

Published on: March 18, 2016

MIDDLE EAST

Israel and the Kurds: Love by Proxy

OFRA BENGIO

The asymmetrical but rewarding relationship between two Middle East minority nations.

Over the past few years, Israeli politicians—from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to President Shimon Peres to Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman—have been publicly advocating the establishment of a Kurdish state. Most recent to weigh in is Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, who called this past January for the formation of an independent Kurdistan and urged enhanced policy cooperation between Israel and the Kurds.

Clearly, the upheavals in the region and the realization that the Kurds are the most effective military power against the onslaught of the Islamic State triggered these calls. But Israelis have long been interested in the Kurds as junior partners in Ben-Gurion's hallowed peripheral strategy, which considered any competitor or adversary of the Arabs an objective ally of the Jewish state, whether sub-state groups like the Kurds or nations such as Turkey, Iran (in earlier times and perhaps again in the future), and Ethiopia. But even beyond this general motive lies layers of relationships between the Jewish and Kurdish people that go back many centuries. To understand how the future may unfold, grasping at least the recent past must serve as prelude.¹

The ties between Israel and the Kurds are complex and shrouded in mystery. Relations are always more complex when they are asymmetrical, as in this case, where they are between a state and non-state actors. Note that we must say actors, plural, because Israel has to deal separately with four Kurdish players in four countries that host Kurdish communities and political organizations: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Complicating the picture still further is the fact that each of the four groups has a different political agenda, a different approach toward Israel, and different geostrategic calculations within its respective state (or what's left of two of them) and in the region as a whole. Moreover, Israel and the Kurds do not have common borders, nor do they always have common enemies that can bring them together. Lastly, while Israeli politicians appear eager to go public with their desire for better relations, Kurdish politicians for the most part seek low-keyed relations in the shadows.

Historically, the Israeli government's interlocutors have been the Kurds of Iraq, with whom it began secret relations in the mid-1960s that have continued intermittently ever since. For most of the part these ties were kept secret, but much has been

leaked and published about the critical period of 1965–75. The relations of that period have left scars on both sides.

Israel was frustrated by the fact that the Kurdish guerrillas did not engage the Iraqi army during the October 1973 (Yom Kippur) war. It was the Kurds' turn to be annoyed in 1975, when Israel stopped its aid after the Algiers Agreement. The two parties have had their own convincing explanations. The Kurds maintained that they feared being marked as traitors for helping Israel, and the Israelis explained that they could not continue their support due to the objections of the Iranian government of the day and the U.S. government. Despite this mutual disillusionment, secret relations were revived after the 1991 Gulf War and boosted after the 2003 Iraq War, reaching a peak in the past few years when, as a result of the region's upheavals, both sides acknowledged their growing mutual need.

The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) needs Israel at this critical time for several reasons. Kurdish leaders believe that Israel can be their best lobby in the West for the project of a Kurdish state. Proof came from President Peres who, during his June 2014 meeting with President Barack Obama, raised the idea of Kurdish independence. Strong support from Jewish and Israeli opinion leaders are also of great importance. However, as the Kurdish leadership views it, lobbying behind the scenes was one thing and publicizing it was another.

The Kurds' second important goal was to acquire weapons and training, which Israel has reportedly been providing the KRG since even before its military encounters with the Islamic State. On the level of economic strategy, Israel granted critical support to the KRG by buying Kurdish oil in 2015, when no other country was willing to do so because of Baghdad's threat to sue. KRG Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami even admitted to the arrangement, saying that to avoid detection Kurdish oil was often funneled through Israel. Iraq's Oil Minister, Husayn Shahrastani, repeatedly inquired as to the nature of the KRG's dealings with Israel and the Mossad, to which KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said he wanted to reply: "Are you the Minister of Oil or of Intelligence?"

As for Israel, its interest in the Kurds stems from two sources. The first is the persistent geopolitical consideration, noted in passing above, of "peripheral alliances." The other is the longstanding affinity between two small nations that failed to achieve regional legitimacy for a very long time. In addition, the very misnamed Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have recently added other important considerations.

First, the tectonic changes that have taken place in Iraq and Syria, and Kurdish feats on the battleground, have proven that the Kurds are a formidable barrier against dangerous anti-Israeli forces emanating from both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist radicals. The Kurds' prowess has complicated U.S. policy, as U.S. support for Syrian Kurds has put it at sixes and sevens with Turkey, a NATO ally. Israel, at least, does not suffer from this problem; indeed, better relations with the Kurds serves as leverage in its relations with Turkey, which are mixed at best.

