



PERSPECTIVES

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Has Israel's Support for Kurdistan's Independence Helped or Harmed the Kurds?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel's public support for the Kurdish referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's independence roused many demons from their slumber. The question to be asked is whether the damage wrought by this support did not exceed its benefit.

Since the expansion of ISIS in the summer of 2014, Israeli leaders have increasingly proclaimed the Kurds' right to an independent state in Iraqi Kurdistan. Those leaders have included former president Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Foreign Minister (now Defense Minister) Avigdor Lieberman.

These declarations of support surged all the more when the Kurds announced their decision to hold a referendum on independence, which eventually took place on September 25, 2017. On that day, in a symbolic expression of the relationship between Israel and Kurdistan, a few Israeli flags were raised beside Kurdistani flags. Israel was the only country – and was prominently presented as such – to support Kurdish independence.

Israel's public stance has provided huge ammunition to those who want to delegitimize and demonize the Kurdish independence movement and portray the Kurds as traitors, Masoud Barzani as a Zionist puppet, the referendum as the declaration of a new Israel, and Israel's support as an attempt to establish "Greater Israel." Israel's stance also offered further justification to the lightning alliance forged by Iraq, Turkey, and Iran to thwart any progress towards Kurdish independence.

The threatening language adopted by the leaders of those countries left no doubt about their intentions. As Nouri al-Maliki, vice president of Iraq, averred a few days before the referendum, "We will not allow the establishment of the second Israel in Iraq." It was a reiteration of the words of a previous Iraqi leader who warned, as far back as the 1960s, when Israel was militarily assisting the Kurds' struggles against the central regime in Baghdad, against the creation of a second Israel in Iraq.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who misses no opportunity to make anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli assertions, pounced eagerly on the Israeli declarations. He accused the Mossad of involvement in the referendum and called on the Kurdistan leadership to awaken from the dream of an independent state supported solely by Israel. Maps were distributed in Turkey showing "Greater Israel" as an entity with borders extending from the coast of Egypt to the Persian Gulf in consolidation with "Greater Kurdistan." Turkish nationalists who demonstrated against the referendum outside the Israeli embassy warned against "the second Israel" and claimed they had been warning of this danger for thirty years.

At a summit meeting with Erdoğan aimed at torpedoing the Kurdish move, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterated the mantra by stating, "America and Israel benefit from the referendum ... and are trying to establish a new Israel in the region." A short time after Iraqi forces wrested Kirkuk from the Kurds on October 16, Iranian chief of staff Muhammad Gulpaygani declared that "the United States and Israel have plotted to establish a second Israel in Kurdistan ... but the orders of the Supreme Leader and the sacrifice of General Soleimani have stopped these intrigues in their tracks and Kirkuk has been liberated without shedding a single drop of blood." The Arab media chimed in too, depicting Kurdistan as "the second Israel," "the Iraqi Israel," or "Israel's twin."

How have the Kurds dealt with these charges? Their leaders have maintained a deafening silence that reflects great confusion. President Barzani, who was one of the architects of the clandestine ties with Israel, found himself in a trap: on the one hand, he hoped Israel's stance would lead to US and Western support; but on the other, he feared the harmful effects of public Israeli support among the enemies of the Kurds. Hence the effort to rid himself of guilt by association with the Israeli avowals of support.

Kurdish intellectuals, however, have tried to fight back. Some responded positively to Israel's support; others saw it as gravely damaging while at the same time settling scores with the Arab and Muslim world for its hostility towards the Kurds' aim of independence. All these intellectuals adopted an apologetic and defensive tone. One wrote that to condemn the Kurds as "a second Israel" is to disdain the Kurdish national movement and ignore the

Kurds' authentic struggle, which has lasted one hundred years. Another asserted that the Kurds had been promised a state long before Israel's establishment and that the Kurdish dream of independence was not Israel's handiwork.

Almost all the Kurdish writers sought to expose the hypocrisy inherent in the anti-Kurdish positions. It was claimed, for example, that the entire Arab world as well as Iran does business with Israel. The Israeli flag, it was said, is flown in some of these countries, yet they harassed a few Kurdish youths and hotheads who hoisted Israeli flags during the referendum.

It was likewise claimed that leaders of the Arab states maintain covert ties with Israel while running to the media to denounce it. Turkey in particular outdid itself on this score: it recognized Israel as early as 1949 and even developed extensive strategic relations with it, but expressed shock over any ties between the Kurds and Israel.

Another line of argument concerned the oil Israel buys from the Kurds, who retort that it was the Arab states and Iran that first sold oil to Israel. The charge of a double standard was also leveled at the Arab world's support for the struggle for a Palestinian state while staunchly opposing a Kurdish state.

Bolder writers have stressed that there is no shame in having ties with Israel, one of the most powerful states in the region and the only one to express support for the Kurdish issue while the Arab and Muslim world ignored it completely.

Others, however, strongly oppose these ties, arguing that the identification of the Kurds with Israel will only harm their relations with the Arab and Muslim world. One Kurdish spokesman went so far as to say, "If a Kurdish state must be established with Israeli help then it is preferable that it not be established at all." Some commentators also cast doubt on Israel's motives, saying it supports the Kurdish issue with the cynical aim of creating a schism in the Arab and Muslim world.

As for Israel's considerations, they stem from a combination of historical, strategic, humanitarian, and even moral factors that cannot be detailed here. One should only mention the clandestine ties Israel maintained with the Kurds in Iraq from 1965 to 1975, and, in this context, the great change that occurred in Israel's strategic goals. In those years, the goal was to break out of regional isolation and, in line with David Ben-Gurion's periphery doctrine, forge an alliance with an ethnocratic entity. Another main objective was to weaken Iraq and prevent it from possibly joining a war against Israel. Today, the main goals are to fight radical Islamic elements such as ISIS and, above all, to counteract Iran and its expansion towards Syria.

What, then, has Israel's current support for the Kurds given them, and has it answered their expectations?

Israel's support played a significant role in the stages before the referendum and during the event itself, raising the Kurds' morale by helping them feel they were not alone in their just struggle. However, the Kurds clearly had unrealistic expectations of Israel – particularly their hopes that Jerusalem would persuade the US administration to support the principle of Kurdish independence, and that Israeli military forces would come to the Kurds' aid if there was a need for it. In both cases they suffered bitter disappointment.

Israel did not succeed in altering Washington's position on the referendum. The US not only did not support the referendum but sided with the Baghdad government in the conflict between Kurdistan and Iraq. The US abandoned the Kurds to their fate, even though they are seen as loyal US allies.

When, in the aftermath of the referendum, military clashes erupted between Baghdad and Irbil, many Kurds expected – with a patent lack of realism – that Israel would dispatch aircraft or ground forces to help rebuff the Iraqi attacks, even though Israel has no physical access to the Kurdish enclave. This was a reprise of the severe disappointment the Kurds suffered in 1975, when the Americans abandoned them and Israel had to stop its assistance because of the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran and the loss of physical access via Iran.

For the second time in four decades, Kurdish hopes have been shattered. Not only has Israeli support seriously damaged the Kurds' image in the Arab and Muslim world, but it has provided a pretext for an unholy anti-Kurdish alliance of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Nevertheless, many Kurds continue to appreciate the fact that Israel was the only one to take their side in their struggle.

In the end, the Kurdish enclave's capitulation to the surrounding countries ensured that a "new Israel" will not arise anytime soon. Yet the Kurds' considerable achievements over the past twenty years cannot easily be erased, and the fact that 92% of those voting in the referendum favored independence will continue to inspire the Kurds' aspirations for national self-determination.

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