

## THE ISRAELI-KURDISH RELATIONS

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This article is dedicated to the Israeli-Kurdish relations within the framework of political processes in the Near and Middle East. The history and general dynamics of these relations is shown with a special emphasis on the analysis of the latter after the establishment of the State of Israel and the attempted utilization of the Kurdish factor by Israel in its regional strategy against the Arab surroundings. Also, the large-scale political changes in the region after the operation conducted by the USA and its allies in Iraq, and the general impact thereof on the Israeli-Kurdish relations are examined.

### *Introduction*

In 2001 a team of Israeli, German and Indian specialists published the results of a research according to which it was maintained that the Jews were distant ethnic relatives of the Kurds. According to the results of a research done by a team of genetics headed by the professors of the Hebrew University Ariella Oppenheim and Marina Feurman, the genetic affinity of the Jewish people and the residents of the present-day Kurdistan is manifested in a more express way than between the Jews and the neighboring Arab peoples who belong to the group of Semitic languages. According to Professor A. Oppenheim, in earlier works the genetic kinship of the Jews and Arabs was indisputable because the chromosomes of the Kurds had not been researched at that time. The Jewish-Arab genetic kinship was accounted for by the fact that some Palestinian Arabs, probably, assimilated with the Jews converted to Islam, because the genetic affinity between the Jews and other Arabs (Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi) is much weaker [1].

The given research was done with consideration of all the latest achievements in the decoding of the human genome and using much more precise instruments. According to the researchers, the Jews and Kurds had common ancestors who resided in the borderline areas of the modern Iraq and Turkey. According to these authors, the Jews mostly manifest genetic affinity with the Kurds, and to some extent, with the Armenians and Italians which allows to claim that

the Jews originated from the North-Eastern regions of the Mediterranean [2].

The results of this research, regardless of their scientific validity, have become yet another example, illustrating the specific relations established between the Jews and Kurds over centuries. These relations with deep historical roots have acquired special significance upon the establishment of the Jewish State against the background of the political developments in the Near and Middle East. They have become even more topical after the far-reaching geopolitical shifts in the region caused by the war waged by the USA and its allies in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent political processes.

### ***1. Historical background***

For centuries the territory of the present-day Northern Iraq has been inhabited by the peoples that belonged to various religious, ethnic and language groups. Muslims (Kurds and Turkmen), Christians (Armenians and Assyrians), Yezidi and Jews resided in this territory together. Whereas the Kurds, Yezidi, and, partially, the Assyrians and Jews mostly lived in mountainous areas and were engaged in nomadic husbandry, the Armenians and some Jews were mainly concentrated in large cities and towns playing a key role in trade, finance and management [3].

The history of the settlement of Jews and the spread of Judaism in the Kurdish-populated areas can be traced back to ancient times. According to the Bible, after the defeat of the Kingdom of Israel by king Salmanzar III of Assyria in 722 B.C. part of the captivated Jews were settled in Media and Mesopotamia. When Nebuchadnezzar II, jointly with the Medians, defeated Assyria and conquered Judea, he settled many Jews in Babylon and its environs. Later, many Babylonian Jews maintaining ties with their compatriots in Israel supported the latter in their struggle against Rome. During the Roman occupation they revolted against Emperor Trajan but the uprising was cruelly suppressed. Under the Parthians and Persians the Jews of Babylon enjoyed internal autonomy and were ruled by an exarch appointed out from Jews [4].

According to Roman and Greek sources, as a result of the invasion of the Armenian King Tigran II the Great to Palestine in 83-71 B.C., many Jews were also settled in the Southern areas of the Armenian Plateau adjacent to Northern Mesopotamia, particularly, in the new capital of Armenia, Tigranakert founded by Tigran the Great (a town upstream on the river Tigris) [5]. Later, they also settled southward in Northern Mesopotamia.

Jewish rabbis conducted missionary activity to convert the local population to Judaism and quite successfully. By the beginning of the new era, the majority of the citizens of Arbel (Erbil) adopted Judaism, including even the dynasty of the

local rulers of Adiabene, according to the Jewish legend and the Talmud [6]. In *The Jewish War* by Josephus Flavius it is stated that during one of the first clashes of the insurgent Jews with the Romans (66 A.D.) «the kinsmen of Monobazus, king of Adiabene, named Monobazus and Kenedeus» fought with exceptional valor. In addition, among the heroes of the defense of Jerusalem Flavius mentioned «one from Adiabene, who was the son of Nabateus, and called by the name of Chagiras, the word signifying ‘a lame man.’” [7].

