



Erbil Conference

Peace Conference Ends in Death Threats and Recrimination

Participants claim they were misled

New York Times quotes the son of keynote speaker:

**“Four times al-Qaeda tried to assassinate us.
One day they blew up our house in Baghdad. Now we are wanted by everyone.”**

ERBIL, Iraq, September 24, 2021: A conference held in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq [attracted](#) global [media coverage](#) when its keynote speaker issued a demand for Iraq to join the Abraham Accords and recognize the state of Israel. Yet within 24 hours, conference participants were denying any foreknowledge of the event’s controversial agenda as Sunni and Shiite militias launched a manhunt for those involved.

Held two weeks before Iraq’s national elections, the conference appears to have inadvertently played into the hands of Islamist militias and extremist political parties, including that of prominent Shiite cleric Muqtadr al-Sadr, whose party won a plurality of votes in the election. Sadr was swift to condemn the event in Erbil and to declare that it is legitimate to shed the blood of conference participants.

In a lengthy [story](#) published on September 29, 2021, *The New York Times* Baghdad bureau chief, Jane Arraf, reported that: “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.”

In an article titled “Calls for peace with Israel backfire after Iraqi conference,” NBC news [reported](#) that “Instead of boosting the prospects of peace, the Sept. 24 conference may have played into the hands of hard-liners vehemently opposed to normalization.”

According to *Responsible Statecraft*, the in-house journal of The Quincy Institute:

several attendees have claimed that [Wisam al-Hardan, leader of a Sunni militia called the Awakening,] tricked them into attending. Several told Kurdish media that they had been invited to a conference about the possibility of obtaining government salaries for the Awakening.

Another participant, Fella Hassan al-Neda, claimed that Hardan had invited him to a “conference in the name of peaceful coexistence between religions, including the Jewish religion.”

“We were surprised by the speeches about Israel, peaceful coexistence, the Abraham Accords, what the United Arab Emirates did, and normalization of Israel,” he told journalists....

Thanassis Cambanis, director of the international policy program at The Century Foundation, noted that “there appeared to be a coordinated campaign by a like-minded group of Americans and U.S.-based groups to promote the conference—misleadingly—as representing some groundswell of Iraqi public opinion.”

~ [Iraqis fear for their lives after botched pro-Israel conference in Erbil](#)

Visibly [unnerved](#) Sunni tribal leaders who participated in the conference issued a video statement (above) in which they said:

In the name of God the beneficent, the merciful, this is a statement from tribal figures who participated in yesterday’s conference for the normalization of relations with Israel.

We are a group of tribal figures from a number of different Iraqi provinces who are members of the Sunni Awakening.

We wish to clarify what occurred during the Peace and Reclamation Conference held yesterday, Friday, in Erbil and the reason for our participation. We received an invitation from he who is known as Wisam al-Hardan, that the conference was for those [Awakening members] whose contracts had been invalidated; to increase their salaries; and to integrate them into the Iraqi security forces. However, we were shocked to find that the subject of the conference was totally different and bore no relation to the basis upon which we were invited.

Therefore, we hold he who is known as Wisam al-Hardan fully responsible, both tribally and legally, for what occurred and reiterate that we have nothing whatsoever to do with this matter. Our position is clear and known: we support the Palestinian people. No to [the Peace and] Reclamation [Conference]. We are against normalization [with Israel]. We demand the personal intervention of the Iraqi Prime Minister in this matter, because we have become targets for assassination by every segment of Iraqi society and are totally innocent of this matter and opposed [to normalization with Israel].

Interestingly, a photo of Salah Musleh, Shaykh of the Bu Diab tribe (quoted and photographed above, wearing a red-checkered headdress) also appears in a [Foreign Policy](#) article titled “A Pro-Israel Summit in Erbil Breaks New Ground: At great personal risk, Iraqi civil society leaders gather to demand entry into the Abraham Accords.”

In an [op-ed](#) published in *The Wall Journal*, conference organizer Joseph Braude wrote that keynote speaker Wisam al-Hardan had been fired as “leader of the Sons of Iraq Awakening movement, or Sahwa, of Sunni tribal fighters against al Qaeda and ISIS” and acknowledged that “an Iran-backed jihadist moved to take his place at the helm of the Sahwa.”

The Erbil conference illustrates the risks posed by foreign advocacy groups operating in Muslim majority societies through local partners, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as Israel and Judaism.

