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Israel and Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East

by Aldo Liga

ABSTRACT

The regional transformations resulting from the outbreak of the Arab upheavals, the onslaught of ISIS and the coming apart of historical boundaries anticipate a very different Middle East in the years to come. Another factor of instability could be the independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan planned to be held in 2016 and then postponed due to the ongoing battle for Mosul: Israel backs Erbil's nationalist claims and one can imagine that in the event of a secession, Israel could be one of the first countries to upgrade ties to open relations. Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations have nestled amongst escalating conflicts and religious and ideological cleavages since the 60s. They have identified military, intelligence and energy cooperation as a way to bypass precarious regional equilibriums and granitic hostilities. Today, these cross-border policy solutions could have positive spillovers across the whole region, encouraging political dialogue through mutual economic interests and trade.

Israel | Iraq | Kurds | Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) | Islamic groups

keywords

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Introduction

The regional transformations resulting from the outbreak of the Arab upheaval, the onslaught of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the coming apart of historical boundaries anticipate a very different Middle East in the years to come. The enduring bonds between two minorities in the region – the Jews and the Kurds – may prove to be a significant element in prefiguring a less polarised regional order in a theoretical post-ISIS scenario. Indeed, multifaceted relations, political, economic and cultural affinities, could open new spaces for cooperation and influence equilibria in the whole region.

The Kurds, the world's largest nation without a state,¹ inhabit, fragmented in dozens of political factions, a contiguous area in four different countries – south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northern Syria and north-western Iran. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres made provision for a Kurdish state within the boundaries of Turkey but, three years later, when the "European powers began to suspect they had bitten off more than they could chew,"² the Treaty of Lausanne frustrated these aspirations.³

¹ Sarah Leduc, "The Kurds: The World's Largest Stateless Nation", in *France24*, 30 July 2015, <http://f24.my/1Is9CGq>.

² Nick Danforth, "Forget Sykes-Picot. It's the Treaty of Sèvres That Explains the Modern Middle East", in *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/10/sykes-picot-treaty-of-sevres-modern-turkey-middle-east-borders-turkey>.

³ However, it is worth mentioning that "when European imperialists tried to create a Kurdish state at Sèvres, many Kurds fought alongside Atatürk to upend the treaty. It's a reminder that political loyalties can and do transcend national identities in ways we would do well to realize today. The Kurdish state envisioned in the Sèvres Treaty would, crucially, have been under British control. While this appealed to some Kurdish nationalists, others found this form of British-dominated 'independence' problematic. So they joined up to fight with the Turkish national movement." Ibid.

* Aldo Liga holds a master's degree in International Security from Sciences Po Paris (with a focus on international energy and Middle East) and a bachelor's from the "Cesare Alfieri" School of Political Sciences in Florence. He is working for IMPACT initiatives after previous experiences at the European Commission ENGIE and think-tanks, such as the Centre de recherches internationales (CERI) in Paris.

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Compared to the other Kurdish minorities spread across the region, who basically gave up their nationalist claims and limited their actions to demanding cultural and political autonomy, only the Iraqi Kurds have partially achieved the “closest thing Kurds have to an independent state,”⁴ the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), based in the city of Erbil, in 1992.

The Kurds represent 15 to 20 per cent of the Iraqi population.⁵ Israel has identified the Kurdish minority as a buffer against common adversaries, while the Iraqi Kurds see the Jewish state as a potential ally in order to legitimate their political independence and an economic partner to alleviate internal instability. Both Jews and Kurds are minorities (roughly 15 million Jews and 30 million Kurds worldwide)⁶ that have been traumatised by persecution and wars to preserve their identity (unique, in cultural and ethnic terms, compared to the neighbouring Arabs, Persians, and Turks), and delegitimised in their quest for a state of their own.⁷

“It is as if history is repeating itself”: fifty years ago, with these words, Iraqi defence minister Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli (1965-1966), blamed the Kurds of Iraq for seeking to establish “a second Israel” in the Middle East.⁸ Although there is no official relationship between the two nations, they have been pursuing a discreet relationship at the government and business levels since the 60s. In military and energy cooperation, the two peoples have identified a way to bypass precarious regional equilibria and granitic hostilities. An independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan was initially planned to be held in 2016 but has been postponed due to the Mosul campaign: Israel’s top officials have backed Erbil’s claims for independence a number of times and it is likely that in the event of a territorial secession, Israel might be one of the first countries to upgrade ties into open relations. Once again, questioned borders and proactive international consent could theoretically allow the legitimisation of “outcast nations”⁹ and their right to self-determination.

Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish ties nestle among escalating conflicts, religious and ideological cleavages, economic stagnation and rising inequalities in the Middle East: building up common grounds, betting on historical and cultural affinities, bypassing official bodies, co-opting political factions, these bonds suggest alternative policy

⁴ Sarah Leduc, “The Kurds: The World’s Largest Stateless Nation”, cit.

⁵ “Who are the Kurds?”, in *BBC News*, 14 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>.

⁶ Although there is no ethnic census on the Kurds by country, estimates indicate that they form a population of between 20 and 40 million. There are 15 million Kurds in Turkey, 7 to 8 million in Iran and 1 to 2 million in Syria. The KRG claims 5.3 million inhabitants, but according to Baghdad they are only 4.3 million. According to the Paris Kurdish Institute, there are roughly 1.6 million Kurds in Western Europe, including 800,000 in Germany. Sarah Leduc, “The Kurds: The World’s Largest Stateless Nation”, cit.

