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### Abstract

Israel's relations with the surrounding countries have generally been explained concerning the Arab-Israel dispute or with Israel's famous periphery doctrine. It is unknown whether the concept of the peripheral strategy still dominates the minds of the Israeli political elite. However, significant changes have been shaping the Middle East; Iraq is no longer an important enemy, and in some parts of it, the Kurdish Regional Government exists, a friendly entity for Israel. Moreover, regional instability and security needs compel the Jewish state to find new friends in the Middle East, and a friendly Kurdish state would enable Israel to live easier in the Middle East. In the foreseeable future, the Kurdish Regional Government will be an essential partner for Israel, and for Kurdish Regional Government, Israel will be a significant role model for it. Furthermore, this article explores the future developments in the relations between Israel and Kurdish Regional Government.

**Keywords:** *Israel, Kurds, Middle East, Periphery, Foreign Policy.*

### Özet

İsrail'in komşu ve çevre devletlerle ilişkileri genellikle Arap-İsrail anlaşmazlığı veya İsrail'in ünlü Çevreleme Doktrini üzerinden açıklanmıştır. Çevreleme Doktrini'nin İsrail siyasi seçkinlerinin zihinlerine hâlâ hâkim olup olmadığı bilinmemektedir. Bununla birlikte, önemli değişiklikler Orta Doğu'yu şekillendirmektedir; Irak artık İsrail açısından önemli bir düşman değildir ve bazı bölgelerinde İsrail'e dost olan bir Bölgesel Kürt Yönetimi bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca bölgesel istikrarsızlık ve güvenlik ihtiyacı, Yahudi devletine coğrafi çevresine yakın devletlerin arasında alternatif dostlar edinmekten başka pek bir seçenek bırakmamaktadır ve dost bir Kürt devletinin İsrail'in Orta Doğu'da kolayca yaşamasını sağlayacağı açıktır.

Görünen o ki, yakın gelecekte Bölgesel Kürt Yönetimi İsrail için önemli bir ortak ve Bölgesel Kürt Yönetimi için de İsrail önemli bir rol model olacaktır. Bu makale de İsrail ve Bölgesel Kürt Yönetimi arasındaki ilişkilerdeki olası gelişmeleri araştırmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *İsrail, Kürtler, Orta Doğu, Çevresel, Dış Politika.*

## I. Introduction

In August 2015, it was reported that Israel supplied almost three-quarters of its oil need from Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). KRG denied the reports, and declared that it did not sell oil to Israel "directly or indirectly," while Israel did not comment on the source of its oil supplies (Haaretz, 2015). On the other hand, since 2014, public statements by senior Israeli officials (Mandel, 2017) have propelled many people to write op-eds and papers about the presumed notion that KRG could be Israel's new friend in the Middle East (Kedar, 2014). Although Iraq does not recognize and has no official ties with Israel, Iraqi Kurds' affiliation with Israel is a well-known truth. Israeli pronouncements supporting Kurdish independence might be largely symbolic; however, it is clear that these developments have sparked new interest in the "special relationship" that Israel maintains with KRG.

Since 2003, significant geopolitical developments have taken place in Iraq. Some areas of north of Iraq has been recognized as Kurdistan and as a federal region in the Constitution of Iraq which was adopted in 2005 (Constitute Project, 2005). As such the regional government in the north identifies itself as Kurdistan Regional Government as seen in their official website (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2022b). KRG has come out to be a de facto state in the new federation, and has been operating almost without any direct link to the central government for more than a decade. The chain of events has encouraged a desire for independence among Kurds of Iraq. In this sense, KRG has flourished its relations with international organizations, many countries and with Israel as well. On the other hand, an independent, cooperative and non-Arab Kurdish State would be more than a welcome development for Israel. In this regard, the prospect of an independent KRG and its friendly relations with Israel remind us Oded Yinon's plan for the Middle East designed in the 1980s and David Ben-Gurion's periphery strategy.

