



# **Israel and Iraq: Taking the Civilian Path to Improve Relations**

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## Israel and Iraq: Taking the Civilian Path to Improve Relations

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**This research examines the potential for cooperation between Israel and Iraq, the largest Arab country to Israel's east. Iraq is changing and is undergoing reconstruction following a series of wars and crises. It works to bring together its diverse ethnic and religious groups, and to navigate through the regional geo-political conflict between Sunni states and Iran. Israeli decision makers tend to ignore the centrality of Iraq, and to focus only on the Kurds there. Israel generally sees Iraq as a country that lost regional significance following the Gulf wars, and as a failed state under Iranian dominance. This, however, does not reflect reality and needs to change. While the Iraqi leadership is not likely to alter its official policies towards Israel anytime soon, there is a chance for a bottom-up process of change. Israel-Iraq relations can benefit from positive mutual images fostered by the Jewish-Iraqi community, and from existing people-to-people interactions via social media. Practical cooperation can be developed in the fields of trade, infrastructures, agriculture, and tourism, and this can serve as a basis for future diplomatic ties between the two countries.**

### A. Introduction

This article examines the prospects for cooperation between Israel and Iraq – the largest Arab state east of Israel – the existing cooperation between the two countries, and the effect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israel-Iraq relations.

Iraq is a complex state, to put it mildly, currently undergoing far-reaching changes: the Kurdish ethnic group that is populating the three provinces of northern Iraq held a referendum in September 2017, which widely supported the notion of an independent Kurdish region; Iraq is recovering from a series of wars and crises that swept its territory and is currently busy rebuilding the central governing institutions; and on 12 May 2018, Iraq held general elections, which will have a major effect on Iraq's regional orientation. Will Iraq choose to approach the Sunni states in the region, or will it try to solidify its ties with Iran?

Due to the chain of events following the Gulf War in 1991 and the US attack on Iraq in 2003, Iraq lost its clout in the region. As a result, Israeli decision-makers tend to ignore its existence. When they relate to Iraq, it is usually to show that the division of countries in the region is "artificial" and that they are "failed states." Alternatively, Iraq is perceived as being under "Iranian patronage," which makes it off-limits for Israel. In other cases, Israel refers to Iraq in the context of the civil war in Syria while focusing on Syria. Israel tends to forget that Daesh was created in Iraq as a result of the conditions that prevailed in the country at the

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time and ignores the fact that the "artificial" state in Iraq survived despite everything, as well as the opportunities that it produces for Israel in the longer term.

The discussion of possible and existing cooperation between Israel and Iraq must take into account the complexity and dynamism characterizing Iraq. Therefore, this article starts with presenting the historical and political background of Iraq, on the basis of which the opportunities for potential cooperation between the two countries will be identified and described. The article will also address existing collaborations and discuss the effect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the prospects of fulfilling this potential, even though this conflict is of little interest to Baghdad, who derives its attitude toward Israel out of the power struggles between the countries of the region in an effort to improve its position in the Middle East. The last part of the article will address Israel's policy toward Iraq while making suggestions as to the pathways Israel should explore.

Establishing official relations between Israel and Iraq is not on the agenda in the near future, and interaction at the political level between the two countries is extremely marginal. However, the potential for rapprochement, especially between the peoples, exists. Unlike the relations between Israel and other Arab countries, which are shaped by politicians, it is possible and desirable to use a "bottom-up" approach with Iraq, which may someday lead to a warmer and more durable relationship.

## **B. Iraq: Historical and Political Background**

Before we delineate the Israel-Iraq relations and the prospects for cooperation between them, we will provide the background of the current political structure in Iraq and present the great complexity that characterizes this country. This section presents the main forces that are currently active in Iraq, their regional orientation, and their relations with various bodies in the region.

In general, the country is divided into political blocs, which differ in their positions and orientation, rather than by ethnic groups (Shi'ites, Sunnis, Kurds). The stronger bloc, led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi, to which the Sunni and possibly the Kurdish parties may join, holds to Iraqi nationalism, focuses on Iraq's domestic affairs – primarily the rehabilitation of the country – fights corruption, and supports anti-sectarian politics. From the regional and international point of view, this bloc is a proponent of joining the Sunni Arab bloc led by Saudi Arabia, is in favor of receiving continued American aid, and strongly opposes Iran and its influence on Iraq. The second bloc, led by the militia leader Hadi al-'Ameri and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, is prominently supported by Iran and opposes the US and the Sunni Arab bloc. This bloc emphasizes Shiite sectarian affiliation and calls for cross-border ethnic cooperation with Shiite Iran. An important element of this bloc are the Shiite militias that fought Daesh, some of whom were sent to Syria on behalf of Iran to help Bashar al-Assad.

### **1. Haider al-'Abadi: Leader of the Moderate Shiites**

Iraqi Prime Minister al-'Abadi is a moderate religious Shiite. Iraq's achievements in the struggle against Daesh were largely credited to him. Al-'Abadi is clearly pro-Western: he works in cooperation on military issues solely with the Americans, and his opponents even accuse him of yielding to American dictates. His visit to the US in March 2017 and his meeting with President Trump proved successful. The fruits of the visit were the exclusion

of Iraq from the list of countries whose subjects are not allowed to visit the US. Thanks to him, the presence and influence of the Iranians in Iraq has been significantly limited, including the removal of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, whom al-'Abadi personally humiliated.

