

THE IRAQI KURDS' DESIRE FOR STATEHOOD AND THE ROLE OF ISRAEL

СТРЕМЛЕНИЕ ИРАКСКИХ КУРДОВ К ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОСТИ И РОЛЬ ИЗРАИЛЯ



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Bachelor of Laws and master's student (International Legal Module) at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, Republic of Serbia; vladimirluznjanić@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5673-2268

Владимир Святославович Лужнянин

Бакалавр права и магистрант (Международно-правовой модуль) юридического факультета Белградского университета, Республика Сербия; vladimirluznjanić@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5673-2268

The paper analyzes the Kurdish issue in present-day Iraq and how it affects today's constellation of forces in the Middle East. Emphasis is placed on Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations and ties. First, how the state of Israel has supported the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle to gain greater autonomy within Iraq, and finally independence, since its inception. Secondly, it shows the history of Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations and how they developed. Namely, what role did the Iraqi Kurds once play in Israel's conflict with the Arab states, what role do they have now and what role can they play in the future. At the end of the paper, predictions are made about the future of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, whether as an independent state or within a confederated Iraq.

Keywords: Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Israel, Iraq, Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations, Middle East

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В статье анализируется курдский вопрос в современном Ираке и то, как он влияет на сегодняшнюю расстановку сил на Ближнем Востоке. Особое внимание уделяется израильско-иракским курдским отношениям и связям. Во-первых, насколько государство Израиль поддерживало иракских курдов в их борьбе за большую автономию в составе Ирака, а затем и в борьбе за независимость. Во-вторых, она показывает историю израильско-иракских курдских отношений и то, как они развивались. А именно, какую роль иракские курды когда-то играли в конфликте Израиля с арабскими государствами, какую роль они играют сейчас и какую роль они могут сыграть в будущем. В конце статьи делается прогноз относительно того, как может выглядеть будущее Иракского Курдистана, будь то независимое государство или конфедеративный Ирак.

Ключевые слова: Курды, иракские курды, Израиль, Ирак, израильско-иракские курдские отношения, Ближний Восток

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On September 25, 2017, Kurds in northern Iraq put forward a referendum on independence and that day was historic for the Kurds, since there was a dilemma — would the Kurdish state finally emerge after 100 years of aspirations, or would the new bloody conflicts begin. Interestingly, only a few days before the referendum, Israeli flags were seen along Kurdish flags during a pro-independence rally in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan Region¹. At first sight, many would wonder what connection Israel and the Kurds have. However, they have been connected since the early days of the Jewish state's emergence in the Middle East.

Security policy of the Israel is best seen through the concept of “Periphery Strategy”, which is aimed at collaborating with the non-Arab states in the region of Middle East. Israel also forged close ties with ethnic minorities such as Kurds in Northern Iraq². In fact, Israeli-Kurdish ties going back to the 1950s; they began to develop shortly after the outbreak of the Kurdish rebellion in the autumn of 1961 [Bengio, 2014, p. 4]. These relations became very tight in 1950s and early 1960s, especially in Israeli weapons supplies and training Kurds in their struggle against the Iraqi government [Minasian, 2007, p. 22].

From the Israeli point of view, Iraqi Kurdistan is indeed strategically important. Relation between Jewish state and Iraqi Kurdistan gained momentum and visibility when Mustafa Barzani (father of Masoud and Idris Barzani) visited Israel twice, in 1968 and 1973 and had meetings with Israeli officials including the Prime Minister [Bengio, 2014, p. 5]. After these visits, they crystallized three main pillars of cooperation: security cooperation (intelligence and military training), economic cooperation (energy, construction, agricultural technology), and culture [Liga, 2017, p. 3].

Ties between Iraqi Kurds and Israel manifested during Operation “Desert Storm”, which was held by US and its allied forces against Iraq in 1991. After the active operationalization phase, US and their allied forces supported uprisings against central government in Baghdad in the Shiite South and the Kurdish North. After Iraqi forces suppressed an initial post-war Kurdish uprising, US, and its allied forces in mid-1991 established a “no-fly zone” over the Kurdish areas, protecting the Kurds from Iraqi forces [Katzman, 2010, p. 1].