In any case it is indisputable that at the beginning of the new era Judaism had a significant place in the areas populated nowadays by the Kurds [8]. At the same time it should be stressed that it was in this region where the Biblical Talmud had been previously created. However, Christianity spread in Adiabene as in other Oriental Jewish communities. Nevertheless, here the Jews remained a major ethnic group up until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Both in the family and the synagogue the Kurdistan Jews speak in Aramaic dialects, while in public, in Kurdish [9]. Some Kurdistan Jews also speak in the Neo-Aramaic language although on a limited scale [10]. Small Arabic-speaking Jewish communities residing in the Nisebin area were also grouped with the Kurdistan Jews [11].

Many aspects of Kurdish and Jewish culture are so interwoven that popular Jewish legends on the origin of the Kurds regard the latter as Jews. Some argued that the Kurds originated from one of the break-away tribes of Israel or related the origin of the Kurds to King Solomon, etc. [12].

The close ties between the Kurds and the local Jews manifested themselves even when several Kurdish tribes were resettled by Shah Abbas to the region of Khorasan in the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries for the protection of the Persian borders; some Kurdistan Jews were resettled with them and established a small but tightly knit community. Naturally, the resettlement of the Kurdistan Jews to Khorasan was aimed at the promotion of the economic development of this region [3, p.44].

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the relative freedom of the Kurdish women enabled Asenath Barzani to become the first woman among the Kurdistan Jews who was given a rabbinic title. Her father was the renowned rabbi Samuel Barzani (circa 1630) who founded numerous Jewish schools in Kurdistan. Ultimately, Asenath headed the Jewish academy in Mosul, Iraq [13].

This ethnic group of Jews has several names: the Kurdistan Jews, the Jews of Zakho, and the Assyrian Jews. The Kurdistan Jews often refer to themselves as the «anshei Targum» or the «people of Targum.» They speak the Eastern dialect of the Neo-Aramaic language akin to the language of the Babylonian Talmud.

Surely, it has dramatically changed since the Babylonian times and incorporates a host of loan words from the Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic languages, and the classical Hebrew. The Kurdistan Jews believe this language evolved from the colloquial language of the Jews of Assyria and Babylon and refer to it as «leshon Targum.» This language differs greatly from the similar dialect spoken by the Christian population and the Iraqi Arabs refer to the language of the Jews as the «jabali» or «mountainous.» They are referred to as the «Jews of Zakho» because many Jews from this ethnic group resided in Zakho and its environment in Northern Iraq.

In cities the Kurdistan Jews were into crafts; in the country, they cultivated grapes, tobacco, wheat and stockbreeding which was rare for the Jews of other groups [14]. The total number of the Kurdistan Jews in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century was by different estimates 40-50 thousand. Other data are also quoted. The Israeli sources describe the following picture of the distribution of the Kurdistan Jews in Northern Iraq by 1947 based mainly on the Iraqi statistics: 3109 in Arbil province, 4042 in Kirkuk, 10,345 in Mosul, 2271 in Suleymaniye, and 2851 in Diyala province. The total of 22,618 Jews lived in the Kurdish-populated areas [15].

Starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this community was permanently present in Palestine. Over the next three centuries there were no reports about the migration of the Kurdistan Jews. Later, in 1900-1926, about 1900 Kurdistan Jews migrated to Palestine, and 2500 by 1935.

After World War I a small group of Kurdistan Jews settled in the Caucasus in the vicinity of Tbilisi. They were referred to as the «laklukh» (the origin unknown.) They referred to themselves as the «srel» (or «Jew») derived from «Israel.» In the mid 1930s some of them left the USSR and went to Palestine via Turkey; most of them remained and were deported to Kazakhstan in 1951. After Stalin's death and the beginning of rehabilitation these Jews started to gradually move to Israel. A small community remained in Kazakhstan. By the early 1980s the Kurdistan Jews in the Soviet Union numbered no more than 2000 (residing mainly in Tbilisi and Alma-Ata) [16].