Al-'Abadi also promotes cooperation with the moderate Sunni political group in Iraq, headed by Parliament Speaker Saleem al-Jaburi, in the view that such cooperation is essential in the post-Daesh era. For this reason, al-'Abadi's government's foreign policy strives to approach the bloc of Sunni Arab states, especially the Gulf states, who are financially essential to rebuilding Iraq, especially its Sunni-dominated regions. In June 2017, al-'Abadi made his first official visit to Saudi Arabia and discussed with his hosts a long list of agreements between the two countries that are essential to their bi-lateral relations. Among other things, the border between the two countries was fenced, and a number of Saudi-funded development projects were agreed upon (for example, the renovation of the football stadium in Baghdad). Iraqis also expect the Saudis to partially fund the rehabilitation of the Sunni areas affected by the war on Daesh.

Al-'Abadi rarely expresses himself about Israeli issues. When asked about it, his answer is that Iraq is committed to the Arab peace initiative. Iraq also supports the rights of the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority, and in January 2017 the Iraqi ambassador to Jordan was sworn in to become the representative of Iraq in Ramallah. In August 2017, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki visited Iraq and discussed the prospects of expanding the relations between the sides. His Iraqi hosts generally discussed Iraq's principled position on the Palestinian issue, without making any commitments, while the visit was not extensively covered by the Iraqi media.

## **2. Muqtada al-Sadr: The Leader of the Sa'irun (Marching Forward) Party**

The young cleric, based in the city of Kufa near Najaf and his power base in the outskirts of Baghdad, dismantled his former party, al-Ahrar, a distinctly sectarian Shiite political party, and established a new party: Sa'irun, which believes in bringing together religious and secular politicians and is headed by the Iraqi communist party. This party brands itself as a non-ethnic party, fights political and national corruption, and stands by the principle of "Iraq first". Whereas in the past the party's people and al-Sadr himself expressed extreme anti-American and anti-Israel positions, in recent years the party's positions have changed and it became a distinctly anti-Iranian party. In the joyous demonstrations of the party's followers, members of the lower Shiite class, the masses shouted "Iran out!"

Al-Sadr is known for being inconsistent. His critics claim he has a childish personality. However, it should be noted that he is consistent in his nationalist positions. His relationship with the pro-Iranian player is extremely hostile. He has not visited Iran for a long time, inter alia, because he rejects the country's religious views. He is conducting a crusade against the corrupt politicians, headed by al-Maliki, and against the pro-Iranian militias headed by his great rival al-'Ameri. After the Americans left, against whom they fought, he decided to eliminate the Iranian presence in Iraq, which he considered undermining the sovereignty of the state. al-Sadr also has a militia, the Saraia al-Salam (Peace Brigades), which was partially dismantled. This militia, unlike other militias, is not taking part in the security operations against Daesh pockets. More importantly, al-Sadr opposes its participation in the fighting in Syria, where the Iranians use other Iraqi militias.

Al-Sadr's relationship with Lebanon's Hezbollah are very fraught, and on his recent visit to Lebanon he refrained from meeting Hassan Nasrallah. Al-Sadr is not a Pan-Arabist or Islamist nationalist, like the Muslim Brotherhood or Hezbollah. It represents a new Iraq-centric Shiite-Iraqi identity, strives to integrate all population groups, and views Iran as the source for Iraq's problems since 2003.

Al-Sadr is also the only Iraqi political leader to mention Iraq's Jews as a community that was part of the Iraqi fabric in the past, while most Iraqi politicians still refrain from dealing with the issue. Not only does al-Sadr mention Iraq's Jews, he also treats them positively, as full partners in Iraqi nationalism and in the love of Iraq.

### **3. Hadi al-'Ameri: Head of the al-Fath (Occupation) Party**

Al-Ameri appears to be the strongest man-behind-the-scenes of the Shiite militias in Iraq. He is also Iran's senior representative in Iraqi politics. In the course of the fighting against Daesh, the Shiite militias were forming in Iraq, and are known by the name of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Forces). For the most part, these were new groups that joined existing Shi'ite militias. Although they did not play a central role in the reclaiming of the territories from Daesh, they enjoyed great prestige and most of them had not yet vacated the Sunni cities they liberated.

Under Iraqi law, militias cannot participate in the elections. Thus, al-Ameri and his partners – other pro-Iranian militia commanders – Qays al-Khaz'ali (commander of 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq [The League of the Righteous]) and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis (commander of Hezbollah al-Iraqi) – founded a party by the name al-Fath (the Occupation). The May 2011 elections highlighted its position as the largest party in the pro-Iranian bloc.

Al-Ameri, who heads the oldest militia, Badr, served alongside the Iranian army and against the Iraqi army in the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. He speaks fluent Persian but lacks charisma or real public sympathy. Next to him in the pro-Iranian bloc is the party of former prime minister al-Maliki, Dawlat al-Qanun (State of Law) and another religious Shiite party, al-Majlis al-Aa'la (The Supreme Council).

One of the militia party's strengths is its ability to reward its supporters and voters financially and provide them jobs, but mainly because of the great fear that its members impose. They send murder threats, they arrest, hurt, and break into the offices of activists. Currently, they are the main source of fear among the Iraqi public.

### **4. The Sunnis**

The Sunnis lost much of their power as a result of the emergence of Daesh. Until a year ago, four out of Iraq's eight million citizens lived in displaced persons camps. As of 2018, despite efforts to bring people back to their home, 2.9 million displaced persons have yet to return home. The prominent Sunni politician in the 2014 elections, the governor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi, lost power and now lives in Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, while the prominent Sunni politician Salim al-Jaburi successfully cooperates with al-'Abadi. The Sunni representation is split into at least three camps, which do not manage even to compose a memorandum of understanding. In the Sunni areas, branches of Shiite parties, with Sunni activists, emerge, reflecting the transformation of Iraq into a state of Shiite majority. Iraqi



politics is being conducted in the Shiite playground and therefore the positions of the Sunni parties, including on the Israeli issue, are not very important.