⁷ Ofra Bengio, “Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds”, in *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 2014), <http://www.meforum.org/3838>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

solutions that could potentially convey more stability in shaping the future Middle East, bringing out different links and interconnections and scaling down political divides. Starting from a brief introduction to the unravelling of the post-World War I order in the region, this paper identifies in the tight but little-known relationship between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq a key to understanding regional transformations in the years to come, highlighting the extent to which cross-border economic cooperation could potentially open new spaces for improved political dialogue.

The first part of the paper offers a brief introduction of how Mesopotamia is unravelling following the collapse of Ba'athist Iraq and the ISIS onslaught; the second section is focused on how Israel has historically played on Iraqi internal cleavages and how through military, economic and cultural cooperation the two peoples have managed political isolation; the third part illustrates the extent to which Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish ties could play a role in a theoretical post-ISIS Iraq, essentially through a sort of "energy triangle" with Turkey that may signal a softer end to Sykes-Picot. The last section concludes explaining why Israeli-Kurdish ties are significant in rethinking the area in the near future.

1. Beyond conventional alliances: Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan in the unravelling of the post-World War I order

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 and the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, the Middle East has experienced a "Kurdish moment."¹⁰ On 1st February 2016, Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and President of the Iraqi Kurdistan region since 2005,¹¹ stated on his website that "the time has come and the situation is now suitable for the Kurdish people to make a decision through a referendum on their fate."¹² He did not refer to proclaiming full-fledged statehood, but rather "to know the will and opinion of the Kurdish people about independence and for the Kurdish political leadership to execute the will of the people at the appropriate time and conditions."¹³ According to the Kurdish authorities the referendum should have taken place before the end of the year but, as yet, no date has been given.

¹⁰ Guillaume Fourmont, "Kurdistan(s), une nation, des états?", in *Moyen-Orient*, No. 26, (April-June 2015), p. 15.

¹¹ His term expired in August 2015 but presidential elections have been postponed to 2017 due to the lack of any clear successor and the growing instability affecting the region. Alex MacDonald, "Tensions Mount as KRG Council Calls on Barzani to Extend Presidency", in *Middle East Eye*, 17 August 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/45933>.

¹² Isabel Coles, "Iraqi Kurdish Leader Calls for Non-Binding Independence Referendum", in *Reuters*, 2 February 2016, <http://reut.rs/1QFyi5q>.

¹³ Ibid.

After World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom obtained a mandate from the League of Nations over Palestine, and the role of guarantor of Kurdish people's freedom. However, following the signature of the Treaty of Lausanne, the land inhabited by this people was split into a recognisable geographical area that fell into the sovereign space of four separate states. As mentioned above, the goal to set up an independent Kurdistan was partially reached only by the Iraqi Kurds, with the establishment of the KRG in 1992. The Al-Anfal Campaign and the Kurdish genocide¹⁴ that occurred in the final stages of the Iran-Iraq wars (1980-1988) raised international awareness of the plight of the Kurds. Today, the KRG has representative offices in 13 countries and a mission to the European Union. The region operates as a de facto state, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have emerged as the two strongest parties: they govern together, but their relationship is characterised by rivalry and intermittent cooperation. The KDP, headed by Barzani, controls the northern part of the country and its capital, Erbil. The PUK, led by Jaled Talabani,¹⁵ based in the city of Sulaymaniyah, is dominant in the south. "Feudalism" and "tribalism" are concepts which underlie how politics is conducted in the region.¹⁶ From 1994 to November 1997 the two parties were embroiled in a bloody civil war: between 3,000 and 5,000 people died. In 2009 a third player emerged, the Movement for Change (Gorran) which, under the leadership of Nawshirwan Mustafa, leads the official opposition to the traditional parties.

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq the international community opposed the breakup of the country, and the 2005 Constitution defined it as "a single federal, independent and fully sovereign state" (Art. 1) recognising "the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region" (Art. 117).¹⁷ But legal disputes with Baghdad have proliferated since the new structure of the state was set up, mainly on the control over the region's energy sector, but also on the public payroll, and, more broadly, over economic issues. Baghdad insists that the revenues from the oil extracted in the North of the country must be managed by the central government. The KRG has developed oil and gas fields and facilities, "assumed de

¹⁴ The campaign was commanded by Saddam Hussein's cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, secretary general of the Northern Bureau of Iraq's Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party. Anfal, "the Spoils," the eighth sura of the Qur'an, is the name given to a series of military actions conducted between 1986 and 1989 and culminated in 1988. According to Human Rights Watch up to 100,000 people perished in "a systematic ethnic cleansing programme." Iraq became the first government to use chemical weapons against its own people. See "Anfal: Campaign against the Kurds", in *BBC News*, 24 June 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4877364.stm.

¹⁵ President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014. Fuad Masum, from the same party, has been head of state since July 2014.

¹⁶ Martin van Bruinessen (interview by Saïda Bédar), "Le peuple kurde: identité nationale et divergences politiques", in *Moyen-Orient*, No 26, (April-June 2015), p. 20.

