

Israel-Iraq Cooperation in 2019: Security Challenges and Civilian Warming

Dr. Ronen Zeidel*

March 2020

A. Introduction

The final months of 2019 were marked by widespread, prolonged protests throughout Iraq, which began in October. Baghdad was the focal point of the demonstrations, which were directed at the ruling political elite and the state backing it: Iran. Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned at the end of November, throwing official Iraq into a political vacuum and guaranteeing that any premier appointed to replace him would be considered an interim ruler and as such, his government would only be accepted by the weakened political elite, but not by a significant part of the population.

A 2018 [study](#) of Israel-Iraq relations, written within the framework of a Mitvim Institute project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel's ties with Arab states, stressed that a rapprochement between official Iraq and Israel was unlikely. Its central argument was that relations between the two countries were hardly affected by the Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab conflict and that the main factor influencing relations was the conflict between Israel (and perhaps the US, too) and Iran. The events of recent months bolstered this assessment. Iran and its proxies within the Iraqi regime accuse the West and Israel of fanning the unrest. The Shiite militias, the standard bearers of Iraq's cooperation with Iran, ramped up their anti-Israel rhetoric even before the protests broke out. Given this polarized state of affairs, another trend spotlighted in the previous study is gaining momentum – wide-ranging solidarity manifested on social media between a growing number of Iraqis and Israelis, stemming from hostility to Iran and an affinity for the history of Iraqi Jewry. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and senior political figures contributed significantly to boosting this trend in 2019.

This article reviews the changes that occurred in 2019 in the nature of Israel-Iraq cooperation, as they relate to diplomatic, security, economic and civilian aspects.

B. Details of the Cooperation

No significant change occurred in 2019 in terms of diplomatic relations between the two states. Prior to the protests' eruption, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali al-hakim, a minor figure in the outgoing government, reiterated his country's support for the Arab Peace Initiative. Before that, in July 2019, Iraq's ambassador to the US, Dr. Farid Yassin, was quoted, unbeknown to him, as saying he believed there should be ties between Iraq and Israel (but also saying he realized that was unrealistic under the present circumstances).

* Dr. Ronen Ziedel is an Iraq scholar at the Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, and a task-team member at the Mitvim Institute.

On the other hand, Israel's perception of Iraq as a security challenge went up a notch in 2019, with Israel viewing Iraq as an important link on the supply route of ballistic and other weapons from Iran to the front with Israel. Israel is closely monitoring the construction of the military base near the Syria-Iraq border crossing of Albukamal al-Qaim. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and senior defense officials began [referring](#) to Iraq as a security challenge after ignoring it for years. In the summer of 2019, [several drone attacks attributed to Israel](#) were conducted against Shiite militia bases in Baghdad and deep in Iraqi territory, resulting in fatalities. Previously, Israel carried out several attacks on Iraqi militia targets [in Syria](#), also resulting in some deaths, without assuming responsibility for them. Israel's strikes deep within Iraq were the first since its 1981 attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor.

The attacks placed the Iraqi government in an embarrassing situation, portraying it as weak on all fronts. The Americans were demanding that Iraq stop turning a blind eye to Iran's entrenchment on its territory, while Iran and the militias demanded that Iraq respond to the attacks within its borders. The Iraqi government appointed an investigative committee, which determined, after much delay, that [Israel was responsible](#) for the attacks, but the government did not commit to a response. The militias, for their part, adopted increasingly harsh rhetoric against Israel. Most Iraqis condemned the manner in which Iran was turning their country into a wrestling ring with the US and Israel. On the sidelines of this discourse, prior to the demonstrations, the strike on the hated militias prompted gleeful Iraqi responses on social media.

The Kurdish region has not taken part in the country-wide protests, but has been affected by them given its dependence on developments in Baghdad. Before the protests broke out in October 2019, the Kurdish administration, which is still under the control of the Barzani family and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan had forged a good relationship with the al-Mahdi government, despite its growing pro-Iran leanings. The Kurds are leading a "damage control" campaign following the referendum conducted in September 2017 on independence for the region. They are trying to reassert their standing and place in Iraq as an autonomous region. Al-Mahdi was a more attentive partner in this regard than his predecessor, Haider al-Abadi. The rapprochement between the Barzanis and Iran should also be analyzed against this backdrop, as evidenced in the memorial ceremonies held throughout the region for Qasem Soleimani, sponsored by the local leadership and with the participation of senior officials of major parties. This process contributed, understandably, to reducing the level of Kurdish ties with Israel. There were no significant visits in 2019 of Kurdish figures in Israel or interesting statements about the relationship. In that sense, one could say that official Israel "discovered" Arab Iraq in 2019, whereas in previous years, Israeli declarations of solidarity were mainly directed at the Kurds and their aspirations.

As was the case in the diplomatic arena, no significant change was discerned in terms of economic ties between the two countries, which are still non-existent. Israel's MFA considered providing humanitarian aid to Iraq following the 2018 Basra water protests, including offers to attempt to deal with the infrastructure problem, but no appropriate channels for such aid were found. Helping Iraq develop a high-tech industry was also under consideration. One of the underlying themes of the protests was a desire to cut off the supply of Iranian goods, which have been flooding Iraqi markets and stifling local agriculture and industry, in order to encourage local production. If that were to occur, Iraq would not be open to Israeli exports, but perhaps modest imports to Israel of unique (high quality and inexpensive) Iraqi products would help develop trade between the two states. Under a

standing 2003 waiver from Israel's Ministry of Economy, renewed every six months, Iraq is exempt from Israel's list of enemy states and thus a possible trade partner.

