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Kurds, Jews, and Kurdistan Jews: Historic Homelands, Perceptions of Parallels in Persecution, and Allies by Analogy

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Abstract: This article highlights the positive relations between the Jewish and the Kurdish nations, maintained mainly by Kurdistan Jews until their displacement to Israel in the mid-20th century. These positive relations have been transmitted through their oral traditions, documented by both communities and travelers to Kurdistan, and validated by several scholars who studied the Jews of the region, Kurdistan, and Jewish-Kurdish relations. The dearth of historical documentation of both societies has resulted in a ‘negative myth’ used by the enemies of the Kurds and the Jews to dehumanize them before the 20th century, and therefore delegitimizing their right to statehood in modern times. From the 16th century onward, there is more solid evidence about the Kurdistan Jews and their relations with Kurdish neighbors. There are considerable and certain parallels between the two nations in terms of their oral traditions as well as linguistic and literary practices. The historical ties between the Jews and their neighbors in Kurdistan formed a fruitful ground for the relations between the Jewish people of Israel and the Kurds since 1948. Despite the exodus of almost the entire Kurdistan Jewish population to the State of Israel, Kurdistan Jews have largely retained their identity, culture, and traditions and have effectively influenced Israel’s policy towards the Kurds. The often-secret relations between the Kurdish movement in Iraq and Israel since 1960 played an important role in the global security policy of the Jewish nation in the Middle East, and in effect served to keep Baghdad from becoming involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict on one hand, and allowed the Kurdish liberation movement in Southern/Iraqi Kurdistan to survive on the other. These ties were reinforced by the sense of a common fate and struggle for statehood, persecution and genocides, feeling of solidarity, mutual strategic interests, humanitarian and economic dimensions, in post-1988 Halabja Massacre, the operation of the US led coalition against Iraq in 1991, and 2003 Invasion of Iraq. Since the Arab Spring, the military interventions against the self-proclaimed caliphate, Islamic State (IS), and the referendum for an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq in 2017, this relationship allegedly has extended to include the relationships between Israel and the Kurds in Western/Syrian and Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan as well. Notably, Israel was the only state that publicly supported the creation of an independent Kurdish state. With all the development the Kurdish question has paved in the 21st century, the article concludes that the majority of the Kurds of the 21st century can be described as a ‘pariah people’ in Max Weber’s definition and meditation of the term and Hannah Arendt’s ‘rightless’, who ‘no longer belong to any community’, while describing the different aspects of the political, economic, and cultural calamity of Jews, refugees, and stateless people at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: the Kurds; Kurdistan Jews; Israel; pariah people



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1. Introduction

In 1966, the former Iraqi defense minister ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli’ (1919–1981) blamed the Kurds of Iraq for seeking to establish “a second Israel” in the Middle East (Bengio 2014). During the 2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum, former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki repeated the same words to the US Ambassador to Iraq, Douglas A. Silliman, that they will not allow a “second Israel” to be created in northern Iraq

(Rudaw 2017). From al-Uqayli to al-Maliki, they have also claimed that the West is supporting the creation of this “second Israel” in the north of Iraq, as they had carried out in 1948 when they created the “first Israel.” Meanwhile, in Turkey, anti-Kurdish rhetoric doubled down during the 2017 referendum on longstanding anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that the Kurds are “Zionist puppets,” if not secretly Jews themselves. “The Turkish media has long speculated about the Jewish ancestry of Masoud Barzani, former president of Kurdistan Regional Government, and showed maps purporting to show Kurdistan’s place in the increasingly grandiose geography of “greater Israel” (Danforth 2017). During the referendum, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei also claimed that America was trying to establish ‘a new Israel in the region’ (Bengio 2021, p. 841). The central governments of the Kurdish-speaking world have linked and continue to link Israel, Zionism, and imperialism to any demands for self-determination, basic human rights, or linguistic rights requested by the Kurds in different parts of Kurdistan (see McGirk 1980; Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2019; Sheyholislami 2019; Khezri 2021).