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Alliance Israelite Universelle started to open schools and carry out numerous educational programs among the Kurdistan Jews [14, p.48]. These measures up until the foundation of the State of Israel also extended to the non-Jewish population and as a result many educated people appeared in the Kurdish regions.

The Iraqi Jews, especially the ones residing in the central provinces of the country since the Ottoman rule had played important roles in the economic, cultural and even political life of Iraq. After the granting of formal independence to

Iraq by Great Britain in 1932, the Iraqi Jews retained their privileged status under the government of Feisal and played a significant role in big business and civil service. The first changes in the attitude to the Jews started to manifest themselves in the late 1930s when the pro-Nazi sentiments started to grow in Iraq. In 1941 even Jewish pogroms broke out in Iraq which were however soon suppressed by the British army [17].

## ***2. The Israeli-Kurdish relations after the establishment of the State of Israel***

With the advent of the so called «Palestine War» or the «War of Israel for Independence» in 1948-1949, the Jews came under cruel persecution by the Arab government. The Jewish community of Iraq found itself in a severe situation and started to actively leave the country [17]. As a result, most of them left Iraq and moved to the newly established State of Israel 1948-1952. Nevertheless, as a community they still led isolated life in Israel celebrating Kurdish holidays and maintaining the Kurdish culture and language. The fact that virtually the whole Jewish community of Iraq (about 120,000–130,000), one of the oldest in the Diaspora, left the country was determined by a combination of Zionist ideas which acquired new significance after the foundation of Israel and the insecurity which the community faced after the first Arab-Israeli wars. Only 5000 Jews refused to leave Iraq, mainly in the North, for different reasons. However, because of reprisals most of them left the country by different ways, especially after the Six-Day War of 1967 [17]. The community of the Kurdistani Jews in the vicinity of Zakho virtually disappeared except for some wealthy local Jews who preferred to adopt Islam to abandoning their property and leaving [3, p.45].

One of the most complicated problems during the emigration of the Iraqi Jews was their evacuation. Initially the Jewish Agency assumed that they would be shipped from Basra to the Israeli seaport Eilat. However, this proved to be impossible because of the ongoing official belligerence between Israel and Iraq and the blockade imposed on of the the Straits of Tiran by Egypt. Nevertheless, the Iraqi government allowed to airlift the Jews but via the neutral Cyprus. As a result of this large-scale airlift known in Israel as «Operation Ali Baba» from May 1950 to December 1951 nearly 113,000 Jews were evacuated from Iraq. Some Iraqi Jews, mainly from Kurdistan, left Iraq via Iran and Turkey. The total number of the Jewish immigrants from Iraq amounted to about 121,000 [17, p.398-399].

However upon arrival in Israel the Kurdistani and Iraqi Jews faced numerous problems. Apart from the natural difficulty of acclimation for the tens of thousands of people deprived of the habitual living conditions, the problem of

relations with the diverse groups of Jewish population arose. Historically most of the Jews spread all over the world were the so called Ashkenazi. Even after the Holocaust which resulted in the extermination of the majority of the European Jewish Diaspora, the Ashkenazi (and the descendants of the latter all over the world) outnumbered all the other branches of Jews. It was the Ashkenazi who accounted for the majority of Israel's population and controlled all the levers of state governance, cultural and public life of the country. There have always been complications between the Ashkenazi and the other Jews, particularly, the so called «Oriental Jews» owing to the differences in the worldview, language, customs, self-identification and social self-assessment. This is particularly true in regard to the Kurdistani and Iraqi Jews who being the direct offspring of the oldest community were historically excelled in cultural and property standards in contrast with all the other Jewish communities. The Iraqi Jews who regarded themselves as «aristocrats» compared to other Jews could not reconcile with their discrimination in the new state. They were oppressed singled out for their patriarchal customs and traditions in the eyes of other Jews, the dialect and, most importantly, the more tolerant attitude to the Muslims, to the point of permitting mixed marriages with the latter. Even the decades of life in Israel did not weaken the nostalgia of the Kurdistani Jews for their former motherland [18].

Being the main source of knowledge and information on the Kurdistani political landscape the Kurdistani Jews have always played an important role in Israel's policy with respect to the Kurds. In all probability only in Israel the Kurdish ethno-political factor is appreciated with due consideration; the latter has been the subject of close attention, development and political planning. Since the mid 1960s a new phase in the Kurdish-Jewish relations has begun as hostilities against the Iraqi government began in the Kurdish-populated towns of Northern Iraq which resulted in the overt guerrilla struggle against the Baghdad government and spilled over to the adjacent countries: Turkey, Iran and Syria.

