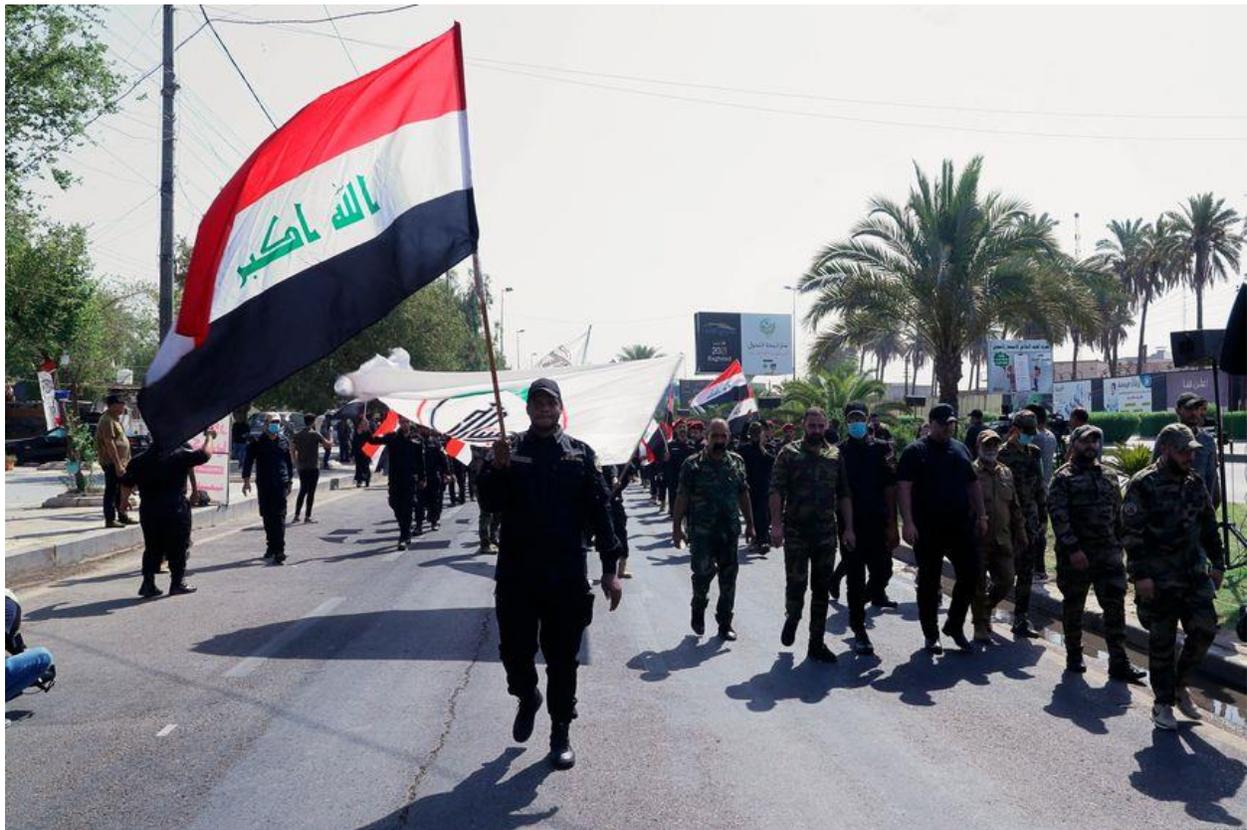


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## *Under Threat, an Iraqi Disowns His Call for Peace*

And the New York Times lends the false recantation a measure of credence.

By Joseph Braude | Oct. 3, 2021



Iran-backed militia fighters march in Baghdad, June 29. PHOTO: KHALID MOHAMMED/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Advocating peace can be dangerous in the Middle East. My organization sponsored a Sept. 24 conference in the Iraqi Kurdish city of Erbil, which drew 312 prominent Sunnis and Shiites from around the country who urged Iraq to join the Abraham Accords and make peace with Israel. The government in Baghdad dubbed the attendees “criminals” and issued arrest warrants, while Iran-backed Shiite militias threatened to kill participants and fire rockets at Erbil.

The first speaker was Wisam Al-Hardan, leader of the Sons of Iraq Awakening movement, or Sahwa, of Sunni tribal fighters against al Qaeda and ISIS. I helped him prepare his speech, which was adapted into an [op-ed](#) for these pages. Shortly before the conference, Mr. Al-Hardan told me he was worried about the threats that would inevitably follow. I urged him to do whatever he felt was right. He steeled himself and took the stage.

In response, Baghdad issued an arrest warrant for him and his son, who didn't attend the conference; militias threatened to kill his relatives in parts of the country where he couldn't protect them, and an Iran-backed jihadist moved to take his place at the helm of the Sahwa. A day or so later, he disowned the speech and op-ed piece in a statement broadcast on Kurdish television, in which he claimed to have been "duped." (He paid me the courtesy of telling me in advance that he planned to do so.)

[New York Times](#) Baghdad bureau chief Jane Arraf was one of several journalists who interviewed me by phone about the incident. I explained how I had helped Mr. Al-Hardan develop the speech from his original draft and served as go-between with the Journal's editors. I confirmed that I translated the edited English-language version back into Arabic and submitted it to Mr. Al-Hardan for approval.

In response to Ms. Arraf's question about his later claim that he didn't know the content of the speech from which the article was drawn, I provided the full video of his delivering it to the crowd as well as a clip of a Kurdish TV interview, taped after the conference but before the threats began, in which he reinforced the message. Ms. Arraf's report mentions neither video, and asserts that I told her the Journal editors had provided "input" on the piece. That's her word, not mine, and the Journal editors made no substantive changes. The Times thereby lent a measure of credence to a recantation that obviously was made under duress.

The Iraqis who participated in the conference came to me in part because I am the son of an Iraqi Jewish woman born in Baghdad, and I took on the commitment out of a sense of kinship and personal conviction. My organization is doing everything we can to help protect them. As part of that effort, we would like to call public attention to one of the ways international media can help: Don't allow Iran or its violent proxies to manipulate your coverage. Don't let their intimidation and threats shape the story. And, when courageous people stand up for peace at clear risk to themselves, take note of this and ask why it is happening and why the Iranians feel so threatened by it.

*Mr. Braude is founder and president of the Center for Peace Communications.*