

Middle East News

Analysis • Are the Kurds Still Israel's 'Natural Ally'?

The fact that Israel and the Kurds have had common enemies – Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria – have led to shared strategic interests and on-and-off covert relations since the mid-1960s. But the big question today is whether, in the wake of the tectonic shifts of the last two years, this could trigger an open alignment between them

[Ofra Bengio](#)[Follow](#)

05:04 PM • November 20 2025 IST



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The tectonic changes in the Middle East in the aftermath of the October 7 war raised expectations for an alignment between Israel and the Kurds. These expectations were fueled by Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar's declaration on November 10, 2024, that the Kurds are Israel's "natural ally" and that ties with them should therefore be strengthened. He further emphasized: "This has both political and security aspects."

Sa'ar's declaration was like music to the ears of many Kurds – and some Israelis as well – but the political reality has proved quite different, due to the complexity of the situation.

To unravel this complexity, it's necessary to differentiate between people-to-people versus official relations; between relations with the Kurds of Iraq and those of other countries; and between open and covert relations.

A comparison between Jews and Kurds shows many similarities. Both are relatively small nations (15 million Jews and 35 million Kurds), traumatized by persecutions and wars. Both have been engaged in life-and-death struggles to preserve their unique identities, and both have been delegitimized and denied the right to a state of their own.

In addition, both are ethnically distinct from neighboring Arabs, Persians, and Turks, who represent the majority populations in the Middle East.

Historically, the two nations, Jews and Kurds, have never posed a threat to each other. Indeed, as paradoxical as it might appear given the Kurds are Muslims, their main enemies have been their Muslim brethren – Arabs, Turks and Persians. These are also Israel's enemies, which further strengthened the affinity between the two non-Arab nations.

These similarities formed the basis for people-to-people ties, including Jewish pro-Kurdish lobbies, cultural activities and joint Kurdish-Israeli demonstrations in the diaspora.

At the political level, at certain times there were shared strategic interests based on the fact that Israel and the Kurds have had common enemies. The most glaring example is Iraq, which posed a threat to both. Hence the on-and-off covert relations that existed between them since the mid-1960s.

Today, it's possible to say that all four states – Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria – pose a threat to both the Kurds and Israel. But the big question is whether this could form the basis for an open alignment between the two.

Problems and challenges

One main challenge is the asymmetry between a state and non-state entities. Such asymmetry makes

relations very problematic since it doesn't enable partnership on an equal footing.

Another challenge is that Israel, as a state, has had to face four Kurdish entities that were sometimes rivals, forcing it to align with one partner at the expense of another.

For example, the rivalry between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq –Israel's historical partner – and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey tipped the balance a priori toward the Kurds of Iraq.

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters in the Qandil mountains, northern Iraq, last month, after announcing the withdrawal of all its forces from Turkey. The PKK formally renounced its armed struggle against Turkey in May, ending four decades of conflict that claimed some 50,000 lives.

Credit: Shwan Mohamm / AFP

Another stumbling block was that Israel, historically isolated in the Middle East, sought to form alliances with any state in the region willing to do so. The two states that were part of its "[Peripheral Alliance](#)" at the time (Israel's 1950s–1970s strategy of aligning with non-Arab states to offset hostility from Arab neighbors) were Iran and Turkey. This made ties with the Kurdish political leaderships in those countries almost impossible.

Another barrier is the lack of common borders, which hinders direct and open communication and makes any significant Israeli support a far-fetched possibility.

Due to all these challenges, one can notice another asymmetry: While Israeli politicians and officials speak openly about the Kurds and Kurdistan, their Kurdish counterparts are very reluctant to do so regarding Israel.

On the Israeli side, the most glaring example was Prime Minister Netanyahu's [declaration of support](#) for Kurdish independence in Iraq a few days before the

referendum on September 25, 2017 – a vote that passed with over 90 percent support but was later rejected by Iraq's federal government.

Kurdish leaders, on the other hand, keep silent regarding Israel – and for understandable reasons. Any mention of Israel may tarnish their image and delegitimize their cause in the eyes of their enemies. One such example is the trope in Arab media likening Kurdistan to "Yahudistan," a term that appears as early as the 1963 book on the Kurds of Syria by Muhammad Talab Hilal, a Syrian security official and politician.

The Kurds are destined to remain forever in the vicinity of the nation-states in which they live, and cannot afford antagonizing them for the sake of relations with distant Israel.

Kurdish leaders also know full well that the Kurds are destined to remain forever in the vicinity of the nation-states in which they live, and therefore cannot afford antagonizing them for the sake of relations with distant Israel.

Yet, more often than not, expectations for such ties have been high on both sides. On the Kurdish side, Israeli declarations raised expectations that Israel would come to their support in times of crisis and war. On the Israeli side, there were also expectations that Kurdish leaders would support Israel in its own wars. Both sides' expectations were unrealistic.

Rojava as a case study

Israel's stance on the Kurdish entity in Syria, known as Rojava, may serve as a case study for analyzing the two parties' relations. Because of its association with the PKK, Israel initially kept its distance from this entity, which was established in 2011.

U.S. troops and Syrian Democratic Forces fighters patrol Al-Darbasiyah in Rojava, northeastern Syria, in 2018. The Kurdish-led SDF, backed by the U.S. against Islamic State militias, agreed in March to integrate into Syria's new caretaker government. Credit: Delil Souleiman / AFP

However, the war against Hamas in Gaza, the collapse of Assad's regime and the rapidly changing strategic map of the region made a certain degree of rapprochement possible. Israel feared both the Turkish creeping invasion of Syria as well as the jihadist-populated new Syrian regime.

For their part, the Kurds felt squeezed between their main enemy, Turkey, in the north and the new regime in Damascus. Thus, unlike other Kurdish leaders, General Mazloum Abdi, who heads the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in northeastern Syria, openly welcomed possible Israeli support, saying: If Israel "can prevent attacks against us and stop the killing of our people, we welcome that and appreciate it."

Mazloum Abdi in an interview with the Associated Press in Syria, last month. Credit: Hogir Al Abdo/AP

Abdi's declaration proved that he had overcome the taboo of not speaking about the 'elephant in the room,' Israel. It also demonstrated his political wisdom in playing the Israeli card against both Turkey and the Syrian regime. He certainly appreciated the deterrent power of Sa'ar's declaration.

However, so far, nothing tangible has emerged from these declarations, as both parties have settled for trying to reach accommodations with the post-Assad regime.

Kurdish-Israeli relations: Where to?

For all the difficulties and challenges, there are several areas where the two nations can maintain, if not strengthen, relations.

A Kurdish man waves Israeli and Kurdish flags during a rally before the Kurdish independence referendum in Erbil, Iraq in 2017. Shortly after, the Iraqi government criminalized waving the Israeli flag in public Credit: AZAD LASHKARI/REUTERS

First, cultural ties may be strengthened despite the barriers presented by borders. Second, the diaspora may provide a platform for the strongest cooperation between Kurds and Jews. Kurdish intellectuals and activists are not shackled by the regimes back home, and both Jews and Kurds abroad face antisemitism and Kurdophobia, respectively.

Third, on the diplomatic level, Israel could continue lobbying for the Kurdish cause in international forums. Covert relations must also be part of the repertoire as long as there is no independent Kurdish state. Lastly, the very fact that Israel exists may grant strategic depth to the Kurds – and vice versa.

Prof. Ofra Bengio is a Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University and Head of Kurdish Studies Program at the Moshe Dayan Center. She is the author of four books on the Kurds and Kurdistan, two of which have been translated into Kurdish

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