Both Yinon's plan and periphery strategy were designed to be pursued for Israel's survival in a hostile environment. Part of Yinon's plan was to affect the division of the Middle East into ethnic or sectarian states by the dissolution of the Arab states. As for Iraq, Yinon

told that

*“In addition there is a large Kurdish minority in the north, and if it weren’t for the strength of the ruling regime, the army and the oil revenues, Iraq’s future state would be no different than that of Lebanon in the past or of Syria today... Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel’s targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria... In Iraq, a division into provinces along ethnic/religious lines as in Syria during Ottoman times is possible. So, three (or more) states will exist around the three major cities: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, and Shi’ite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni and Kurdish north” (Yinon, 1982).*

According to the plan, Iraq was supposed to be broken down into three units which are the Shi’ite state in the south, the Sunni state in the middle and the Kurdish state in the North. On the other hand, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has sparked new interest in the article, which was viewed as a road plan to the fragmentation of Iraq as per Israeli scenario. At the same time, for the Kurds of Iraq, Yinon’s plan was also in accordance with David Ben-Gurion’s periphery strategy. He argued that “it is possible that through contacts with the peoples of the outer zone of the area (Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia) we shall achieve friendship with the peoples of the inner zone, who are our immediate neighbors” (Sobhani, 1989: 34). According to Ben-Gurion, his strategy would also include the improvement of relations with ethnic or religious minorities in Arab countries, which were mainly the Christians in Sudan and the Kurds in Iraq (Guzansky, 2014: 102). The main aim of this policy would be having as many friends as possible to protect itself from surrounding hostile neighbours and to break the circle of Arab enmity (Shlaim, 2011: 195). In truth, the impossibility of making peace with the neighboring Arab governments drove Israel to forge links with the peripheral non-Arab states and non-Arab minorities like the Kurds. Ben-Gurion also mentioned this strategy, as a system of alliances against the expansion of Soviet Union, in his letter to the president of the United States in 1958:

*“Our object is the creation of a group of countries, not necessarily in formal and public alliance... Such a group would include one Arabic speaking nation (Sudan); two Moslem non-Arab nations (Iran and Turkey); a Christian nation (Ethiopia); and the State of Israel. While I hope that every effort will still be made to stem the advance of Nasser in the Arab world, it is vitally necessary and*

*possible to consolidate freedom and mutual assistance in this outer perimeter of the Middle East” (Özdemir, 2007: 313).*

It is not known whether the concept of the peripheral strategy still dominates the minds of the Israeli political elite, or it is not evident that the State of Israel pursues a plan which looks like Yinon’s in the Middle East. However, given the developments in Iraq since 2003, and in light of Yinon’s plan and the periphery strategy, Israel's developing relations with KRG seem to have significant regional effects in the future. Iraq is no longer an important enemy, and on some parts of it there exists a friendly entity for Israel. On the other hand, even though Israel does not have good relations with its old periphery of Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia, it now has Greece, South Cyprus Greek Administration, South Sudan and Azerbaijan instead, and in addition to these countries, KRG. It seems that in the foreseeable future, KRG will be an important partner for Israel in the Middle East, and as for KRG, Israel will be a significant role model for it.

For this reason, this article aims to explore and analyze the relations and possible areas of cooperation between KRG and Israel including their historical dimension. Besides, this study tries to scrutinize the prospective developments in the relations between Israel and KRG. In this regard, this work is based on an extensive literature review, comprised of reviewing leading sources in history and politics, academic journals, proceedings, and open sources. The information gathered from these sources has been systematically used as an input for discussions to generate further research questions.



(Kurdistan Regional Government, 2022a)

## II. Israel's Relations with the Kurds of Iraq, A Brief History

Israel's ties with the Kurds of Iraq goes back to the 1950s when Ben-Gurion formulated and practiced periphery strategy in Israel's foreign relations (Bengio, 2004: 33-69). However, concrete relations between Israel and the Kurds developed after the the Kurdish rebellion began in 1961 (Bengio, 2014: 4). These relations continued until 1963 and from then on intermittently until 1970 (Bengio, 2003: 40), and then until 1975 (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001: 81). Following the outbreak of the revolt, Israeli officials in Paris received requests for "weapons, money, medical supplies, and propaganda aid." Kurds were provided with \$20,000 to purchase radio equipment, and large-scale aid to the Kurds began only after 1963 (Rubin, 2007: 373).