¹⁷ "The federal system in the Republic of Iraq is made up of a decentralized capital, regions, and governorates, as well as local administrations" (Art. 116); "The Arabic language and the Kurdish language are the two official languages of Iraq", (Art. 4). *Constitution of the Republic of Iraq*, 2015, http://www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf.

facto control over disputed lands¹⁸ and created a cohort of influential supporters to lobby Kurdish interests in Washington and abroad."¹⁹

February 2016 was not the first time Barzani called for a non-binding referendum after the onslaught of ISIS in the region, a rise which is erasing the Sykes-Picot borders and revisiting the post-World War I order. Despite the efforts of the Iraqi Kurds in facing this threat, international and regional powers have always opposed their aspirations for independence, especially neighbouring countries with large Kurdish minorities of their own. Conversely, the Israeli government endorses their quest for statehood: just a few weeks before Barzani's latest claim for independence, Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked supported the necessity to "openly call for the establishment of a Kurdish state that separates Iran from Turkey, one which will be friendly towards Israel," defining the Kurds as "a partner for the Israeli people," "an ancient, democratic, peace-loving people that have never attacked any country." "It is time to help them," she concluded.²⁰

Empathy between the two peoples has not been demonstrated in an open, defined relationship due to the mutual necessity of not upsetting domestic and regional political equilibria or disturbing the relationship with Baghdad.²¹ Indeed Iraq, like 30 other United Nations member states, does not recognise Israel and has no official ties with the country. Amos Gilad, a senior Israeli defence official, said "our silence – in public, at least – is best. Any unnecessary utterance on our part can only harm them."²² Therefore, a very discreet but steady dialogue between the two nations has structured the framework of their bilateral relations: intelligence, military training and humanitarian aid have been implemented since the early years of the Iraqi Ba'ath (1968-2003). "Events have conspired to bring the Kurdish and the Jewish people into an embryonic relationship that might yet develop into a new political force in the Middle East":²³ in a period of potential redrawing of boundaries in the area, this empathy could possibly be transformed into one of the cornerstones of a new regional order, mostly fashioned by regional autonomies, permeable boundaries and economic associations.²⁴

¹⁸ Among others, in Kirkuk (described as "our Jerusalem" by Jalal Talabani), Nineveh and Diyala governorates. Determining their status is contentious given their "oil-rich territories, multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, and historical legacies of Arabization" and their impact on KRG internal politics, reflecting geographical divisions between KDP, PUK, and Gorran. Denise Natali, "Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan", in *Lawfare Blog*, 1 November 2015, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/9676>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tamar Pileggi, "Justice Minister Calls for an Independent Kurdistan", in *The Times of Israel*, 20 January 2016, <http://toi.sr/1S2dF52>.

²¹ Ofra Bengio, "Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds", cit.

²² Dan Williams, "Israel Tells U.S. Kurdish Independence Is 'Foregone Conclusion'", in *Reuters*, 26 June 2014, <http://reut.rs/1pS1Ekq>.

²³ Neville Teller, "The Kurds and Israel: Straws in the Wind", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 July 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Experts/The-Kurds-and-Israel-Straws-in-the-wind-361248>.

²⁴ Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (May/June 2014), p. 139-148.

2. Managing political isolation: "outcast nations" and foreign affairs

2.1 "Customising" the region: An independent Kurdistan in the Israeli realist security and foreign policy paradigm

In facing the regional transformations resulting from the Arab upheaval, Israel has undertaken "a mostly risk-adverse, minimalist and pro-status quo policy," mindful of its "scarce to non-existent direct political influence in the region."²⁵ This realist approach, which stems from the "mutually reinforcing notions of geopolitical vulnerability and regional isolation" strengthens the "conservative and cautious attitude" of the country toward political shifts in its volatile neighbourhood:²⁶ stability and status quo need to be understood as a reflection of the concern "that any shifts in power could worsen Israel's delicate regional position by empowering more antagonistic actors."²⁷

Conversely, an independent Kurdistan in the north of Iraq could represent a positive shift in improving Israeli security: a Kurdish state is not considered as a threat by the Government but more as a strategic partner in order to dilute the many threats looming large in the region and the political isolation of the Jewish state. The timing of the most recent pro-Kurdistan declarations released by members of the Israeli cabinet could be explained by the fact that a fragmented Iraq thwarts Iran's grand design of a Shi'a crescent linking Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah, the threat of which jeopardises the northern border with Lebanon.²⁸ Both the Jewish State and the KRG strategic positions were, in different fashions, enhanced by "diversions and divisions of the wars in Syria and Iraq" and, more generally, by the chaos of the Arab neighbourhood,²⁹ and both the countries could benefit from their reciprocal understanding. Israel has identified in the Kurdish minority a sort of ally in its hostile environment, establishing links since the "periphery alliance" strategy adopted by David Ben-Gurion.³⁰ The Jewish state has played on historical and cultural affinities with non-Arabs in the region, bypassing official bodies and co-opting minorities such as the Kurds and Berbers, considered

²⁵ Benedetta Berti, "Seeking Stability: Israel's Approach to the Middle East and North Africa", in *FRIDE Policy Briefs*, No. 198 (March 2015), p. 1 and 6, <http://fride.org/publication/1254/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1 and 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸ Yossi Alpher, "Why Israel Wants an Independent Kurdistan", in *Forward*, 9 July 2014, <http://jd.fo/c8UQl>.

²⁹ Ian Black, "Israel's Strategic Position 'Enhanced by Chaos of Arab Neighbourhood'", in *The Guardian*, 11 June 2015, <https://gu.com/p/49yv/j/stw>.

