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'WE DEMAND FULL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH STATE OF ISRAEL'

Hundreds of Iraqi notables call to join Abraham Accords, make peace with Israel

At Erbil conference, participants also urge rebuilding ties with the country's dispossessed Jewish diaspora; normalization remains a crime under Iraqi law

by Arron Boxerman and Lazar Berman | September 25, 2021



Iraqis attend the conference of peace and reclamation organised by US think-tank Center for Peace Communications (CPC) in Arbil, the capital of northern Iraq's Kurdistan autonomous region, on September 24, 2021 (Safin HAMED / AFP)

In an unprecedented plea for regional reconciliation, over 300 prominent Iraqis called for their country to normalize ties with Israel on Friday night.

“We demand full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel...and a new policy of normalization based on people-to-people relations with the citizens of that country,”

said Wisam al-Hardan, who commanded Sunni tribal militias that aligned with the United States to fight al-Qaeda in 2005 in response to the power vacuum that followed the 2003 American invasion.

Iraq has officially been at war with Israel since the Jewish state was founded in 1948. Iraqi soldiers have fought in three successive Arab wars against Israel. Saddam Hussein's secret nuclear weapons program alarmed Israel, which ultimately destroyed the Osirak reactor in Iraq in 1981, and in 1991, the Iraqi dictator fired dozens of Scud missiles at Tel Aviv and Haifa in an attempt to draw Israel into the Gulf War.

At [Friday's conference](#) in the Kurdistan region, Iraqi participants called on their country's leaders to end the state of war and join the so-called Abraham Accords. The agreements, formulated by the administration of former US President Donald Trump, were signed on the White House lawn in September 2020 between Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Morocco and Sudan signed normalization agreements with Israel in the ensuing months.

"Abraham, peace be upon him, birthed a nation that paved the way for peace. Today, we and all his descendants from the three main religions bear responsibility to complete this path together," said Maj. Gen. Amir al-Jubouri, a former senior Iraqi army commander who participated in an unsuccessful coup d'etat against Saddam Hussein in 1989.

Al-Hardan contrasted the states that had joined the Abraham Accords with what he deemed the "warlordism and devastation" that reigned elsewhere in the region.



Wissam al-Hardan, a Sunni tribal leader from Anbar province in Iraq, calls for normalization with Israel at a conference in Erbil on Friday, September 24, 2021 (Credit: Center for Peace Communications)

“We must choose between tyranny and chaos on the one hand, and an emerging axis of legality, decency, peace, and progress on the other,” al-Hardan told the attendees.

The gathering, which included Sunni and Shi’ite Muslim tribal leaders, social activists and former military commanders, took place in the Iraqi Kurdistan’s capital of Erbil. It was organized by the Center for Peace Communications, a New York-based nonprofit that seeks to advance closer ties between Israelis and the Arab world.

Other attendees from around the region spoke virtually to the participants, including former UAE official Ali al-Na’imi and Chemi Peres, the son of former Israeli president Shimon Peres.

Iraqi Kurds, who speak Kurdish rather than Arabic, see themselves as nationally and culturally distinct from other Iraqis. Their region has some autonomy from Baghdad; Israelis occasionally visit the area, albeit with a low profile.

Iraqi law continues to issue strict penalties to citizens and residents who maintain contact with Israelis. For decades, association with “Zionist organizations” or promoting “Zionist values” was punishable by death. A 2010 amendment to the Iraqi criminal code limited the sentence to life in prison.



Iraqis attend the conference of peace and reclamation organised by US think-tank Center for Peace Communications (CPC) in Erbil, the capital of northern Iraq's Kurdistan autonomous region, on September 24, 2021 (Safin HAMED / AFP)

Al-Hardan harshly criticized the laws against dealing with Israelis and Zionists, saying it violated the fundamental human rights of Iraqis.

“The so-called ‘anti-normalization laws’ in Iraq are morally repugnant, and have been repeatedly exposed by the international community as an assault on human rights and freedoms of expression and association,” said al-Hardan.

A flourishing Iraqi Jewish community lived in the country for centuries, mostly in the central city of Baghdad. But as British colonial rule ended in Iraq and the State of Israel was born in Mandatory Palestine, everything began to change.

A vicious 1941 pogrom, known in Arabic as the Farhud, saw the deaths of hundreds of Iraqi Jews at the hands of their compatriots in Baghdad. The attacks were sparked by rumors that Jews had helped the British retake power in Iraq following a coup by pro-Nazi Iraqi generals.

After Israel was founded in 1948, Iraq began persecuting those Jews who remained. The government made Zionism a criminal offense, began firing Iraqi Jews from the civil service en masse; other Jewish Iraqis were arrested and executed as suspected spies.

Between 1950 and 1952, over 100,000 Iraqi Jews emigrated to Israel as part of Operation Ezra and Nehemiah. Driven to emigrate by further decades of repression and war, only a handful of Jews remain.



Iraqi Jews arrive in Israel's Lod Airport on May 1, 1950. (GPO / BRAUNER TEDDY)

Calling the expulsion of Iraq's Jews "the most infamous act" in the country's decline, Hardan wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on Friday that Iraq "must reconnect with the whole of our diaspora, including these Jews."

Other Iraqis who participated in Friday's conference urged their country to rebuild ties with those who arrived in Israel fleeing persecution and their descendants.

"The love and longing for these people endures in our country, while much of the property of these Jews remains in Iraq," said al-Juburi.

According to Sahr al-Ta'i, an Iraqi cultural official who participated in the conference, several working groups will be formed in the wake of the conference, including committees to improve ties between Iraq and its Jewish diaspora, trade and investment, educational reform, and advocating for the repeal of Iraq's anti-normalization laws.



Iraqis listen to Sahr al-Ta'i at the conference of peace and reclamation organized by US think-tank Center for Peace Communications (CPC) in Erbil, the capital of northern Iraq's Kurdistan autonomous region, on September 24, 2021 (Safin HAMED / AFP)

Iraqi officials have said their country will not normalize ties with Israel without a just resolution of the Palestinian issue. But in 2019, Iraqi ambassador to the United States Farid Yassin noted that there were “objective reasons” to establish ties between the two countries.

“But the objective reasons are not enough,” Yassin added, stressing that there are “emotional and other reasons” that make open communication between Jerusalem and Baghdad impossible.

Many Palestinians strongly oppose normalization between Israel and the broader Arab world. Both Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas and the Hamas terror group described last year's normalization accords as a “betrayal.”



Dr. Sahr al-Ta'i, an Iraqi advocate of normalizing ties with Israel, speaks at a peace conference in Erbil, Kurdistan, on Friday, September 24, 2021 (Screenshot)

The response would likely be much the same should Iraq decide to normalize ties with Israel, and even cultural activities similar to Friday's conference have drawn intense condemnation. Al-Ta'i rejected the notion that normalization with Israel meant giving up on the Palestinians.

"The peace project that we are adopting does not contradict the interests of the Palestinian people. On the contrary, we see peace as the best and only way to empower the Palestinian people in building state institutions and providing better opportunities for future generations," al-Ta'i said.

"Israel today, as you know, is a strong country and an inseparable part of the world and the United Nations. Iraq cannot neglect this fact and live in isolation from the world," she added.

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