

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR IRAQ TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL?



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Introduction

US President Donald Trump who followed pro-Israeli policies in the Middle East after taking office in 2017, displayed intense diplomatic performance for the normalization of Arab countries' relations with Tel Aviv. He brokered the normalization of diplomatic, political and commercial relations between Israel and firstly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, and then Sudan.¹ Even though there are signals that the wave of normalization will continue, the perception that these agreements actually prioritize national, political and economic interests rather than a regional peace plan and have the motivation to gradually isolate Palestine causes reactions in some countries in the region, especially in Iraq.

Besides the supporters and opponents of normalization with Israel, there are also those who maintain that normalization is not a pressing issue due to the geographical distance between the two countries and that Iraq should focus primarily on its own agenda.

Indeed, the discussions in the country did not end despite the statements of the Iraqi Government's Spokesperson Ahmet Molla Talal who said, "Iraqi law prohibits normalization with Israel and the Iraqi government and the people know this clearly."² Talal had announced on August 26 that the normalization efforts of other countries with Israel are their internal affairs and Iraq would not be involved in these matters. On October 15, the remarks of Baha al-Araji, who served as the Deputy

Prime Minister in the government of Haider al-Abadi, the former prime minister, that the environment is suitable for the normalization of relations with Israel and the priorities regarding this decision will be determined by the Shiite religious authority in Najaf sparked discussions in the country.³ The Victory Coalition led by Abadi rejected Araji's statement declaring, "Such statements are a distortion that undermines the image of Iraq, its people, its history and the religious authority that in principle accepts the legitimate rights of Palestine." The names who support Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr also showed reaction to Araji who is a former member of the Sadr movement.

Besides the supporters and opponents of normalization with Israel, there are also those who maintain that normalization is not a pressing issue due to the geographical distance between the two countries and that Iraq should focus primarily on its own agenda. Iraq, trying to rebuild its physical-social infrastructure and institutions, which were almost completely devastated by the tensions and conflicts it has been exposed to, has been seeking an opening in its foreign policy for a while, but social reaction, historical traumas and Iran's hegemonic impact on the country constitute an obstacle to normalization of relations with Israel. On the other hand, the efforts of neighboring countries to normalize their relations with Israel and to limit Iran may be a factor of pressure to establish contact on the Baghdad-Tel Aviv line.

A Brief History of the Tension

Israel's extremist policies and expansionist attitude towards the Palestinians have been regarded as one of the fundamental dynamics against the normalization of Muslim countries

and Arab states with the Tel Aviv administration for many years. The primary motivation of Iraq's lack of relations with Israel is based on this reality.

It is known that approximately 130,000 Jews, who constitute three percent of the country's population, lived in Iraq between 1949-1951.⁴ The Jewish population has played a very active role in the political, economic and cultural life of the country. In fact, Sassoon Eskell who was of Jewish origin, served as finance minister for five terms during the country's royal period before his death in 1932. Furthermore, it is well-known that the brothers Saleh and Daoud al-Kuwaiti, who composed famous songs in Iraq at that period, and Salima Murad, one of the most important singers of the country, were Jewish.⁵ However, after 1948, most of the Jews living in Iraq gradually left the country. Iraq has not recognized Israel officially because the countries are technically at war since 1948. The deadlock between the two countries has turned into a historical phenomenon. With the declaration of the Israeli state in May 1948, Iraq participated in the war against Israel as part of the Arab military alliance that was created to ensure that Palestine was completely controlled by the Arabs. With the withdrawal of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan from the war, Iraq became ineffective, but was the only Arab country that did not sign the ceasefire agreement that ended hostilities in 1949. Despite deploying tanks, planes and soldiers on Israel's border with Jordan during the Six-Day War in 1967, Iraq, which suffered great losses, was defeated again in the last great Arab-Israeli war in 1973.

Due to Baghdad's hawkish policies, Tel Aviv sought a balance against the Baghdad government by establishing an alliance with