³⁰ This doctrine called for Israel to develop close alliances with non-Arab states (such as Turkey, pre-revolutionary Iran and Ethiopia) to counteract the opposition of Arab states to the existence of the Jewish state. The original periphery alliance doctrine "ground to a halt between 1973 and 1983 and was in many ways replaced by the Arab-Israel peace process." Yossi Alpher, "Israel: Alternative Regional Options in a Changing Middle East", in *NOREF Reports*, June 2013, p. 1, <http://noref.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Israel-Palestine/Publications/Israel-alternative-regional-options-in-a-changing-Middle-East>.

as “proxies.”³¹ Israeli companies are investing heavily in the Kurdish region, especially in the energy, construction, communication and security sectors.³² The nature of their relationship is maintained at a “clandestine” level, so as not to hurt the partners of the Jewish state which, at least officially, denies the legitimacy of every Kurdish statehood and supports a united Iraq. Indeed, at the centre of the Israeli foreign projection is the strategic alliance with the United States (to whom no real alternative exists) and the very close economic ties to both the US and the European Union.³³

The Israeli public commitment towards the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is certainly among the most explicit support within the international community. In June 2014, talking at Tel Aviv University’s Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared “we should [...] support the Kurdish aspiration for independence,” “a nation of fighters [who] have proved political commitment and are worthy of independence.”³⁴ A month later Netanyahu added with a hint of empathy, “they deserve it.”³⁵ Avigdor Lieberman, Israel Foreign Minister (2009-2015), did not hesitate to urge John Kerry to change America’s position on the independence of the region, “Iraq is breaking up before our eyes and it would appear that the creation of an independent Kurdish state is a foregone conclusion.”³⁶ Shimon Peres, president of Israel from 2007 to 2014, endorsed the independence of Kurdistan too, assessing that a unified Iraq was not possible without “massive” foreign military intervention. During a meeting in the United States, he told Obama that “the Kurds have, de facto, created their own state, which is democratic.”³⁷ The Kurdish city of Duhok recently organised a two-day memorial celebration on the occasion of the death of President Shimon Peres, attended by hundreds of people.³⁸

³¹ For instance, the founder of the Movement for the autonomy of Kabylie, Ferhat Mehenni, went for an official visit in Israel in 2012 “whereas Algeria officially doesn’t have any diplomatic relationship with the Hebrew state. This is an interesting case of co-optation: Sephardi Jews have very strong historical and cultural ties with North African Berbers and there is a large North African Jewish community in Israel.” Cleo Jay, “A Berber Spring: the Breakthrough of Amazigh Minorities in the Uprisings’ Aftermath”, in Fawaz A. Gerges (ed.), *Contentious Politics in the Middle East. Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 343.

³² Saleh Al-Naami, “Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan”, in *Middle East Monitor*, 1 September 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=19922>.

³³ While Jordan and Egypt are the “long-held pillars of Israel’s approach to regional security” and regional economic partners, the commercial ties with the other MENA countries are extremely limited (with the exception of the Palestinian Authority). Benedetta Berti, “Seeking Stability: Israel’s Approach to the Middle East and North Africa”, cit., p. 4.

³⁴ “Israel’s Prime Minister Backs Kurdish Independence”, in *The Guardian*, 29 June 2014, <https://gu.com/p/3qgjz>.

³⁵ Ilene Prusher, “The (Soon-to-be) State of Kurdistan and Its Friends in Jerusalem”, in *Haaretz*, 2 July 2014.

³⁶ Dan Williams, “Israel Tells U.S. Kurdish Independence Is ‘Foregone Conclusion’”, cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Julie Lenarz, “Iraqi Kurds Reject Anti-Israel Rhetoric to Hold Vigil for ‘Friend of Kurdistan’ Shimon Peres”, in *International Business Times*, 30 September 2016.

The Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations could also be read through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, the KRG position over the conflict would seem elusive. When the Palestinian National Authority opened its consulate in Erbil in 2011, Barzani put emphasis on the common fate of the two peoples, talking about the "historical day for the two brotherly and prosecuted nations."³⁹ Previously Barzani had declared that when the Israeli Embassy opened in Baghdad he would ask that an Israeli consulate be established in Erbil as well.⁴⁰ The Arab upheavals and the rise of the Islamic State have brought new dynamics into this ambiguous triangle. Recently Al Arabiya revealed that a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Executive Committee, Saeb Erekat, has taken a position against Kurdish self-determination because it could encourage other countries to separate from the Arab states: "Kurdish independence would be a poisoned sword against the Arabs."⁴¹ At the same time, Israel blames Western countries for the way the Kurdish and the Palestinian issues have been addressed: Ayub Kara, Deputy Minister of Regional Cooperation, claimed it was "not logical that 40 million Kurds were without a country while you [the West] looked for other people who are only two or three million and tried to set up a state for them."⁴²

2.2 Military, economic and cultural cooperation: Israel in the Iraqi Kurds' quest for legitimacy

Although officially minimised, relations with the Jewish state have covered significant domains, empowering the Kurds of Iraq in core sectors, and contributing to secure their pathway to independence. A number of Israeli intelligence veterans reported that cooperation has taken the form of military training "in return for their help in smuggling out Jews"⁴³ as well as in spying on Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad and, more recently, on Iran.⁴⁴ Reportedly, in 2003 Israeli experts penetrated Northern Iraq to drill peshmergas⁴⁵ in shooting techniques.⁴⁶ According to *Le Figaro*, Israeli intelligence agents were based in the

³⁹ Fryad Mohammed, "Palestine Opens Consulate in Iraqi Kurdistan", in *Ekurd Daily*, 29 November 2011, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/11/state5614.htm>. In 2009 Mahmoud Abbas was the first Arab president to visit Kurdistan as a semi-autonomous region.

⁴⁰ "Iraq's Kurds Support Relations with Israel, Massoud Barzani", in *Ekurd Daily*, 8 June 2005, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2005/6/independentstate187.htm>.

⁴¹ Akiva Eldar, "How to Revive the Arab Peace Initiative", in *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2015, <http://almon.co/2kxm>.

⁴² "Israel Backs 'Urgent' Kurdish Statehood, Top Israeli Official Says", in *Rûdaw*, 23 April 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/23042016>.