Because Iraq was a common threat for both Iran and Israel, they cooperated secretly to support the Kurds of Iraq who were fighting against Baghdad. Israel's and Iran's intelligence services, MOSSAD and SAVAK respectively, worked together to help the Kurds in their struggle against the Iraqi government (Melman and Javedanfar, 2007: 79). A CIA report told that since the late 1950s, MOSSAD and SAVAK have collaborated on activities, MOSSAD supported the Kurds in Iraq and assisted SAVAK's actions (Marshall, Scott and Hunter, 1987: 169). Ya'acov Nimrodi, the Israeli military attaché in Iran, played a central role in MOSSAD's cooperation with SAVAK, as well as maintaining contacts with the Kurds (Marshall, Scott and Hunter, 1987: 169). MOSSAD and SAVAK officials met with the Kurdish leader Mustapha Barzani in Northern Iraq in May 1965 (Kimche, 1991: 189), and they offered arms, funding and military training for Peshmerga (Kurdish fighters) (Entessar, 2004: 2-4). SAVAK, which also gave Israeli officials a land corridor into Northern Iraq, served as the conduit for the cash and the arms transfers. During the 1960s, MOSSAD and Israeli military advisers actively trained Kurdish fighters, and in 1966, Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol deputized Aryeh Eliav, a member of the Israeli parliament and Deputy Minister for Industrialization and Development, to conduct a survey and to contact Barzani. Then an assistance program was set up and an Israeli field hospital with Israeli doctors and nurses was sent to Barzani (Cooley, 2005: 82). This help and training were effective in Barzani's major victory against Iraqi forces at Mount Hindarin in 1966 (Gunter, 2004: 89). On the other hand, the Kurds, for their part, helped an Iraqi air force pilot with his plane defect to Israel in the same year (Black and Morris, 1991: 185, 206-209; Katz, 1994: 175).

Barzani had intermittent contacts with Israel and attacked the Iraqi army during the June 1967 War in order to distract Iraq from the Israeli front, and in the same year, he began to receive a monthly stipend of US\$50,000 from Israel (McDowall, 2007: 331). After the 1967

War, the military armament which included Soviet-made arms Israel captured from Egypt and Syria were shipped to Barzani (Sobhani, 1989: 46-47), and Israel also helped provide technical support (Stansfield, 2003: 76). On the other hand, both MOSSAD and SAVAK helped Barzani establish an intelligence organization called "Parastin." As in 1967, during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Peshmerga again tied down Iraqi troops, which might otherwise have been used against Israel (Gunter, 2004: 89). Barzani visited Israel twice during this time period in secret, in 1968 and 1973, and met with important Israeli leaders, including the prime minister (Bengio, 2014: 5).

Both parties concealed these connections. Besides distracting Iraqi forces from the Israeli front, from Israel's perspective, its relations with Kurds also provided access to Iraq's Jewish population and enabled Israel to repatriate Iraqi Jews. Iraqi Jews were smuggled across Northern Iraq to Iran with the assistance of SAVAK, who later handed them over to Jewish organizations who relocated them in Israel (Sobhani, 1989: 86). However, the collaboration ended in 1975 when Iran and Iraq signed the Algerian Treaty (Parsi, 2007: 52). By the Algerian Treaty, Iraq made some territorial concessions to Iran, who in turn agreed to withdraw its support to the Kurds. Consequently, Israel was no longer able to use Iran's land to deliver supplies to the Kurds. Members of the Israeli intelligence community still remembers the period when Israel secretly trained and armed Peshmerga against the Iraqi government. Eliezer Tsafir, a former MOSSAD official who participated in the covert operations in Northern Iraq, has told in his memoir, "Ani Kurdi," or "I am a Kurd," that deep ties between Kurds and Israelis were established when Barzani sent emissaries to Israel. According to Tsafir, Barzani informed Israelis that Kurds, like Jews, were overlooked by everyone and in need of assistance (The Jewish Press, 2015).

Israel's interest in the Iraqi Kurds was also witnessed after the Gulf War in 1991. The uprising of the Kurds in Northern Iraq, and its crush by the Iraqi government led to a humanitarian crisis, and thousands of Kurds became refugees. While Jewish organisations from different parts of the world mobilised their resources to collect aid for the Kurds, Israel launched a relief operation and sent medical supplies, clothing and blankets (Barron, 1991). At the same time, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir urged the United States to defend the Kurds when he met with United States Secretary of State James Baker (Neriah, 2012). The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) also kept in touch with the Kurds on a different level. Morris Amitay, who was AIPAC director between 1974 and 1980, maintained contact with Kurdish authorities for over three decades. He said that Kurds have never opposed Israel and their friendship with the Kurds was always valued by their Israeli



friends (Guttman, 2012). In 1991, when Iraq crushed the Kurdish revolt, this led to the establishment of the Israeli-Kurdish friendship league in Jerusalem, and AIPAC began to advocate for the Kurds, because Kurds were a small nation fighting for independence in a hostile neighborhood (The Jewish Press, 2015). Besides, Morris Amitay's son Mike Amitay was the executive director of the Washington Kurdish Institute (WKI) from 1996 to 2005. Under Amitay's direction, WKI engaged in humanitarian aid efforts, and initiated medical treatment and research programs in Northern Iraq (Bengio, 2014: 3).

