

Jews in Afghanistan: A Brief Cultural and Historical Perspective

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The Institute for the study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP) in New York, invited me to say a few words about Afghan Jews. It is was an honor to be their guest speaker in a webinar series of “Antisemitism in South Asia in Comparative Perspective” on 22 April, 2021.

First of all, it is important to note that the amount of academic research is very highly limited in this area of study. The first book was compiled by an Afghan Jew from Herat named Ibne Amin bin Hazarat Rab Jani.¹ The first article on Afghan Jews was published in 2007 by Ambassador Said T. Jawad, currently the Ambassador of Afghanistan in Russia and also an article recently published by Dr. Ghulam Mohammad Dastgeer in Farsi language entitled “The ancient Jews community of Balkh”². The rest are all journalistic reports. This paper is mostly prepared from video clips and personal interviews with Afghan Jews and Afghan Muslims.

When speaking about anti-Semitism in Afghanistan, academically, different fields of study play a role in understanding this topic. Without understating these fields of studies, we cannot understand Afghan Jews and comprehend or understand anti-Semitism in Afghanistan. These are the fields of: linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropology and history.

When I came to the United States of America 41 years ago, I learned that many Americans think that Semitism applies to the Jews, so when someone speaks of anti-Semitism, he/she refers to the Jews! There is a misunderstanding about the word Semite. Linguistic research clearly shows that Semite is not a religious term, but a linguistic term. The word Semite comes from the name of “Shem,” the son of the Prophet Noah. Linguistically, the term Semite refers to those people whose ancestors spoke Assyro-Babylonian, Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew and Ethiopic. Assyrians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Amorites, Arameans and Canaanites including Phoenicians, Arabians and Abyssinians shared the root of the language. Surprisingly enough, most of the Semites speak Arabic today, which is the richest of all languages. Author and translator of old scriptures, Thomas Cleary writes, “Arabic, the most precise and primitive of the Semitic languages, shows signs of being originally a constructed language. It is built up upon mathematical principles—a phenomenon not paralleled by any other language.”³ The Qur’an, the Islamic scripture, is written in the Arabic language.

In the contemporary world, the word Semitic is appropriately applied to both Arabs and the Jews. Semite is not a race issue but a linguistic one. Neither a converted Jew nor a converted Muslim is considered to be a Semite. Also, there is a difference between Zionism and Judaism. Zionism is an ideology made by mankind like capitalism and communism while Judaism is a faith and hasn’t got anything to do with Zionism. That is why many Orthodox Jews disagree with the State of Israel and they don’t recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Hence it is totally wrong that if one says, he is anti-Zionism, he is also anti Jews. One can be anti-Zionism but not anti-Jews because Judaism is a monotheistic religion with its rich culture, values and five thousand years of history.

1. Jawad, Said Taib. The history of Afghanistan’s Jews. www.ambassadorjawad.com

² Dastgeer, Ghulam Mohammad. M.D. The ancient Jews of Balkh. WWW.JAWEDAN.COM. May 11, 2021

³ Cleary, Thomas. The Essential Koran, 1993.

It is very interesting to note that the word antisemitism in Afghanistan is still very unfamiliar to the majority of Afghans except some educated Afghans who studied in the West. This is because it is a western term and created by a European man. I, personally learned this term when I went to Europe for my education in 1974 as a student of cultural anthropology in Denmark. At that time the term of antisemitism was less than 100 years old. The term was coined by a German named Wilhelm Marr in 1879.

The reason Afghans do not know the meaning of antisemitism is not only because it is a foreign term for them but Afghanistan being predominately a Muslim nation does not have any hostility or hatred toward the Jews, they being people of faith. Muslims recognize and acknowledge Judaism as a monotheistic religion and revere its Prophet Moses very highly. It is important to note that Jews in Afghanistan were also Afghans like any other minority group. They were treated as Afghans not Jews. So, the relationship between these two groups in our discussion is Afghan Jews with Afghan Muslims.

Not only in Afghanistan, but also in other Muslim countries Muslims and Jews lived side by side in peace without any problems. As a matter of fact, Jews always enjoyed peace and security under Muslim empires. The best example of this co-existence was Muslim Spain where Muslim and Jews were working, cooperating and living in peace together. However, when Jews were expelled by the Christians from Spain in 1492, they took refuge in Muslim lands. As a matter of fact, when Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain, the Christians told the Muslims: "Take your Jews with you!" By the same token, the Ottoman empire in which the Ottomans "provided a particular place of refuge for Jews driven out of western Europe by massacres and persecution."⁴ . Another good example of Muslims protecting Jews was in World War II when Nazis occupied Paris. Jews were sheltered by the Grand Mosque of Paris. They were hidden and given Muslim identity cards by the staff of the mosque. The French film industry made a movie out of this episode called "Les hommes libres," (Free men, 2011). I, personally had a Jewish friend in Kabul. We found each other after more than 50 years after my presentation on this topic on April 22, 2021. I interviewed him for this essay and topic of discussion. We did not have any problems as Afghan Muslim and Afghan Jew as two classmates.