⁴³ The Kurds played a very important role in helping Israel to displace the Jews of Iraq at the end of the 60s, when they were transferred towards the borders with Iran. Saleh Al-Naami, "Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

⁴⁴ Dan Williams, "Israel Tells U.S. Kurdish Independence Is 'Foregone Conclusion'", cit.

⁴⁵ Peshmerga means "one who confronts death" or "one who faces death": they are the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁴⁶ Magdi Abdelhadi, "Israelis 'Train Kurdish Forces'", in *BBC News*, 20 September 2006, <http://>

region, recruiting and training Iranian dissidents in spy-craft and sabotage as part of Israel's struggle against Iran's nuclear energy program.⁴⁷ The substantial presence of women serving alongside men in the armed forces of both countries is an interesting similarity between the two peoples and a common point in the respective military cultures.⁴⁸

In the vision of Masoud Barzani, food security is one of the pillars for stabilising the sovereignty of KRG as a regional body. As part of the effort to diversify its economy, in 2009 the KRG launched the Strategic Plan for Agriculture with the aim of attaining food self-sufficiency by 2013.⁴⁹ Israel has played a role in implementing this strategy. According to *Yedioth Ahronoth*, a delegation led by KRG Vice President Kosrat Rasul and Minister of Agriculture Jamil Sleiman Haider, visited the Afikim kibbutz in the Jordan Valley area of the West Bank, with the aim to "enhance cooperation between Israel and the KRG, and explore the possibility of tapping into Israeli expertise in fields like agriculture, poultry farming, and the production of dairy products."⁵⁰

Cultural diplomacy is an additional, significant axis of the Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish tie. In May 2015, the Iraqi-Kurdish parliament legitimised the Jewish presence in the region passing a law that establishes seven departments in the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs dealing with religious minorities: Sherzad Omer Mamsani was appointed director of the Jewish Affairs Directorate and in March 2016 visited Israel for the first time in this role.⁵¹ The Directorate aims at fostering Kurdistan's ties with Jews and Israel, marking "the first time a regional political entity recognizes and seeks to correct the historical injustices of the Jewish expulsion":⁵² at the beginning of December 2015, the 70th anniversary of the expulsion of Kurdish Jews in the 1940s, when 150,000 Jews from the region were displaced, was honoured.⁵³ Among the other tasks of the Directorate, it is worth mentioning the preservation and reconstruction of the remaining synagogues, cemeteries and physical reminders of the Jewish presence:⁵⁴ many urban renewal

news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5364982.stm.

⁴⁷ Joseph Fitsanakis, "Israeli Mossad Training Iranian Exiles in Kurdistan: French Newspaper", in *IntelNews*, 11 January 2012, <https://intelnews.org/2012/01/11/01-906>.

⁴⁸ Seth J. Frantzman, "Kurds in Iraq See Israel as Middle East Model", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 July 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=460467>.

⁴⁹ Pierre Blanc, "Kurdistan: la terre et l'eau au cœur des stratégies de pouvoir", in *Moyen-Orient*, No. 26, (April-June 2015), p. 66.

⁵⁰ Yahya Dbouk, "An Israeli Dairy Farm in Iraqi Kurdistan?", in *Al-Akhbar English*, 22 February 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/15050>.

⁵¹ Although 94 percent of Iraqi Kurds are nominally Muslim, "Kurdish identity is not based on religion, but on language and culture", says Kendal Nezan, head of the Paris Kurdish Institute. Sarah Leduc, "The Kurds: The World's Largest Stateless Nation", cit.

⁵² Sherzad Omer Mamsani, "Reaching Out to Its Jewish History, Report from Kurdistan", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 October 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=429963>.

⁵³ "Kurdistan Holds First Memorial Ceremony Marking 70 Years since Jewish Expulsion", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 December 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=436306>.

⁵⁴ Tamara Zieve, "Kurdistan Official Launches Appeal to UN to Save Jewish Tomb", in *The*

projects that include the preservation of the Jewish heritage have been launched, such as the Erbil City Centre Master Plan.⁵⁵ It is thought that there are from 200,000 to 300,000 Jews of Kurdish origin in the world, but most of them decided to live in Israel. According to Mariwan Naqshbandi, who leads an office in the Ministry of Religious Affairs in charge of promoting religious tolerance, some 200-300 Jewish families are believed to be still living in Iraq: they converted to Islam, but are secretly keeping up their traditions.⁵⁶ However, these estimations are challenged by number of analysts and pundits.⁵⁷

3. Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relations envisioning a post-ISIS Iraq

3.1 *The struggle against the Islamic State*

This intense and discreet dialogue is continuing despite the rise of ISIS and its very nature could become an important vector of legitimacy in a theoretical post-ISIS Iraq. Bolstered by “a combination of government neglect, careful planning, brutal tactics, and clever recruitment, the Islamic State had the manpower, money, and territory to make a credible claim to be a state. [...] It] is the only insurgent group in the Middle East to have made a plausible claim to the office [of Caliphate] since the fall of the Ottoman caliphate in the early twentieth century.”⁵⁸ Since the crisis began in 2014, nearly 1.8 million Iraqis and Syrians have fled to Iraqi Kurdistan,⁵⁹ increasing its population by 30 percent.⁶⁰ At least 5,000 Yazidis, predominantly ethnically Kurdish, were murdered by the Islamic State in the first phase of its campaign in Iraq. Each party in the anti-ISIS fight is pursuing its own aims and the way in which a theoretical defeat of ISIS is managed could lead to a new set of ethnic and religious conflicts and to territorial fragmentations which are difficult to predict.⁶¹ Indeed, other Shi’ite and Sunni provinces had already considered steps toward autonomy before the onslaught of the Islamic State.

