

## **Israel-Iraq Relations: Opportunities to Advance Cooperation**

### **Workshop Summary**

**August 2018**

**On 17 May 2018 the Mitvim Institute held a workshop on Israel-Iraq relations, based on a research by Dr. Ronen Zeidel, which was conducted as part of Mitvim's project of the unfulfilled potential of Israel's relations with Arab countries. The workshop took place just after the general elections in Iraq, and featured Dr. Ronen Zeidel, Linda Menuhin and Idan Barir. The discussion focused on Iraq's internal processes, the complexities of the Iraqi state, Israel's relations with the Kurdish region, strategic and economic interests of Israel in connection with Iraq, the opportunities emerging from the growing civic interactions between Israelis and Iraqis, and the possibility of establishing future economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries. This document summarizes the main points of the discussion, but does not necessarily reflect an agreement between all participants.**

#### **A. The state of Iraq is in the process of rebuilding**

Following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq not only lost its independence, but also the existential infrastructure of an independent and sovereign modern state. In recent years, we have witnessed the rebuilding of the Iraqi state, which is reflected in an increasing preoccupation with domestic affairs, together with growing ongoing opposition to external interference, including the Iranian involvement. The local young leadership that is growing in Iraq slowly replaces the incumbent leadership, which is based on former exiles and the old guard. The process of state rebuilding allows greater freedom of expression for diverse positions, even with regards to Israel.

#### **B. An opportunity for a positive civic link between Israel and Iraq**

Iraqi society is relatively open, therefore anyone interested in being in contact with Israel or with Israelis can find the ways to do so. However, most of the interactions are currently taking place with the more educated population in Iraq, notably the younger among them. For those who are in their forties or older, it is harder to leave behind previous positions toward Israel, but it seems that young people are not bound by such positions and are less fearful. Nevertheless, this population group does not constitute the majority of the Iraqi population, which is characterized by great diversity and includes also marginal and extremist groups. It must be recalled that the masses of the Iraqi people have been exposed to incitement against Israel for 70 years, so that those who are in contact with Israel are often subjected to a substantial threat.

Still, compared to other Arab countries, there is room for optimism regarding possible ties with the Iraqi people. A recent survey conducted in Arab countries by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) showed that in Iraq there is a more positive attitude towards Israel than in the other that were surveyed. This was also the case in a previous survey. Young people in Iraq seem to be able to imagine an Israeli embassy in Iraq instead of or alongside

the embassies of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, the MFA is investing greater efforts than it did in the past in developing contacts with Iraqi citizens, and encourages, among other things, the arrival of delegations of Iraqi opinion leaders to Israel in order to expand and enhance the positive attitude towards Israel in Iraq.

New technologies allow the MFA to promote interactions with young Iraqis. Since 2011 the MFA operates an official Facebook web page by the name "Israel Speaks Arabic", that has 400,000 Iraqi followers (second to Egypt) out of a total of one million and a half, most of which are aged between 18 and 35. The activity of the Iraqi followers on this page was particularly positive in comparison with that of youngsters from other Arab countries. Against this backdrop, the MFA recently launched a new Facebook page aimed specifically at the Iraqi public called: "Israel in Iraqi-Arabic". This page has gained 16,000 followers and 2 million views (a third of them from Baghdad) already in its first 10 days.

Ties between Iraqis and Israelis also takes place between intellectuals. Some Iraqi authors, for example, ask that their books be translated into Hebrew and be published in this language. This is a rare thing in the Arab world. Furthermore, there are Iraqi researchers who are being interviewed for radio networks in Israel, and there were Iraqi journalists who visited Israel. There are also interviews of Israelis of Iraqi origins (Including the authors Eli Amir and Sami Michael), and there are connections between Israeli and Iraqi artists and intellectuals who live in Europe.

The relatively positive attitude of Iraqi population groups towards Israel, along with the technological means that allow interactions between citizens, allow to explore the promotion of bottom-up relations between Israel and Iraq – first establish a positive and good relationship on the civic level, which will later seep into the political echelons and change the diplomatic relations between the two countries, based on a strong foundation of contact between the peoples.

### **C. The need to update Israel's policy toward Iraq**

The prevailing perception of Iraq in Israel is far from reality. Some still attribute to Iraq the same positions dating back to the era of Saddam Hussein; others see Iraq as an Iranian marionette; and there are those who refer to Iraq as an artificial state that is not viable after it collapsed with the fall of Saddam Hussein. To this, we should add the Israeli desire to align with the Kurds in northern Iraq, Israel's historic allies.

It seems that since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has ceased to be of interest to the Israeli public, since it does not pose any major military threat to the existence of the Israeli state. The Israeli eyes are turned now to the Iranian threat from the east. Indeed, given the new circumstances in Iraq, it offers far more chances and opportunities for Israel as compared to other countries in the region, even if there are certain dangers to Israel that may arise from the reality in Iraq.