Israel's relations with the Kurds of Iraq were the worst kept secret of the Middle East (Black and Morris, 1991: 327). Prime Minister Menachem Begin officially acknowledged Israel's clandestine relations with the Kurds in 1980, and he confirmed that Israel had sent both humanitarian aid and military advisers and weapons to the Kurds of Iraq (Neriah, 2012; Black and Morris, 1991: 330). For Iraq, Israel's support was an attempt to establish a "second Israel" in Northern Iraq (Bengio, 1998: 34). In this sense, it is evident that the end of Saddam Hussein's rule in April 2003 and the creation of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq marked the beginning of a new phase in the relations between Israel and the KRG. Yet, the state of the relations between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq in this new period would be a period of claims and denials.

### **III. Israel and KRG in the New Millennium: A Period of Claims, Supports and Denials**

Since the end of the Iraq War in 1991, Kurds of Iraq have obtained autonomy by the creation of a safe haven and the no-fly zone by coalition forces. KRG was formed in 1992 (Kurdistan Parliament-Iraq, 2022), and after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, they have been virtually assured strong regional self-government in the new Iraq. The new geopolitical context has enabled KRG to flourish its relations with Israel, and bilateral ties have entered a new phase in the general context of the bilateral relations. Even though officials from both Israel and KRG have issued ambiguous statements about the nature of the relations, it seems that both parties have been eager to exploit the potential for cooperation.

Relations between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq were secret in the 1960s and 1970s, and were mostly confined to clandestine military cooperation. However, since 2003, even though some figures from both sides try to deny the improving ties, there are signs that Israeli and Kurdish officials wish to overcome obstacles and challenges, and want to upgrade the bonds of friendship. For instance, in 2004, Israeli media reported that Israeli officials met with Kurdish political leaders, and Masoud Barzani (Mustapha Barzani's son), Jalal Talabani and

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon publicly reaffirmed Israel's positive relations with the Kurds of Iraq (Neriah, 2012). As Iraq has no official relations with Israel, Kurdish and Israeli officials' meetings were surprising. However, this development showed the intention of the Iraqi Kurds to get in touch with Israel after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Masoud Barzani, the president of the KRG, stated that he had no issues with Israel establishing diplomatic ties in 2005. According to him, since numerous Arab nations have ties to the Jewish state, forging ties between the Kurds and Israel is not illegal. He also said that he would request the opening of an Israeli consulate in Erbil, the capital of the KRG, when an Israeli Embassy is opened in Baghdad (United Press International, 2005). Additionally, at a world conference in Greece, Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq at the time, and Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister, exchanged a historic handshake. The handshake was minimized by Talabani's administration, which stated that Talabani was acting as the leader of his Kurdish party and the vice president of the Socialist International, not as the president of Iraq, and that it was merely a "civilized social act." Additionally, the office of Talabani stated that the handshake does not mean any liabilities for the state of Iraq, and will not change its dependence on Arab unity, the Arab initiative, and genuine international agreements. It was also told that it will not affect Iraq's support for the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority (BBC, 2008).

The evidence that has come to light suggests that Israel and the KRG's cooperation first focused on security. In 2004, American journalist Seymour Hersh claimed that the Israeli experts were training the Peshmerga in Northern Iraq:

*"Israeli intelligence and military operatives are now quietly at work in Kurdistan, providing training for Kurdish commando units and, most important in Israel's view, running covert operations inside Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria... The Israeli operatives include members of the MOSSAD, Israel's clandestine foreign-intelligence service, who work undercover in Kurdistan as businessmen and, in some cases, do not carry Israeli passports" (Hersh, 2004).*

The same claim that Israeli military personnel were training the Peshmerga in Northern Iraq was also reported in Israeli media, in the Yedioth Ahronoth. In this regard, it was told that an Israeli company was constructing an international airport in Erbil, while Israeli-manufactured equipment, including "dozens of motorcycles sniffer dogs, Kalashnikov-upgrading devices, flak jackets, uniforms and helmets" were supplied to the Kurds (Urquhart and Howard, 2005). Apart from these reports, in 2006, BBC also reported on the same issue, and a BBC TV programme showed Israeli personnel training the Peshmerga in shooting

techniques in Northern Iraq (Abdelhadi, 2006).