Jerusalem Post, 1 August 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=462958>.

⁵⁵ Caecilia Pieri, “Villes du Kurdistan d’Irak: une multiplicité d’identités et de patrimoines”, in *Moyen-Orient*, No. 26, (April-June 2015), p. 36.

⁵⁶ Michael Kaplan, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s First Jewish Leader Wants to Revitalize Judaism and Boost Israel-Ties, But Challenges Lie Ahead”, in *International Business Times*, 23 October 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/node/2154230>.

⁵⁷ Among others, Mordechai Zaken, head of Minority Affairs in the Israeli Public Security Ministry, contested the current existence of a sort of Jewish community in Iraqi Kurdistan, stressing that there are no operating synagogues in the region: there were several dozen families with a distant family connection to Judaism but most of them immigrated to Israel thanks to the law of return. Ariel Ben Solomon, “So Are There Jews in Kurdistan?”, in *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 November 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=432756>.

⁵⁸ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse. The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2015, p. 153.

⁵⁹ Roughly 1.5 million displaced Iraqis and 280,000 Syrian refugees according to the KRG.

⁶⁰ Eli Lake, “Crisis Looms for Refugees Taken In by Iraq’s Kurds”, in *Bloomberg View*, 30 September 2015, <http://bv.ms/1P5emcv>.

⁶¹ Joost Hiltermann, “The Perils of a Post-ISIS Iraq”, in *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2016, <http://atfp.co/2d6o3h7>.

Loosely organised, the anti-ISIS coalition (to which Israel was not publicly asked to contribute) has been arming Iraqi Kurds since June 2014. Actions led by peshmergas have proven to be decisive in the struggle against the Caliphate, creating new “facts on the ground” that have strengthened its internal sovereignty and international recognition.⁶² However, because of the way in which this military aid has been channelled (following uncoordinated, unbalanced, unconditional and unmonitored procedures), it risks making the Kurds a less effective partner, accelerating “the Kurdish polity’s fragmentation,”⁶³ and jeopardising the attempt to turn the peshmergas into a professional force.⁶⁴ After a period of strategic framework agreements, the Kurdish political system is shifting again to an intra-elite power struggle. The arms were given disproportionately to the KDP, pushing the PUK into greater reliance on Iranian military assistance and on the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK),⁶⁵ inflaming competition over coordination. This environment is probably not conducive to a sudden declaration of independence and risks undermining Kurdish aspirations.

Israel is financing the Kurdish resistance essentially through economic cooperation, and energy imports are crucial to understanding the Israeli involvement in the fight against the Caliphate.⁶⁶ According to the *Financial Times*, “Israeli refineries and oil companies imported more than 19 [million] barrels of Kurdish oil between the beginning of May and August 11 [2015],” 77 percent of the average Israeli demand in that period, shipped from Turkey’s Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.⁶⁷ The Turkish government, despite the fact that it has long opposed an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan as a potentially dangerous precedent given its own large Kurdish population, has developed strong cooperation with Erbil since 2007: trade relations were valued at 10 billion dollars in 2013.⁶⁸ Ankara agreed to connect a new pipeline from the Taq Taq oil field, in Kurdistan, to the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline (Iraq-Turkey Crude Oil Pipeline, Iraq’s largest crude oil export line), guaranteeing

⁶² Denise Natali, “Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan”, cit.

⁶³ International Crisis Group (ICG), “Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict”, in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 158 (12 May 2015), p. i, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/405>.

⁶⁴ Maria Fantappie, “The Peshmerga Regression”, in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 14 June 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1114708>.

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), “Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict”, cit., p. ii.

⁶⁶ It is worth considering that Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan “have a history in the oil trade that precedes even the establishment of the State of Israel” in 1948. Indeed, the British Mandate commissioned a pipeline from the Kirkuk oil field to the city of Haifa. Sharon Udasin, “Report: Majority of Israeli oil imported from Kurdistan”, in *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 August 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=413056>.

⁶⁷ David Sheppard, John Reed and Anjali Raval, “Israel Turns to Kurds for Three-Quarters of Its Oil Supplies”, in *The Financial Times*, 23 August 2015, <http://on.ft.com/1JdEjR0>.

⁶⁸ Turkey fears that an independent Iraqi Kurdish state could quickly expand to include parts of Turkey, entailing a redrawing of borders and the unleashing of renewed struggles with the “Mountain Turks”, what Ankara calls its Kurd minority: the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is historically perceived as a major national security threat. Despite that, cross-border economic cooperation is essential to secure KRG ambitions and has proved to contribute to overcoming political fissures. Denise Natali, “Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan”, cit.

the depositing of oil payments into a Kurdish bank account in Turkey, rather than into the Iraqi national account in New York, definitely challenging "Baghdad's claims to exclusive control of Iraq's natural resources."⁶⁹ Thanks to this energy cooperation among Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Israel, the Jewish state (and its private companies) has indirectly contributed to the international campaign against ISIS, by funding Kurdistan's war efforts:⁷⁰ the sales were reportedly worth 1 billion dollars.⁷¹ Furthermore, Israel is a base for Kurdish oil exports: some buyers took tankers to Ashkelon where oil was loaded into storage facilities to be resold in Europe.⁷² Italy, France and Greece emerged as big buyers, but "Israel is by no means the only country that has been buying more Kurdish oil."⁷³ The pro-Israel lobby in the United States is probably another vector of support: recently, a senior Kurdish delegation met with Israel lobbyists in Washington, seeking financial aid for the war against the Islamic State and relying on the ability of the lobby and of Israel to influence US foreign policy.⁷⁴

As mentioned above, the rise of ISIS, the dismantling of the post-World War I order, and the increasing instability in the region are at the centre of the Israeli realist security and foreign policy paradigm and the multifaceted relations with the Kurds could prove to be true assets in reframing regional equilibria. However, despite the fact that Israel is mainly interested "in enabling the Erbil government to secure the terms and conditions that will help it to declare its independence from Baghdad"⁷⁵ in a post-ISIS scenario, the country does not want to antagonise other allies in the region that advocate the unity of Iraq, such as the United States, Turkey or Iran. If Iraqi Kurdistan continues to be part of Iraq the clandestine nature of the Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relationship will probably be maintained.

