

Why Israel Is Cheering On Iraqi Kurds' Push for Independence

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A discussion on how the relationship has evolved to the point where Israel was the only regional government encouraging rather than decrying the KRG referendum.

Last week's independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan drew the ire of all its neighbors, including the central government in Baghdad. Yet a bit farther afield, the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was offering vocal support for the vote, a position that reflected decades of quiet relations between Israel and Irbil. In an email interview with World Politics Review, Bilal Wahab, a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute, discusses the history and diplomatic impact of Israeli-Kurdish ties and what Israel's support for Iraqi Kurds means for other Kurds in the region.

World Politics Review: How far back does official Israeli support for the Kurds go, and what has the nature of their relationship been over the past decade or so?

Bilal Wahab: Netanyahu first publicly voiced support for an independent Kurdish state in June 2014, as the threat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State was rising. He reiterated such sentiments recently as the residents of Iraqi Kurdistan were heading to the polls in a unilateral, internationally nonbinding referendum. The leaders of northern Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, were happy to receive the Israeli support, given the international opposition to the Kurdish move. Kurdish leaders, however, could not openly celebrate Israeli encouragement for fear of repercussions from their neighbors, who often link aspirations for Kurdish independence with Zionism.

Israel's secretive relationship with Iraqi Kurdish leaders peaked in the early years of Baath Party power in Iraq from 1968 to 1975. Mustafa Barzani, the father of the current president of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, was leading a rebellion against the Iraqi regime at the time. Israeli security and intelligence agents helped the Kurds with military training and humanitarian assistance—while also benefiting from learning more about Iraq from within. Although the relationship remained covert, it was beneficial to both sides.

The Kurds were engaged in asymmetrical warfare against Iraqi troops and profited from Israeli assistance. In addition to training, Israel provided the Kurds with channels to the West, particularly Washington. As for Israel, helping the Kurds in general, and their rebellion in particular, fit a foreign policy strategy of establishing peripheral alliances, which was the basis of Israel's relations with non-Arab countries and entities in the Middle East, such as Turkey and pre-revolution Iran. The Kurds also helped protect and assist the migration of the remaining Jews in Iraq to Israel.

Yet this support was not without consequences, and a backlash from the Baath Party soon followed. In 1966, Iraqi Defense Minister Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli accused the Kurdish nationalist movement of trying to establish "a second Israel" in the Middle East. Not coincidentally, Iraq's former prime minister and current vice president, Nouri al-Maliki, used the same phrase to delegitimize the recent Kurdish referendum.

In 2005, Massoud Barzani stated that (<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2005/6/independentstate187.htm>) "establishing relations between the Kurds and Israel is not a crime," adding that several other Arab countries have already established such ties. Jalal Talabani, the late Kurdish leader and former president of Iraq, once shook hands publicly with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak in Greece in 2008—not as the president of Iraq, which he was at the time, but in his capacity as head of a Kurdish political party, as he put it.

A more open Israeli-Kurdish relationship would be difficult unless Kurdistan achieves independent statehood. In the meantime, Israel's help for the Kurds is less focused on the Middle East and more on Washington, in particular convincing the United States to back the establishment of a Kurdish state in the region.

WPR: Since Israel recently mended ties with Turkey, why would it now take such a public stand on a move Turkey opposes, and what does that say about the complex political relationships forming in the Middle East? What does support of Iraqi Kurds mean for the Kurds of Turkey, Iran and Syria?

Wahab: Israel still lacks a clear and coherent policy toward the broader Kurdish ethnic group in the region. While Israel has maintained good relations with Iraqi Kurds, it considers the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, a terrorist group. This stems from historical PKK ties with Palestinian movements hostile to Israel, some anti-Zionism literature penned by PKK founder Abdulla Ocalan and consideration for maintaining good relations with Turkey.

Israel's position regarding Syrian Kurdish forces seems to be unresolved. The main Kurdish political movement in Syria, the Democratic Union Party, or PYD, is an offshoot of the PKK, whose leaders found refuge in Hafez al-Assad's Syria in the mid-1970s. On the other hand, the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, are U.S. allies and effective fighters against the Islamic State. The PYD also hopes to translate its military victories in Syria into a political foothold. To that end, it is looking for friends and allies, and Israel could see an opportunity in making a new friend in Syria.

The government in Turkey is increasingly concerned by Israeli support for Iraqi Kurdistan's independence. In turn, Israeli support for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria will likely oscillate with the ups and downs of Israeli-Kurdish relations, with the Kurds often on the losing end.

WPR: Israel's relations with Arab countries like Egypt and Jordan have mainly been confined to the government level, with little reach or appeal among the wider populations. Is this also the case in its relations

with the Kurds?

Wahab: Because of the political reasons mentioned, open and friendly relations between Israel and the KRG are not possible. However, in the event of an independent Kurdish state, open relations with Israel become more likely. First, there are around 200,000 Kurdish Jews in Israel, some of whom have visited Iraqi Kurdistan for historical, cultural and business reasons. Kurds and Jews share a history of trauma that binds their distinct identities. Iraqi Kurdish officials often hail the KRG's greater tolerance for religious minorities compared to their neighbors, including the central government in Baghdad. The KRG's Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs even appointed a Jewish representative for Jewish affairs in 2015. Many in Iraqi Kurdistan appreciate Israeli NGO activities and medical aid to children and victims of past chemical attacks under Saddam Hussein. Political pronouncements of support from Israel for the independence referendum also struck a positive tone with many Kurds, especially since all their neighbors and allies opposed it.

In a poll (http://www.meforum.org/3838/israel-kurds#_ftnref45) conducted in 2009, 71 percent of Iraqi Kurdish respondents voiced support for establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. Many in Israel, in turn, describe the Kurds as a "natural ally of Israel." That being said, the majority of Kurds are Muslims, many of whom also empathize with the Palestinians, not only on the grounds of shared religion but also statelessness.

If the Kurds in Iraq and Syria seek to build a state, they should note that security-focused relations between Israel and some Arab states have not adequately trickled down into economic, technological or people-to-people cooperation. Public resentment against Israel in the Arab world stems, in part, from society seeing few dividends from such a relationship. The most efficient lesson the Kurds should seek from Israel is how to build strong political and economic institutions that secure the population and ensure its prosperity. ❖

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