Neither Israeli nor Kurdish officials confirmed these claims, which remained unproven. According to Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, the story was entirely wrong, and the relevant countries were aware of this (Hersh, 2004). He also told that the KRG region has been devoid of any Israeli citizens, and because Israel and Iraq have still been technically at war, so no Israelis are allowed to travel to Iraq (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2005). Besides, Fuad Hussein, an important Kurdish leader labeled the report as "totally untrue." He said that Erbil's airport was accessible to everyone and that at least three aircraft from Baghdad and other Arab and European capitals arrived there every day. He stressed that both Kurds and Arabs use the Erbil airport and Israelis wouldn't have gone unnoticed if they had been in the airport. As for the military training, he emphasized that Kurds don't require instructors to teach them how to use light weapons. Because, since 1961, Kurds of Iraq have been at war, and many of them are proficient at using a variety of weapons, including heavy ones (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2005). Barzani, for his part, also denied reports saying that these reports were wholly untrue and there was no need for someone to train the Iraqi Kurds (Institut Kurde de Paris, 2005).

Apart from the claims that there were secret military relations between Israel and KRG, Dawud Baghestani, former chief of the Kurdish region's human rights commission, began to publish the "Israel-Kurd" magazine in KRG in 2009. Baghestani said that the aim of the publication was to foster rapprochement between Kurdish and Israeli peoples. Even though it lasted only a short time, as Baghestani told, its mission was to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by returning almost 150,000 Kurdish Jews living in Israel to the Kurdish region in Iraq (Al Arabiya News, 2009). At the same time, Falah Mustafa Bakir, then head of KRG's Department of Foreign Relations, stated that Kurds do not have problems with Israel, and noted that KRG is sometimes called "the second Israel." He also expressed his feelings about Israel and the Israeli people:

*"They have not harmed us. We can't be hating them because Arabs hate them. We think it is in the interest of Iraq to have relations with Israel. And the day after the Israelis open an embassy in Baghdad, we will invite them to open a consulate here"* (May, 2010).

On the other hand, Tel Aviv University established the Kurdish Studies Program in the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies in 2010 (Rabi, 2014: xi). It was explained that as a political force to be reckoned with in the Middle East, Kurds have gained

importance, and all facets of Kurdish issues-political, cultural, and historical alike-have arisen as the subject of great scholarly study (Tel Aviv University, 2022). Meanwhile, Israel's Ambassador in the United States, Michael Oren, raised the issue of the creation of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq with senior Pentagon and Congress members, and also held secret talks with KRG President Barzani to make assessments, while Barzani visited Washington in 2010 (Timeturk, 2010). At the same time frame, Idan Ofer, a businessman and the chairman of the Israel Corporation, reportedly visited the KRG in June 2010 to meet with top Kurdish authorities. The visit's aim was explained as to show support for KRG and help develop economic ties between KRG and Israel (Haaretz, 2010). However, for the claims about the links between KRG and Israel, Barzani, while speaking at a news conference, stated that KRG has no relations with Israel and expressed his uneasiness on the subject. He told that he was sick of answering these questions, so he would not do so in the future. According to him, the central government in Baghdad specializes in maintaining diplomatic relations, and no relations can be established with a state without the administration's involvement (Kuwait News Agency, 2010).

During that period of time, it seemed that Iran was carefully watching what's going on in Northern Iraq with relation to Israel. In this regard, Press-TV of Iran claimed in August 2011 that six unmanned aerial vehicles, intelligence agents, and military experts were all scheduled to be sent to Northern Iraq by the Israel Defense Forces (Ynet News, 2011), and in March 2012, it was reported that Israel was using Northern Iraq for intelligence missions in Iran in search of evidence that Iran is building a nuclear warhead (Ynet News, 2012). Moreover, in May 2012, Iran's Consul in Erbil, Azim Hosseini, claimed that Israelis under different passports, names and banners in the KRG region were working against Iran (Al Arabiya News, 2012). However, KRG fired back these allegations and Kurdish officials described Consul's claims as "untrue:"

*"This is not the first time that Iranian officials are saying this without presenting evidence or reasons. The government is not able to be quiet faced with these accusations anymore, so we confirm to the public there are no centers or offices of Israel in Kurdistan, and we deny this accusation. It is untrue. This is an attempt to draw Kurdistan into the fight between Israel and Iran, and we do not want to be part of this"* (Al Arabiya News, 2012).