This is despite the fact that the Kurdish struggle for statehood has lasted at least one hundred years. In addition, in previous decades, the Kurds were more commonly cast as “Palestinians.” When former president of Iraq and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Jalal Talebani (1933–2017), called the contested city Kirkuk ‘The Jerusalem of Kurdistan’ (Talebani 2002, pp. 19–23), “he intended the metaphor to be read from the Palestinian perspective” (Danforth 2017). To this day, some scholars, who are primarily concerned with European colonialism, pay lip service to the Kurdish question by linking it to the Palestinian question. These nods to the Kurdish question, however, have not entailed any practical support from these scholars in the way that the Palestinian case has received. In fact, the most prominent postcolonial scholars, from Edward Said, to Tariq Ali, to Hamid Dabashi, as well as contemporary Western politicians influenced by their work, such as Ilhan Omar, have failed to support discussion of the Kurdish question (Eliassi 2013; Romano 2019). Through this lens, one can understand Edward Said’s denial of the Iraqi Ba’thist regime’s chemical attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja and his silence on the same regime’s notorious al-Anfal Campaign against the Kurds, where thousands were massacred. Said pointed out in the *London Review of Books* that the “claim that Iraq gassed its own citizens has often been repeated. At best, this is uncertain” (Said 1991). In a similar vein, Ilhan Omar voted against the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and to condemn Turkey’s war of ethnic cleansing against Kurds in Rojava, while nevertheless being a vocal critic of imperialism and Zionism in respect with Gaza (see Riotta 2019; Romano 2019; Eliassi 2013). In contrast with Israel and Palestine, Kurdistan—with a few exceptions—has historically been deprived of the support and solidarity granted by regional and international communities to both Israel and Palestine. As an ancient and indigenous Middle Eastern nation whose people are exiled in their own homeland, and who often are targeted for genocide and ethnic cleansing by exterminationist neighbors, the Kurds of the 21st century have much in common with the Jews of the 20th century, particularly before the creation of modern nation states and the establishment of the State of Israel. Many Kurds today see parallels to the Jewish people of the late 19th and early 20th century, both in terms of persecution as a people and in terms of aspirations for a nation state.

A. The Kurds and the Jews until 1948¹

Kurdish-Jewish relations date back millennia. However, the dearth of historical documentation of both societies allowed the medieval imperial literature and historiography of the pre-20th century Islamic/ate world to develop a ‘negative’ myth about the Kurdish-Jewish relations.² For example, one of the most famous and recited narrations about the origin of the Kurds in this imperial historiography of the pre-20th century Islamic/ate world makes a direct connection between the Kurds, the Jews, the West, and the supernatural world.³ In this telling, King Solomon, who ruled over the supernatural world, summoned his angelic servants and ordered them to fly to Europe and bring him five hundred beautiful women. When his servants returned, they learned that the king had

passed away, but they retained the women for themselves, who then gave the birth to the Kurdish nation (Bengio 2014). The Arab historian and traveler, Al-Mas'uudi (893–956 CE) in his large-scale work, *Muruuj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawaahir* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) summarizes all historical and contemporary accounts about the origin of the Kurds. According to his narration, some believed the Kurds originate from the bondwomen of King Solomon. When he lost his kingdom, some hypocritical devils known as *al-jasad* (lit. 'body') committed adultery with his bondwomen. However, Allah protected the virtuous bondwomen from the devils, but the 'debauched' bondwomen became pregnant. When Allah restored Solomon's kingdom, and those bondwomen gave birth to the devils' children, King Solomon said, "banish the children along with their mothers/bondwomen to the mountain" (Al-Mas'uudi 2005, p. 96). Subsequent generations of imperial Arab, Persian, and Turkish scholars and historians repeated this story and similar narratives on the origin of the Kurds. This narration has in turn informed the modern governments of the region, who categorize the Kurds as 'Nomadic Arabs,' 'Mountain Turks,' or 'Mountain Persians,' until 1991. This premodern narration of the Kurds as 'bastard Jews/Europeans' allowed Middle Eastern states to also conceptualize the Kurds as the ultimate 'evil' and 'the others' in the region. Such accusations are echoed today by some in the Middle Eastern media, who claim that Kurdistan is following in the footsteps of 'Yahuudistaan' (Land of the Jews). These linkages and parallels are intended to demonize and delegitimize Kurdish and Jewish populations and their relations throughout history (Bengio 2014; Yeğen 2007).

Kurdish and Jewish experiences are rooted in a historical connection: that one was stateless until the mid-20th century while the other continues to be, and that both minorities are considered moderate, secular, and outcasts in a sea of extremists that targets both to this day (Danforth 2017). In fact, many aspects of Kurdish and Jewish cultures have become so intertwined that in several popular Jewish folk stories, the Kurds are considered to be of Jewish origin. The legendary tombs of Biblical prophets, such as Nahum in Alikush, Jonah in Nabi Yunus (ancient Nineveh), Daniel in Kirkuk, Habakkuk in Tuyserkan, and Queen Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, venerated by Jews to this day, are located in regions inhabited mainly by Kurds (Mamikonian 2005, p. 384). In addition to a more peaceful environment, the mountainous areas of Kurdistan provided a haven for Jews, Yezidis, Assyrians, and other minorities.