Traditionally, the Sunnis hold to more nationalist positions regarding the Israeli and Palestinian issues. The extremist Sunni faction, represented by members of the Ba'ath party and the Jihadists, has almost disappeared, and its representatives, who are not currently active in Iraq, occasionally play anachronistic positions (for example, encouraging delegitimization of the current regime in Iraq and calling for violent rebellion) in the Arab media. Most Sunnis in Iraq pin their hopes on the money from the Gulf that will bring about the rebuilding of their ruined cities and perhaps help bring the displaced persons back to their homes. Therefore, the al-'Abadi government rapprochement with the Gulf states, including the acceptance of their moderate positions toward Israel, is acceptable to the Sunni population and its representatives in politics. The Sunnis are very concerned about the growing Iranian influence in Iraq, which is a more frightening existential threat to them than the "Israeli threat".

The May 2018 elections and their results only underscored the weakness of the Sunnis, many of whom are probably concerned about the rise of pro-Iranian Shiite parties backed by militias stationed in Sunni areas. The Sunnis voted mainly for the Al Wataniyya party headed by Iyad 'Allawi (Shiite) or for regional parties. It should be noted that al-'Abadi's party won a landslide victory in the most populated Sunni district of Nainawa province (Mosul) and marked impressive achievements in other Sunni provinces. The great fear of Iran, along with the appreciation they feel for al-'Abadi, will probably lead the Sunnis to support the alliance between al-Sadr and al-'Abadi, an anti-Iranian coalition supported by Saudi Arabia.

## 5. Kurdistan and the Kurds

The Kurdish region in Iraq is now largely conducted as a separate political unit. In September 2017 an official referendum was held on the motion of Kurdish independence, with a large majority voting in favor of independence. The referendum increased tension between Arab Baghdad and the Kurdish region and led Baghdad to respond with a series of steps, notably the reoccupation of the disputed oil-rich Kirkuk province. The Iraqi Kurdish region's prospects of becoming independent may affect Iraq's future unity.

The relations between Israel and the Kurds began in the 1950s and reached their peak in the early 1960s and 1970s. Despite the tragic ending of Iranian support for the Kurds in 1975, which brought an end to the Israeli presence, the relationship left a touch of romantic nostalgia on both sides. Many in Israel identify with the aspirations of the Kurds. Israeli politicians have expressed enthusiastic support of the aspirations of the Kurds for independence before, and, more strongly, during the last referendum. Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, even called for recognition of a Kurdish state on the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan. Sources in the Foreign Ministry claimed that supporting a Kurdish state in Iraqi territory is now an official Israeli policy.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is possible that Kurdish independence is still a far-fetched dream, and that even after the referendum the region will continue to be part of Iraq with all the ensuing implications. In private conversations, Kurdish sources explain that when they obtain independence they will be able to act independently of the Iraqi mother-state, including on

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<sup>1</sup> "[Shaked: 'Openly calling for the establishment of a Kurdish state'](#)," *NRG*, 19 January 2016.

the Israeli issue, implying establishing relations with Israel. However, it is more likely that this has been said to ease the mind of Israelis and to receive support for the Kurdish aspirations for independence. The Kurds believe that Israel has a real influence on the American administration, therefore they put their hope in Israel, especially in light of their failure to convince the world to support their demand for independence so far. Iraqi Shiite politician 'Ammar al-Hakeem mocked the Kurdish intentions before the referendum, saying that "only Israel recognized the Kurdish state."<sup>2</sup>

In 2017 Iraq coped with the most acute crisis in its history with considerable success: a third of its territory was occupied by Daesh. Despite the predictions of various experts, the country has survived and is even more likely to emerge victorious from the fierce confrontation. In the past year the main powerful groups in Iraq held discussions over the image of the state in the post-Daesh era. These are fascinating discussions that may lead to reestablishing the set of understandings that governs Iraq since 2005. Iraq faces many complex internal challenges that it will have to cope with in the coming years: maintaining its unity and stability, its physical rehabilitation, combating terrorism and corruption, and improving the standard of living of its citizens. Under such conditions, it is difficult to imagine Iraq diverting resources and attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it cannot be expected to take any independent steps or play a leading role in the Arab world.

### C. Cooperation between Israel and Iraq

The prospects for a reversal of attitude on the part of the political leadership in Iraq toward Israel are unrealistic at this stage. Iraq's official position oscillates between Iran's radical position and the moderate Arab position in the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative. Even an independent and separate Kurdish state from Iraq, if established, will not be constraint-free with regard to Israel.

The regime in Iraq is very weak and poorly governed. Therefore, any attempt to impose a position on any issue which is not related to Iraq, like the attitude toward Israel, is doomed to failure. However, the situation in Iraq resulting from the 2003 American offensive paves the way for a new approach that has not yet been tried with any other Arab state. This approach includes educating both societies to interact and get acquainted with each other through meetings, promoting cultural ties, and more.<sup>3</sup> This way, the political change, when it happens, will be based on stronger foundations than just Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the Oslo Accords, all of which were signed at the leadership level. Many Iraqis show willingness to follow this path, despite the paralyzing fear.