In that time Israeli community of the Iraqi Jews supported the Kurds by means of large-scale

1 Former Israeli PM Says Israel Will Continue to Support ‘Needs, Aspirations’ of Kurds. *Kurdistan24*. URL: <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c3fd74d7-82a4-400f-908d-b991ea332605> (accessed 01.05.2022).

2 Israel's Periphery Strategy. *The Times of Israel*. URL: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israels-periphery-strategy/> (accessed 20.03.2022).



supplies of medication and first-aid items through the Turkish-Iraqi border [Minasian, 2007, p. 25]. After all, the closest thing that Iraqi Kurds have to an independent state is the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), which administers semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan³. The establishment of the KRG, which was officially recognized by the Interim Iraqi Government in 2005, began with the 1991 Gulf War, when the Turks pressed for the establishment of a “no-fly zone” in northern Iraq to prevent a flood of Kurdish refugees fleeing towards the border between the two countries [Lindenstrauss, Eran, 2014, p. 84].

The 2003 war in the Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime led to new geopolitical context for Israel-Iraqi Kurdish relation. First, Baghdad government was no more radically opposed to Israel, and secondly, KRG leaders were more assertive and were able to express their views [Bengio, 2014, p. 8]. After 2003 invasion of Iraq, international community did not want to divide Iraq. Iraqi Constitution 2005 in Article 1 defines Iraq as a single federal, independent, and fully sovereign state and in Article 117 recognises the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region⁴.

With the adoption of the Constitution, the first session of Parliament was held in Erbil (KRG), when there was elected the first president of Kurdistan Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, the leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party [Zdravković, 2016, p. 79]. At that moment, the Kurds were gaining strength, as it can be seen by their leaders’ statements regarding their relationships with Israel. 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”. Also, Jalal Talabani, Iraqi

president, and the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), did not hesitate to shake hands publicly with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak at the Conference in Greece in April 2008 [Bengio, 2014, p. 8].

With the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the establishment of Kurdish autonomy, Israel has reduced, to a certain extent, its regional threats. Independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq serves as a buffer zone against Iranian influence, blocking Iran’s design of a “Shi’a crescent” linking Iran with Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon [Liga, 2017, p. 3]. For Israel, Kurds in Iraq are very essential, because they need friends in the region, while Kurds want to be partners and do not care about Palestine⁵. Most importantly Kurds regarded Israel as a strategic regional partner in economic and political views, and therefore, they allow Israel to conduct operations from their territory against Iran.

On the other hand, since the Arab Spring the Middle East has changed, which led to a significant disruption in forces in the region. Certainly, the emergence of the so-called Islamic State⁶ (ISIS) and the civil war in Syria contributed the most to it. This development paved the way for possible dramatic change in the status of the Kurds in the Middle East. That is why the participation of Peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdistan armed forces) in the fight against Islamic State in the form of cooperation with the anti-ISIS coalition, should be seen in the broader context of their historic struggle for a Kurdish state [Zdravković, 2016, p. 80].

Islamic State murdered 5000 Yazids, predominantly ethnically Kurdish in the first phase of its campaign in Iraq [Liga, 2016, p. 11]. Due to the threat to both its people and its territory, the Kurds were the first to effectively oppose the Islamic State.

3 The Kurds: The World’s Largest Stateless Nation. *France 24*. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20150730-who-are-kurds-turkey-syria-iraq-pkk-divided?ref=tw> (accessed 04.05.2022).

4 Iraq’s Constitution of 2005. *ConstituteProject.org*. URL: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en (accessed 04.05.2022).

5 Israel Endorsed Kurdish Independence. Saladin Would Have Been Proud. *The New York Times* URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/world/middleeast/kurds-independence-israel.html?smid=tw-share> (accessed 15.04.2022).

