

# The New York Times

## *Talk of Iraq Recognizing Israel Prompts Threats of Arrest or Death*

A conference promoting normalization, organized by a little-known American group, prompted a furor, pointing to the volatility and danger in Iraqi politics.

By Jane Arraf | September 29, 2021



Iraqis attending a conference pressing for normalization with Israel this month in Erbil, Iraq. Credit...Safin Hamed/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

BAGHDAD — A conference last Friday in Iraq's Kurdistan Region looked routine enough, with speakers at a satin-draped table in the ballroom of a luxury hotel and men in suits and tribal robes in the audience.

But there was nothing routine about the agenda: pressing for Iraq to normalize relations with Israel, a rare and risky public stance in Iraq that has emerged as an unexpected

flash point in the simmering tensions between the Kurds and central government. Participants are now facing arrest warrants, death threats and the loss of jobs.

A standoff has ensued between Iraqi security officials who want to seize those involved and the Kurdish authorities, who are refusing to turn over the wanted Iraqis who are their guests — despite the threat of attack by Iranian-backed militias. A key speaker has recanted and said he was tricked.

The uproar is a reminder of how volatile Iraq is, with political, economic and fighting power fragmented among competing players, with none more potent than those militias aligned with Tehran, Israel’s most implacable foe.

The conference sponsor was a little-known nonprofit group based in Brooklyn, [the Center for Peace Communications](#). Created in 2019, the group’s stated goal is “to resolve identity-based conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.” In [a tax filing](#) it said more specifically that it “aims to roll back anti-Semitism and foster a culture of supportive relations with Israel.”

“We knew that this would trigger enormous controversy and a backlash,” said Joseph Braude, the center’s founder and chief executive. “We nonetheless did it because the people in Iraq who wanted to do this asked for our help.”



Joseph Braude, the Center for Peace Communications founder, speaking to journalists in Erbil  
Safin Hamed/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Iraq has historically backed the Palestinian cause, and is technically in a state of hostilities with Israel dating to Israel's founding in 1948, when more than 100,000 Iraqi Jews were expelled from the country. Iraqi law makes it a crime to "promote Zionist principles" and lists the punishment as death.

The conference in the Kurdish capital of Erbil promoted reconciliation but seems to have achieved the opposite, triggering a sectarian skirmish between the mostly Sunni Muslim attendees and Iranian-backed Shiite paramilitary groups who have declared the attendees traitors. It has also stirred up dangerous disputes between competing Sunni forces two weeks before Iraqi elections.

As news of the conference spread, the Iraqi government and authorities in overwhelmingly Sunni Anbar Province issued arrest warrants for at least six Iraqis they said were involved in the conference, though one warrant was later withdrawn. Other attendees were dismissed from their government jobs.

At several checkpoints between Baghdad and Anbar province, militia fighters erected huge banners with the faces of those on the arrest warrants, declaring them guilty of treason.

The main speaker at the conference, Sheikh Wissam al-Hardan, from Anbar, is now under Kurdish protection along with other conference attendees facing threats. But the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is semiautonomous from Baghdad, is also under threat.

The region, which broke away from Iraqi government control with U.S. help three decades ago, has faced increasing attacks, including drone strikes, linked to Iranian-backed militias because of a U.S. military base in Erbil.

"We will not delay in burning all the traitors' locations with smart missiles and drones," a group called Guardians of the Blood Brigade, which has claimed responsibility for previous attacks in Erbil, warned after the conference.

In his keynote speech to the conference, Sheikh Wissam described the expulsion of Iraqi Jews after the creation of Israel in 1948 as a major tragedy and said Iraq should recognize Israel, as the United Arab Emirates and several other Arab countries [did last year](#). He warned against Iraq becoming like Lebanon, which he said had been swallowed whole by a militia — a reference to Hezbollah, backed by Iran.

The conference featured an address by a U.A.E. official, but Mr. Braude said the Emirates did not help finance the event. He is a fellow at the [Al Mesbar](#) Studies and Research Center, a think tank in Dubai, in the U.A.E., that researches political and social movements in the Muslim world.

The Center for Peace Communications is funded by American philanthropists and one European, he said, but he declined to name them. Its chairman is [Dennis Ross](#), a retired senior U.S. State Department official, who spoke at the Erbil conference.

Mr. Braude has said that he spoke with the U.S. military about [job prospects in Iraq](#) shortly after the 2003 invasion. He [pleaded guilty in 2004](#) in New York to smuggling ancient cylinder seals looted from the Iraq Museum, which he said he had intended to turn over to the authorities.

The Iraqi Kurdistan government maintains unofficial security and other ties with Israel, but denied after the conference that it promoted normalization or had authorized any event doing so. But The New York Times has seen documentation that a senior official approved the conference, knew of its content in advance and offered logistical support.

While the conference linked the two issues, many Iraqis draw a sharp distinction between feeling an affinity for the country's former Jewish community and openness to the state of Israel.

The Iraqi Jews — an ancient community and an integral part of Iraqi society — were pressured by the government to give up their citizenship and property and leave Iraq after the creation of Israel in 1948. Mr. Braude's ancestors were part of that community.

"Iraq is not a monolith and people harbor different views about Jews," Mr. Braude said. "I feel like this is a long-term effort."

In the short term, it has put some people in danger. Ali al-Hardan, who along with his father was wounded fighting ISIS, said some Sunni extremist groups had declared killing him and his father halal — religiously permitted.

"Four times Al Qaeda tried to assassinate us," he said. "One day they blew up our house in Baghdad. Now we are wanted by everyone."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/world/middleeast/iraq-recognizing-israel.html>