#### 1. The Jewish Track

Having a large Jewish Iraqi community in Israel can be leveraged to establish future contacts between citizens of both countries. Many Iraqis come to deal with Israel mainly through the somewhat nostalgic context of the Jewish community in Iraq and its bitter end. Sometimes, the Jewish context also serves to justify prohibited contacts with Israeli Jews of Iraqi origin.

<sup>2</sup> "!.كرديستان العراق تتوسط عمار الحكيم لنقل امتنانها لإسرائيل" [Iraqi Kurdistan provokes Amar al-Hakim to convey its gratitude to Israel], *OneIraqNews*, 6 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ronen Zeidel, "[An Alternative Model of Arab-Israeli Encounters](#)," in Nimrod Goren and Jenia Yudkevich (eds.), *Israel and the Arab Spring: Opportunities in Change*, (Ramat Gan: Mitvim - The Israel Institute for Regional Foreign Policy and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013), pp. 90-99.

The second and third generations of the Iraqi community in Israel have also recently shown interest in Iraq and in meetings with Iraqis. Jews who immigrated from Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s still maintain steady contact with Iraqis through social networks. In Iraq, there are those who preserve Jewish heritage sites and show great interest in the Jewish past of their country, while sharing information with Israeli friends. Exiled Iraqis, with foreign passports, are increasingly visiting Israel. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that Israelis of Iraqi origins be included in official and unofficial contacts with Iraq. The Jewish channel opens hearts in the interaction with the Iraqis and creates broad interest and legitimacy that is not always present in other kinds of interactions with Israelis.

Obviously, there are controversies between Iraqi Jews and other Iraqis. Similar to some European countries, controversial demands are made of Iraq. Iraqi Jews want Iraq to apologize for expelling its Jewish population, compensate them for property that was left behind, and restitute their property. Based on past experience, these issues do not usually emerge in informal meetings between Israelis and Iraqis. Even the issue of the "Jewish archive" that Iraq demanded of the US its restitution, while the Iraqi Jewry demanded that it remains in the US, was finally resolved to the satisfaction of the parties. The settlement of the issue happened thanks to the Iraqi ambassador to the US, Luqman al-Fayli,<sup>4</sup> who personally intervened. He also gave the opening address at the Middle East and Africa Studies Association (ASMEA) conference in 2014, which is known for its pro-Israel positions.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, in the absence of a Jewish community in the province, the government official in charge of the Jewish property in the Kurdish government was a non-Jewish Kurd. In late 2017 he resigned due to budgetary problems, and Iraqi officials suggested that a non-Israeli Iraqi Jew be appointed. They also raised the possibility that this person could take care of the many Jewish properties that were left behind in Iraq.

## 2. Economic and Commercial Options

According to the definitions of the Israeli Ministry of Economy,<sup>6</sup> Iraq is not defined as an enemy state. The trade opportunities between Israel and Iraq are numerous. The Kurdish region, the safest area for Israelis, needs investment and development in almost every aspect. The financial and banking systems in this region are very basic and far from meeting the standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the use of credit is limited to large cities, and even that it is not possible everywhere; ATMs are a rare commodity; and the economy is a cash economy that suffers from a permanent shortage of cash coming from Baghdad. An Israeli company that develops an efficient financial and banking system will be received with open arms. The region also suffers from a severe housing shortage that has greatly increased real estate prices in the cities. However, the construction market in the region is controlled exclusively by Turkish companies and it is unlikely that an Israeli entrepreneur will succeed in competing with them.

Two types of trade activities with the Kurdish region receive special attention: defense and oil exports. As far as security is concerned, Israel has assisted in the past with the training

<sup>4</sup> After being processed and presented in the US, the "archive" is due to be returned to Iraq in 2018. The disqualified Torah scrolls were buried in Washington at a ceremony attended by representatives of the Iraqi Jewish community and diplomats from the Iraqi embassy. For details see: Saed Salum, "سعد سلوم، ما الذي يعترض عودة الأرشيف إلى العراق.", [Who opposes the return of the archive to Iraq], *ankawa*, 30 September 2017.

<sup>5</sup> ASMEA, "Special remarks by ambassador Lukman al-Fayli," 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, 30 October-1 November 2014.

<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the Israeli Foreign Ministry still sees Iraq as an enemy state, a situation that makes it very difficult for Iraqi (Arab and Kurdish) visitors to Israel. Having double definition makes it difficult to advance the ties.



of the Peshmerga forces, especially those that subordinate to Mas'ud Barzani. Currently, these forces stationed in a front line to stop Daesh do not need training but weapons. These weapons are supplied, to some extent, by the West. The Kurdish forces have no armored corps nor air force. In the present context, extended military aid to the Kurds will involve Israel in a complicated internal Arab-Kurdish conflict and is therefore not recommended. The second type of trade is oil exports. The oil fields in the Kurdish region are controlled, almost exclusively, by Turkey, from which a very modest amount of Kurdish oil is exported. In principle, the Kurds cannot export oil themselves. Any attempt to do so will encounter economic sanctions from Baghdad and lack of cooperation on the part of the buyer countries, who do not wish to jeopardize their ties with Baghdad. In principle, Israel does not need Kurdish oil and when it agreed in the past to store Kurdish oil in Ashqelon it was no more than a gesture for the Kurds. However, the unverified information we have deals with relatively large oil transactions with the Kurdish region that sells oil to Israel at a price lower than the market price.<sup>7</sup> At the end of 2017, most Kurdish oil fields in dispute were re-occupied by the Baghdadi government. If the current situation continues, the prospects to potentially cooperate in the security and oil sectors are not significant.

