

KURDISTAN AND ISRAEL - A SILENT FRIENDSHIP

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This article aims to show and explain the Israeli-Kurdish relations within modern history and the ongoing political and military process in the Middle East. The first part of this article is dedicated to show the efficiency of Kurdish Peshmerga forces. After this first part, it will go deep in what is the main topic, Israeli-Kurdish relations and it will show which the main links are and how they develop their relations. It will conclude explaining the changes in the geopolitical setting, the step that Kurds are taking, how this can be connected with the Jewish State and which impact could result.

Keywords: Kurdistan, Israel, foreign politics, Middle East, international relations, Kurdish statehood, peshmerga

After the “Arab Spring” started in April 2011, what was already understandable became absolutely unclear and everything that had a sense seems now falling apart. After the rise of ISIS, the region is sprinkled with failed states, which can be considered (from my point of view) collapsed: Syria and Iraq are the main and those that have suffered the most the Islamic State; partly also Lebanon, and of course after this year we can also put in the list Yemen and Libya. If we want to continue to think of following this “black path”, we could even consider the recent failed *coupe d'état* in Turkey as an indication of what is in store for that former Middle-Eastern powerhouse [1].

Terrorist and separatist organizations are the main characters which are playing this game on the ground in Syria and Iraq. On the count of terroristic groups we can list: Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas (even if some international bodies have recognized Hamas as political party, its matrix is notoriously a terroristic one). On one side they're challenging the traditional order and the balance of these nation-states established after World War I by the victorious powers. On the other side we have on the top of our qualification the Kurds, mainly those of Iraq and Syria, which are actively undermining the region and controlling large strips of territory.

In this chaotic scenario two countries play a different role: on one side, with the much longer-standing regional democracy, Israel, and on the other side the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a constitutional monarchy that has always been opened and friendly in achieving allies and diplomatic connections with Western world.

But Israel and Iraqi Kurds will be the topics I'll put my focus on, and why just them? The answer is simple: because they're more connected with each other than many people think and because they are the two biggest minorities in the Middle East.

THE IDEAL KURDISH WARRIOR

The Peshmerga (literally “one who faces the death”) originally are the soldiers of Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish military organization, involved from a strictly tribal pseudo-military border guard to a well-trained, disciplined guerrilla force. Led by individuals such as Shaykh Mahmoud Barzanji of Sulaymaniya, Shaykh Said of Palu, and Mulla Mustafa Barzani of Barzan, the cause of the common Kurd in battle was changed from tribal survival to autonomy or independence for Kurdistan [2].

The ideal of the warrior has been engrained in Kurdish culture since long before the 20th century, according to Mehrdad Izady, the ancient Babylonians (circa 650 BC) labeled the inhabitants of the Kurdish mountains Qutil, a word possibly derived from the Semetic Akkadim word “qard” and the Indo-European Persian word “gurd”, both of which can be defined as hero or warrior [2, p. 30].

In 1891, Ottoman Sultan Abd al Hamid II (1876-1909) created the Hamidiya Cavalry, merging Turkish leadership with Kurdish tribal fighters. This force had two primary purposes: to defend the Cossack Region from a possible Russian threat and secondly, to reduce the potential of Kurdish-Armenian cooperation [2, p. 33].

Historically the Ottomans in moments of difficulties have always relied on Kurdish fighter forces, due to the fact that they were and are one of the best military group in the region, in fact during World War I, they once again relied on the Kurds

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capacities, with their newly-acquired military experience, to supplement the Turkish army. The end of World War I brought forth a new era for an organized Kurdish military, due to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916, Kurdistan was no longer the unofficial buffer between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, but a region divided between several new nations (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Persia) [2, p. 33].

With a majority of Kurds split between British-controlled Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) and the recently dismantled nation of Turkey (Northern Kurdistan) it became more difficult to create a pan-Kurdish army. Despite their physical division, the growing number of Kurdish intelligentsia attempted to take advantage of the regional disarray and lobby for a Kurdish nation-state. Thoughts of autonomy and a possible Kurdish military would soon be eliminated however, neither the British nor the growing Kemalist Turkish government wished to see an independent Kurdistan, especially one able to defend itself [2, p. 35].

This is why maybe it is always been rejected and neglected this case, maybe because they've proved every time that they are strong even alone and they don't need a huge help from other countries, so basically they will not be dependent by anybody (Lortz M) [2, p. 37].