It is believed that the Soviet Union was a major instigator of this turmoil. When in the late 1940s the so called «Mahabad Republic» in the North-West of Iran was defeated, one of its leaders Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his two thousand cohorts managed to break through the Iranian ambushes and escape to the Soviet Union. In 1957 the brigade staffed with the Kurds trained in Tashkent and Chirchik and headed by Mustafa Barzani was covertly deployed in the Kurdish areas of Iran. The bulk of the field commanders who proved to be combat worthy during the Kurdish uprisings in Iraq and later in other countries belonged to this brigade [19].

The initial success of the Iraqi Kurds in the struggle against the Baghdad

regime attracted the attention of the Israeli special services which regarded them as efficient allies in their struggle against Syria and Iraq, Israel's most consistent adversaries in the region. That is why by the end of 1950s, with respect to the Kurdish minorities in Arab states, Israel pursued the policy later referred to as the «peripheral strategy.»

### ***3. The «peripheral strategy» and the role of the Kurds in Israel's geostrategy in the Near and Middle East***

Traditionally the security policy of the Jewish state has accounted for such a major component as the «peripheral strategy» designed to cooperate with the non-Arab states in the region [20]. However, it should be noted that the basic principles of the «peripheral strategy» were elaborated by the ideologists of Zionism before the foundation of the State of Israel and the political contacts of the Jewish organizations with the Kurds started in the 1930s.

Yet back in 1904, Theodore Herzl pointed out that the territory of the Jewish state to be created in the Promised Land must extend from «Egypt to the Euphrates.» On July 9, 1947, a member of the Jewish Agency for Palestine Rabbi Fischmann declared in his report at the session of the UN Committee that the «Promised Land extends from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates including parts of Syria and Lebanon.» The Kurds divided between Iran, Turkey and the two most dangerous enemies of Israel, Syria and Iraq, were of particular interest in these plans [21].

According to a number of researchers, as far back as in the late 1930s David Ben-Gurion delineated the fundamental principles of the so called «peripheral strategy» or the «theory of allied periphery.» Following the foundation of the State of Israel, Ben-Gurion intended to broaden this strategy. He focused the attention on the establishment of an alliance confronting the Arab countries and developing strategic partnership with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. Although this policy also sought to weaken Syria, Sudan, Lebanon and Egypt, the main target was Iraq. It was with the aim to weaken or prevent the Iraqi threat that Israel established secret but close ties with the leaders of the Kurdish movement. This was in striking contrast with the attempts to establish similar ties with the Coptic community in Egypt, first of all, in connection with the historical continuity of the Egyptian state [21]. It should be admitted that initially, after the establishment of the Jewish state, the leadership of the latter in the late 1940s was somewhat discreet about the support of ethnic and religious minorities in the region which was mainly determined by the insufficient viability of Israel itself [22].

Back in the late 1930s, the initiative of establishing contacts with the Kurds

belonged to an officer of the Zionist secret service Rubin Shilia, one of the leading ideologists of the «peripheral strategy.» Under the disguise of a Hebrew school student in Baghdad he organized a network of agents and established secret contacts in the mountainous Kurdish-populated regions of Iraq. These contacts proved to be very useful during the resettlement of the Iraqi Jews to Palestine via Northern Iraq, Turkey and Iran. By the end of 1950s and in the early 1960s Israel became the principal source of weapons supplies and training for the Kurds in their struggle against the government. By various estimates, thousands of Mossad agents and instructors of the Israeli army resided in the Kurdish-populated regions of Iraq at the time and conducted undercover operations.

The reports on the operations of Mossad in Iraq and its support of the Kurds repeatedly appeared in the Muslim and Israeli press and other publications. According to Victor Ostrovsky, a former Mossad agent, the Israeli secret services also actively used volunteers from humanitarian organizations and their own Iraqi agents for special subversive and terrorist operations in Iraq [23].

