiers during the 1948 war—the same war that indirectly brought Maurice to Israel.⁹³ As Maurice writes in his memoir, upon arriving in Israel, he still dreamed of a career in cinema:

I hoped to realize my dreams of becoming a great film director. However, at the end of this jaunt the effect of working as a small contributor in a big cinema project left me depressed. I realized at once how far I was from success... not anymore the son of Me'ir, the mover and shaker at Studio Baghdad whose word was abided by the highest and the lowest ranking employee.⁹⁴

Another uncle, Naji Sawda'i, after a long and devastating stay in a transit camp for newly arrived immigrants, obtained a low-paying job as a projectionist in a cinema in Jerusalem. As such, Israel was a disappointment for those in the Sawda'i family who hoped to continue their cinema business there.⁹⁵ In this sense, the Sawda'i family's initial experience in Israel

⁸⁹ NARA II RG 59, Country File Iraq, 1950–1954, box 5489, Crocker to DOS, "Motion Pictures Iraq," June 18, 1951.

⁹⁰ Silver, *Recording History*, 143.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 147, 171–72.

⁹² Ori Yehudai, *Leaving Zion: Jewish Emigration from Palestine and Israel after World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Bryan K. Roby, "Not All Who Ascend Remain: Afro-Asian Jewish Returnees from Israel," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 2 (2022): 260–81.

⁹³ Sawdayee, *The Baghdad Connection. Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955) was a major early Zionist narrative film. It played a large role in setting the Israeli narrative of the "War of Independence" as a heroic battle for survival. See, for example, Uri S. Cohen, "From Hill to Hill: A Brief History of Representation of War in Israeli Cinema," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 43–58. Early Israeli cinema was, according to Ella Shohat, an elite Zionist Ashkenazi venture until the 1960s. Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 53–70.

⁹⁴ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 188.

⁹⁵ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 188–89.

parallels other stories of Mizrahi disappointment and hardship with regards to migration and resettlement in the new Jewish state.⁹⁶

Disappointed with his career in Israel, Maurice, together with his brother Eli, traveled to France several times in the mid 1950s. Part of the family left for France in 1951 and their father, who had studied there in his youth, regularly went to Paris on business to purchase films for the family's cinemas in Iraq.⁹⁷ During one of these trips, Me'ir decided to send his two sons to Tehran. In the 1950s, several US production companies ended indirect distribution to Iran via Iraq.⁹⁸ Since the Sawda'i family had distributed films to Iran via Iraq, direct US distribution to Iran was a blow to their business. Under the guidance of their Tehran-based uncle, Na'im Sawda'i, Me'ir hoped his two sons would be able to continue the family business in Iran. As described by Lior Sternfeld, large-scale Iraqi Jewish migration to Iran dates to the period around WWI, when many fled mandatory Ottoman conscription. Before the twentieth century, religious training, intermarriage, and commercial ties connected the Iraqi and Iranian Jewish communities. Between 1941 and 1951, there was a second wave of Iraqi Jewish immigration to Iran. Many of these Iraqi Jews either continued their preexisting businesses in Iran or created new ones focusing on commerce and the financial sectors.⁹⁹

In 1956, Maurice and Eli moved to Iran, where they briefly worked with the Iraqi Jewish Zubli family, who had owned Cinema Royal in Baghdad and who, like the Sawda'is, had moved their operation to Teheran. However, unlike the successful cinema business established in their native Iraq in the 1930s, the Sawda'i family only had limited success in Iran. Due to personal, financial, and political reasons, Maurice and Eli struggled to establish their business in Iran. With a low and constantly diminishing cash flow and much of the capital provided by their father locked in regional banks, the situation turned from bad to worse when their father passed away in August 1962. In 1967, they dissolved the company and left Iran for good.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

When Maurice and Eli left Tehran in 1967, the family's more than 30-year involvement in cinema ended. The family business spanned more than three decades, three generations, and multiple immigrations, diasporas, and nation states across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. After leaving, Maurice decided not to return to Israel. Instead, he settled in New York City, a place that became home to many members of the family. In the early 1970s, the last of the Sawda'is left Iraq. Some followed Maurice and settled in the US while others went to Israel. In 1967, the family sold Studio Baghdad and transferred the money abroad. However, the capital gained from the studio was used to build new lives in Israel and the US, not to continue or start the family business anew. For other Iraqi Jews involved in cinema, immigration to Israel offered new opportunities. George Ovadia, who was born in Iraq, first established himself as a successful director in Iran, directing more than 25 films there. In the late 1960s, he immigrated to Israel and became a leading director of melodramas and Bourekas films.¹⁰¹ Israel was, or became, important to some members of the family. At the same time, Israel was also marginal. Most of the family did not settle there and places like Iran and the US emerged as alternative options and opportunities for business and new lives. The history of families, like the Sawda'is, can help us

⁹⁶ See for example Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁹⁷ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 184.

⁹⁸ Mingant, *Hollywood Films in North African and the Middle East*, 99.

⁹⁹ Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*, 32–39.

¹⁰⁰ Sawdayee, *The Immigrant*, 234–41.

¹⁰¹ Rami Kimchi, *Israeli Bourekas Films: Their Origins and Legacy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2023), 67, 83; Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 116; Askari, *Relaying Cinema*, 226.

think in unsectarian terms about the history of religious and minority communities. In turn, this becomes an important step towards writing a different history of film and cinema, of Iraqi Jews, and of Iraq.

At a time when many Iraqi Jews began looking outward, the Sawda'i brothers expanded their business, invested more than a million dollars in a large studio project, and became the largest single importer of Hollywood movies and owners of the largest cinema in Baghdad. Traditionally seen as a period of waiting for the exodus, when examined through the history of cinema and the economic activities of the Sawda'i family, the 1940s and early 1950s emerge as less linear, less determined, and significantly more nuanced and multidirectional in terms of Iraqi minorities, their involvement in popular culture and the economy, and their attachment to Iraq.

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