6 organization banned in the Russian Federation



If we want to understand Israeli involvement in the fight against the ISIS and its support to Kurdish resistance, we need to monitor the flow of money and energy, because Israel finances the Kurds essentially through economic cooperation and energy imports⁷. Certainly, to achieve this cooperation, a third party, Turkey, had to be involved. Since 2007 Turkish government, even though it had opposed an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, because of its large population of Kurds, developed strong cooperation with Kurds in Iraq⁸. Turkey agreed to connect a new pipeline from the Taq Taq oil field, in Kurdistan, with the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline (Iraq-Turkey Crude Oil Pipeline, Iraq's largest crude oil export line), guaranteeing the depositing of oil payments into a Kurdish bank account in Turkey, rather than into the Iraqi national account in New York, challenging Baghdad's claims to exclusive control of Iraq's natural resources [Ottaway M., Ottaway D., 2014, pp. 139–148]. Through energy cooperation among Israel and Kurds in Iraq, the Jewish state, and its private companies, has indirectly contributed to the international campaign against Islamic State, by funding Kurdistan's war efforts [Liga, 2016, p. 13].

Most importantly, this energy cooperation or the energy triangle between Israel, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Turkey was established despite complicated diplomatic relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv related to the Palestinians. The Kurds have also been able to establish good relations with the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington, all with the aim of receiving greater financial assistance in their fight against ISIS.

Since the rise of the Islamic State, cracks have emerged in the relations of forces in the Middle East region, whose boundaries were drawn up by

the Sykes–Picot Agreement more than 100 years ago. The Iraqi Kurds have certainly proven to be a respectable force in the region that can be counted on. So, we can say that Israel is interested in enabling the Erbil government to secure the terms and conditions that will help it to declare its independence from Baghdad⁹. Yet Israel, as much as it supports the Iraqi Kurds, does not want to disrupt relations with the US and Turkey or deepen its antagonism with Iran.

The reemergence of a powerful state in Iraq is not in favor of Israel, moreover they want Iraqi state to be weak, and ultimately, for Iraq to disintegrate into three groups of the Kurds, Shiite Arab, and Sunni Arabs [Khosravi, Kalhori, HamehMorad, 2016, p. 173].

Nearly 93 % of outgoing voters (72 % of the 3.3 million registered voters) voted for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, and the question is whether the Kurds will get an independent state soon¹⁰. Masud Barzani stressed that the will of the Kurds and their desire for independence must be respected. It is likely that in post-ISIS Iraq, the Kurds will remain part of that state, but will strive for greater federalization or even confederalization. They will certainly have the support of Israel as they have so far, especially in maintaining ever closer ties.

But it should also be noted that Turkey and Iran are the two largest external trading partners for the Iraqi Kurds. Both Iran and Turkey want to weaken Baghdad central government, but on the other hand guarantee Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity, both because of their internal and external interests [Liga, 2016, p. 14]. Because of that Iraqi Kurdistan is somewhat vulnerable, because above all, as we have already noted, energy cooperation with Israel

7 Majority of Israeli Oil Imported from Kurdistan. *The Jerusalem Post*. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=413056> (accessed 05.05.2022).

8 Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan. November 1, 2015. *Lawfare*. URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/stalemate-not-statehood-iraqi-kurdistan> (accessed 15.04.2022).

9 Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan. September 1, 2015. *Middle East Monitor*. URL: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150901-strategic-dimensions-of-the-relationship-between-israel-and-iraqi-kurdistan/> (accessed 20.04.2022).

10 Irački Kurdi masovno se izjasnili za nezavisnost. September-27-2017. *Politika*. URL: <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/389652/Svet/Iracki-Kurdi-masovno-se-izjasnili-za-nezavisnost> (accessed 05.05.2022).



depends on a single gas pipeline that Turkey can influence, which makes the Kurds more financially vulnerable. While on the other hand, Iran's influence has been greatly magnified by the emergence of the Islamic State, as Tehran has provided economic, political, and security assistance, particularly to PUK Peshmergas and Shi'a militias¹¹.