Various arms supplies for the Iraqi Kurds actively continued in 1965-1975 [24]. The Parastin, the intelligence service of the Kurdish Democratic Party, was also established with Mossad's support in the late 1960s. The operations conducted by the Israeli intelligence agency in Northern Iraq were of particular significance for Israel because the Iraqi Kurds were pounded not only by the Iraqi troops but also by the regular army of Syria, another Arab state ruled by the Baath party. After the commencement of active hostilities in Northern Iraq against the Kurds in 1963, Syria, concerned about the spread of the Kurdish separatism in its territory, offered necessary support to Baghdad to combat the Kurdish forces. The Syrian troops strengthened by air force and heavy artillery actively participated in the hostilities against the Kurds at Mosul, Zakho and Dohuk. Moreover, as the Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq attempted to unite the two states into one, a military alliance was signed in October 1963 in Damascus under which the integrated Syrian-Iraqi armed forces were supposed to be created. However, when these attempts failed in a short while and due to the fierce Kurdish resistance in the North, the Syrian troops were withdrawn from the Kurdish-populated provinces [25].

Thus, owing to the Israeli support of the Iraqi Kurds, sizable Syrian forces were diverted from the borders of Israel. The engagement of the Iraqi troops in the suppression of the Kurdish insurgency prevented Iraq from participating in the Yom Kippur War against Israel in 1973 since this required the withdrawal of the Iraqi army units from the home (Kurdish) front and the Iranian border. The well-known Israeli expert Ofra Bengio assesses Israel's support of the Kurds as



follows: «Although limited in time and place, this support introduced the theory of the American-Israeli-Iranian conspiracy against Iraq. It proved to Iraq that although it had no common border with Israel, it could pay a price for involvement in the conflict (i.e. Arab-Israeli conflict – S.M.) and finally it inserted a strong bilateral element into the general Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's support to the Kurds was perceived as threatening the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. For Iraq this support was no less than an attempt to establish a "second Israel" in Northern Iraq.» [26].

Since the late 1950s the Israeli special services had actively cooperated with the CIA in the establishment of the Iranian Shah's intelligence agency SAVAK. The close cooperation of the Israeli, US and Iranian intelligence services most clearly manifested itself in the backing of the Kurdish insurgents struggling against the Baghdad government in Northern Iraq. This cooperation lasted until 1975 when the Shah's government trying to improve relations with Iraq signed the so called Algiers Accord and terminated the support of the Iraqi Kurds [27]. According to a CIA report on the Mossad in 1979, «The main goal of the Israeli-Iranian relations was to boost pro-Israeli and anti-Arab policy in the Iranian government. Mossad had been involved in joint operations with the SAVAK for many years, since the late 1950s. Mossad assisted SAVAK and supported the Kurds in Iraq. The Israeli's also regularly supplied the Iranian intelligence service with reports on the activities of Egypt in Arab countries, the tendencies and developments in Iraq and the activities of the Communists threatening Iran» [28]. The then Israel's military attaché in Iran Ya'acov Nimrodi contributed greatly to the relations with the SAVAK and, especially, to establishing contacts with the Iraqi Kurds [28].

According to a former senior Mossad official Eliezer Tsafir, Israel had military advisers at the headquarters of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in 1963-1975, trained and supplied the Kurdish units with fire arms, field and anti-aircraft artillery. The US also participated in this campaign [29]. Israel spent tens of millions of dollars on the support of the Kurds, supplying them via Iran, which pursued its own goals in Iraq and had close ties with Israel up until 1979. However, according to Eliezer Tsafir's testimony, Israel never supported the Turkish Kurds in their war against Turkey or the Iranian Kurds under the Shah [29].

It is not ruled out that thanks to the Kurdish sources and the agents of the former SAVAK the Israeli intelligence service gained the needed intelligence about the location of the Iraqi nuclear reactor Tammuz-1 (Osirak) destroyed by the Israeli air force in June 1981 (although in this case aerial intelligence proved more valuable) [30].

However, the 1975 Algiers Accord under which Baghdad ceded some border-line territories provided for the refusal by the Shah's government of the support of the Kurds against the Iraqi government. At the same time, Israel also lost the possibility of using the Iranian territory for the support of the Kurds; as a result, the uprising of the latter was harshly suppressed. As it turned out, the final Israeli support of the Iraqi Kurds ended after the commencement of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Mossad and the CIA started to operate in the opposite direction, i.e., from the Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq (especially, the Mossad) and Turkey against Iran. The published documents of the US embassy in Teheran on the Kurdish question bear witness to the active subversive operations of the Mossad and the CIA in the Kurdish-populated areas of Iran [31].