Despite Kurdish officials' denials, positive statements for Israel were expressed by some Kurdish journalists, and for instance, in August 2013, Ayub Nuri argued that since Kurds had

a great deal of sympathy for Israel, Israel would gain from KRG's independence. He also claimed that an independent Kurdish state would act as a buffer zone between Israel and Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, giving Israel its first true ally in the region (Berman, 2013).

In June 2014, for the first time, a senior Israeli official declared his open support for the independence of the Kurds. Despite the fact that he did not say whether he meant merely the Kurds in Iraq or all of the Kurds in the Middle East, in a policy address in Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that it was Israel's responsibility to back international efforts to help the Kurds' quest for independence, and according to him because Kurds had a track record of political steadfastness and moderation they have deserved of their own political independence (Sobelman, 2014). Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman also shared the same views about the independence of the Kurds. In June 2014, he said that Iraq had been gradually disintegrating and the establishment of a separate Kurdish state would be inevitable (Williams, 2014a). He described the independence of the Kurds of Iraq as a fait accompli, while at the same time stressed that Israel was taking no action to help the Kurds achieve formal statehood. He also added that the de facto existence of an autonomous Kurdish state has been the current accepted reality (Williams, 2014b).

Even though senior Israeli officials openly supported the independence of the Kurds of Iraq, the Israeli Foreign Ministry stated that Israel did not have formal diplomatic relations with KRG, without making any comments on the claims about the ties between Israel and KRG. In this context, Amos Gilad, a senior defence official said that Israel's silence about relations, at least in public, was the best policy because any superfluous statements of Israeli authorities might have only been harmful to the Kurds (Williams, 2014a). On the other hand, Eliezer Tsafir said that it was the Kurds who wanted the relations to remain secret (Soffer, 2014). At the same time, Sami Abdul Rahman, a Kurdish official, played down the importance of Israeli officials' advocacy of independence for Kurdish people, and told that those statements were not coordinated with KRG:

*"We are not coordinating with Israel. We are not responsible for statements made by other governments... There was a period-a short period-decades ago when there were relations. But it stopped... In terms of any covert relationship-that does not exist... In terms of a formal relationship with Israel-that does not exist... Since the Iraqi government does not have relations with Israel, neither do we... These are statements that Israeli leaders are making without any input from us"* (Williams, 2014c).

Although Israel has maintained ties with the Kurds of Iraq for years, it was the first time that senior government officials have openly called for the independence of the Kurds. These comments came amid media reports that Israel began to receive crude oil from KRG. In June 2014, a tanker carrying crude oil from Northern Iraq arrived at Israel's Ashkelon port and unloaded the Kurdish oil, while the port authority did not comment whether KRG sold the oil directly to a buyer in Israel or to another party. Meanwhile, Israel's National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Ministry spokeswoman said that they did not make any remarks on the country of origin of crude oil purchased by Israel's private refineries (Payne, 2014). As usual, The Kurdish Ministry of Natural Resources dismissed the claims that Kurdish oil was sent to Israel, and a ministry official told that without any basis in fact or evidence, those media claims tried to raise resentments between the KRG and the central government of Iraq (Rudaw, 2014).

Meanwhile, supportive statements for the independence of KRG and for the development of relations between Israel and KRG continued. Ofra Bengio, a senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, told that oil delivery was not an isolated agreement, it was part of a "wider strategic relationship" between Israel and KRG. She stated that links between KRG and Israel would be elevated to open relations as soon as Barzani announced independence, and the realization of this development was subject to Kurdish people (Soffer, 2014). In March 2015, Mickey Levy, a member of the Israeli parliament, said that KRG had the right to become independent and he would endeavor to start a discussion regarding independence within his own party since he firmly believed in it (Abdulla, 2015).