As underscored in the 2018 paper, the civilian, cultural and identity arena holds potential for establishing relations between Israel and Iraq. The major importance of the Jewish dimension in forging such ties, through a channel perceived as more "legitimate" by Iraq, was also highlighted. Two interesting initiatives in this regard emerged at the beginning of 2019: (1) An initiative by Edwin Shuker, Vice President of the European Jewish Congress, a British Jew of Iraqi origin who tried to promote the return of Iraqi citizenship to all Iraqi Jews who want it. His initiative struck a receptive chord in Iraqi public opinion, but did not progress to parliamentary or government discussion. (2) An initiative to allow Jews of Iraqi origin holding Israeli passports to visit Iraq according to a model adopted by Tunisia, meaning in connection with an important Jewish religious festival (such as the Shavuot holiday) but not throughout the year. This initiative did not progress, either.

Nonetheless, relations continued to develop between a growing number of Iraqis and Israelis. While Iraq's political elite is bound to Iran on the Israel issue, it has not prevented examination of a new model of relations: "Winning hearts and minds" from the grassroots up, based on a people-to-people model. This trend continued and even intensified after the demonstrations began. Privately, through social media and rare visits, a growing number of Iraqis express their desire for ties with Israel after their country undergoes the desired change. They are also hoping for Israel to support the Iraqi people by harming Iran. On the other hand, due to claims by the regime that the protesters are backed and funded by Israel, the protesters have refrained from publicly identifying with Israel although anti-Israel expressions are very marginal.

Israel is clearly encouraging this trend, with the MFA assuming a significantly more active role than it had in the past. In late 2018, the ministry launched a unique, first of its kind Facebook page called "Israel in Iraqi Dialect" (إسرائيل باللهجة العراقية). The Arabic-language page, aimed at encouraging discourse with the Iraqi people, gained momentum in 2019. As of February 2020, the page had some [292,000 followers](#). Once the wave of demonstrations began, the page expressed clear sympathy for the protesters, who responded with appreciation, and the number of followers grew. Four delegations from Iraq visited Israel in 2019 as guests of the MFA, and Iraqis were also included in another visiting Arab delegation.

After the MFA leaked news of the visits in April, discussions began in Iraq regarding normalization (تطبيع) of ties with Israel. The militias took the most radical line against the issue and since they were armed, people listened. In early September, a list of Iraqis accused of working to normalize relations with Israel was posted on Facebook. It included political analysts, academic researchers and intellectuals. As far as is known, none of them were engaged in ties with Israelis or called for normalization. In September, a pro-militia journalist posted a threatening item regarding the planned participation of Iraqi intellectuals at a London conference on Iraqi Jewry, which was also attended by Israelis. The threat directed at Iraqis who meet with Israelis is serious and concrete.

In July 2019, a further development was recorded with [a message](#) by Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz wishing the Iraqi people well and expressing his desire for increased cooperation with them. By appealing directly to the Iraqi people, Israel sought to bypass the Iraqi government and avoid a direct appeal to the regime. On 4 November, after the wave of protests began, Katz issued [a message](#) of support for "the Iraqi people" and their justified

demands. On 8 December, Netanyahu [condemned](#) the massacre of protesters carried out by militias in Baghdad and blamed Iran for the bloodshed. The senior echelons in Israel view the protests as an opportunity to challenge Iran, but that does not negate the fact that Israel is the only state in the region to have expressed support for the protesters and their demands, thus far.

C. Summary

In the second half of 2019, Israel began referring to Iraq as a security challenge because it served as a conduit for the supply of Iranian weapons to the front. For the first time since its 1981 attack on the nuclear reactor, targets deep within Iraqi territory were attacked, and the government in Baghdad blamed Israel. On the other hand, the trend of solidarity between Iraqis and Israelis continued and recently received official Israeli government backing against the backdrop of the wave of country-wide protests. Senior echelons in Israel expressed support for the Iraqi protesters' demands, in light of the anti-Iranian sentiment underpinning the protests.

Iraq is at a crossroads that is sure to impact relations with Israel. If the protests are suppressed with active Iranian support, Iraq will become Iran's first "proxy state" in the region. If that happens and the real ruler in Baghdad is the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds force, the ability of the puppet regime in Baghdad to oppose Iran's demands, for example in military terms, will be very limited. The repercussions will be felt mostly in the realm of security. For example, Iran could move ballistic equipment to Syria without interruption and perhaps even use Iraq as a launch pad.

A continued status quo between the government and the protesters in Iraq will further weaken the government, which is already having to lean on Iran as its sole source of support. The little legitimacy it still has will disappear. Iraq will sink into political paralysis and self-centeredness, and will further lose its importance as a factor and target for improved relations with Israel. On the other hand, if the protesters succeed in toppling the regime, an opportunity will open up for Israel. The deep anti-Iranian sentiment underpinning the protests will lead the state's new rulers to distance themselves from Tehran. The new Iraq will seek new regional allies that will respect the change it has undergone, and that would be compatible with Israeli interests.