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The Historic Ties between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq Will Continue

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CIA map of the Middle East and Kurdish areas. (*CIA via University of Texas*)

- **The Iraqi army participated in significant wars against Israel (1948, 1967, and 1973) and was defeated in all of them. Iraq nearly finished a nuclear reactor for the development of a nuclear bomb in 1981 for use against Israel, and it was destroyed by Israeli planes.**

- **Technically, Iraq and Israel are still in a state of war and have no official diplomatic ties. This begs the question of why, in May 2022, the Iraqi Parliament passed a law that threatens the death penalty or life imprisonment for any Iraqi citizen, company, or institution that attempts any kind of normalization with Israel or Israelis.**

- **The success of the Abraham Accords set off alarms with the mullahs of Iran. The prospect of the Abraham Accords' expansion is undoubtedly one of Iran's biggest fears. With the Iraqi government under the influence of Iran, it will do everything possible to prevent Iraq from becoming the next country to join.**

- **Israeli-Kurdish relations have been conducted with a high level of secrecy, and have deepened and expanded since the Six-Day War of 1967. Kurdish leader Mulla Barzani visited Israel at least twice (in 1968 and 1973), meeting with Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and high-level Israeli officials from the Intelligence community.**

- **After the fall of Saddam Hussain's Ba'athist regime in 2003, the geopolitical context for Kurdish-Israeli ties has changed dramatically, with the Kurds establishing a de facto Kurdish state and renewing and deepening their relations with Israel.**

- **Historically, Israel has had cordial ties with the Kurds in a generally hostile region where Jews and Kurds have fought against the odds with the same Arab enemy in their struggles for a homeland.**

- **If Kurds ever have their own independent state, they most definitely would join the Abraham Accords. However, many challenges and obstacles remain for this to happen.**

Iraq was one of five Arab countries that participated in the war against the newly created Jewish state in 1948. The war ended in 1949 with the United Nations brokering armistice agreements, a series of ceasefire agreements signed by all warring states except Iraq.

The Iraqi army participated in two more significant wars (in 1967 and 1973) against Israel and was defeated in both. Hence, technically, Iraq and Israel are still in a state of war and have no official diplomatic ties. This begs the question of why, in May 2022, the Iraqi Parliament passed a law that threatens the death penalty or life imprisonment for any Iraqi citizen, company, or institution that attempts any kind of normalization with Israel or Israelis. It is worth noting that this law applies to Iraqis as well as foreign companies and individuals operating in Iraq.

One of the key provisions of this law, titled "Criminalizing Normalization and Establishment of Relations with the Zionist Entity," punishes any political, security, economic, technical, cultural, sports, and scientific cooperation with Israel and Israelis under any circumstances.

Undoubtedly, the timing of the law has to do with several factors, one of which is the Abraham Accords, which have changed the geopolitical landscape by offering the opportunities and enormous benefits that come with normalization. The younger generation, in particular, is well-aware that the Abraham Accords are creating jobs and fostering a stronger financial future.

On a societal level, the Abraham Accords have also broken decades-long hatred and hysteria over “Israel, the enemy.” They are changing public opinion through dialogue and mutual understanding to deepen and expand people-to-people connections.

In September 2021, Erbil, the capital of Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region, hosted a conference on normalizing relations with Israel. Some 300 influential people, including Iraqi Arab tribal leaders and lawmakers, attended. The conference came as two Arab countries, the UAE and Bahrain, were establishing ties with Israel, and Morocco and Sudan declared they would join the Abraham Accords.

The success of the Abraham Accords set off alarms with the mullahs of Iran. The prospect of the Abraham Accords’ expansion is undoubtedly one of Iran’s biggest fears. With the Iraqi government under the influence of Iran, it will do everything possible to prevent Iraq from becoming the next country to join.

Himdad Mustafa, an independent researcher based in Erbil, to whom the law would be applied, noted: “When 300 people gathered in Erbil calling for peace and normalization with Israel, the Iraqi government immediately passed a law criminalizing ties with Israel and Israelis. The law is clearly aimed at Kurds.”[1]



Shrapnel from an Iranian ballistic missile in front of civilian residences in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan’s capital. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards took credit for the attack, claiming they were firing at an Israeli facility. (*KRG*)

Shortly after the Erbil conference, the Iraqi government and several Shia militia groups released statements calling those who participated in the conference “traitors” and for the places where “traitors” and “evil bases” are located to be burned down.