Kurdistani Jews have continuously cultivated and maintained positive relations between the two nations. As one of the most ancient Jewish communities, they orally maintain a unique wealth of ancient Jewish literary tradition "embellished with themes from local Kurdistan folk lore and daily life" (Sabar 1982, p. xi). Until their exile and immigration as masse to Israel in the 1950s, there were about 25,000 Jews scattered in nearly two hundred villages and towns in Kurdistan (Ibid., p. xv). According to their oral tradition, recorded by travelers to Kurdistan and validated by several scholars who studied the Jews of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Jews are the descendants of the Jews carried into exile from Israel and Judea by the Assyrian kings (see Benjamin of Tudela 1907, p. 54; D'Beth Hillel 1973, p. 80; Field 1937, p. 709; Hamilton 1972, p. 290) and referred to by the prophet Isaiah as "lost in the land of Assyria" (Isa. 27:13). Christianity was received and was successful in this area at least partly because it was inhabited by Jews (Sabar 1982, p. xvi). The relatively peaceful Kurdistan has been, for a longtime, "safe haven" for many religious minorities, including the Jews, in the Middle East.

Kurdistani Jews often have been ignored by medieval Islamic/ate historians and scholars. Due to their small number, their support for the tribal chieftains, and their submissive nature, they were "generally perceived as unthreatening and reliable" (Zaken 2019, p. 181). In the mid-7th century on the border of Armenia, a conquest treaty was concluded between the Arabs and 'the Magians and the Jews' (Ben-Jacob 1961, p. 14). More substantial evidence about the existence of Jewish settlements in Kurdistan and the relationship between the Kurds and Jews is found in the itineraries of two Jewish travelers to Kurdistan in the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela and Pethahiah of Ratisbon.

As has been shown, travelers and scholars have been reporting on urban centers as well as on small Jewish groups scattered in Kurdistan from the early 12th throughout the 20th century (Sabar 1982, p. xvii). Benjamin of Tudela documents the account of David Alroy, the messianic leader from Kurdistan who rebelled against the king of Persia and planned to redeem the Jews from exile and lead them to Jerusalem (see Benjamin of Tudela 1907, p. xiii). Fearing persecution and the approaching Crusaders, many Jews from Syria-Palestine fled to Babylonia and Kurdistan, where they “enjoyed some degree of autonomy” (Sabar 1982, p. xvii). Due to great massacres of the Kurdish and Jewish population, as well as the destruction of cities and towns by the Mongol conquests, much of the urban population of the steppes fled deeper into the more rugged and impregnable parts of Kurdistan. Even many Kurds who escaped the sword of the Mongols fled to Syria and Egypt, and two Kurdish tribes fled as far as Algeria (Minorsky 1927, pp. 1140–41; Sabar 1982, p. xvii).

In addition to these historical ties, there is also a certain parallel between the two nations from linguistic and literary standpoints. The Kurdistan Jews spoke different dialects of the Aramaic language into the 20th century. Some recent evidence suggests that one of the three different ancient alphabets possessed by the Kurds resembles the old Aramaic script (Bengio 2021, p. 830). There is also a certain parallel between the two nations from a literary perspective. In a world where to write poetry in a subaltern language was to contest the terms of political sovereignty, the Kurdish-language verse of mystic union of Melayê Cizîrî (1570–1640) marked the beginning of the written Kurmanji school of Kurdish literary culture. During the same time, we have the first documents and manuscripts written by the Jews of Kurdistan proper (see al-Zahiri 1965), an indication of how writing in a subaltern language and religion contested the terms of political sovereignty by both the Kurds and the Kurdistan Jews. Interestingly, Melayê Cizîrî’s poetic act of solidarity of standing alongside the Jews, Yezidis, Zoroastrians, and other religious and ethnic minorities came at a historic juncture. His poem rejects the violence and extremism of the Sunni-Turkish-Ottoman and Shia-Persian-Safavid empires in favor of a moderate vision of Sufi Islam that depicts a religious and ethnic pluralism in Kurdistan’s natural landscape. For instance, his famous ghazal, *The Heart is an Ocean* incorporates Jewish and other religious symbols and starts with:

تورم ب دل و پیرموی موسایم نهر
ناتش پیرس و نوری تهجهلالیم نهر

Although a follower of Moses, in my heart Mount Sinai shines.