But Israel remaining isolated and surrounded by hostile Arab states could not ultimately deprive the Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities in these states of support. In February 1982, Oded Yinon, an Israeli journalist and former foreign ministry attaché, published an article, «A Strategy for Israel in Nineteen Eighties» in the periodic publication of the World Zionist Organization's Information Department, the «Kivunim.» The central idea of the article was that Israel must to continue to pursue an active policy aimed at the undermining of Arab states (primarily, internal breakdowns and rifts) by means of ethnic and religious minorities. Taking into account that the author is a retired Israeli diplomat and the article was published in the journal of an authoritative Jewish organization, it can be concluded that the ideas of «peripheral strategy» still dominated the minds of the Israeli political elite, let alone, the Jewish Diaspora which is traditionally more aggressive towards the Arab states [21].

Once in a while O. Yinon's article raised a storm of responses in both the Arab, Western and Jewish press. The events related with the war of the US in Iraq in 2003 revived the interest in this publication which many researchers interpreted as the implementation of the plans for the fragmentation of the Arab Near East [33].

#### ***4. Israeli-Kurdish relations at the present stage***

The distinctive relations between Israel and the Kurds manifested themselves again during Operation «Desert Storm» held by the US and coalition forces against Iraq in 1991. It is common knowledge that after the active phase of Operation «Desert Storm» the allies instigated uprisings against the Baghdad regime in the Shiite South and the Kurdish North. These uprisings were harshly sup-

pressed by the government troops. The subsequent reprisals in the North resulted in a humanitarian crisis which turned tens of thousands of Kurds into refugees. All over the world, the Jewish organizations started a vigorous propaganda and lobbying campaigns to aid the Iraqi Kurds and to exert pressure on Iraq to stop the persecutions [34]. Israel demonstrated its sympathy with the Kurds by means of large-scale supplies of medication and first-aid items through the Turkish-Iraqi border. This campaign was organized by the Israeli community of the Iraqi Jews. The Iraqi Jews even organized a large-scale demonstration at the residence of the Israeli Prime Minister Shamir during the meeting of the latter with the US State Secretary James Baker calling on the US government to defend the Kurds from reprisals [35].

However, the Israeli attitude to the Kurds was largely dependent on the level of the Israeli-Turkish cooperation. As the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointed out in May 1997, the threat of terrorism unites Turkey and Israel: «Turkey suffers from the PKK terrorist attacks, and we see no difference whatsoever between the PKK terrorism and the terrorism faced by Israel.» This speech of Netanyahu was noteworthy not only for his statement against the establishment of the Kurdish state but also for his words that a peace treaty could not be signed between Syria and Israel unless Damascus stopped supporting the PKK [36].

The changing priorities in the security policy of Israel forced the latter to reconsider its attitude to the Turkish Kurds [37]. It was clearly manifested during the Israeli air raid against the PKK in the North of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon during Operation «Grapes of Wrath» and by the support provided by the Israeli intelligence service in order to locate and capture of the leader of the Turkish Kurds Abdullah Ocalan [38].

However, after the end of the new US military operation against Iraq in 2003 from which the Kurds probably benefited most, the Turkish press reported that one of the Kurdish leaders was a Jew, and as a result «Israel will soon establish close ties with the de facto Kurdish state in Northern Iraq.» For several weeks, the Turkish mass media actively speculated about this scenario. On February 19, 2003, the famous Turkish newspaper «Hurriyet» published an article which claimed that the leader of the KDP Masud Barzani was an ethnic Jew and a descendant of an old family of Kurdish rabbis. This article referred to a well known work, «Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews» published back in 1982 and the research done by the Turkish historian Ahmed Ucar who found materials about the activities of a Kurdish rabbi named Barzani in the Turkish archival materials dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Turkish media believed that Masud Barzani

would ostensibly head the new pro-Israeli Kurdish-Jewish state expanding from the Nile to the Euphrates throughout the Biblical Promised Land, including the Kurdish-populated territory of Northern Iraq.

