

The Other Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

In the safe haven of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Jews and Israel are remembered fondly, if increasingly vaguely.

"They call that lack of restraint?" the former Iraqi army officer exclaimed, while watching the BBC's coverage of the Al-Aqsa Intifada on satellite TV last winter. "If this demonstration were held in Baghdad, there'd be 10,000 bodies in the street," said the Arab from Baghdad who now teaches in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Almost 4 million people live in the safe haven of northern Iraq. A de facto autonomous region, it has been administered by the Kurds since 1991 when Saddam Hussein withdrew his administration in a failed bid to embargo the insurgent Kurdish regions of the country into submission. The vast majority are Kurds, but there are also many Turkmans and Assyrians. In addition, thousands of Sunni and Shi'ite Arabs have taken refuge in the Denmark-sized haven, which was created by the United Nations and is protected by U.S. guarantees. They have either fled from Saddam's rule or surreptitiously sought employment in the safe haven, where the economy is better. Others simply come here to shop.

Though the region is run by the Kurds, they don't always see eye to eye with each other, and even fought a civil war from 1994 to 1996. Since it ended the two main parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), have basically divided the turf between their rival parliaments, working out of the cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniyah respectively.

Unlike the rest of Iraq, residents of the Kurdish-controlled north are free to speak their minds, without fear of retribution. And while the media across the Middle East portray a monolithic anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian sentiment, in this corner of Iraq the truth is quite the opposite.

When they see TV pictures of Palestinians marching through the streets of Hebron, Jenin, and Gaza waving portraits of Saddam, most Kurds feel anything but sympathy. "If the Palestinians love Saddam so much, why don't they try living under him; we'd be glad to move to Israel," comments a professor at the University of Sulaymaniyah. Many Kurds express outright disgust for Palestinian support for Saddam, a man they accuse of genocide.

Memories of the 1988 Anfal campaign are fresh in the minds of residents of northern Iraq. In a ten-month orgy of violence toward the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam's forces murdered some 182,000 Kurdish men, women, and children. Saddam justified his brutal actions by accusing the Kurds of disloyalty during the war. His forces destroyed most of the region's towns and villages. The worst single atrocity took place on March 16, 1988, when the Iraqi air force dropped chemical weapons on Halabja, killing over 5,000 civilians.

The Iraqi Kurds have risen from the ashes of burned villages and destroyed communities. Much of their recovery is the result of the United Nations' so-called oil-for-food program, under which the U.N. funnels proceeds from Iraq's oil sales to humanitarian programs. New schools are apparent in the smallest villages, roads are being repaired and the major cities boast new sewers.

Though the program covers all of Iraq, Saddam appears to have invested more of his portion of the income in the military and new palaces than in reconstruction.

The north's economy also benefits from the fact that the Kurds use an older issue of Iraqi dinars than the rest of the country, avoiding the inflation caused by Saddam's unlimited printing of bank notes in Baghdad. The old notes are worth 100 times as much as Saddam's dinars.

As for the Kurds' distaste for Palestinians, a case in point came in 1999, when the Jordanian director of UNICEF in northern Iraq decided to replace Swedish early childhood education specialists with Palestinians from UNRWA. The local population protested and, according to sources in the non-governmental organization community, UNICEF had to reverse the decision because of the "psychological trauma" the presence of Palestinians caused among Kurds whose families had been subject to Saddam's chemical weapons.

But the Iraqi Kurds' sympathy toward Israel is not simply shaped by their antipathy toward Palestinians. While the Kurds now acknowledge that independence is not an option in their part of Iraq, let alone pan-Kurdish unity with their brethren in Turkey, Syria or Iran, they view Israel as a model of a minority establishing control over its own future. Indeed, in 1967, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, father of the current KDP leader Masud Barzani, visited Israel for consultations with Moshe Dayan, among other government officials. The Kurds hoped for and received some training and equipment, but the flirtation did not last. Instead, the Kurds turned to the Shah's Iran, which could provide them with material assistance more directly.

Today, there remains considerable admiration for Israel, but high-ranking politicians in both the KDP and Jalal Talabani's PUK stress that the neighborhood in which they find themselves -- sandwiched between Syria, Saddam's Iraq and Iran -- precludes any relations. As for their neighbor to the north, many Iraqi Kurds blame the development of Israel's relationship with Turkey for preventing real progress in Israeli-Kurdish relations. While Turkey is no friend of Saddam and cooperated in the establishment of the autonomous zone, the Kurdish national issue remains a highly sensitive one within Turkey, largely because of the campaign of terror waged inside that country by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) .