On the other hand, Iraqi Kurds, for their part, have continued to stress the importance of their relations with Israel. In October 2015, Sherzad Omer Mamsani was appointed as KRG's Jewish representative as part of a program to "promote religious coexistence" in the KRG region. Mamdani, who began to represent Kurdish Jews, said his family had Jewish ancestors, and told that Kurdish people or KRG had no issues with other religions or cultures. He also said that Kurds have admired Israel and Israel was backing an independent Kurdish state (Kaplan, 2015). Besides, Mariwan Naqshbandi, Mamsani's boss in KRG Ministry of Religious Affairs, stressed KRG's positive ties with Israel, and pointed the same issues in accordance with Mamsani (Neurink, 2015). Moreover, KRG sent its political advisor Nahro Zagros to Israel to discuss with high-ranking authorities about the political assistance Israel may offer KRG. In this respect, Zagros said that Israel might assist KRG in a variety of ways,

including by advocating on KRG's behalf in the United States and by providing KRG with weaponry (Melman, 2015).

Amid these developments, according to the reports in August 2015, the shipment of oil from Northern Iraq to Israel continued. KRG denied selling the oil to Israel; however, Kurdish officials claimed that once they transferred the oil to the traders, they did not care where it went (The Times of Israel, 2015). Nevertheless, Amit Mor, CEO of the Eco-Energy Financial and Strategic Consulting firm, acknowledged that the Ashkelon petroleum port was receiving Kurdish oil for some time. According to him, importing oil from KRG would be advantageous for Israel from both geostrategic and economic perspectives:

*“Although I don’t think the Kurds are having major difficulties in exporting their oil these days, it is very sensible for the Israeli refineries to purchase Kurdish oil via Turkey’s Ceyhan petroleum port, as it takes only one day of sailing for oil tankers to reach the Ashkelon petroleum port. Such is also the case for (Azerbaijani) oil... In addition, from a geopolitical perspective, it should be considered a favorable supply source for Israeli consumers, since by utilizing this oil they indirectly support the Kurdish cause”* (Udasin, 2015).

According to the developments and the intentions of the officials from both sides, it seems that both Israel and KRG have good reasons to establish ties, and they want to upgrade their relations. There is little doubt that the establishment of an independent non-Arab Kurdish state in the Middle East would significantly alter the regional and strategic environment in terms of Israel and the KRG. In this regard, in addition to the senior Israeli and Kurdish officials’ statements, a prominent pro-Israeli figure such as Daniel Pipes advocates and welcomes the birth of a Kurdish state (Pipes, 2014). On the other hand, Israel seems to be determined to persuade the United States for the independence of KRG (Walker, 2015), because, as Bengio remarked in June 2014 that a declaration of independence for KRG is not far away and the the biggest challenge is currently the United States. At the same time she told that

*“There are three scenarios for such a declaration: When the American administration changes; before (Iraqi Kurdistan) President Masoud Barzani leaves office in less than two years’ time, as he might like to be remembered as the builder of Kurdistan; and finally if relations with Baghdad deteriorate further... The main obstacle for separation is the economic dependence of Erbil*

*(the region's capital) on Baghdad. If Erbil manages to export oil and gas independently of Baghdad it will make such a move much more plausible"* (Ben Solomon, 2014).

However, there is an important reason for the Kurds to keep the current relations secret. The Kurds avoid being seen as having ties with Israel, as they fear of antagonizing the Iraqi government and especially Tehran. Kurdish officials have voiced these concerns, saying that the KRG does not want to endanger its connections with Arabs, Turks, or Iranians in order to maintain its relations with Israel (Zebari, 2009). Despite concerns about reactions from Iraq, Turkey and Iran, KRG held an independence referendum in 2017 (BBC, 2017). Israel was the only country to openly back a prospective independent Kurdish state. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel supported the Kurdish people's desire to establish their own state (Heller, 2017). At the same time, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said that at the very least in Iraq, a "free Kurdistan" should be established. She also stated that Israel and the United States both had a stake in this happening, and the US should help the developments regarding the independence (Lee, 2017). Meanwhile, Kurds hoisted giant Israeli flags at massive rallies held prior to the referendum as a sign of appreciation for Israel's support. It seems that waving the Israeli flag might have given Kurds a sense of fraternity with a country they needed (Frantzman, 2017).