Qais Al-Khazali, secretary-general of Asaib Ahl al-Hag (Coordination Framework), a powerful Iranian-backed Shia militia, slammed the conference as “disgraceful.” He called

on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to take action and slammed Kurdish officials for claiming they were not aware of the conference. The anti-Israel/antisemitic Al-Khazali posted a statement on his Twitter account on September 25, 2021, saying that "the Islamic opposition will not remain quiet about this great betrayal, and that we will give the Israeli enemy and those who have normalized ties with them a lesson that will stop all others who are thinking of normalization."[2]

Himdad explains that the criminalization of Israeli-Kurdish ties is primarily driven by "Kurd-phobia," and that Kurd-hatred and antisemitism go hand-in-hand. Himdad further explained,

> *The Turkish and many Arab governments have had relations with Israel for decades. However, these same governments do not tolerate Kurdish-Israeli relations because they are against the very existence of Kurds. So, definitely, the law is aimed at the Kurds. Since 1960, Kurds have been called the puppets of Zionists and given the title, the "second Israel," by the neighboring people to invalidate the struggle of Kurds for Independence.*[3]

The Iraqi parliament, which failed to form a unified and functional government since the fall of the decades-old regime of the feared dictator Saddam Hussain 20 years ago, finally managed to reach a consensus, with 275 lawmakers out of 329 voting in favor of the anti-Israel law. It is worth noting that Iraq's current prime minister, Mohammed Al-Sudani, was nominated to the post thanks to the Iran-backed *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, the largest parliamentary bloc.

This is the same parliament that failed to address Iraq's many socio-economic challenges and introduce policies that would improve the lives of millions of ordinary Iraqis who live in poverty. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, close to 3.2 million school-aged children are out of school, with the Iraqi Parliament allocating less than 6 percent of its national budget to the education sector, placing Iraq at the bottom rank of the Middle East countries.[4] In addition, in 2022, Iraq's public sector was ranked as the 23rd most corrupt in the world.[5] The situation has prompted nationwide protests in recent years, particularly among youth frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities. The unemployment rate for this group reached a high of 34.6 percent in 2022.[6]

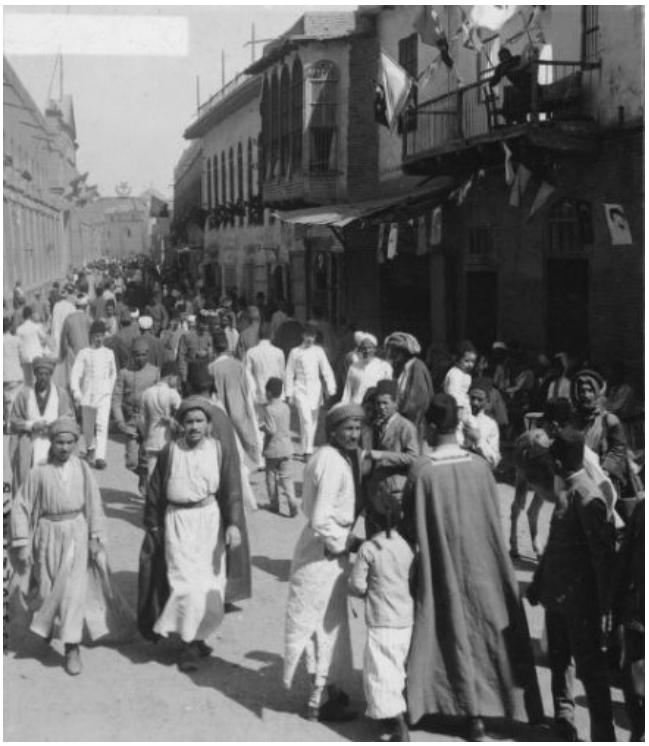
Moreover, Kurdish lawmakers voted *in favor* of this anti-Israel law. It might seem paradoxical that Kurds supported such a law against Israel, the only country in the world that supported the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Arafat Karam, an advisor to Masoud Barzani, the architect of the independence referendum, explained, "I predict the anti-Israel law will further deepen the rift between Baghdad and Erbil. The Kurds' votes favoring the law does not mean that Erbil was joining the chorus against Israel."[7] In short, a yes-decision was taken due to political pressures.