⁶⁹ Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way", cit. Furthermore, it is worth considering that "the opaque and personal nature of KRG-Ankara energy ties, which are largely a private deal between Barzani and Recep Tayyip Erdogan" risks to affect "the terms and nature of the agreement, and more directly KRG exports." Denise Natali, "Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

⁷⁰ Saleh Al-Naami, "Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

⁷¹ "Report: Israel Imports Three-quarters of Its Oil from Iraq's Kurds", in *Haaretz*, 24 August 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.672599>.

⁷² Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Exclusive: How Kurdistan Bypassed Baghdad and Sold Oil on Global Markets", in *Reuters*, 17 November 2015, <http://reut.rs/1kC6K6e>.

⁷³ David Sheppard, John Reed and Anjli Raval, "Israel Turns to Kurds for Three-Quarters of Its Oil Supplies", cit.

⁷⁴ Zvi Bar'el, "Dreaming of Independence, Iraqi Kurds Reach Out to Jews and Israel for Support", in *Haaretz*, 16 May 2016.

⁷⁵ Saleh Al-Naami, "Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

3.2 A constrained and fragile independent Kurdistan

The Israeli endorsement may prove to be a precipitous move. Indeed, legal, economic, and political constraints could undermine Barzani's claim for independence. The long, costly and uncertain process of obtaining international recognition, the vital necessity to do business with neighbouring countries and to expand markets in the Gulf and the growing financial instability KRG is witnessing reduce the freedom of action for an independent Kurdistan. The Regional Government cannot become economically autonomous and the struggle against ISIS has also deepened its regional dependencies, particularly on neighbouring Turkey and Iran: prospects for independence are tempered by the fact that if they "cross the threshold separating full autonomy from independence"⁷⁶ retaliation could follow, being perceived as a domestic security threat by both states. Unilateral decisions could trigger reactions from surrounding regional powers and this would reverberate on the degree and nature of future Kurdish autonomy.⁷⁷

Turkey and Iran are the two largest external trading partners for the KRG. Ankara and Tehran are committed to weakening Baghdad but at the same time they guarantee its sovereignty, thus influencing its different communities according to their domestic or foreign policy goals. As mentioned above, Ankara and Erbil have developed strong cooperation since 2007, however, "by becoming fully reliant on a single transit route and a legally contentious pipeline running through Turkey and a war zone, the landlocked Kurdistan Region has become more financially vulnerable than ever before."⁷⁸ With the rise of the Islamic State, the Iranian influence has become stronger, especially along the border with Suleymaniya and Erbil provinces. Tehran has provided economic, political, and security assistance, particularly to PUK peshmergas and Shi'a militias.⁷⁹

Israel – Iraqi Kurdish ties have already hurt the Islamic Republic and the strong influence Tehran is developing over the region shrinks the margins for a real rapprochement between the KRG and Israel. The Chairman of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, has recently declared that "given the recent position taken by Netanyahu on supporting the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence, any steps taken in this regard will implement the Zionist regime's special goals in the region."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Itamar Rabinovich, "Israel and the Changing Middle East", in *Middle East Memo*, No. 34 (January 2015), p. 9, <http://brook.gs/2bPq1gS>.

⁷⁷ "Any change in Ankara-Baghdad relations, Iranian-Turkish capabilities, access to pipeline infrastructure, PKK-Turkey tensions, Erdogan's political status, Iraqi government stabilization, intra-Kurdish tensions, bridging of Sunni-Shi'a ties, or a strengthened Sunni Arab region could affect the KRG's leverage and ability to export oil and access revenues apart from Baghdad." Denise Natali, "Stalemate, Not Statehood, for Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Not all Iraqi Kurds Welcome Israel's Support", in *Middle East Eye*, 14 July 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/3396>.

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Marzieh Afkham, has added that Tehran would never allow the dismantling of Iraq: “undoubtedly the vigilant Iraqi people will not allow the Zionist regime and enemies of a unified Iraq to carry out their plots and realize their immature fantasies in the region.”⁸¹

Conclusion: The systemic implications of the Kurdish bid for independence

Despite the tensions in terms of vision and long-term goals among the different components of the Kurdish mosaic, both in Iraq and in the whole region, as well as the very fragile nature of an independent Kurdistan and the influence of a host of regional actors on its future, the development of a more autonomous region in the North of Iraq in a theoretical post-ISIS phase should be taken into consideration. Israel could be a precious ally in this process. As mentioned above, both sides are building common ground but “complexity and ambivalence are inherent in Israel’s relationship with its Middle Eastern environment”⁸² and this impacts its Kurdish counterparts.⁸³ However, under the current circumstances, the steady strengthening of political, economic and cultural ties between the two peoples since the 60s could have a significant impact if Iraq’s future as an intact nation remains in doubt. Although at the moment Kurdish nationalism seems unable to declare full-fledged independence,⁸⁴ should the KRG secede from Baghdad, putting an end to Iraqi territorial integrity, Israel might be one of the first countries to upgrade ties into open relations, recognising the Kurdish State.⁸⁵

Haidar Al-Abadi, Iraq’s Prime Minister, has recently said that his government will not hinder a Kurdish independence referendum and sees self-determination as an “undisputed right.”⁸⁶ According to a recent poll, conducted by the Center for Peace and Human Security (CPHS) of the American University of Kurdistan and the Institute of Media and Political Research (IMPR), over 82 percent of eligible voters supports the Kurdish bid for independence, while 34 percent of the respondents believe the timing is not ideal for the process to go ahead.⁸⁷ Although the referendum

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Itamar Rabinovich, “Israel and the Changing Middle East”, cit., p. 1.