But the author of «The Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews» Professor Yona Sabar in her comments on the Turkish publications pointed out that the latter were based on misinterpretation of history. According to Professor Sabar, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish rabbi Samuel Adoni was also named «Barzani» which meant that he was a native of Barzan town. He founded a well known dynasty of the Barzani rabbis represented by the female rabbi A. Barzani (17<sup>th</sup> century.) According to the Israeli scholar, it is unlikely that Masud Barzani belonged to this dynasty since Barzani is a common Kurdish surname, besides there are few Jews left in this area of Iraq.

The Jewish historian from Istanbul Rifat Bali also notes that the whole issue about the possibly Jewish origin of Masud Barzani is part of the broader theory spread lately in the Turkish conservative, nationalist and Islamist circles, and very popular with the Turkish public. According to him, «the Islamists claim that Israel wants to use the 'Kurdish card' and establish a new Jewish state from the Nile to the Euphrates including the Kurdish regions in Northern Iraq and South-Eastern Turkey; this is coincident with the traditional Turkish fears about the plans to dismember Turkey.» Let us also add that a few years ago a book by Dr. *Harun Yahya* was published in Turkey, *Israel's Kurdish Card* about Israel's plans to expand its borders at the expense of Iraq and Turkey in an alliance with the Kurds [39].

Anyway, it is absolutely clear that the establishment of the Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq after the 2003 war and the overthrow of S. Hussein's regime led to the commencement of a new stage in the Israeli-Kurdish relations which can be a serious limiting factor for Israel's political contacts with the other states of the region. Nevertheless, «the Kurds count (and quite reasonably) on the support of Israel's state structures, but even more, on the hundred thousand Kurdistan Jews who previously resided in Kurdistan. Apparently, in the future this comprehensive cooperation will be only expanding despite the counteraction of Iran and a number of Arab states» [40].

In 2004 the Israeli mass media reported about the meetings of the Israeli officials with the Kurdish political leaders, Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, and the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon publicly confirmed the good relations with the Iraqi Kurds [41]. Afterwards, the cooperation of Israel with the Iraqi Kurds actively developed, first of all, in the sphere of security. Lately, according to the newly surfaced information, the Israeli experts are involved in the training

of the Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga (which are transformed from militias into a semi-regular army of the Kurdish autonomy) in Northern Iraq. Although the Israeli officials, the head of the Kurdish administration M. Barzani and the President of Iraq J. Talabani (who is also the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) denied the information disseminated by the Israeli media, the experts have no doubts about it. The Israeli government officially advised the Turkish authorities that even if Israeli citizens trained the Kurdish soldiers are in Iraq, they did it without permission, at their own risk [42].

Nevertheless, the development of the Israeli-Kurdish relations continues to negatively affect the Israeli-Turkish relations. The invasion of the Israeli army to Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the subsequent events, including the possible deployment of the Turkish peacekeepers in this country, once again attracted the attention to the possible development of the strategic relations between Turkey and Israel in the context of the Kurdish problem. It is well known that recently the increasing anti-American sentiment and the crisis in the Turkish-Israeli relations caused by Israel's stance in the Palestinian and Kurdish issues have induced Turkey to be deeply involved in the regional affairs without regard of Israel [43]. The Turkish authorities made a choice in favor of a more active policy in the Near and Middle East which unbalances the Israeli-Turkish relations and will consequently further deepen the political contacts between Israel and the Kurds. This can in many respects impinge on the development of political processes around the Iranian nuclear program which will undoubtedly affect the Turkish-Israeli relations [44].

The aggravation of the Iranian factor is presently a critical element in the dynamics of the Israeli-Kurdish relations. Over the past years, the attempts to conduct covert operations from the territory of Iraq using the organizations in the Kurdish-populated areas of Iran (also, in close cooperation with the American intelligence services) have become a significant component of Israel's «Kurdish strategy.» However, in this case, in addition to the goals pursued by Israel in its relations with the Kurds (except the constant imperative, i.e., the weakening of Iran, the change of its theocratic regime, and the reduction of its influence in the region) a new important task has emerged, namely, to obstruct the development of the Iranian nuclear program by all means. It is thanks to the assistance of the US and Israeli intelligence agencies that the fighters from the Kurdish organizations forming the United Front of the Eastern (Iranian) Kurdistan founded in March 2006 in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) infiltrate into the Iranian Kurdistan. These

are, in particular, the fighters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Organization for the Struggle of Iranian Kurdistan and the Revolutionary Union of Kurdistan (Iran) attempting to weaken and overthrow the Iranian regime with the help from the coalition troops deployed in Iraq [45].