Similar to other developing countries, the Kurdish region needs investments in various infrastructure, especially in banking and communications. Similarly, the Kurdish region will also find it difficult to pay for such infrastructure, due to lack of cash and a different business culture. Therefore, it looks like there are business opportunities for Israel. Statements made by Israeli politicians in support of Kurdish independence were highly appreciated by the Kurdish public. In addition, the Kurds are free of the nationalist and religious ideological inhibitions that govern the attitude of the Iraqi Arabs toward Israel, who on the personal level show great friendly sentiments toward Israelis and Israel. However, it is important to note that the region, led by former President Barzani, is fully dependent on a Turkey that is ruled by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Other Kurdish parties in the region are very close to Iran, who is very influential in the east part of the region. Israel is not present at any of the levels – political, economic or cultural – in the region. If it tries to become economically active, for example, it will find that it has to contend with other countries and that the economic gain, in any case, are minimal.

As for the rest of Iraq, trade with Israel is negligible. This is despite the great potential in various sectors, as will be detailed further below. Arab Iraq has many problems and a lot of money. It does not need massive security assistance, since its security forces are now highly skilled as a result of their fight against the threats at hand. The military engineering forces, who had previously suffered from shortage of equipment to dismantle explosive devices, have closed the gap. However, the capital of Baghdad is still very vulnerable to painful attacks and in the past the equipment quality of the forces conducting security checks in the city was criticized. Israeli companies that provide effective and sophisticated equipment for security checks may find interest in addressing this gap.

Referring to the situation following the recent defeat of Daesh, Prime Minister al-'Abadi said that Iraq was debating how to go about the events in the Syrian border. In other words, it debates how to close the border. The issue has not yet been considered and it is not clear what the border will look like. The separation wall between Israel and the occupied territories

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<sup>7</sup> ["The majority of oil to Israel comes from Iraq,"](#) *Ynet*, 24 August 2015; Dov Friedman and Gabriel Mitchell, ["Israel is Challenging America to Support Kurdish Independence,"](#) *The New Republic*, 3 July 2014.

can be used as a model and Israeli companies may be able to participate in this project either as implementors or advisors.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Opportunities in the Sector of Agriculture

Agriculture is a sector with great potential for bilateral exports and imports. Like the Israelis, the Iraqis became big consumers of poultry. However, Iraq's large breeding farms suffer from water shortages that cause chicken deaths. Israeli knowledge can help address this problem. The two countries can supply poultry meat to one another, thus avoid shortages and soaring prices. Iraq is known for growing its palm trees. Until recently, Iraq was the world's largest exporter of dates which is an Iraqi traditional crop that is common in southern Iraq. However, this industry has been seriously challenged for several decades: the Iraq-Iran war led to the cutting down of palm groves in the central growing region and to severe soil pollution; later, Iraq was exposed to the palm beetle that destroyed many groves in other large areas.

In Israel, on the other hand, palm growing and consumption are steadily increasing. The combination of Israeli knowledge (especially in fighting the beetle and in providing agricultural equipment for date harvesting) with growing date species that are unique to Iraq (Barhee-type dates, for example, which is cultivated in Israel in limited quantities and is very expensive or Khastawi-type dates that is unknown in Israel) may help both countries. In addition, in recent years, Iraq started growing pond fish, while the Iraqi population consumes a lot of freshwater fish (in Basra they also eat sea fish). The Israeli experience in this sector is broader than that of Iraq and may help the Iraqi farmers with establishing marine breeding farms in the Gulf. Iraq can also supply Israel with fish species that are known only to the older Iraqi Jews.

Kurdish agriculture suffers from many problems and the region in question was forced to import its food from Turkey and Iran. The extensive destruction of the agricultural areas, especially during the Anfal genocide and chemical attacks of the late 1980s and the Daesh attacks in 2014,<sup>9</sup> led to the abandonment of villages and accelerated the phenomenon of desertification. Simultaneously, there are millions of refugees from other areas in Iraq who add to the challenge of population growth and the shortage of food. Israeli knowledge of agricultural crops, especially plantation crops and desertification, is highly essential.

### 4. Tourism

If and when there is significant improvement in the domestic security situation in Iraq – not only by eliminating political terrorism, but also the dealing with the rising criminal violence, such as murdering and kidnapping in order to demand ransom from foreign businessmen – it will be possible to leverage the unique potential for Israeli-Iraqi Jews to visit Iraqi sites which may also develop to include traditional and religious tourism. Iraq is the burial place of five of Israel's prophets: Ezekiel, Ezra, Jonah, Daniel, and Nahum (buried in Kurdish-controlled territory). Their burial sites are still used as active religious sites, and Israeli rabbis have expressed interest in renewing visits to these sites. If the town of Uman in Ukraine can

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<sup>8</sup> On the Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iraq, see Roi Kais, "[Together against Iran: The affair between Saudi Arabia and Iraq](#)", *Ynet*, 21 August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The actions of the Iraqi army against the Kurdish population in late 1988 that caused the death of 182,000 people and the destruction of more than 4,000 villages and settlements.

attract mass tourism from Israel, why would not the Shiite town of Chifl to the south of Baghdad, where the prophet Ezekiel is buried?