ISRAEL IS THE MIDDLE EASTERN MODEL FOR THE KURDS

Now that two of the four states where the region of Kurdistan is located, are basically fragmented, the Peshmerga forces are increasing their power. They have now the consciousness that this is the moment for creating a Kurdish state and they see in Israel the example of their motivation for keep on going with this dream. Colonel Mawlud, a Peshmerga commander, described what the Peshmerga are facing and which is the idea they have in mind about the Jewish state. 'We are fighting ISIS for the whole world. We had mortars from ISIS falling in Mosul last weeks' [2, p. 38].

It makes two years that they are risking their lives into the war against the extremists, thanks to this now Kurds are receiving more inter-sectional support, for example the US signed an agreement in June/July to provide direct military support to the Peshmerga and the Canadian defense minister arrived on the 3rd of July for meeting with them and for showing support for the war effort. "The situation is better now in terms of weapons [support], but it is not enough," says Col. Mawlud. "We are fighting ISIS for the whole world". For men

like Mawlud the war on ISIS was unexpected, but was also part of a history of suffering at the hands of outside enemies [3].

From 2001 there were small groups of extremists that were going around the country preaching the come of the caliphate, but nobody was giving too much attention to them (not the domestic institutions and not even the US army that was present on the ground at that time). "Saddam and ISIS are almost the same, they invaded our land and buried our people alive and harmed them, and ISIS does the same. They destroyed our villages and took our properties," recalls Mawlud [3].

The proud of what they have done through the history is visible in every village, they have murals and statues commemorating Kurds who fell in the conflicts against ISIS and before, so it is something inside their history and culture to fight for their lives, as it happened in Jewish history. In fact the wars against ISIS and Saddam Hussein united Kurds with Israel's struggles against similar enemies [3]. "Israel is a free country, optimistic and very positive about themselves and I am sure it can do a lot to combat terrorism, because Israel is the main anti-terrorist country. They call for peace, stable and secure life. We see it as a huge country and important for us," says the colonel. It is quite a strong assertion that this military figure said during his interview, but the fact is that the majority of Kurds think in the same way of how he does [3].

He continued and recalled the old days when many Jews lived in Kurdistan; "(...) and it's not recent relations, we have a blood relation. We have a common cause and share many qualities. We face the same problems. Others did many things to them (as it is happened to us) but, thanks for God that Israel is a strong country and it has defeated its enemies, hopefully as we are doing" [3].

There are very close similarities between them, whether it is the struggle against terrorism or the support for having women serving alongside men in the armed forces. The fact of having a Kurdish state will mean that this nation would also have excellent relations with Israel, another moderate, non-Arab, pro-Western democracy in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu already endorsed Kurdish independence in 2014, and Syrian Kurds - after recently declaring their autonomy - expressed an interest in developing relations with Israel [3].

KURDS IN IRAQ AND ISRAELI. "PERSON TO PERSON" RELATIONS

I would like to talk about the relationship between Israel and Kurdistan not only under the

military and cultural point of view. First of all it is absolutely true that they're the two biggest ethnic minorities living in the Middle East, it is also true that both have a military culture, but the real fact is that they know their situation and they support each other in various way [3, Ibid]. And one more than all the other Kurds, historically has always had ties with this state.

In 1966 Iraqi defense minister Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli blamed the Kurds of Iraq for seeking to establish "a second Israel" in the Middle East. He also claimed that "the West and the East are supporting the rebels to create [*khalq*] a new Israeli state in the north of the homeland as they had done in 1948 when they created Israel. It is as if history is repeating itself."

Unfortunately this didn't happen, if not I am almost sure that the problem caused by ISIS was a lot less bad than how it is now! An Arab commentator had warned earlier that if such a thing should happen, "the Arabs will face within two decades their second *nakba* [catastrophe] after Palestine." So except the evidence that it wouldn't be supported even by their "future neighbors" it doesn't mean that the creation of Kurdistan will be impossible, or that it will be something negative for all the other states (not only those that will have borders with it). Such accusations are echoed today by some Arab media, which claim that Kurdistan is following in the footsteps of "Yahudistan" ("Land of the Jews") [4]. This can bring us the point of which kind and which relations are and could be between these two states.

Following the establishment of the state of Israel, Kurds started to have feelings that we can recognize as admiration and urge to imitate Jewish success [4, p. 16]. At the same time, relations were also characterized by mutual trust which became an important asset for ties in modern times. In turn, Kurdish Jews who migrated to Israel in the 1940s and early 1950s became excellent ambassadors for the Kurds of Iraq, publicizing and pleading their cause among the Israeli public. For example, following the crushing by Saddam Hussein of the 1991 Kurdish uprising, the Kurdish community in Israel, estimated then at 100,000, organized a massive relief operation for the Iraqi Kurds [4, p. 17].