Iraq's rival Iran in 1950, which would last until the 1979 revolution, and it supported Iraqi Kurds. The Ba'ath Party seized power in 1968, and Saddam Hussein officially became the head of Iraqi state in 1979. Saddam had a desire to pursue expansionist policies and to establish hegemony in the region and this cemented the policies ignoring Israel. In particular, the Iraqi government's investment in the military and petrochemical industries with the rapid rise in oil prices in the 1970s accelerated the arms race. Iraq has played an active role in the Arab world regarding anti-Israel policies after a peace agreement was signed between Israel and Egypt in 1979. For this reason, Israel regarded Iraq under Saddam Hussein as a major security threat and her worries gradually intensified.⁶ Thus, Israel destroyed the Osirak nuclear facility, which was built by Saddam in 1981, by an air strike because she feared that Iraq could develop nuclear weapons.⁷ Although Iraq did not retaliate at that time because of her focus on the Iran-Iraq War, she carried out a missile attack on Tel Aviv in 1991 during the Gulf War.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's administration with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, relations between Iraq and Israel took on another dimension. The regulation, before 2003, that prohibits persons with Iraqi passports from traveling to Israel, stated that, "This passport holder is allowed to travel to all countries of the world except Israel," was removed after the occupation. During this period, Iraq did not establish official relations with Israel, and both the state and the society had a serious reserve for the personal relations developed. The first visit of the leader of the Iraqi Ummah Party, Mithal al-Alusi, to Israel in 2004 can be regarded as one of the most

concrete examples. A few months after the visit, the parliamentary immunity of Alusi, whose two sons and bodyguard were assassinated, was abolished by the parliament after his participation in the “Anti-Terror” Conference held in Tel Aviv in 2008, travel restrictions were imposed, and he was asked to be tried in a court for “treason.” However, the Federal Supreme Court ruled in favor of Alusi and annulled the decision of the parliament against him.⁸ This decision shows that there is no legal obstacle to visit Israel or to make contact personally.

In this context, while Israel supported the Kurdish movement’s revolts against Baghdad to destabilize militarily and financially or even divide the Iraqi state with which it was in conflict, Kurdish leaders have cooperated with Israel in various periods.

Israel’s relations with Iraqi Kurds date back to the 1950s. David Ben-Gurion, who regarded Israel as surrounded by the Arab states, aimed to develop relations with non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia as a part of the containment strategy on the one hand, and adopted a dividing and destabilizing approach by supporting separatist movements in Arab societies on the other.⁹ In this context, while Israel supported the Kurdish movement’s revolts against Baghdad to destabilize militarily and financially or even divide the Iraqi state with which it was in conflict, Kurdish leaders have cooperated with Israel in various periods. Furthermore, the Tel Aviv

administration regarded the existence of approximately thirty-five thousand Jewish Kurds who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s as one of the driving reasons for the establishment of relations with Iraqi Kurds. After the uprising against Iraq in 1961, Israel further developed her relations with the Kurds, and made these contacts permanent except for some periods. Molla Mustafa Barzani, one of the leading figures of the Iraqi Kurdish Movement, even paid visits to Israel. Again, in March 1991, Mesut Barzani, son of Molla Mustafa Barzani, visited Israel for arms shipments and aid. Although Israel did not welcome this issue in order not to harm the relations with Turkey during that period, she has always been one of the supporters of a Kurdish autonomous region established de facto in this process and which has gained a legal basis with 2003 invasion. Israel always encouraged an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statements about the independence referendum held by the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on September 25, 2017, that they support legitimate efforts of Kurdish people to have their own state, are among the most concrete examples of Israel’s approach.¹⁰ Besides, it would be appropriate to say that many Kurdish movements, especially the Islamic Kurdish parties, refuse to normalize relations with Israel.

On the other hand, Israel, while maintaining her commercial and strategic relations with the Kurds, has been among the most important customers of the oil exported by the KRG. However, due to the historical sensitivity of Iraq on Israel, the relations of the Kurds with Tel Aviv cause criticism by the actors in Iraq. The handshake of the then Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak at a conference in Greece



attended by the then President of Iraq, the Leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Jalal Talabani in 2008, was the subject of severe criticism, so Talabani has to say that he attended the meeting as the leader of the PUK.¹¹

Based on the historical background, there is no document regarding the normalization of relations with Israel during the period of the monarchy, military dictatorship or Ba'ath regime in Iraq, which has been at war with Israel for almost seventy years. This historical flow indicates that normalization between the two countries will not be easy.

Tough Stance in the Public

Iraq has experienced instability and disorder after the invasion and the emergence of ISIS in 2014 and engaged in her own agenda. Normalization with Israel is not the main agenda in Iraq but in the last few years, attempts or

discussions between the two states to melt the ice have attracted attention.