Kurdish-Israeli Ties and the Fear of a "Second Israel"

In 1966, the then-Iraqi defense minister, Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayali, blamed the Kurds of Iraq for seeking to establish a "second Israel" in the region. Fifty-seven years later, the term

"second Israel" is still perpetuated, claiming Kurdistan is imitating "Yahudistan," meaning the land of the Jews or Israel.

Professor Ofra Bengio, head of the Kurdish studies program at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, said that "the linkages and parallels are intended to demonize and delegitimize both Jews and Kurds, while also implying illegitimate relations between them."[8]



Street in Baghdad, "Where the Jews and Muslims throng," circa 1914. (Keystone-Mast Collection, California Museum of Photography at UCR)

Going back a century, Iraq was home to a vibrant Jewish community. In June 1941, Haj Amin al Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, incited an antisemitic pogrom in Iraq called the "*Farhud*," when Arab nationalists looted Jewish businesses and brutally killed hundreds of Jews. Most Jews left Iraq by 1951, and discriminative policies and persecution targeted those who remained. Here, the Kurds played an important role: the Kurdish region became the only escape route for thousands of Jews, who were assisted by the Kurds to escape Iraq. The Jews who fled in the late 1960s recounted how Masoud Barzani, the son of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who later became the president of KRG in 2005, personally helped smuggle them out over the mountains.

Professor Bengio writes that Kurdish Jews "became excellent ambassadors for the Kurds of Iraq, publicizing and pleading their cause among the Israeli public. For example, following the crushing of the 1991 Kurdish uprising by Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish community in Israel, estimated then at 100,000, organized a massive relief operation for Iraqi Kurds. They also staged demonstrations in front of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and called on the U.S. to protect the Kurds from Saddam."[9]

Iraq's Kurds also fit into the plans of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. His "Periphery Doctrine" sought alliances and friendly ties with non-Arab states in the periphery of the Middle East, including Turkey, Iran (a strong coalition partner that lasted until the Shah's overthrow in 1979), Ethiopia, and also ethnic and religious minorities, like the Kurds and the Maronites in Lebanon, with whom Israel maintained a discreet relationship since the late 1950s.

The strengthening of ties between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq commenced with the outbreak of the Kurdish rebellion, also known as the Barzani rebellion against the Iraqi regime, which lasted from 1961 until 1970. The uprising was led by the much-loved, legendary Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani in an attempt to establish an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq.



The head of Israel's Mossad, General Meir Amit, in dark clothing, met with the Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani in the Kurdistan mountains (circa 1966). The men on their sides are Mossad representatives.

Turning to Israel for Help

The Kurdish rebellion faced serious challenges, and Mulla Mustafa asked the Israelis for help. As a result, a Kurdish team traveled to Israel and met with then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Shimon Peres, then the head of the Labor Party. The visit resulted in Israel deploying an Israeli team to Iraqi Kurdistan with Reuven Shiloah, one of the first Israeli contacts there, who later became the director of the Mossad.

The relationship was conducted with a high level of secrecy, and it would deepen and expand following the Six-Day War of 1967, in which Arabs armies, including the Iraqi military, suffered a humiliating defeat by the Israeli army. Mulla Mustafa visited Israel at least two times (in 1968 and 1973), meeting with Prime Minister Eshkol and high-level Israeli officials from the Intelligence community.

Mulla Mostafa's son, Masoud, and other Iraqi Kurdish leaders repeatedly visited Israel over the decades. Israeli officials also frequently visited the Kurdish region, and the Mossad reportedly set up bases in Kurdistan during the 1960s and 1970s.

Brig.-Gen. Tzuri Sagi was one of the first Israeli Mossad operatives to arrive in Kurdistan in 1965 to train Peshmerga fighters. Sagi stayed for about two years and had regular meetings with Mulla Mostafa. In an article published in the *New York Times* (September 29, 2017), Sagi expressed his love for the Kurdish people: "I became a patriotic Kurd," saying many Israeli soldiers and Mossad operatives shared similar sentiments toward the Kurds of Iraq.

It is essential to highlight that, at first, the Israeli aid involved humanitarian assistance, building field hospitals and training Peshmerga fighters, but supplying them with no heavy weaponry. Later, Israel started providing the Kurds with significant amounts of more advanced weaponry, such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and training Peshmerga fighters in Israel.