In the 19th century, there were 40,000 Jews in Afghanistan. Culturally, Afghan Jews integrated into Afghan culture 100 percent. They all speak Farsi to the extent that they use Muslim-Afghan medium of speech when speaking. They would wear a kippah (Jewish religious hat) only when they were worshipping at the Synagogue. The political establishment provided them the opportunity to worship to do business and to attend schools. Students were exempt from religious classes because Islamic law prohibits imposing Islam on non-Muslims. One could not differentiate whether a student or a businessman was an Afghan Jew or an Afghan Muslim, unless they knew them personally. Especially Jews of Afghanistan have the same physical feature like most Afghans, tan/white and black hair.

Afghan Jews were not living in ghettos in Afghanistan unlike how they were forced to live in European cities. They were not restricted to do business or not to purchase property and real estates. They led a normal life like everyone else. The major concentration of Jews was in Herat in the western part of Afghanistan, Kabul, the capital, Balkh in northern Afghanistan which was the first Jewish settlement after Assyrian and Babylonian exile.⁵ People had normal relations with Jewish families. If there was a

⁴ History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire. Wikipedia. Viewed May 5, 2021.

⁵ Dastgeer, Ghulam Mohammad, M.D.

specific quarter for Jews it was because of cultural cohesiveness and easier life style, Jews decided to have their own quarters in the city mostly called Mussaaii quarters, (people of the faith of Moses). In this quarter they had their Kosher food, Synagogues and family relationships as a group. This trend has changed in the twentieth century and the quarters have disappeared especially in Kabul which changed rapidly. My Jewish classmate Michael Aharon (in Kabul we used to pronounce his name as Mikhaeel with pronunciation of kh and double ee) used to live in the most modern part of the city in Kabul, unlike myself. This is because he was the son of a businessman and I was the son of a teacher. Whether it was rented or owned, it is not the issue. It is Jewish life style in which was much better than ordinary Kabulis (people of Kabul). They had a luxury life style in Kabul. Jewish women had relations with Muslim women in Herat I was told by a Herati woman. Jewish women used to bring goods for sale and would sit and chat for hours. Medical doctors had more personal relations with the Jewish families. The following is the story of Dr Sayed Anwar Rassa, age 94, interviewed on, April 26, 2021, Fremont, California.

“One of my assignment as medical doctor was in the city of Balkh 60 years ago. I happened to be the medical doctor of some Jewish families in that city. They were not only my patients but we also had established family relations. This is because I had to go to their homes for visit. At that time, the city was small. Everyone knew each other. Visiting patients at home was a norm. They invited me and my wife for dinner. After that, my wife became good friends with their wives. Mostly they were business people especially Afghan rugs and dry fruits. We had very good time with each other. They were very kind people and very hospitable. After three years I was called back to Kabul. In Kabul, I found Ishaq, a Jewish businessman in Saraii shazada. (Saraii shazada was the oldest market in Kabul especially for money exchange. He used to do *sarafi* (money exchange). We become friends. This friendship ended up being partner in business. I had saved some money in Balkh and I invested with Ishaq, my Jewish friend.”

Dr Ghulam Mohammad Dastgeer, MD, 82, now living in the State of Colorado, also told this investigator that his father the late Sufi Ghulam Dastgeer had a Jewish business partner in Kabul. They were not only business partners but also, personal friends.

The relationship between Afghan Jews and Afghan Muslims got so close that Afghan young men would fall in love with young Jewish girls. Their stories were so interesting and romantic that is often became the talk of the city both in Herat and Kabul. Afghan Jews were friends with one of the princes of Afghanistan namely Prince Daoud, the son of King Zahir Shah. Jack Ibrahim an Afghan Jew who is now living in New York, said that his brother used to be a close friend of Prince Daoud. His brother used to go and visit the prince at the Arg Palace. “We had a good time” he said. My Jewish friend, Mikhaeel told me that his father Mr. Aharon was one of the Jewish community leaders in Kabul and was invited by King Zahir Shah several times.

Culturally, there is a difference between antisemitism and being biased/ prejudiced. All over the world people do have a degree of prejudices and biases against various groups. In the United States of America, the oldest democracy, there are people who are prejudiced against minority groups such as Blacks, Asians, Muslims and Jews. Afghanistan is not an exception to this worldwide attitude. Afghan political establishments, history tells us were gentler and kinder toward Jews than other minorities such as Hazaras and Shias. But hatred of Jews has not been reported. There is another reason for this in Afghanistan. As we mentioned before, Afghans were Muslims and Islamic law and culture was very clear on how to deal with the People of the Book. Secondly, since Jews migrated to Afghanistan, they were seen as guests. It is within Afghan culture to treat guests not only with dignity and respect but also to

protect them. Hence the Jews in Afghanistan were better off than the indigenous people of the country. For the last two hundred years the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the country were in power. They violated other minorities in all aspects of life including changing the name of villages in northern Afghanistan from the original Uzbek name to Pashto names. Until 1968 a Shia was not allowed to get a job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Non-Pashtuns were not promoted to five stars generals. This period is called the period of Pashtunization of Afghanistan.