Unlike the Israeli Ministry of Economy, which officially allows Israeli citizens to develop commercial relations with Iraqis, the Israeli Foreign Ministry still defines Iraq as an enemy state and prohibits citizens from traveling to Iraq. In May 2018, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs started conducting digital diplomacy by opening an Arabic Facebook page called "Israel in Iraqi dialect", which is followed by almost half a million people today. This can be regarded as a sign of normalization attempts.¹²

On the other hand, Israeli media claimed that, on January 6, 2019, a high-level delegation of 15 Shiites and Sunnis from Iraq paid a series of visits to Tel Aviv. The Israeli Foreign Ministry also confirmed the visit, issuing an Arabic Facebook post stating that the visitors are "Shiite, Sunni and local leaders who are

influential in Iraq.”¹³ In this context, meetings were held with Israeli academicians and senior officials, as well as the visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Center within the scope of the visit in December 2018.¹⁴ Some pro-Iranian groups in Iraq reacted to the visit and argued that the participants should be punished and their identities should be disclosed. Furthermore, with the support of the Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, Vice-President of the Iraqi Parliament Hassan Kerim al-Kaabi, stated that it is necessary to investigate whether the visitors are members of parliament. Kaabi revealed both historical traumas and public opinion by stating, “Traveling to the occupied areas is a red line and a highly sensitive issue for all Muslims.”¹⁵

On the other hand, along with politicians, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the greatest Shiite religious authority in Iraq, stated that Jerusalem is an occupied land and this will not change, and it will have to return to the sovereignty of Palestinian owners no matter how long the occupation lasts. This shows that there is a dilemma stemming from religious authority.

Iraq, which has to observe the historical and political realities about its anti-Israelism, has been consistent in its pro-Palestinian attitude, apart from negative initiatives. Iraqi leaders condemned the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the US President Trump’s peace plan for the solution of the Palestinian problem and called on Muslims to unite to defend the rights of Palestine.

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, who visited Baghdad shortly after Trump’s plan, met with his Iraqi counterpart Berham Salih and the then Prime Minister Adil Abdulmehti. Despite Israel’s strong relations with Iraqi Kurds, Iraqi President Berham Salih, who is of Kurdish origin, emphasized the need to “make efforts to achieve all legitimate rights as well as realizing the peace and stability hopes of the brotherly Palestinian people.”¹⁶

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Iran and Tehran-backed militias as an Obstacle against Normalization

Immediately after the declaration of the Israeli state in May 1948, the relations between Tel Aviv and Tehran experienced their golden age until the 1979 Iranian Revolution. But Ayatollah Khomeini’s rise to power added an Iran-Israeli conflict to the one already existing between Arabs and Israel. Iran’s sensitivity on the Palestinian issue, its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and its nuclear activities worry Israel seriously. Trying to prevent all regions where she is active from developing relations with Israel, Iran opposes the contact of her neighbor Iraq with Israel especially due to serious security concerns.

Iran and Iran-backed Hezbollah and foreign Shiite militia groups that support the Assad regime in Syria are occasionally targeted by Israel's attacks. In August 2019, air strikes allegedly of Israeli origin were conducted against pro-Iranian militia groups under the umbrella of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. As well as showing the tension in the Tehran-Tel Aviv line, these attacks have attracted attention as the first ones Israel has organized in Iraq since 1981. There is an assumption discussed by the authorities that the attacks, which are also the result of the tension between the USA and Iran, represent the expansion of Israel's military operation against Iranian targets in Syria.¹⁸ Pro-Iranian forces in Iraq claimed from the first day that Israel was behind the attacks and announced that they would file a complaint to the United Nations. Ahmed al-Assadi, the spokesperson of the Fatah Alliance,

who is known as being pro-Iranian, said that government investigations were carried out and it will be declared that Israel was behind the attacks.¹⁹ Additionally, Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who is also known as being pro-Iranian, stated that a strong reaction should be shown against Israel if it is proved that Israel is behind the air strikes against Iran-related military targets in Iraq. Although the Baghdad government has not made a concrete statement on the accusations for a long time, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said, "Iran has no immunity anywhere," and "We are facing Lebanon and Hezbollah in the North, Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and Iran in Iraq. We are surrounded by radical Islam led by Iran."²⁰ These statements are regarded as a message delivered to the address although Israel did not explicitly take responsibility for the attacks.



On the other hand, Israel declared her support for the anti-government demonstrations in Iraq that started in October 2019, and attempted to press Tehran through every channel, claiming that Iran was behind the disproportionate violence against the protesters.²¹ Meanwhile, Ali Khamanei, the current religious leader of Iran, claimed that the USA, Israel and Saudi Arabia were behind the protests, Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Pro-Iranian Fatah Alliance said in the Iraqi Parliament that “The US and Israel are behind the instability and disorder in Iraq.” However, reports claim that pro-Iranian militias were behind the executions of the protesters.²²

When Iranian pressure contributes to the anti-Israel sentiment in traditional politics in Iraq, a tougher atmosphere emerges regarding normalization.