Together with the Kurdish troops, the fighters of the Israeli special forces also penetrate the territory of Iran in order to install super-sensitive equipment for the monitoring of the Iranian nuclear and military objectives. In addition, Israel trains the Kurdish special forces for the execution of the mission the American intelligence services failed to accomplish, namely, to infiltrate into the Islamic opposition in Iraq, collect intelligence and liquidate the heads of the Sunni and Shiite «insurgents» in Iraq. Israel also intends to use the Kurdish Peshmerga, numbering at least 75,000, as a force capable of countering both the secular and Islamic opposition in Iraq. The experts from Israel who served in elite forces organized a large training center in the desert areas of Kurdistan where the local Kurdish fighters are trained. The activities of the Israelis in Kurdistan claimed the lives of six Mossad agents in Kirkuk (Northern Iraq) probably killed by the radical Kurdish Islamic group Ansar al-Islam, according to press reports. [46].

On the whole, it can be stated that at present Israel continues, though semi-officially (through shell firms and organizations), but steadily carry out its military and political penetration to the northern Kurdish-populated regions of Iraq, as well as large-scale economic and infrastructure projects (e.g.: the construction of a large modern airport at Erbil.) According to expert estimates, this will enable Israel, in the event of dramatic deterioration of the situation around the Iranian nuclear program (or the expansion clashes in Iraq proper), to use the Kurdish resources and possibilities for rapid response based on Israel's national interests.

### ***Conclusion***

The Kurdish factor has always played a special role in the geo-strategy of Israel after the establishment of the Jewish State. The Kurdish-Israeli relations are a major element of Israel's policy in the Near and Middle East, and effective leverage to exert pressure on Iraq (and to a less extent, Syria) in order to detract the attention of the Baghdad government and to prevent its active intervention into the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the same time, it should be noted that the historical and cultural nearness of the Jews and Kurds determined by a strong and numerous Jewish community in Iraq believed to be the oldest in the world contributed to the close contacts between Israel and the Kurds. Despite the exodus of nearly the whole commu-

nity from Iraq to Israel, the Iraqi Jews have retained their uniqueness, traditions and culture, and to a great extent determined the policy of Israel towards the Kurds, as well as Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. The Kurdish community of Israel also made its contribution to this matter, although to a limited extent.

In cooperation with the USA and Shah's Iran, in the 1950s – early 1980s, Israel provided comprehensive military and political aid to the Iraqi Kurds, which played an important role in the continued armed struggle against the Iraqi government. Signing the Algiers Accord between Iran and Iraq, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution terminated the support of Kurds by Teheran in Northern Iraq, and as a result, restricted the Israeli aid to the Kurds since the latter has no common border with Iraq. Hence, the activity of the Israeli-Kurdish contacts in the military-political sphere dwindled dramatically up until the early 1990s, which, however, did not diminish the significance of the Kurdish factor in the general geo-strategy of Israel in the Near and Middle East. The situation changed again after Operation Desert Storm carried out by the US and the multinational coalition in 1991. The invasion of the US forces to Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of S. Hussein's regime created real prerequisites for the revival of the Kurdish factor in the political process in the Near and Middle East. As a result, naturally, the significance of the Kurds in the regional strategy of Israel has grown again.

At the same time, the level of Israeli-Kurdish political relations is still greatly dependent on the stance of the Arab states, as well as Iran and Turkey. Nevertheless, presently, upon the establishment of a viable Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, the Israeli-Kurdish cooperation may again become a major factor in the geopolitical processes in the region. Naturally, this will have a negative effect on the complicated and «moot» partnership of Israel and Turkey, especially, if the developments around the Iranian nuclear program will in the near future lead to the real possibility of a military operation carried out by the US and/or Israel against Iran. In this case both the aid and direct participation of the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds will be indispensable against the background of the unprecedented significance of the Iranian nuclear program for Israel's national security. However, it should not be ruled out that if there is even a vague hope to neutralize the Iranian problem by political means and through regional pressure on Iran, then for Israel, the Kurdish question will again become a pawn for the sake of the improvement of its relations with Turkey.

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