## 5. Additional Areas

During conversations with Iraqis, it appears that Iraq expects non-direct Israeli cooperation and assistance with infrastructure-related matters. The Iraqis expect Israel to persuade Western countries to improve Iraq's bad credit rating and invest in infrastructure projects, such as the railway from Basra to Europe and to the port of Aqaba. Iraq also needs assistance with automating the various state systems. The mobile market in Iraq has grown rapidly in recent years and requires a supportive infrastructure. The banking system needs upgrading. The oil economy, a centralized and computerized system, is also likely to benefit from Israeli knowledge. It is important to emphasize that Iraq is not a poor country. It is the second largest oil producer in the world after Saudi Arabia and has renewable oil reserves. The Iraqi economy is abundant with money. Entrepreneurs who invest in Iraq, and who manage to deal with corruption and security problems, can draw considerable gains.

Interestingly, Iraqis also note intelligence as a possible area of cooperation with Israel. Iraqi military intelligence (al-Istikhbarat al-'Askariya) became the world's most important factor in fighting against Daesh. It is a state institution working in cooperation with Western intelligence agencies. The security service (al-Mukhabarat) headed by Mustafa al-Kathimi, a member of the Ahmad al-Chalabi group and a pro-American figure, may agree to covert cooperation with the Israeli intelligence services. The Iraqis are interested in information about regional terror networks but also on Iran. However, it is still too early to begin cooperation with regard to Iran, due to the sensitive intelligence sources, but it may be possible to cooperate on terror prevention.

## 6. Which Interactions Do Take Place?

Despite the potential described above, as far as I know, there is no cooperation, either directly or through a third party, to report about between Arab Iraq and Israel. It is interesting that Arab businessmen in Israel, who import products from many Arab countries, including Syria and Lebanon, which are still considered enemy countries, ignore Iraq. Apparently, these businessmen have not yet established business and commercial ties with the relevant counterparts in Iraq.

In recent months an interesting phenomenon was noticed on social networks: Many Iraqis, as well as popular Iraqi sites, express clear pro-Israel positions, calling for the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>10</sup> Those who express these views usually identify by their real name. Such attitude may be explained by the hatred that Iraqis feel toward Palestinians, Arab states (particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia), and Iran. Quite a few expressed positive attitudes toward Israel and mentioned the benefits that Iraq will derive from establishing relations with her. According to official figures from the Foreign Ministry, which were delivered in September 2017 at a Hasbara conference in Arabic, about one-third of the users of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Facebook page in Arabic are Iraqis and almost all of them, as opposed to other Arab users, express positive attitudes towards

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<sup>10</sup> Among the many examples, see Adnan Abu Zeed, "[Iraqi citizens' sentiment may be softening toward Israel](#)," *Al-Monitor*, 27 September 2017; For an Israeli article that calls for a reexamination of the question of relations between the two countries, see Jackie Hogi, "[Israel and Iraq: Let's Talk About It](#)," *Maariv*, 23 September 2017.

Israel. These attitudes also permeate to the ranks of Iraqi intellectuals both in Iraq and abroad, but have yet to affect the country's political leadership. It is still too early to assess the implications of this phenomenon. It may be limited to social media outlets, which in this case serve as a refuge for opinions that should not be made public. It is also possible that this is another expression of the unique public opinion of certain Iraqis, that is influenced by the special conditions of this country, who try, in an exceptional way, to change the attitude toward Israel from below.

#### **D. The Impact of Israel's Conflicts with the Palestinian in the Region on the Relations between Israel and Iraq**

Iraq is an Arab state whose position is almost unaffected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict is irrelevant for the Kurdish region and has little relevance in Arab Iraq. The Iraqi position moves between the Arab pole of al-'Abadi (with the Sunnis and the moderate Shiites), who supports the Arab peace initiative, to the more radical Iranian pole. In general, the issue does not concern policy makers in Iraq at all. From the Iraqi point of view, the "conflict" can be divided into three sub-themes: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli-Arab conflict, and the Israeli-Iranian conflict.

Iraq is showing little interest or involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Shiite Iraqi public does not demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian people and still treat the Palestinians as supporters of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th. Palestinians have been involved in several suicide bombings in Iraq and the Shiites often mention this, using exaggerated numbers of suicide bombers. Demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinians took place after 2003 in the Sunni city of Mosul, but it is not expected that the residents of this battered city continue to do so after their liberation from Daesh; rather, they are expected to focus on rebuilding their lives. Officially, Iraq passively supports the Palestinian Authority and it has no relations with Hamas. Support for the Palestinian Authority is carried out with reservations, because the Iraqis remember well the positions of the PLO during Saddam Hussein's rule and the fact that PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas spent many years in Iraq as Saddam Hussein's guest. Many Iraqis see the Palestinians as Saddam Hussein's supporters and feel resentment.

Therefore, it is not expected that the worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would lead to a change in Iraq's position or that it would try to prevent progress in the negotiations to resolve the conflict, when they take place. Progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will not in itself lead to an improvement in relations with Iraq unless it leads to an improvement with all the Arab states in the spirit of the Arab peace initiative. On the other hand, an improvement in Israeli-Iraqi relations, in isolation from progress with the Palestinian issue, which is unlikely in the present situation, will have no effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians are not dependent on Iraq economically or politically.

The position of Iraq led by al-'Abadi on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict was reflected in the Iraqi support for the Arab peace initiative and its attempt to woo the Gulf states and Jordan. As already mentioned, Iraq will not initiate any move on the Israeli issue and will not necessarily engage in such a move if it is initiated. The group of the Sunni states, led by the Gulf states, are still quite reserved about Iraq and do not share their intentions with her. Only the Lebanese issue is likely to shake Iraq's indifference off. A renewed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, after a period of relative calm, could lead to expressions of anti-Israel

sentiments, especially among the Shiites and those close to Iran, although such a protest is not expected to be accompanied by actions.