Although a worshipper of fire, deeper sacred light is mine. (Duski 2019, p. 147)⁴

Similar to Kurdish poets of the 16th century onward, the documents and manuscripts written by the rabbis of Kurdistan during these centuries attest this historical and cultural bond between the Kurdistan Jewish and the Kurdish communities. In fact, “the relative freedom of Kurdish women at that time led to the ordination of the first among the Kurdish Jews woman rabbi, Rabbi Asenath Barzani, in the 17th century. She was the daughter of the celebrated Rabbi Samuel Barzani (ca. 1630) who founded many religious schools and seminaries in the Kurdish-speaking areas. Eventually, Asenath became the head of an academy at Mosul” (Mamikonian 2005, p. 384). The works of Kurdish poets of the 16th and 17th centuries, with the religious scholarship of some rabbis, such as Rabbi Asenath, present Kurdish cities such as Amidya, Zakho, Urmia, and Cizre republics of letters for both the Jewish and Kurdish communities, rather than marginal to metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Shiraz, and Tabriz, as highlighted and discussed within the framework of imperial literature and historiography of the dominant groups of the Middle East. Similarly, “the 16th and 17th centuries brought about a whole slew of scripts composed by the Kurdish Jews themselves, mostly religious manuscripts but also a few documents which illustrate their economic and social life. There seem to have been quite a lot of *yeshivot* all over the place, who attracted domestic as well as foreign students” (Ammann 2014, pp. 276, 277).

In the following centuries, especially the 18th and 19th centuries, Kurdistan and particularly its religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews, and Yezidis, suffered severely

from colonial ambitions of both Safavid and Ottoman empires. Their communities were shattered, their religious shrines and symbols were destroyed, and their populations were decimated. Amidya was besieged and destroyed in 1832 by the Ottoman-affiliated agha of Rawanduz. Missionaries such as Asahel Grant (in 1832), Badger (in 1852), and Stern (in 1854) among others documented the oppression of religious minorities by the affiliated-Ottoman and Safavid officials (see [Badger 1969](#), p. 199; [Stern 1854](#), p. 225). These religious minorities soon after were trapped in American/European imperial ambitions. As a result, Jews and other religious minorities moved further into rural areas and formed distinctive small communities (see [D'Beth Hillel 1973](#), p. 79). The 19th century marked the “downfall of the Kurdish emirates the takeover of Ottoman governors and a general decline in population. Many localities earlier reported to have large Jewish populations suddenly housed only a few families or none at all. Typical examples were the once enormously influential communities of Amadiya and Nirwei. The same effect could be observed in most other towns” ([Ammann 2014](#), pp. 277, 278). In the early 20th century, for security reasons and owing to the improvement of transportation by the use of motorized vehicles, many Jews (as well as Kurds and Assyrians) “gradually left the villages and the hardships of farming and moved to urban centers” ([Sabar 1982](#), p. xxii). For example, Walter Fischel who visited the Kurdish communities a few years before the establishment of State of Israel, writes: “I found hardly a village in those highlands that had no Jews, though there are usually not more than six or eight families” ([Fischel 1949](#), p. 554). However, since 1903, missionary activities had been taken up by the Hevrat Kol Yisrael Haveirim (*Alliance Israelite Universelle*). Since the 1920s, *Alliance Israelite Universelle* “has been opening schools in Kurdish-populated regions (in Sanne in 1903, in Kirmanshah in 1904, in Mosul in 1907, and in Khanekin in 1911), and introducing many educational programmes specially designed for Kurdish Jews” ([Mamikonian 2005](#), p. 386). These measures involved non-Jewish population as well. As a result, a large stratum of educated people emerged among the peoples inhabiting these areas, especially the Kurds.