Most recently, in September 2021, a meeting on the normalization of relations with Israel was held in Erbil. In this context, some Sunnis and Shiites gathered in Erbil and called on Iraq to join the Abraham Accords, a US-led Middle East peace initiative in which Bahrain, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates have started maintaining ties with Israel. Nonetheless, the Iraqi government issued a firm explanation in which it rejected "illegal meetings" in Erbil where the prospect of forming ties with Israel was considered (Rudaw, 2021).

#### **IV. KRG: A New Partner for Israel in the Middle East?**

Since 2003, Iraq has devolved into sectarian divisions and the current position of KRG in Iraq has a resemblance to the Yinon Plan. KRG is virtually independent and has become a de facto state within Iraq. If it gains its de jure independence, Yinon's plan for Iraq will be nearly realized. In addition, Israel's relations with Iraqi Kurds are improving, and instability in the Middle East has left the Jewish state with no choice but to find new friends closer to its geographic proximity. In this regard, Israel's periphery strategy seems to be in motion, and peripheral states Israel has relations have changed, South Sudan, Greece, South Cyprus Greek



Administration and Azerbaijan replacing Ethiopia, Turkey and Iran respectively (Guzansky, 2014: 99).

The independence of KRG is a matter of great importance to its people. However, such an outcome would disintegrate Iraq, which is already a weak power in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion. An independent Kurdish state would most probably have a strategic partnership with Israel. As such, this would reduce Israel's isolation in the Middle East and lessen the risk of an "eastern front" attack against Israel. Additionally, the independence of KRG might be beneficial for Israel in Syria. Because if Syria is divided into racial and sectarian states and Syrian Kurds are united with KRG, this would put an end to the state of Syria and the threats emanating from it against Israel. Moreover, an independent KRG will be a neighboring state for Iran, and this may compel both KRG and Israel to forge strong security ties. It then would be in Israel's interest to collaborate with KRG, both for intelligence-gathering purposes and for using KRG region as a prospective base for its military operations. For these reasons, it is reasonable for Israeli officials to favor the independence of KRG. It seems that no other country but Israel has the enthusiasm for an independent Kurdish state, and should KRG declare independence, Israel might be one of the first states to recognize, as it did with South Sudan.

Israel, on the other hand, has reservations about open relations with KRG. It may want its policies with respect to Iraq and KRG to be in conjunction with the policies of the United States, which for the time being supports the integrity of Iraq. Besides, even though its relations with Turkey are soured, Israel might not want to further alienate that country by establishing open relations with the Kurds, and it seems that Israel also considers the feelings and reservations of Kurdish leaders who do not wish to be seen too much in collaboration with Israel openly. In this regard, it seems that neither Israel nor KRG have a well-defined and consistent policy towards each other. There are only ad hoc policies which are initiated according to changing circumstances, and regional developments, and both parties are reluctant to admit the existence of any kind of formal relations.

For the time being and for the near future, Israel's relations with KRG will most probably remain secret. First of all, KRG does not wish to antagonize the Arab countries, Turkey and Iran. Secondly, Israeli officials' pronouncements supporting the independence may end up being only cheap rhetoric if continuous action is not forthcoming. Those in Israel who worry that this may boost world support of a Palestinian state may oppose the creation of an independent Kurdish state. While Israel may escape the implications of the statements pertaining to the independence of KRG, it is in fact KRG that have more to lose. It is

surrounded by neighbouring states that closely watch the developing relations between Israel and KRG, and claim that an independent Kurdish state would become a “second Israel.” Israel’s relations with KRG causes great concern in these states, and presumably, these states would fear that the independence of the Kurds would diminish their influence and regional power. Whereas both Israel and KRG aim to enhance their relations, the neighbouring states may not fully support, and can try to influence the development of that relationship. In this regard, for its own interests, Israel might explore the role of mediating differences between the independent KRG and its neighbouring states.

However, it is in both Israel and the KRG's best interests to have the Middle East's political landscape ready so that a public connection may be launched. Israel may attempt to persuade the United States to support the idea of KRG independence depending on what happens in both Syria and Iraq. On the other side, the KRG might attempt to use Israel's clout in Washington to soften Washington's opposition to official independence, transforming the country from a de facto to a de jure independent state. It appears that this would be a drawn-out procedure, though. As for now, open and cordial relations between Israel and the KRG are not conceivable for the above cited political reasons. Open ties with Israel, however, are more likely in the event of a sovereign Kurdish state.

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