The second consideration is the intelligence dossier. In the past, Israel has used Iraqi Kurdistan as a base from which to obtain intelligence on Iraq. After the Islamic

Republic came to power in Iran in 1979, Iraqi Kurdistan also served as a base for Israeli intelligence collection on the Islamic regime. In January 2012 the French newspaper *Le Figaro* claimed that Israeli intelligence agents were recruiting and training Iranian dissidents in clandestine bases located in Iraq's Kurdish region. A year later *The Washington Post* disclosed that Turkey had revealed to Iranian intelligence a network of Israeli spies working in Iran, including ten people believed to be Kurds who reportedly met with Mossad members in Turkey. This precarious relationship between Israel and Turkey—along with the risks and costs to both sides—persists today.

While the upheavals in the region have increased the mutual interests between Israel and the Kurds, they have not lessened the Kurds' desire to keep relations behind the scenes as much as possible. Being a state in embryo surrounded by Arab and Muslim countries makes the KRG very cautious about publicizing anything that has to do with Israel. This is especially true at this critical time, when it is looking for regional support for its project of establishing a Kurdish state, or short of that trying to preempt negative reactions to it. The KRG is especially wary of Iran, which is opposed to the establishment of a Kurdish state. Accordingly, it is anxious not to be seen as allied with Israel, which would certainly antagonize Tehran.

In addition, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a historical ally of Israel and the major power on the ground nowadays, has to take into consideration the position of its partners in the KRG, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) or Gorran, which are allied with Iran and are therefore opposed to relations with Israel. At the same time the KRG seeks to buy the goodwill of Sunni Arab countries that used to blame the Kurds for attempting to establish a "second Israel." Against the background of Sunni-Shi'a conflicts in the region, these states have become more amenable to the idea of a Sunni Kurdish entity. KRG President Mas'ud Barzani has said that regional attitudes have shifted markedly of late: "It has been a dramatic change. Countries that had long been against the move were being swayed by the claim that sovereignty within the current borders of the Kurdish regional government could instead bring clarity." He further emphasized that "the existing culture in Iraq is not one of co-existence." Interestingly, however, the Palestinians—who could have been the greatest supporters of Kurdish independence since they fight for their own—have come out loudly against the Kurds. PLO Secretary General Saeb Arekat recently declared: "Kurdish independence would be a poisoned sword against the Arabs."

In addition to its political reasons not to identify itself with Israel, the KRG has weighty economic ones, especially in this period of severe economic crisis. The KRG's economic partners are Arab and Muslim countries whose support dwarfs anything Israel can offer. However, in spite of the bad blood between Ankara and Jerusalem, there is a possibility of triangular relations with Turkey and Israel. As surprising as it might seem, the KRG is interested in the normalization of relations between the two, among other reasons to secure the shipment of Kurdish oil to Israel via Turkey.

How does the KRG intend to solve these dilemmas? One way is to ignore Israeli statements of support altogether. While the Kurdish rank and file usually greet such statements enthusiastically, they are met with dead silence from politicians. This

stance helps Kurdish politicians: On the one hand they benefit from strong Israeli support for their cause, and on the other they keep enough distance to protect themselves from negative reactions from their allies. Interestingly, just three days after Shaked's announcement President Barzani emphasized the Kurds' drive for independence, noting that the international community had started to accept that Iraq and Syria would never again be unified.

To compensate for the distance it keeps from Israel, however, the KRG sends positive messages *vis-à-vis* the Jews and Jewish culture. Thus, instead of opening an Israeli representation office in the normal diplomatic manner, in October 2015 the KRG announced the opening of a Jewish representation office at the Ministry of Endowments (*awqaf*) and Religious Affairs. This was a symbolical move since there are few if any Jews in Kurdistan. Similarly, the KRG has invited Israeli rabbis to visit Kurdistan and meet officials there. From time to time it also calls on Jews to return to Kurdistan, while Israeli Jews of Kurdish origin are welcomed in the KRG. This past February, Sherzad Omar Mamsani, the Jewish representative at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, made a well-publicized visit to Israel, where he met with Knesset members and other Israeli officials. Was it a trial balloon, a sign that the KRG has overcome its fear of open relations? Time will tell.

Whatever the case, its position allows the KRG to express genuine sympathy for Jews; to get support from American Jews who have been lobbying for the Kurds in the corridors of power for a long time; to appear as a protector of minorities; and to disguise its real political and strategic ties with Israel. At the same time, this pro-Jewish attitude helps shield the KRG from its detractors since none of them, not even Iran, wishes to appear anti-Semitic by criticizing the Kurds on these grounds.