From all the above we could conclude that Kurdish region in Iraq is geo-strategically very important and highly sensitive. Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan represent the heart of Arabic Middle East in term of geopolitics. Iraqi Kurdistan in Northern Iraq has significant oil sources, lack of water problems and has a boundary with Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Due to that, this region of Iraq geopolitically is the most important to Israel, and presence of Israel in such geopolitical environment will bring certain benefits for it [Khosravi, Kalhori, Hamehmorad, 2016, p. 174].

Iraqi Kurds have always played an important role in the geostrategy of Israel, especially to heighten pressure on central government in Baghdad and to prevent its active intervention into the Arab Israeli conflict [Minasian, 2007, p. 28]. In this way, the Kurds, in cooperation with Israel, created a kind of balance of power in Iraq. However, because of this, the Kurds also paid a high price for human sacrifices in conflict with Iraqi authorities.

On the other hand, the situation for the Kurds improved to a certain extent in the 1990s, but only with the change in the geopolitical structure of the Middle East after 9/11, when the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 paved the way for the re-emergence of the Kurdish nationalism [Khosravi, Kalhori, Hamehmorad, 2016, p. 176]. Fight against radical Islamic elements, like ISIS, and the strive to counteract Iran and its expansion toward Iraq and Syria are main goals in Israeli-Iraqi Kurds cooperation. If we look at the present situation, Iraqi Kurds-Israel relationship could potentially become

a driver for stability in shaping the future Middle East [Liga, 2017, p. 4]. But from the other point of view, Kurds also have unrealistic expectations from the Jewish state. Firstly, they hope that Israel would persuade the US administration to support Kurdish independence from Iraq, and secondly that IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) would come to the Kurds' aid if there is a need for it [Bengio, 2017, p. 4].

Today, the level of Iraqi Kurds-Israeli relations depends on the stance of the Arab states, as well as Turkey, and Iran. Great powers, particularly Western states, refuse to consider statehood for Iraqi Kurds on the grounds that it would threaten the internal cohesion of Iraq and boost Kurdish autonomy movements in the neighboring states¹². At the same time, Israeli support of KRG to some extent damaged the Kurds' image in the Arab and Muslim world. Now Iran, Turkey, and Iraq have an excuse to create an anti-Kurdish alliance, because the creation of an independent Kurdistan in today's Iraqi territory would also create serious problems for them with their Kurds, which are more prevalent there than in Iraq itself.

Summarizing, we could note, that any change in Iraq-Turkey relations, Iran-Turkey relations, PKK-Turkey tension, Erdogan's political status, Israeli Iranian relations, Iraqi government stabilization, intra-Kurdish tension, bridging Sunni-Shia ties, or strengthening Sunni Arab region in Iraq could affect Iraqi Kurdistan and their struggle for an independent state. But from an Israeli foreign policy perspective, it is nearly certain that if the Kurds declare independence, Israel will respond by quick recognition of the new state, like Israeli policy on South Sudan [Lindenstrauss, Eran, 2014, p. 88]. In other words, Israel would probably be the first country to recognize the Kurdish state.

However, in the foreseeable future, one or two decades from now we will hardly see an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. It is most likely to go towards greater

11 Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan. *Lawfare*. URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/stalemate-not-statehood-iraqi-kurdistan> (accessed 05.05.2022).

12 Seufert G. The Return of the Kurdish Question. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comments*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. 2015. URL: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2015C38_srt.pdf (accessed 05.05.2022).



federalisation or even confederalization of Iraq and strengthening of the Kurds. This will only strengthen the Israeli-Kurdish ties over time for mutual benefit. This development has already confirmed the overcoming of the agreements that shaped the Middle East more than 100 years ago. In the context of the unravelling of the post-World War I order, both parties will certainly benefit from this clandestine decades-long relationship, extolling a partnership nestled in the complex international projection of the two “outcast nations” [Liga, 2016, p. 17].

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