

An Israeli Facebook Page ‘In Iraqi Dialect’

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Brief Analysis

About seven years ago, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a Facebook page titled “Israel Speaks Arabic,” which aims to expose the Arab world to information about Israel that is not frequently reported in traditional Arab media outlets. Surprisingly enough, the page, which has over 1.5 million Arabic-speaking followers, turned out to be particularly popular in Iraq. In 2017, around 400,000 Iraqis followed Israel Speaks Arabic, making them the second largest group among the page’s followers. Moreover, that same year, Iraqis viewed the page’s content over 50 million times. These numbers led the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to open a new Facebook page – “Israel in the Iraqi Dialect,” which is specifically tailored to Iraqi audience.

But while the willingness of Iraqis to engage with Israel may be encouraging, it is also somewhat baffling. Although Jews had been living in Iraq for more than two thousand and five hundred years, the twentieth century saw the rise of extreme anti-Semitism in the country. Between 1948 and 1951, following the foundation of Israel, Iraq deported and revoked the citizenship of many of its 150,000 Jews, while also freezing their assets. The rise in violence towards Jews in Iraq had begun roughly a decade earlier, as Nazi propaganda and the anti-Semitic messages of Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, gained traction among the Iraqi public. Indeed, by 1941 Iraqi Jews already came under fire: In June of that year, the Jewish population of Baghdad fell prey to the Farhud – a pogrom that resulted in 179 deaths and more than 2,000 injuries.

And as time went on, Iraqi policies continued to put Jewish lives at risk. In 1969, nine Iraqi Jews were executed in Baghdad’s Liberation Square after being falsely accused of spying for foreign entities, and the government declared a national holiday on the execution day. Moreover, during that period, merely uttering the word “Israel” was sufficient grounds for detention.

In light of this history, the apparent open mindedness of Iraqi social media users’ toward Israel is a phenomenon worth exploring.

One factor that may have contributed to the change in Iraqi public opinion is a growing realization in Iraq that Israel is not the enemy. Although Iraq has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, interactions on Facebook indicate that Iraqis have come to believe that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the responsibility of the two feuding parties and that the conflict does not mandate an overall hawkish policy toward Israel. In addition, many Iraqi intellectuals have underscored the role that diverse ethnic components played in the history of Iraq, particularly the

role of the Iraqi Jews in building modern Iraq in the first half of the twentieth century, and the impact of the absence of this component on Iraqi identity. Moreover, it seems that many Iraqi social media users think that Iraq could benefit from Israeli technology.

However, it is not only rational calculations that have led to the apparent shift in Iraqis' perception of Jews and Israel, but also a sense of nostalgia, which is reflected in a number of books now available in Iraq whose subject matter is Iraqi Jews, and which conjure the sense of a mutual history. This year, translated versions of books such as *The Conflict of Identities in Iraq*, written by a group of Israeli researchers, and *The Pictures on The Wall* by Israeli-Iraqi author Tsionit Fattal were exhibited at the Baghdad International Book Fair. Such works have the power to overcome language barriers and establish a new line of communication between contemporary Iraqis, many of whom have never met a Jewish person, and Jews of Iraqi heritage.

The formation of dialogue between two populations whose nations are not engaged in diplomatic relations is highly interesting considering the fact that such intimate communication does not exist between Israelis and citizens of Egypt and Jordan, where a formal peace treaty exists at a state level yet there little interaction exists at the popular level.

However, despite these winds of change, serious challenges to the growing rapprochement remain due to Iran's interference in Iraq and its efforts to curry favor with Iraqi politicians, which has fueled and cultivated anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. It is noteworthy that this hostile policy is paralleled in Iran's calls for the annihilation of Israel as a vital goal. Opponents of the idea of establishing normalized relations with Israel also find its efforts to use social media suspect, arguing that Israel is exploiting social media to deceive the youth about the comforts of life in Tel Aviv and trick them into thinking that Israel is a modern democratic state.

Nonetheless, many of the Iraqis following "Israel in the Iraqi Dialect," are calling on the younger generation of Iraqi Jews to return to their "original" homeland and advocate for returning their property. Others are expressing their desire to see the opening of an actual Israeli embassy in Baghdad in order to reconnect with Iraq's former Jewish history. ❖

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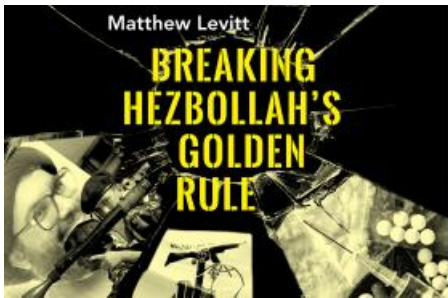
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