When Iranian pressure contributes to the anti-Israel sentiment in traditional politics in Iraq, a tougher atmosphere emerges regarding normalization. Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz announced in August 2019 that Israel would join a US-led naval alliance to ensure the safe passage of merchant ships through the Hormuz Strait, a very important shipping route off the coast of Iran. The then Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali al-Hakim commented that “Iraq rejects the participation of the Zionist forces (Israel) in any military formation to ensure the passage of ships from the Arabian Gulf.”²³ However, we can say that he made this statement about the Arabian Gulf by considering Iranian pressure because there are allegations that Hakim announced

in January 2019 that Iraq believed in a two-state solution to end the Palestinian crisis with Israel.²⁴

Furthermore, the Iraqi side reminded that the laws prohibit the normalization of relations with Israel when there were allegations that Israel was preparing to open a “virtual” embassy in Baghdad in August 2020. Regarding the allegations discussed by many politicians, Muqtada al-Sadr commented that Israel will face her doom by launching a virtual embassy in Iraq.²⁵ Considering the tough stance of Sadr, who leads the largest group of the parliament, how he affects the society he addresses and how most of the actors in Iraq have agreed with pro-Iranian groups about Israel can be understood. Akram al-Kaabi, the Secretary General of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia group Harakat al-Nujaba, claimed that Israeli political and security delegations visited Iraq with American and western passports. He continued by commenting that “some ISIS-like mercenaries have prioritized the normalization of relations between Baghdad and Tel Aviv and established a virtual embassy.” These comments illuminate the stance of pro-Iranian groups. Kaabi claimed that Trump gave the task of normalizing Iraq-Israeli relations to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed.²⁶ This shows the extent of the reaction to the normalization of the Gulf countries with Israel. Furthermore, the statements of the Iranian Defense Minister Amir Khatami, who met with Iraqi Defense Minister Cuma Inad in Tehran, said that, “The secret relations established by some states with the Zionist regime have been revealed and this is a betrayal to the Muslim peoples.”²⁷ This statement is similar to the ones declared by Iraqi militias and it gives a message to Iraq as well.

With the new normalization trend that started with Trump's latest attempts, almost all of her neighbors, who have diplomatic relations with Israel, may impose the normalization on Iraq as a conjuncture.

Normalization Pressure Caused by the Initiatives in Foreign Policy

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has performed fast diplomatic activity after taking office in May 2020. He paid visits to neighboring countries in search of a new balance and foreign policy for Iraq, which was stuck in the struggle between the USA and Iran. Although Kadhimi planned to make his first overseas visit to Saudi Arabia on July 20, 2020, the visit was cancelled when King Mohammed bin Salman got ill. He paid his first visit to Iran. On August 25, 2020, a triple summit among Iraq, Jordan and Egypt was held. Iraq has sought a regional balance in foreign policy and strengthened her search for a diversification of actors that she contacts. Kadhimi described the triple summit, which had a purpose to strengthen relations, as "The New Levant Initiative." Immediately after this summit, Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan visited Baghdad with a delegation on 27 August.²⁸

In March 1949 Turkey became the first Muslim country to recognize Israel. Egypt and Jordan followed her respectively in 1980 and 1994 and normalized their relations with Israel. With the new normalization trend that started with Trump's latest attempts, almost all of

her neighbors, who have diplomatic relations with Israel, may impose the normalization on Iraq as a conjuncture. At a time when the relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel have entered the normalization process, the USA's pressure on the countries in the region to favor one of the parties urged Iraq to leave her axis policies and intensify regional diplomatic initiatives. In fact, Iran's pressure on Iraq about Israel through the militia she backs may push the Baghdad government into a bottleneck in relations with other actors in the region. However, Iraq is in search of a balanced foreign policy and may at least soften her anti-Israel rhetoric because she wants to establish diversified political, diplomatic and economic relations with other actors to break Iran's hegemonic stand in Iraq.

In the medium term, Baghdad may unusually want to strengthen her contact with Tel Aviv in line with Iraq's relations with the USA and the nature of the contacts developed by the countries of the region with Israel. Mithal al-Alusi, former member of the parliament and leader of the Ummah Party, who has encouraged the Iraqi government to normalize the relations with Israel, claimed that normalization with Israel would be discussed in the European tour organized by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi which covers Paris, Berlin and London.²⁹ In August, when the Washington Post asked about his comments on UAE's agreement with Israel to normalize relations, Prime Minister Kadhimi said that "the UAE's actions are a domestic issue in which Iraq should not interfere."³⁰ But we can say that the normalization discussions will be a part of the agenda for a longer time.