Iraqi Kurds do retain some connection with Israel via the airwaves and cyberspace. Iraqis generally distrust state television. There's a joke about a man who complains that the black-and-white TV he bought in a Baghdad market doesn't work. The merchant pastes a photo of Saddam Hussein on the screen, and exclaims, "See, it works fine. And now it's in color."

But north of the Kurds' line of control, the media situation isn't nearly as dire. Over 50 newspapers are available in Sulaymaniyah, ranging from the Baghdad official press to Kurdish and Assyrian local publications. In Iraq proper, only Baath Party papers are allowed. Those who can afford the \$400 satellite receiver can access the BBC and CNN. Still, many Iraqis rely on the Voice of Israel in Arabic for their news.

A personal experience makes the point. Last spring, I sat in a shared taxi near the dividing line of territory controlled by the PUK and KDP, as a PUK peshmurga (militia man) rummaged through the trunk in search of weapons. Another soldier gazed upward at the clouds rolling over the drought-stricken region. "Do you think it's going to rain?" he asked his comrade. "Yes," was the response, "Israel Radio said it would rain, so it will rain." An hour later I was caught in a downpour.

The Kurds also get Israeli TV via satellite. Hotels in the north program guest TVs to receive Israel's Channel 2, and some students in Sulaymaniyah tune in for the American films.

While the Internet is available only to Baath Party elite in the rest of Iraq, the north is fully connected. Sulaymaniyah and other cities boast numerous Internet cafes and home connections. In ministries, universities and cafes, agronomists surf the website of Ben-Gurion University for hints on desert agriculture, while newspaper columnists and policy-makers check Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center site for the latest developments in Middle East policy.

The personal Kurdish-Jewish/Israeli connection, however, is clearly fading. The older generation of Iraqi Kurds

fondly remember Jewish neighbors and friends, most of whom left in the late 1940s and 50s, but younger people don't have the same recollections. Residents of Halabja, Sulaymaniyah, Irbil, Akre and Zakho can still point out what used to be the Jewish quarters, but finding old synagogues and graveyards proves much more difficult. In Amadya, residents recently argued over where the Jewish graveyard had been -- even though a centuries-old Jewish community had departed just decades earlier.

And as Jews themselves become less familiar, the positive image of both Israel and Jews is, inevitably, on increasingly shaky grounds. The militant Saudi-financed Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan, which has grown up along the Iranian border, and its off-shoots tap into dissatisfaction with the arrogance and petty corruption of local administrations in both the PUK- and KDP-administered regions. The Islamists have tens of thousands of adherents today and won over 70 percent of the vote in Halabja in the last elections.

Saudi-funded mosques and schools preach virulently anti-Israel and anti-Semitic lessons. A popular myth circulated by Islamists in the Gulf and Egypt last year, that Pepsi is a secret Jewish acronym for "Purchase Every Pepsi and Support Israel," is making the rounds in Halabja. A university student from Tawella insisted that the Crusades had been fought between the Jews and the Muslims, as he had been taught by a teacher from the Wahabbi sect that holds sway in Saudi Arabia. There are university students who genuinely believe that Jews control the United Nations, and that Jews dominate the U.S. government.

But there are also residents of the safe haven who envision a region where Jews, Arabs, Kurds, Persians, and Turks can live in relative peace, and not only accept Israel, but also uphold the Jewish state's success as a model to be implemented in their own troubled corner of the Middle East. As one university professor commented, "What we want is to get rid of Saddam so that we can do what the Jews did in Israel. We have a diaspora. People will work furiously hard. All we need is security."

And while Kurds may have a special affinity for Israel, the Iraqis' wider disgust with Saddam may make the feeling even more general. A Kurdish pharmacist from Baghdad, visiting friends in the safe haven, told how a mullah who had come to fill a prescription had commented that he would "welcome an Israeli flag over Baghdad so long as they threw out Saddam and then left us to our business. We couldn't care less about Arab nationalism," the mullah told the pharmacist. "We're not crazy like Syria. We just want to rebuild our country." ❖

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