These historical, linguistic and literary ties between the Kurds and Jews, similar to many other minorities, were further affirmed by their similarity in lifestyle, common interests in jobs and occupations they pursued, and their practice of religious and cultural costumes derived from ancient oral and increasingly written traditions and transmitted from generation to generation. Several visitors have observed the participation of some local Kurds in Jewish festivals and ceremonies and vice versa (see [Sabar 1982](#), pp. xxvii–xxix). These sermons and festivals played important roles in the cultural, religious, and national edification of isolated communities such as Kurdistan, where the rate of illiteracy was high (*Ibid.*, pp. xxvii–xxix). Both communities preserve this lifestyle to this day; even when the Kurdistan Jews immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, they still maintained their lifestyle to a great extent (*Ibid.*, pp. xxiv–xxvi). With these historical, cultural, and geographical ties to Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Jews have maintained their strong relationship to the Land of Israel as well as to Kurdistan. They have maintained a “tradition tracing their origin to the exiled tribes of Israel” by various means (*Ibid.*, p. xxix). [Zaken \(2007, 2019\)](#) mentions several attacks and hostilities toward Kurdistan Jews by Muslim Kurds in cities such as Zakho in the late 19th century. Despite these hostilities, which in some cases, seem to be “atypical incident[s]” ([Zaken 2019](#), p. 189), many reports indicate positive relations between the two communities. The Kurdish city of Zakho, due to the large number of synagogues and the large Jewish community was known as “the Jerusalem of Kurdistan” ([Ben-Jacob 1961](#), p. 61). Up to this day, the Kurds call Kirkuk ‘Small Jerusalem’. In keeping with Jewish tradition, deceased Jews of Kurdistan were buried with their feet facing in the direction of Jerusalem ([Sabar 1982](#), p. xxxi). In addition to Muslim Kurds, various available documents generally tell the good relationship also between non-Muslim Kurds and Kurdistan Jews. “A few Jews and Christian have been living among the majority of Yezidi in Baa’dre and Ain Sifin” ([Sandreczki 1857](#), p. 296). Some scholars believe the common Jewish elements among the Yezidi Kurds is because of the fact that they inhabited many of the same territories for generations ([Ammann 2014](#), p. 281).

The Kurdistan Jews developed a rich oral folk tradition incorporating many elements of Kurdish culture. “The oral folk literature is predominantly secular and its contents and sources are Kurdish or general Near Eastern,” (Sabar 1982, p. xxxii). Some Jewish folk tales, rhymes, and proverbs in Kurmanji Kurdish indicate that they have non-Jewish sources (Ibid.). “Some of these stories, such as *Zin-u-Mame*, the well-known tragic Kurdish love story, include songs and dirges that are always chanted in Kurdish, even when the rest of the story is told in Neo-Aramaic,” (Ibid., p. xxxvii). In addition to liturgical songs, the Kurdistan Jews have a rich stock of folk songs, rhymes, and proverbs. According to Edith Gerson-Kiwi, who has studied their music for many years, “the rich [Kurdish] unwritten literature of folk epics, ballads, and dance tunes . . . has been widely accepted by the Jews and integrated into the rest of their singing style,” (Gerson Kiwi 1971, p. 61). Since Modern Israeli Hebrew is the national language, the Neo-Aramaic, Arabic, and Kurdish languages of Kurdistan Jews in Israel have been gradually replaced by Hebrew. However, several institutes and universities have preserved the Neo-Aramaic manuscripts and Kurdish-language folktales and songs (Sabar 1982, p. xl). In addition to religious practices, there were many commonalities between ways of life of the Jews and the Kurds. Their dress code conforms almost entirely to that of the Kurds (Ammann 2014, p. 290). There were also educational exchanges between Palestine/Land of Israel and Kurdistan. A few Kurdish students studied at religious schools in Palestine/Land of Israel and a few Jewish students from Palestine/Land of Israel studied in schools in Kurdistan (Ibid., p. 295).

Kurdistan’s Jewish population, although widely outnumbered by Muslim Kurds and to a lesser degree by Aramaic and Armenian-speaking Christians, Yezidis, and other groups for hundreds of years, played a special and important economic role as craftsmen, especially as weavers and silversmiths. Some members of urban Jewish families had been representatives in the Municipality Councils. In the towns in which Jews lived in separate neighborhoods, their quarters were called in Kurmanji-Kurdish, *mehelle jiya*, and in Sorani-Kurdish, *mahalle jewlakan* or *garaky jewlakan*. Although the central governments of the regions have renamed those areas, local people still use the old names, another indication that the community is still present, or imagined as present.