They also staged demonstrations in front of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and called on the U.S. government to protect the Kurds from Saddam. Shortly afterward, an Israeli-Kurdish friendship league was established in Jerusalem with the aim of fostering ties between Israel, Jews, and Kurds worldwide. Israel's Kurdish Jews provided a bridge to other Israelis in the early 1990s when they

initiated moves with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), facilitated by their common language and cultural background. Generally speaking, the KRG felt easier developing ties through the Kurdish Jews of Israel since the claim was to deal with Iraqi citizens. On another level, from the 1990s on, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), headed by Morris Amitay, maintained relations with Kurdish officials since "pro-Israel Jewish activists viewed support for the Kurds, a small nation struggling for self-determination in a hostile Arab neighborhood, as helping Israel reach out to a natural ally" [4, p. 20].

On the Kurdish side, in 2009 the *Israel-Kurd* magazine, published by Dawud Baghestani, appeared in the KRG to foster rapprochement between the two peoples [4, p. 21].

THE IRAQI-KURD POLITICAL ANGLE LOOKING AT ISRAEL

We've analyzed the "person to person" relations, and now we can make an order of several general observations on political relations. First, no well-defined, consistent, and open policy has been formulated by either Israel or the KRG; only ad hoc policies according to changing circumstances have been initiated. Second, the subject is extremely sensitive for both: Kurds are apprehensive of the reaction of the Iraqi government and fellow Iraqi citizens who might label them as traitors, while Israel is cautious not to embarrass them or to appear to be inciting Kurds against the Iraqi government [5]. Third, there is a big difference between Israel's relationship with the Kurdish leadership in Iraq and that in Turkey, this is due to a reflection of various historical, geostrategic, and political factors. The guideline that has governed relations between Israel and the Iraqi Kurds is: "My enemy's enemy is my friend" [5, p. 5].

Israeli-Kurdish ties go back to the 1950s when Israel's foreign policy strategy of the peripheral alliance was first launched. This strategy maintained that Jerusalem should seek alliances with non-Arab states as well as with minorities in the Middle East in order to address the larger Arab block. Relations between Israel and the Kurds began developing shortly after the outbreak of the Kurdish rebellion in the autumn of 1961, apparently at Jerusalem's initiative.

One of the early Kurdish interlocutors was the activist Ismet Sherif Vanly. In his memories, Vanly revealed that in 1964, when the Kurdish revolution was in dire straits, he suggested to Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani to contact Jerusalem for help

[5, p. 7]. Upon Barzani's agreement, Vanly went to Israel to meet Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, as well as Shimon Peres, head of the Labor party. Following that visit, the Israeli government sent a permanent representative to Iraqi Kurdistan.

These ties brought benefits to both partners, Jerusalem obtained intelligence as well as support for a few thousand Jews fleeing Baath Iraq, and the Kurds received security and humanitarian aid as well as links to the outside world, especially the United States [5, p. 8]. The first official acknowledgment that Jerusalem had provided aid to the Kurds dates to September 29, 1980, when Prime Minister Menachem Begin disclosed that Israel had supported the Kurds "during their uprising against the Iraqis in 1965-1975" and that the United States was aware of the fact. Begin added that Israel had sent instructors and arms but not military units, and basically because they didn't need military support, they managed army issues absolutely fine. Israeli aid was initially limited to humanitarian assistance such as the construction of a field hospital in 1966 [5, p. 8]. It expanded gradually, eventually to include the supply of small arms and ammunition. Later, it encompassed more sophisticated equipment such as antitank and anti-aircraft weapons and it also included training Kurds in Israel and Kurdistan.

THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL SETTING

Geopolitics is always a delicate topic of this region and the geopolitical context for Kurdish-Israeli relations has changed dramatically in the last few years, allowing for a certain openness or even rapprochement. Still, the total secrecy that governs these ties gives room for many questions and conspiracy theories.

The 2003 war in Iraq and the establishment of a de facto Kurdish state, reinvigorated ties between Israel and the KRG. In 2005, KRG president Masoud Barzani stated that "establishing relations between the Kurds and Israel is not a crime since many Arab countries have ties with the Jewish state" [6]. For his part, Jalal Talabani, Iraqi president and head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) did not hesitate to shake hands publicly with Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak at a conference in Greece in April 2008.