Commenting on these and related developments in Indonesia, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staqf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council, observed:

Domestic organizations acting at the behest of foreign donors — even if they seek to accomplish worthy objectives — may be incapable of accomplishing those objectives, due to lack of knowledge, institutional infrastructure and a popular base.

Recent events in Iraq — where an ill-advised conference played into the hands of Islamist militias and extremist political parties on the eve of national elections — illustrate the dangers posed by NGOs that weave ‘beautiful narratives’ to impress donors, while in reality undermining progress or even placing others in jeopardy.

Widespread media coverage of the Erbil conference, in the Middle East, was generally colored by the [political interests](#) of those controlling the media outlets in question. An extensive and relatively objective analysis of the event was, however, published by Saudi Television Network *Asharq News*. The full text of *Asharq News*’ coverage may be read in its original [Arabic](#) and an English translation (below).



Who were the participants in the Israeli normalization conference held in Erbil?



Participants in the “Peace and Reclamation” conference in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, 24 September, 2021 — @INPPLUSarabi

Dubai, Asharq News, 26 September, 2021

A “[Peace and Reclamation](#)” conference that called for the normalization of relations with Israel has caused a wave of controversy, raising questions as to its purpose, participants and organizers.

A number of Iraqi personalities took part in the conference, including former politicians, tribal leaders and ex-military personnel. Even though the conference was held in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, the majority of participants and speakers were Arabs from outside of the region.

Wisam al-Hardan

Wisam al-Hardan is the head of the Iraqi Awakening, which was established in 2005 by tribal leaders in Anbar province to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq side-by-side with American forces. Al-Hardan was elected leader of the Iraqi Awakening in 2013, replacing Ahmed Abu Risha.

During the conference, al-Hardan said: “We demand to join the Abraham Accords and their provisions for the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the signatories and Israel. We also demand a new policy of normalization based on people-to-people relations.”

Al-Hardan also wrote an article in American publication [*The Wall Street Journal*](#) on Friday repeating the same demands for “full diplomatic relations with Israel and the establishment of a new policy for mutual growth and flourishing,” condemning Iraqi laws that criminalize taking this step.

Amer al-Jubouri

Amer al-Jubouri is a former Iraqi general who — according to the [*Times of Israel*](#) — participated in a failed coup attempt against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 1989.

During the conference Amer al-Jubouri called for the end of strife in the region “so that peace can reign and Israel may become an integral part of the Middle Eastern panorama.”

Sahar al-Taie

During the Erbil conference, Sahar al-Taie presented herself as Head of Research at the Iraqi Ministry of Culture in Baghdad and said that “recognizing Israel as a friendly state has become essential to peace in the region,” adding that Iraq “will not give up on an anybody, whether they be Israeli or Palestinian.”

In her closing statement to the conference, Sahar al-Taie revealed that a number of committees had been created to achieve the goals of the conference, among them a committee to re-establish ties with the Iraqi Jewish diaspora; a committee for trade and investment and a committee for partnership and reform, whose purpose is to abolish those laws opposed to normalization with Israel.

The Iraqi Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities acknowledged that al-Taie is a Ministry employee. The Ministry has formed a committee to investigate her participation in the conference, as she attended “in her capacity as an official of the Ministry” even though she “does not possess credentials to speak in the name of the Ministry.”

The Ministry denied that al-Taie carries the rank of “General Administrator,” but rather is a “Senior Researcher, Grade 5.”

The Ministry condemned al-Taie’s “irresponsible” actions, reiterating that it “firmly holds the position of the Iraqi government and people, rejects normalization and embraces the demands of our Palestinian people for the complete restoration of their land and rights.”

Raysan al-Halbousi

Al-Halbousi participated in the conference in his capacity as Shaykh of the al-Bumatr tribe from al-Anbar province, stating that “normalization with Israel has become a necessity.”

Al-Halbousi said in comments to Agence France Press (AFP): “We have had enough enmity, discord and killing. We should turn a new page of cooperation, peace and security so that our children and grandchildren may live in peace and security. We cannot convince ordinary citizens to normalize Israel overnight... [but] with time, ideas change.”

Saad al-Ani

Former Iraqi officer Saad al-Ani was among the conference participants, and said in his conference speech that the continuation of enmity towards Israel is damaging and destroying Iraq.