The 2018 elections introduced a new unknown: al-Sadr. His views on Israel are far more extreme than those of al-'Abadi. Even if some of his party's candidates are secular and moderate, it is reasonable to assume that they will not lead the Sa'irun party, and certainly not with regard to Israel. al-Sadr and the hard core of its supporters will continue to oppose moves such as the transfer of the American embassy to Jerusalem or interfering with the status-quo of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The question is whether, as part of a coalition with al-'Abadi and others, when the priority is explicitly given to rebuilding Iraq and getting closer to the Sunni bloc, the anti-Israeli protest will be limited to demonstrations. Chances are that it will. It is clear that a government led by the pro-Iranian camp will completely change the situation. Iran may then use its influence in Iraq to send troops to Syria through Iraq to achieve the territorial contiguity it aspires to. In such a situation, Israel will not be able to supervise the transfer of Iranian and Iraqi troops and equipment to Syria.

The most important factor in figuring out the Iraqi position toward Israel is the Israeli-Iranian conflict. Iran is acquiring allies in Iraq through whom it gains influence. However, this influence is also limited in Shiite politics and even in the Shiite Iraqi world, which rejects the political theology underlying the Islamic Republic of Iran. Contrary to the prevailing position, Iraq is not, and is not expected to be, an Iranian patronage state. The Shiite hegemony in Iraq creates an affiliation to Iran which raises serious concerns in Iraq. Al-'Abadi and his political allies (al-Sadr, the Sunnis, the moderate Shiites, and to some extent the Kurds) are politically, ideologically and religiously far from Iran. His rivals, al-Maliki, al-'Ameri, and several of the al-Hashd al-Sha'bi militias,<sup>11</sup> are supported by Iran. They, too, will not oppose Iran with regard to Israel. The degree of extremism in relation to Israel depends, to a large extent, on the question of which of the camps forms the next government.

## **E. Recommendations for Israeli Policy Change towards Iraq**

What should be Israel's expectations from Iraq and what should it do about it? First of all, Israel needs to formulate a policy regarding this important country. With its 39 million citizens, Iraq is the largest Arab state east of Israel. The days of the Iraqi expeditionary forces and the threat of Saddam Hussein's missiles have passed forever. The official Israeli position toward Iraq is as a "failed state", an "artificial" state that is about to disappear, or as a territory under Iranian patronage. Israel's indifference toward Iraq cannot be a substitute for clear policy. In such a case, Iraq remains the focus of regional violence, which has a negative impact on all countries in the region, including Israel. Strengthening the pro-Iranian Shiites in Iraq could bring to life the nightmare of the "Shiite Crescent" in the Middle East. Without Iraq, Iran controls only small Shiite enclaves in the region. A complete Iranian control over Iraqi politics may, in the medium term, erode the young Iraqi democratic and parliamentary systems and even bring in figures from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's ideological influence in the Middle East will thus increase.

Officially, Israel recognizes the Kurdish region in Iraq while ignoring most of the country. Why does Israel ignore Iraqi Arabs? Is the Israeli behavior in the Iraqi-Kurdish case similar

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<sup>11</sup> This refers mainly to the "Hezbollah-Iraq" militias, and to a certain extent, to 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq. The other forces of suspicion are the result of popular mobilization for patriotic reasons, in June 2014 following the call of the Iran opponent senior cleric Ali Sistani to fight Daesh. These forces have not yet been institutionalized.



to the Israeli policy on the Armenian-Azeri issue? Israel regards Azerbaijan as a strategic partner, partly because this country supplies most of Israel's oil. Therefore, Israeli policy tends to favor the Azeri side in its conflict with Armenia, even though the latter has diplomatic relations with Israel. Even if the information regarding the large oil deals between Israel and the Kurdish region is finally confirmed, this does not justify the Israeli disregard for Iraqi Arabs. Israel does not need Kurdish oil, despite its apparently tempting prices. Moreover, the supply of Kurdish oil is completely dependent on Turkish consent, and Turkey is liable to interrupt the flow. It is therefore preferable to continue to purchase oil from a strategically recognized and important country such as Azerbaijan.

In the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, official Israel insists on seeing the new Iraq as the successor of the hostile state under the Ba'th regime, and the regimes preceding it. This may be the main reason for the sweeping support for the independence of the Kurdish region in Iraq. In the current situation, this is antithetical to the periphery policy, which at the time was intended mainly to harm Arab countries such as Iraq and Syria. Support for the Kurds right now is intended to weaken more prominent regional rivals: Iran and Turkey. Paradoxically, by supporting the rights of the Kurdish minority,<sup>12</sup> Israel allows Iran control the center of this large and important state. Israeli support for Kurdish aspirations for independence raises great concern among Iraqi Arabs who would like their country to remain united. Iran and its supporters are already taking advantage of that to provoke anti-Israeli sentiments and to denounce those who express different positions as traitors.

Developments in Iraq in recent years contradict the prevailing working assumptions among decision makers in Israel, who maintain that the Middle East is divided into Shiite and Sunni blocs. Iraq has Shiite dominance, but under Prime Minister al-'Abadi, it made every effort to belong to the Sunni Arab camp. This camp, for its own reasons, is not always willing to accept Iraq, who, for that reason, often finds itself in regional isolation. This situation pushes the Iraqis to seek their unique identity in the Middle Eastern space, instead of assimilating into Arab or Shiite space. The clear Israeli interest is that Iraq be part of the Sunni camp or that it remains in regional isolation, since this way it will not be influenced by Iran.