Israeli media also alluded to secret meetings in 2004 between Ariel Sharon, Masoud Barzani, and Jalal Talabani. There were also reportedly meetings between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the KRG's Nechirvan Barzani. According to some non-Israeli sources, Israeli activities in the KRG were widespread. The *Yedi'ot Aharonot* newspaper published an exclusive article

regarding Israel's training of Peshmergas; another Israeli source mentioned the activities of an Israeli company in the construction of an international airport in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. The same source revealed that a company owned by former Mossad chief Danny Yatom and entrepreneur Shlomi Michaels conducted business with the Kurdish government, providing strategic consultation on economic and security issues.

For their part, Iraqi sources, especially Shiite ones, have published lists of scores of Israeli companies and enterprises active in Iraq through third parties. According to a poll conducted in 2009 in the KRG, 71 percent of the respondents said they supported establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, and 67 percent said they viewed such relations as an important step toward an independent Kurdistan.

A "surprise" came also in the last 2/3 years, not so pleasant in which way it came to light, but hopefully the outcome of it will be much less bloody, I am talking about the upheavals in Syria, which have also brought Syrian Kurds to the forefront. They were previously an unknown entity as far as Israel was concerned. Here again the rule of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" became relevant as both the Kurds of Syria and the Israelis confronted Islamist terrorist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Dawlat al-Iraq wa-l-Sham al-Islamiya [7].

It seems, however, even in this case the relations between Jerusalem and Syrian Kurds predated the recent upheavals. Many sources wrote that both Syrian Kurds and Israelis cooperated in various issues, but no proofs have been brought to light, even if it seems probable that the Syrian Kurds and Israelis are sending feelers for possible cooperation [5]. If so, this would be even more important after the last declaration of independence that they openly made.

Lastly, there have been reports claiming that Israel has been developing ties with the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), a Kurdish-Iranian group linked to the PKK. There are claims that Jerusalem has provided training at PJAK bases in the KRG. One report also asserted that Israel, together with the United States, was providing money, arms, and intelligence to PJAK but that support had stopped abruptly by 2013 [7].

Now also the Iranian Kurds, that for so long have been very quiet, started to wake up and take their cause till the point of fighting for their rights and even independence; in fact in the last two/three months, clashes between Iranian Kurds and Iranian governmental forces have erupted again. It was

inevitable that this chain would be opened again, once that the Iraqi Kurds started their war against ISIS, proving to be effective and demonstrating to everybody (moreover to their Kurdish brothers living in Syria, Iran and Turkey) that there is a physical possibility for building the so wished Kurdistan, all the other 3 will follow them. In fact like this has been, with the surprise of Syrian Kurds leading all the possible and thinkable surprises.

CONCLUSION

Kurds have always passed hard moments, and they've always been able in overcoming them. The fact that now they see an effective possibility of finally building their state is pushing them in fighting even stronger the enemy of nowadays: ISIS. We have seen how the military culture is deeply rooted inside them and how they are increasing their knowledge and capacities in it. We have also seen how culturally and mentally open they are, it is normal for them to put men and women on the same level, starting from the army. Thanks to this and to the fact that they're a minority in the Middle East they've built ties with Israel since long ago.

Historically and culturally they are close to each other, both have passed through genocides, diaspora, battles for keeping their land, both are fighting terrorism and they have a great capacity in managing their own economy using what it is in their power (one natural resources and the other technological innovations). The theoretical explanation to this links between this ethnic group and this state "my enemy's enemy is my friend", is a very smart one. We saw that the reasons are others and they date back in time.

We saw already a declaration of independence made by Syrian Kurds, even if this group is not the biggest from the numerical point of this ethnic minority, they've already given a "push" to the Kurds who live in the surrounding countries for taking action. I think that physical possibilities for the independent State of Kurdistan are a lot more likely in the Iraqi Kurdistan (due to the fact that they've

always been somehow independent under certain point of view and the fact that their institution are already efficient and they work).

They are waiting the right time for declaring it, they are used to be patient and they know that the precise moment is coming. They know that they've to prove to the world and to the international bodies that this is the correct thing to do, and right now they are strengthen the foundation of their land for building another strong and powerful state as Israel. It is their example, and it's absolutely normal to understand why they look at Israel as model.

When a Kurdish state will be finally declared I would not be surprised if the first ally of that country will be the Jewish state, and I'm pretty sure when finally this will happen the situation in Middle East will change quite a lot and there will be hard life for all the extremists and terroristic groups present in the region. When this will happen (and I hope this time will come soon), maybe we will be finally able to see a situation of stability and "calm" in this area so tormented by war and genocides. And who knows, maybe it would be especially thanks to these battalions of women who are fighting ISIS that this day will come faster, they're feared by ISIS more than anyone else, they're called the angels of death, and let's hope that the death of this terroristic group will be given from these angels' hands.

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