Israelis also helped to bring the "Kurdish question" to Europe by financing awareness campaigns about the Kurds and their plight. The ties between the two friends continued with the first official acknowledgment on September 29, 1980, when Prime Minister Menachem Begin revealed that Israel supported the Kurds "during their uprising against the Iraqis in 1965-1975."[10]

Since the fall of Saddam Hussain's Ba'athist regime in 2003, the geopolitical context for Kurdish-Israeli ties has changed dramatically, with the Kurds establishing a de facto Kurdish state and renewing and deepening their relations with Israel. In 2005, the Kurdish president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Masoud Barzani, openly called for establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. In 2008, Iraq's then-president Jalal Talabani and the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) openly embraced Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak during a conference in Greece. This move upset Iraqi Arab lawmakers. Talabani responded by saying that he had done so in his capacity as a Kurd and as head of the PUK, not as president of Iraq.

There are also unverified reports that both Masoud Barzani and Talabani had meetings with the late Ariel Sharon in 2004, and it has also been reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already met with the current KRG President of Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani.

Win-Win Relationship

Israel also maintains economic ties with Kurdistan, purchasing Kurdish oil despite objections from Iraq's central government in Baghdad. A report in the *Financial Times* discusses investments by many Israeli companies in energy, development sectors, and communications projects in Iraqi Kurdistan, in addition to providing security training and purchasing oil.[11] Moreover, in a poll conducted in 2009 in Iraqi Kurdistan, 71% of Kurds supported normalization with Israel.[12] The results are unsurprising since, historically, Israel has had cordial ties with the Kurds in a generally hostile region where Jews and Kurds have fought against the odds with the same Arab enemy in their struggles for a homeland.

For more than 100 years, Kurds have been the victims of "Arabization" campaigns of ethnic cleansing programs and genocides. As early as the 1930s, Iraq attempted to ethnically cleanse the Kurdish areas by resettling large numbers of Arabs. The ethnic cleansing peaked in Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq following the rise of the Arab Ba'ath Party, a party whose ideology was hugely influenced by Nazi Germany under Hitler. The Ba'athists sought to achieve their grandiose plan of creating "one Arab nation" built on Arab ethnic purity. To achieve their aims, they embarked on a campaign to erase non-Arab minorities such as the Kurds and Assyrians. In the early 1960s, the Syrian government implemented the "Arab Belt Project," which saw 1.4 million acres of Kurdish agricultural land given to Syrian Arab farmers. In the past decades alone, at least half a million Kurds have been murdered by the Syrian and Iraqi governments. The worse atrocities occurred in Iraq between 1988 and 1991, when more than 200,000 Kurds were killed, and Saddam's *Anfal* campaigns destroyed more than 4,500 Kurdish villages.[13] "*Anfal*" is a Koranic term adopted by Saddam to describe his program to eradicate the Kurds and loot their possessions. "*Suratal-Anfal*" means the spoils (of war).

Aso Qaderi, a Kurdish filmmaker, political activist, and the executive director of *The Times of Kurdistan* in Norway, said in an interview,

> *Kurds and Jews have a common history of genocides, repression, exile, and displacement. And our history and sacrifices are similar, and we were two nations that no one supported in all the suffering that has come upon us....Our relationships date back to the late 1950s; these relations have always been in the interests of both sides. Over the decades, these relationships have grown economically, culturally, commercially, socially, politically, and security-wise.*[14]

Qaderi pointed out that more than 300,000 Kurds (mainly Jewish) now live in Israel and have played a pivotal role in influencing Israel's policy and public opinion on the Kurdish question.

In reference to the anti-normalization law, like Mustafa Himdad, the Erbil researcher, Qaderi points a finger at Iran, saying this "law is an order from the Iranian regime and has been enacted through Iranian militia groups and proxies in Iraq."[15] But Qaderi firmly asserts that Iran and its proxies in the Iraqi government will not succeed in breaking the decades-old Kurdish-Israeli ties.

Most Iraqis, including Arab Iraqis, are well aware that this law is just a propaganda tool enacted for domestic consumption. When the law came into force, the influential Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr posted a tweet praising it as a "great achievement" and called on his followers to come out to the streets to celebrate. Yet only a few hundred responded to his call and gathered in downtown Baghdad to chant anti-Israel slogans.