Although Iraq was allegedly pressured by American officials to normalize her relations with Israel, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein

stated that Iraq did not face any pressure from the Western and Arab countries for normalization.³¹ However, it is highly possible that countries of the region, due to their contacts with the USA and their tendency to exclude Iran, may impose normalization with Israel to attract Iraq to their side. It should be kept in mind that Iraq's economic, political and social fragilities still worsen, and she is surrounded by the US-Iran conflict. Consequently, she may not resist the pressures from the other Arab countries anymore.

“It is very unlikely that the harmony between Trump and Netanyahu will continue in the Biden era under the same conditions.”

Possibilities for a Shift on the General Course in Biden Period

Joe Biden, who adopts a different foreign policy approach when compared to Trump, will take office as the 46th President of the



USA and the effects will be felt strongly in the Middle East. It is very unlikely that the harmony between Trump and Netanyahu will continue in the Biden era under the same conditions. Israel achieved many gains during the Trump era, but she may experience a period in which she must return to the negotiation table to solve regional problems that crystallized specifically in the case of Palestine.

The steps to be taken by the US to shape the diplomatic relations between Iraq and Israel in the new period have great importance. We can predict that the future US President Biden will support the momentum caught up with the normalization with Arab countries which was actually one of the political initiatives of Trump. In fact, Biden regarded Israel's compromises with the UAE and Bahrain as positive steps.³² Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is considered to be the most striking country among the countries who have joined the normalization process in terms of both her symbolic aspect and regional influence. In fact, it was in the press that Saudi Arabian and Israeli leaders had a secret meeting.³³ However, if this trend would evolve into a possible Iraq-Israel normalization process, the US administration must contribute to a climate that can weaken Iranian influence in Iraq.

How much Biden will adopt the staff and political stance inherited from the Barack Obama administration, which he assisted for two terms, should be taken into consideration when analyzing the potential effects of the Biden era on the relationship between Israel and Iraq. Obama could not offer a significant and structural solution to the chronic Palestine issue. Moreover, he signed the biggest US-Israel military aid agreement in history.³⁴ However, it is known that the greatest conflict in the relationship between the Israeli ad-

ministration and Obama is the different political perspectives regarding Iran.

The Israeli administration was the fiercest opponent of the US-led nuclear agreement reached with Iran in 2015. Netanyahu, when invited by the Republican Party, delivered a speech in the US Parliament in 2015 and openly criticized the Obama administration's Iran policy.³⁵ In fact, Biden seemed to have a similar approach to Obama on Iran. He declared his willingness to re-enact the nuclear deal which Trump has withdrawn and promised to return to the negotiation process instead of economic sanctions. Iran announced that she tends to support such diplomatic steps that will ease the economic shackles.³⁶ In this regard, Iran will resist a possible normalization process between Iraq and Israel who opposes the dialogue between the US and Iran.

The presence of American soldiers in Iraq is a privileged issue for the Biden administration which mentions Iraq as one of the priority issues in foreign policy. Biden stated that he agreed with the Trump administration's announcement that the number of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan would be reduced but noted that a complete withdrawal is not possible.³⁷ It is obvious that the main goal of the new US administration is to maintain the US presence in Iraq more effectively with fewer soldiers and to achieve control in the country with non-military solutions. It is known that Secretary of State Antony Blinken, whom Biden announced to be appointed in the new period, has an approach to strengthen the cooperation in the region and this stance is expected to prevail in the near future.³⁸ We

can say that the US will aim to kill two birds with one stone by weakening Iranian influence in Iraq while improving the regional stability in her favor by normalizing Iraq-Israeli relations.

As a result, Iraq's ability to take initiatives for normalization seems quite limited due to the traditional anti-Israeli policy she adopts and the Iranian influence strengthened by the presence of a Shiite bloc in the country. Current Israeli Iranian relations are hard to improve within the diplomatic framework in the short and medium term. Therefore, along with other limitations, if the Iranian influence on Iraq does not weaken, it should not be expected that Iraqi-Israeli relations will follow a course toward normalization. However, Biden proposed the establishment of federated regions belonging to Sunni, Shia and Kurds after the Iraq war in 2003. His road map that he defined as the "Iraq Plan" when he was a presidential candidate in the 2008 presidential elections in the USA and Israel's Iraq policy, which supports the weakening of Baghdad administration and division of the country by encouraging the Kurds, are very similar. Biden's close relations with the Kurds overlap with the warm relationship between Israel and the Kurds. This may bring Biden and Israel closer in their Iraq policy. In other words, the Kurds are the common point for both actors both in particular and in Iraqi policy. Furthermore, considering Israel's relationship with the secular Sunnis, Sunni groups will be another common point between the new US administration and Israel in terms of possible division scenarios of Iraq, although it is not expected in the near future.

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