The Israeli interest is to see a normal, self-rehabilitating Iraq, guaranteeing an adequate standard of living for all its citizens, devoting national energy to rehabilitation rather than nationalist militarism and oppression, and turning into a country where fear and violence are eradicated. Such an Iraq is necessarily Shiite. Israel must hope for the dominance of the moderate Shiite, anti-Iranian and pro-Western stream. At this stage, it is too early to assess whether an Iraqi prime minister with such characteristics would agree to accept a secret message from Israel congratulating him for the success of the Iraqi army in defeating Daesh or expressing condolences after mass casualty attacks. It may be possible to settle for messages to the Iraqi people through social media channels. In February 2018, the Foreign Ministry issued for the first time a message of condolences, addressed to "Iraq" following a major attack in Tiran Square in Baghdad. The message was received with great enthusiasm by Iraqis on social networks. Even an open official message of friendly sentiments to the Iraqi people, on Israeli web sites in Arabic for example, will also be welcome.

Due to the weakness of the Iraqi state, especially after 2003, Iraq offers a different framework of closer relations with Israel. Instead of prioritizing contacts with the political elite, as was done with all other Arab countries (and then encounter the most hostile public

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<sup>12</sup> The Kurds make up 5 million of Iraq's 39 million inhabitants.

opinion, such as in the case of Egypt and Jordan), it is possible now to first interact directly with the people: through social networks, public Skype talks with Iraqis, direct encounters, and so on. The large Jewish community that lived in Iraq in the past enables the deepening of ties between the descendants of those Jews and many Iraqis who yearn to know the Jewish past of their country. Iraq can be like Morocco and Tunisia, an Arab country that attracts Jewish religious tourism (to the tombs of the prophets Ezekiel, Ezra, Jonah, Nahum and Daniel) and genealogy tourism. Israel, for its part, can attract Muslim religious tourism to holy sites of Islam, Christian pilgrims from Iraq and even Shiite tourism, for example to a site where according to one tradition the head of Imam Hussein (the Imam of Shia) was buried, at the Barzilai Hospital in Ashkelon. Another channel that has not yet been tried is that of medical tourism from Iraq to Israel via a third country such as Jordan.

There is another difference between Iraq and the other Arab countries: it has always had a Shiite majority. After 2003, the Shiite majority gained political hegemony, and Iraq became the only Arab state ruled by the Shiites. Having different ethnic roots than the rest of the Arab states, Iraq tends to differentiate itself and prefer its territorial nationalism over pan-Arab issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue. These feelings are shared by the entire Iraqi population but are particularly prominent among the Shiites. The desire to make contact with Israel and Israelis comes from Iraqis of all ethnic groups and nationalities: about 500,000 of the users of the Foreign Ministry website in Arabic, "Israel speaks Arabic" (one-third of the total number of users) are Iraqis and usually express friendly messages to Israel.

As for the possibility of a Kurdish declaration of independence, which seems very distant now, Israel has the right to have its own position on the issue. However, Israel must demand, as a condition for recognition, that the Kurdish state – if and when it is established – maintains full diplomatic relations with Israel, including having embassies and allowing free tourism. Israel should carefully follow the moves of the Kurds and recognize their state only if it becomes clear that the way leading to its establishment is paved and agreed upon by all parties in Iraq. Israel should refrain from unilateral statements on controversial issues, such as the status of Kirkuk and the buffer zones between Iraq and the Kurdish region. Israel must not encourage the Kurds to take reckless steps, for example, by making promises of support or lobbying the Americans. Israel should monitor the effect of the moves regarding the Kurdish issue on other groups in the region and on the regional system. The pro-Kurdish lobby, which succeeded in obtaining a declaration from the Israeli prime minister in favor of Kurdish independence, created on the one hand the appearance of an unbalanced Israeli position in Iraq and even interference in its internal affairs, while on the other hand, it created false hopes for practical Israeli support. Experts and commentators who predicted, and still predict, the dismantling of Iraq, also caused damage.

Israel must make it clear that its support for a Kurdish state, if announced, does not support the dismantling of Arab Iraq. Israel can and should make decisions of symbolic significance to the Kurds: for example, having the Knesset and Yad Vashem recognize the terrible massacre (known as the "Anfal") that Saddam Hussein waged against the Kurds in 1988 as genocide, and extending assistance to the Kurds. Cultural, linguistic, and academic cooperation will also contribute to fostering friendship between the two peoples. However, even if Iraqi Kurdistan declares its independence, currently a distant possibility, Iraq, whose capital is Baghdad and where Arabic-speaking Iraqis live, will still remain. This part, where most Iraqis live, should be discovered by Israel.

As explained in the article, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not central to Iraq's relations with Israel. Therefore, even if progress is made towards resolving the conflict, this will not guarantee the improvement of relations with Iraq. Both Israel and the Palestinians ignore Iraq, and Iraq will coordinate its policy on the issue with the other Arab states and play a secondary role. Israel's total disregard of the political, economic and commercial aspects of Iraq (and official Iraqi disregard for Israel) stems from the preservation of outdated ways of thinking on both sides. On the Israeli side, Iraq is a hostile country. Iraq, for its part, has a hard time disengaging itself from the Arab and Iranian embrace. In addition, its economy and regional orientation continue to lean toward the Gulf and not eastward towards the Mediterranean and Israel.