The story of Michael Aharon, my classmate in New York is interesting.

One day, he was in the financial district of New York city, and someone called him: Mikhaeel! Mikhaeel! He turned around and saw a man selling fruits on a fruit stand. The man asked Mikhaeel: "Don't you know me?" Mikhaeel responded, "I'm sorry, I don't". The man said: "I am Mahmoud, your friend at licee Estiqlal" Mikhaeel happily and vividly remembered. They chatted for a while. Another day, Mikhaeel was with his 8-9 years old son. He approached Mahmoud to purchase some fruits. After the transactions, Mahmoud did not accept money. Mikhaeel's son was very surprised that why he was not taking his money. Mikhaeel explained to him that in Afghanistan friends do not treat each other based upon material things but just like brothers and family. That is Afghan hospitality-, friendship and love to fellow classmate being a Jew or not a Jew. My classmate, Michael Aharon (Mikhaeel Haroun) is now living in Florida.

Mediation of President Daoud:

There are several love stories between Afghan young Muslim men and young Afghan Jewish girls. All these romances ended up with the rejection of not only the girl's family but the entire Jewish community in Herat or Kabul where the love story took place. The Jewish family, either sent their daughter out of the country or she was totally abandoned for marrying an Afghan Muslim man. Among these episodes, the story of Shushan Simantov and Ahmad Anwari is most dramatic. This episode was aired on February 8, 2021 from Radio Nowroz in the Charsoo program from Herat City of Afghanistan.

President Daoud (1973-1978) mediated between the Jewish community of Herat and the Muslim family and married Shushan, the Jewish girl, to Ahmad, the Muslim man in Kabul. Shushan left Herat to her brother Zebulun Simantov in Kabul. President Daoud, according to Shushan, not only married her to Ahmad but also accommodated them in Kabul. He, the President, arranged a flight from Kabul to Herat for the bride and the groom according to Shushan. The initiative of President Daoud was based upon the Islamic law that a Muslim man can marry a woman from the People of the Book, meaning Jews and Christians. According to Jewish law a Jew cannot marry a non-Jew.

After the Fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, CNN reported that Zebulun Simantov, the last Jew left Afghanistan along with 30 others including 28 women and children to a neighboring country. Zebulun Simantov, 62, tried hard to stay in Kabul but that was not a choice under the Taliban this time. He used to manage the only Synagogue in Kabul with the financial help of another Jewish philanthropist from outside. In the first takeover of the Taliban in 1996, Simantov compromised with the Taliban despite the fact that the Taliban disrespected the Torah. But that was not an abnormal issue for the Taliban because the Taliban do not respect other religions and denominations anyway. They destroyed the Grand standing Buddha of Bamiyan which was not only the symbol of a major religion of the world such

as Buddhism but also the most fascinating piece of art in ancient history and archeology of Afghanistan. Hence, destroying the Torah was not an act of antisemitism but a lack of appreciation along with ignorance of ancient history, archeology, art history and also denouncing other world religions.

On the Issue of Pashtuns of Afghanistan being the descendants of the lost twelve' tribes of Israel, this author disagrees. This issue surfaced after the American invasion of Afghanistan.

First of all, there is no language similarities between the Hebrew language and the Pashto language. Anthropologically, the core principle of a culture is the language. Secondly, Pashtuns come from Arian tribes and the Pashto language is one of the Arian languages. The Arians are ten tribes and the Pact or Pakhtoon or Pashtuns is one of those tribes. This issue is mentioned in the history of Herodot, Rig Veda and Avesta. I strongly believe that bringing this unscientific issue into the picture of Afghanistan is a foreign conspiracy for their own political goals and objectives. Of course, there are some similarities between the Jews and the Pashtuns but those similarities cannot be justified for Pashtuns to be the descendants of Jews. These similarities are not hair- style or attire but mostly behavior and business dealings. The Pashtuns are fierce warriors, but not necessary horse riders. The ancient Jews were skilled horse riders and trainers. On the civil side, the Jews were mostly money exchangers and charging interest was a typical Jewish business attitude. If some Pashtuns did the same thing in 19th century of India, they probably learned it from the Jews who migrated all over the world not only to Afghanistan.

After the creation of Israel, it was by the request of the World Jewish Congress in February 1950 that they asked Afghanistan to let Jews migrate to Israel. The kingdom of Afghanistan at that time gave the Jews a choice. Jews always loved their place of birth; in their interviews they admit the fact that they loved Afghanistan. Again, many Jews left during the 1967 war in the Middle East. Some remained in the country until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After the Soviet invasion almost, all left the country. Simnatov was the last Jew. Afghan Jews are Afghans. We hope that one day a true peace prevails in Afghanistan and they return to their original homeland, Afghanistan.

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