Mithal al-Alusi

Former Iraqi parliamentarian and founder of the Iraqi Ummah Party Mithal al-Alusi also participated in the “Peace and Reclamation” conference. In comments to the news site [Rudaw](#), al-Alusi said that conference participants were “calling for the establishment of balanced relations between Iraq and the state of Israel.”

Al-Alusi said it is time for Iraq to make its own decisions, saying the country must “exert its sovereignty free from the hegemony of the militias and Iran.”

“Lightweight Personalities”

Iraqi politician and researcher Ghanem al-Abed said to *Asharq News* that “the majority of conference participants are unknown lightweights who do not represent Iraqi Sunnis. I believe that these people have been exploited,” reiterating that “they have no weight on the Sunni street.”



Ghanem pointed out that the most prominent participant was the Iraqi Awakening leader Wisam al-Hardan who “is known to flip his positions and political alliances.”

Ghanem observed that the conference “tried to fracture intra-Iraqi relations and incite sectarian strife by using the participants’ self-proclaimed status as leaders of a certain Iraqi sect [Sunnis].”

The Conference Organizers

The conference was organized by the “Center for Peace Communications,” which is headquartered in New York and works to strengthen relations between Arabs and Israelis as well as protect activists supportive of normalization with Israel.

According to the center’s website, its founder is [Joseph Braude](#), an American expert of Jewish-Iraqi origin. According to his biography on the center’s website, Braude’s intellectual project revolves around containing enmity towards Israel in media, religious and educational discourse in the Middle East.

Besides Braude, the center’s board of directors is headed by senior American diplomat [Dennis Ross](#), who is a counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and played a prominent role in the Middle East peace process through the administrations of George Bush Senior and Bill Clinton. Ross was an intermediary between the Palestinians and Israelis, helping them reach the 1995 Interim Agreement. He also facilitated the [1994] Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

The Board of Directors also includes Adam Garfinkle, a historian, American political scholar and founding editor of *The American Interest* and Heath Grant, professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, who formerly worked for the U.S. State Department and USAID.

Tribal Retractions

A number of retractions have accompanied the widespread denunciation of conference participants. Some participants claim to have been tricked or misled by the name of the conference.

Fallah Al Nada, one of the tribal leaders participating in the conference, said in a statement that he attended because Shaykh Wisam al-Hardan presented it as a conference about “peaceful coexistence between religions, including Judaism,” only for Fallah to be surprised by speeches about normalization with Israel.



Fallah said “after these statements and speeches we walked out of the conference room,” reiterating that he “never has nor will haggle over the Palestinian cause and the occupation of their land.”

[NOTE: A [video](#) of Wisam al-Hardan’s address to the conference, posted on the Center for Peace Communications’ YouTube account, is edited at the point which immediately follows al-Hardan’s call for the normalization of relations with Israel (08:39) (accessed on 26 October 2021). The video also ends immediately at the conclusion of al-Hardan’s statement, and thus does not show the audience’s reaction to his speech, nor reveal who remained in the room after al-Hardan’s call for Iraq to join the Abraham Accords.]

A group of Awakening members and tribal figures who participated in the conference issued a statement denouncing calls for normalization.

The statement was read to journalists in Erbil on Saturday by Salah Musleh, Shaykh of the Bu Diab tribe, which resides in the Baghdad Belt. He claimed that the group attended the

conference after receiving an invitation from Wisam al-Hardan “that the conference was for those Awakening members whose contracts had been invalidated and to integrate them into the Iraqi security forces,” indicating that they were shocked that the subject of the conference was totally different.

The group stated that Awakening leader Wisam al-Hardan bore “full tribal and legal responsibility” for what occurred, reiterating that “our position of support for the Palestinian people to reclaim their full rights is clear. We are against normalization.”

“Deportation of participants”

The Interior Ministry of the Kurdistan Region said that some of those who participated in the conference “will be deported and will never have a foothold in the Kurdistan Region.”

The Interior Ministry clarified in a statement obtained by *Asharq News* that “a civil society group organized a workshop for a number of Iraqi persons from different provinces. The subject of the workshop was coexistence and implementing federalism in Iraq in accordance with the Iraqi constitution, but unfortunately the organizers derailed the workshop from its stated purpose and instead used it for political objectives.”

The Ministry considers that the speeches and statements delivered at the conference “do not correspond in any way whatsoever with the official policy of the Kurdistan Regional Government and do not represent the policy of the region,” adding that “on this basis, the Interior Ministry will take legal action against those persons that derailed the conference and will punish them whoever they may be.”