The romanticizing of the relations between Israel and the Kurdish region is another challenge Israel faces when interacting with Iraq. This attitude is based on long-standing security ties, which included, inter alia, the activity of Mossad advisors in northern Iraq until 2006, and oil trade (stolen from Iraq). While Iraq is beginning to conduct itself as a democracy, the Kurdish region does still not operate as such. Israel must work on formulating an inclusive policy toward Iraq, while establishing good relations with both the

Kurdish region and the Iraqi state. Israel should not focus only on its relations with the Kurdish region. Continuing with the current policy, as expressed in Israel's recent public support for Kurdish independence, would eliminate the prospects of establishing good relations with the state of Iraq. The MFA understands that, and tries to maneuver between the two fronts simultaneously, rather than deal only with one at the expense of the other.

The main Israeli interest with regard to Iraq is that it will become a stable and normal state without Iranian involvement, which will establish good relations with Israel. There are signs of intelligence cooperation between the two countries, intended to serve this interest. However, in order to promote the prospects of realizing this interest, the Israeli law that defines Iraq as an enemy state and prevents any type of cooperation with it, must be changed. The exclusion of the Kurdish region in the north – as promoted by MK Ksenia Svetlova – is a first step but is not enough. This step might also be harmful, if not accompanied by an action targeting Iraq as a whole. It is necessary to change the definition of the entire Iraqi territory as an enemy state, and to allow those who are interested to obtain entry visas to the country. The attempt to exclude only economic activity, while denying entry of Israelis into Iraq poses difficulties and obstacles, including to Iraqis who are interested and ready to visit Israel.

#### **D. Opportunities for economic ties with Iraq**

Iraq is not a poor country, and it provides many business opportunities. Although Israel focuses mainly on economic relations with the Kurdish region, Israeli companies and investors must also take into account Iraq as a relevant economic market. However, we should not forget that Iraq is not yet stable politically and economically, and that this makes it difficult for foreign investors to enter the country. Israel should be particularly interested in the entry of western investors to Iraq, who would help push the Iranian presence away.

On the part of the Iraqis, there is an expectation that Israel will be able to help open doors and bring investments from international bodies and institutions to Iraq. There is also the expectation that Israel will be ready to provide international aid to Iraq when necessary, even if it is done secretly and without Israeli identification signs. For example, Israel established a trauma center for Yazidi children and women in the northern Kurdish region, and provided assistance, while hiding its Israeli origin, to the victims of the earthquake in Iraq. There is also the idea of establishing an unofficial Internet medical community in Arabic, which will also help diabetic patients in Iraq (a common disease in the country). Such a move will also converge with potential efforts to develop medical tourism from Iraq in Israel, as was done with Jordan. The activity of "[Save a Child's Heart](#)" (an Israeli-based international humanitarian project), for example, has sparked positive echoes in Iraq.

#### **E. The Jewish component of the Israeli-Iraqi relationship**

The Jewish component plays an important role in the development of Israeli-Iraqi relations, and Jews of Iraqi origins form a bridgehead to establish civic ties. In Iraq, a significant change in the attitudes toward Jews has been observed, and today there is a positive attitude and even longing for the Iraqi Jewish community. For example, the Iraqis repeatedly mention the Jewish finance minister who served in the 1930s, as a counter-example of the corruption that prevails in Iraq today. In addition, in the 1950s, leading Iraqi musicians, whose songs are still very popular in Iraq, migrated to Israel. There are translations of books that tell the story of the Iraqi Jewry, and Hebrew language and literature are studied at the

university in Baghdad. The Iraqi Ministry of Culture granted sponsorship to events in Europe that dealt with the Jews of Iraq (for example, screening Linda Menuhin's film "[Shadow in Baghdad](#)"). Iraq has a kind of brotherhood that connects all those who suffered under the rule of Saddam Hussein, including the Jews. Muqtada al-Sadr, the most prominent political and religious leader in Iraq today, represents this approach. He has an unusual voice in the Iraqi political system, which refers favorably to Iraqi Jews, and even called them "Iraqi patriots." Even among the Jewish-Iraqi community in Israel there is a longing for and connection with culture, history, and Jewish-Iraqi identity, which include actions to preserve the Iraqi language (reflected in more than 60,000 followers of a designated Facebook page).

## **F. The impact of the Palestinian issue on Israel-Iraq relations**

Following Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein and following the belief in Iraq – which has not been proven – that about 1,500 Palestinians blew themselves up in terror attacks in Iraq, Iraqis are currently antagonized with regards to the Palestinians, and sometimes even express hatred towards them, although in the past Iraq had long supported their struggle. In Iraqi public discourse, this is sometimes expressed in statements of support of Israel in its struggle against the Palestinians. However, Iraq is part of the Arab League, and as such it supports the Arab Peace Initiative and the official Arab position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Under current circumstances, no change in the Iraqi position and no willingness to establish formal ties with Israel is expected. However, one must remember that the Palestinian issue is not the focus of Iraqi politics nor of its public discourse, as it may have been in the past. The Iraqi public now focuses on the country's domestic affairs and challenges. Therefore, Iraq should not be expected to take a leading role in any initiative dealing with the Palestinian issue, and the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the potential ties between Israel and Iraq is limited, when compared to other Arab countries.