Shiite political leader Mustafa al-Sadr was summoned from Iraq to pledge his fealty to Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei. Al-Sadr is in black garb next to Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

Qaderi continued: "This law has no value for the Iraqi people. Even some Iraqi Arab leaders have ties to Israel."[16] "For us Kurds, it is business as usual – Kurds will maintain their relations with Israel diplomatically and politically."[17]

Israel - The Only Country to Back Kurdish Statehood

The late Masoud Barzani, then president of the KRG, like his father Mulla Mostafa, the iconic leader of Kurdish nationalism, dreamed of establishing a homeland for the Kurds of Iraq. On September 25, 2017, he backed holding the Kurdish Independence Referendum. An overwhelming 92.73% of Kurds voted in favor of independence. Masoud had hoped to use the overwhelming "yes" vote as political leverage to open the path for negotiating independence from Iraq.

But the move was met with hostility from international allies and regional foes except for one country, Israel. The Jewish state was the only country in the world to endorse an independent Kurdish state. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, "(Israel) supports the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve their own state."

A month later, on October 20, 2017, tens of thousands of Iraqi troops and *Hashd Al-Shaabi* ("Popular Mobilization Forces"), an Iraqi Shia armed militia backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and other proxy IRGC-backed militias, launched an offensive against the Kurdish region and were about to advance towards Erbil. The Shia Arab Iraqis, with the support of Iran, launched their attack to eliminate the political integrity of the autonomous Kurdish region.

However, Kurdish fighters from Syria and Iran joined Peshmerga forces from Iraqi Kurdistan. Together they were able to defeat the attackers and stop them from progressing. The General Directorate of Counterterrorism in the Kurdistan Region wrote: "The Pirde [Peshmerga base] epic is a symbol of the steadfastness of the people of

Kurdistan, and a failure of a hostile scheme....October 20, 2017, was the day when the Kurdish people and the Kurdistan Region regained their dignity, and it was a graveyard for enemies."[18]

Back in the 1960s, Israel was the only country that came to the aid of Iraqi Kurds, and decades later, it was again the only country that openly supported the Kurdish right to independence. As a result, waving Israeli flags became a frequent occurrence in the Kurdish region and a symbol of unity between Jews and Kurds.

In late 2017, the Iraqi parliament passed a law making flying an Israeli flag publicly a criminal act. However, that did not stop many Iraqi Kurds, especially young people, from feeling close to the Jewish state.

The Iranian regime, through its proxies in the Iraqi government, is the most significant source of Kurd-phobia in Iraq and the driving factor fueling tensions. In addition to their explicit threat to Israel, Iranian officials frequently threaten the Kurdish region, and repeatedly accuse the Kurds of working with Israel. The accusations include identifying and arresting "a network of agents of the Zionist regime's spy organization (Mossad)" entering Iran through the Kurdish region to carry out attacks. The IRGC has launched ballistic missiles toward Erbil under the pretext they are targeting secret Israeli military bases.

As recently as May 21, 2023, Iran's Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib claimed that Iranian security forces had detained several Kurdish-Iraqi spies cooperating with Israel "that tried to cross the western borders of Iran." He warned, "If insecurity is created for the Islamic Republic, any action on the borders will be met with a decisive and overwhelming response."[19]

If Kurds ever have their own independent state, they most definitely would join the Abraham Accords. However, many challenges and obstacles remain for this to happen. Kurds will continue their long-standing ties with Israel, but for now, these ties will remain "covert" due to the fear of Tehran and its loyalist supporters within the Iraqi government.

Israel's hands are also tied due to a lack of interest or commitment by the American administration to an independent Kurdish area in northern Iraq. Americans and their allies often emphasize the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state, neglecting to mention that an overwhelming majority of Kurds reject being part of the illusory state of Iraq.

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Notes

[1] Interview with Himdad Mustafa, May 24, 2023

[2] https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/1441714451956666376

[3] Ibid.

[4] https://www.unicef.org/iraq/what-we-do/education

[5] https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/irq

[6] https://www.statista.com/statistics/812116/youth-unemployment-rate-in-iraq/

[7] https://en.qantara.de/content/iraq-bans-contact-with-israel-anti-semitism-as-state-doctrine

[8] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297093743_Surprising_ties_between_Israel_and_the_Kurds

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] https://www.ft.com/content/150f00cc-472c-11e5-af2f-4d6e0e5eda22

[12] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297093743_Surprising_ties_between_Israel_and_the_Kurds

[13] https://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com/

[14] Interview with Aso Qaderi, May 25, 2023

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] https://www.memri.org/reports/hussein-yazdanpana-%E2%80%93-kurdish-leader-calling-toppling-islamic-republic-iran

[19] https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/484961/Baghdad-provided-guarantees-on-Iraqi-Kurdistan-intel-minister

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