⁸³ Although there are remarkable beneficial effects of the Israeli-Kurdish relationship, the “Israeli connection” could endanger the future steps to autonomy for the Kurdish region. As former Iraqi MP Mahmoud Othman told Middle East Eye, “they [the Israelis] can do nothing for the Kurds because they are geographically away. Moreover a lot of Arab countries, Islamic countries, Iran, maybe even Turkey would have a negative reaction. I think Kurds will not benefit from this and it would be better if they [Israelis] don’t talk about it”. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Not all Iraqi Kurds Welcome Israel’s Support”, cit.

⁸⁴ “Maria Fantappie, Specialist in Kurdish Issues”, in *ARTE*, 3 October 2014, <http://info.arte.tv/en/node/26661>.

⁸⁵ Ofra Bengio, “Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds”, cit.

⁸⁶ “Iraq’s PM Sees Kurdish Referendum As ‘Undisputed Right’”, in *Rûdaw*, 26 August 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/26082016>.

⁸⁷ “Poll Shows 82 Percent Support for Kurdish Independence”, in *Rûdaw*, 20 August 2016, <http://>

is non-binding and will not directly lead to a declaration of independence, in the event of a secession, the establishment of a confederation or of a truly federal system, a clearer partnership between the two states could be set up, reducing Israeli isolation and increasing its influence across the region, in a moment of growing "antisolutionism"⁸⁸ in dealing with the Palestinians, threats from Hezbollah and with the dismantling of Syria looming large.⁸⁹ This partnership may prove to be a significant element in prefiguring a less polarised regional order: an order less dominated by old hostilities and deep fissures than by regional autonomies, permeable boundaries and economic associations. Indeed, despite the fact that the establishment of two "ethnic democracies"⁹⁰ could also unleash reactions difficult to predict, multifaceted relations, shared concerns, and historical similarities are already contributing to economic and political cooperation among the countries that lie in between. The regional system is not only undermined by civil wars, revolutions and claimed secessions. Other significant changes may affect the area: the oil now travelling across the Kurdish-Turkish frontier represents, according to David and Marina Ottaway, an alternative to the status quo, "forging new economic zones that straddle borders and transcend old hostilities. [...] mutual economic interests, especially in the oil and gas industries, may signal a softer end to Sykes-Picot."⁹¹ Shipped to Ashkelon, Kurdish oil sustains Israeli imports and funds Kurdistan's war efforts. It is worth considering that this sort of "energy triangle" among Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Israel was set up despite the six-year diplomatic standoff between Turkey and Israel. And the recent reconciliation between the two countries is bound to intensify cross-border cooperation. The KRG is certainly interested in the normalisation of relations between Israel and Turkey since this recovered harmony could simplify the exchanges and secure the shipment of its oil.⁹² Furthermore, the mending of the rift raises the prospect of eventual cooperation to exploit the significant natural gas reserves recently discovered in the eastern Mediterranean, probably opening the way for Israeli gas supplies to Europe via Turkey.⁹³ These cross-border policy solutions, bypassing traditional cleavages, ethnic and sectarian divisions, could have a positive spillover in the whole region, encouraging political dialogue through mutual economic interests and trade. In addition to this, Baghdad and Erbil will probably reach a new oil deal in the coming months, potentially opening new interesting scenarios. Interviewed by the Israeli

rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/200820162.

⁸⁸ Brian Reeves, "Israel's 'Anti-Solutionist' Strategy", in *Markaz Blog*, 30 October 2015, <http://brook.gs/2aXfzCe>.

⁸⁹ Saleh Al-Naami, "Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan", cit.

⁹⁰ The concept was introduced by Sammy Smooha, Professor of Sociology at The University of Haifa, and defines a political system that combines democracy with institutionalised ethnic dominance.

⁹¹ Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way", cit.

⁹² Ofra Bengio, "Israel and the Kurds: Love by Proxy", in *The American Interest*, 18 March 2016, <http://wp.me/p4ja0Z-yOI>.

⁹³ Ercan Gurses and Jeffrey Heller, "Israel, Turkey Restore Ties in Deal Spurred by Energy Prospects", in *Reuters*, 27 June 2016, <http://reut.rs/28XGNKf>.

Army Radio on the desirability of Iraqi-Kurdish independence, Amos Gilad noted that "one can look at history and draw conclusions about the future."⁹⁴ Today, the two parties should focus on the multifaceted nature of their relationship, aiming at the most mutually beneficial convergences at the appropriate moment, avoiding leaps forward or abrupt changes. Although major uncertainties in the region are pressing, fixing the terms of bilateral relations is of great importance. In the context of the unravelling of the post-World War I order, both parties will certainly benefit from this clandestine decades-long relationship, extolling a partnership nestled in the complex international projection of the two "outcast nations."

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⁹⁴ Dan Williams, "Israel Tells U.S. Kurdish Independence Is 'Foregone Conclusion'", cit.

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T +39 06 3224360

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