At the same time, the KRG seeks to stop anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli propaganda. For example, in 2009, when several Muslim leaders in the Kurdistan region took to the pulpit to denounce Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip and call for the destruction of the Israeli state and the death of the Jews, the KRG banned these imams from preaching.

Unlike with the KRG, Israeli relations with the Kurdish political organizations of the other states were either negative or nonexistent until recently. Relations with the Turkish Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), for example, were tense because it had strong relations with Israel's enemies—the Syrian regime and the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO)—during the 1980s and 1990s, while Israel had strong ties with Turkey. This state of affairs began to change somewhat following the deterioration of relations between Jerusalem and Ankara as a result of the Mavi Marmara affair in 2010 and the concurrent peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government. Accordingly, Israel and the PKK put out feelers about a possible rapprochement; however, nothing concrete has materialized.

As for the Kurds of Syria, their role as a main bulwark against the Islamic State following the upheavals in that country was not lost on Israel. The main organizations there are the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD), which is an offshoot of the PKK, and the Yekeniye Parastina Gel (YPG) and the Yekeniye Parastina Jin (YPJ), which are respectively the male and female guerilla fighters on the ground. Here, too, the two parties have recently started to put out feelers to explore the

possibility of establishing ties. The Kurds have been interested in acquiring weapons, while Israel has sent humanitarian aid to and reportedly gathered intelligence from the Kurds.

Israel has been very cautious because it needs to tread a fine line between its relations with the KRG and those with its rivals, the PKK and PYD. In addition, Jerusalem had to take into account the fact that the PYD is still linked to the Assad regime; that it had developed strong ties with Russia while the United States was reluctant to grant it outright support; and that Turkey had labeled it a terrorist organization like the PKK. However, Israel's stance may change in response to the Syrian Kurds' March 17 declaration that they intend to create a federal region across the border from Turkey. The Kurds' move may encourage Israel to develop more significant ties with this emerging entity.

On the face of it, relations with the Iranian Kurdish organizations should not have posed any dilemma for Israel, since Iran has vowed to eliminate it and has been leading a proxy war against it on several fronts. The difficulty, however, lies in the fragmentation of the Iranian Kurdish parties. Four major parties compete with each other: the two oldest parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which itself has two branches, and Komala; Parti Azadi Kurdistan (PAK), which was established in 1991; and a younger one called Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (PJAK), which was established in 2004 and is considered an offshoot of the PKK. These parties, which have their bases in the KRG, do not have direct ties with Kurds in Iran, where only clandestine action is possible. Their basis of support internally is very weak.

On the one hand, the KRG periodically puts the brakes on the activities of these parties because it does not want to antagonize Iran. On the other, the United States initiated the talks with Iran that led to what a Kurdish observer referred to as *carte blanche* for the Iranian regime "to undertake strict oppressive measures against Kurdish activists, to an extent that even independent social campaigners are not tolerated." This narrows further Israel's small margin for engagement with the Kurdish parties of Iran. It maintained certain ties with PJAK, but they were abruptly cut in 2013, possibly at the behest of the United States, which was eager to make a deal with Iran. Even though Israel and the Iranian Kurdish organizations may have a common interest in weakening the Islamic regime, the latter's growing power since the nuclear deal have frustrated such a partnership. All of these developments have left the KRG as Israel's main partner among the Kurds.

To sum up, there are many kinds of asymmetries in contemporary Kurdish-Israeli relations, one of which is that Israel cannot expect Kurds to reciprocate Israeli friendship in public. The KRG believes the acknowledgement of open relations with Israel would jeopardize the eventual establishment of a Kurdish state. The KRG and for that matter Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan will be happy to receive whatever support the Jewish state can offer, but on condition that it does not carry any trademark reading "made in Israel."

The late Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani used to say that the very fact that the Kurds exist as a nation on the ground helps to ease the pressure on Israel. This is indeed the main benefit for Israel from a pro-Kurdish stance, and in the choice

between the Islamic State and a Kurdish state, Israel's interest certainly lie with the latter. As the Middle East faces an unpredictable future, this precarious but mutually rewarding relationship will continue.

¹For a historical background see Eric Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan* (Wayne State University Press, 1993); Mordechai Zaken, *Jewish Subjects and Their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival* (Brill, 2007); Ora Shwartz-Be'eri, *The Jews of Kurdistan: Daily Life, Customs, Arts and Crafts* (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2000). For a very interesting memoir see Ariel Sabar, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for his Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq* (Algonquin Books, 2008).

is a senior research associate at the Moshe Dayan Center. She is author of *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* and editor of *The Kurds: Nation-building in a Fragmented Homeland*.

This is your free article this month.