Overall, the Jews of Kurdistan “lived in relative peace and security; they were able to provide for their families and to observe their own religious and spiritual practices” (Ibid., pp. 288–89). Despite a few measures against Jews that were reported and implemented, often by imperial administrations of Ottomans and Safavid empires in Kurdistan, there were multiple positive reports of good relations, especially compared to other Jewish communities. The Jewish Encyclopedia highlights ‘easy circumstances’ for Jews in most parts of Kurdistan, such as the Bait Nur region and Karada (*Jewish Encyclopedia: Kurdistan* 1906). Myths and legends in Jewish and non-Jewish traditions tell us about these positive relationships between the Kurds and Kurdistan Jews. For instance, regarding the town of Sulaimaniyah, founded in 1784, oral Jewish tradition says that its founder, Sulaiman Pasha, invited Jews from Qaradagh, since in his view, “a town with no Jews is not considered a proper town” (Ammann 2014, pp. 288–89). A similarly positive myth recounts the resettling of the town of Zakho after a terrible flood around 1600 BCE: a holy man had been told by the spirits that nothing would work until Jews returned to town (Ibid.). Similar for the Kurds and the Kurdistan Jews, colonial state borders had almost no meaning; “the communities had not been bound together by means of a nation state but at most by trading relations and a little bit of theoretic collective identity on the grounds of religion” (Ibid., p. 295). “In an ethnic sense, with all the political implications, their loyalty was to their Kurdish setting and not to the Arab or Turkish culture. The same obviously goes for Iran. Regarding the city of Sanandaj, for instance, it is said that the Jews there considered themselves Kurds and that in their cultural and social patterns they did not vary greatly from those of the predominant Kurdish society,” (see Ibid.; Magnarella 1969, p. 52). After the State of Israel was established, all the Jews of Kurdistan immigrated there between 1950 and 1951. However, as the following sections will discuss, they maintained their connection to Kurdistan and functioned as ambassadors of Kurdistan in Israel.

B. Kurdish-Jewish-Israeli relations, 1948–2017⁵

These historical and cultural ties between the Jews and their neighbors in Kurdistan created fruitful ground for relations between Israel with the Kurds since 1950s. “These ties were reinforced by the sense of a common fate of two small and persecuted nations whose neighboring countries denied them legitimacy for state of their own, feeling of solidarity, mutual strategic interests, and humanitarian and economic dimensions (Bengio 2021, pp. 828, 834).

These contacts between Jewish organizations and the Kurds in 20th century date back to the late 1930s, long before the establishment of the State of Israel. However, at the end of the 1940s, this relationship “became instrumental in helping Iraqi Jews reach Palestine from northern Iraq via Turkey and Iran” (Mamikonian 2005, p. 392). Jewish families have recounted how the Barzani family, for instance, helped smuggle them out over the mountains.

Since the mid-1960s, there was a secret relationship between the Israeli government and the Kurds of Iraq and more specifically, with Kurdistan Democratic Party. This relationship was based on mutual strategic interests and common enemy, the state of Iraq. Israeli intelligence viewed the Kurds as potentially valuable allies in their fight against the Iraqi regime. “In the late 1950s, based on that rationale, the Israel’s policy towards Kurdish minorities of the Arab states in the Middle East started revealing certain elements soon to be known as the “Peripheral Strategy” (Ibid., p. 391). This strategy includes security and intelligence cooperation with the non-Arab regional powers, among them the Kurds. This Israeli-Kurdish relation was limited to the Southern/Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraq was an enemy, “unlike pre-1979 Iran and pre-2002 Turkey, which were both allies of Israel, which didn’t want to antagonize them by developing ties with [all] the Kurds” (Bengio 2021, p. 837). For the Kurds, Israel became the primary source of arms and military training in their fight against the Iraqi central government (Mamikonian 2005, p. 393; McDowall 1966, pp. 320, 331). Israel also provided humanitarian aid. For instance, physicians came to the region and provided crucial medical aid, including to Mulla Mustafa Barzani himself. Israel also helped bring the Kurdish voice to the world (Bengio 2021, p. 838). Israel’s strategic interest in helping the Kurds motivated not only because Iraq was Israel’s enemy, but also, in the words of Eliezer Tzafrir, a former senior figure in Israel’s intelligence service, because “we also viewed it as a humanitarian issue. We liked the Kurds” (Mamikonian 2005, pp. 391, 395). Echoing this idea, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin Israel supported the Kurds ‘because we are Jews’ (Bengio 2021, p. 838). However, the collaboration between the CIA, Mossad, Savak, and their support of Kurdish insurgents ended in 1975 when Iran withdrew its support for the Kurds following the Algiers Accord, which Iran signed with Iraq in an attempt to improve relations between the two states. During this time, Mustafa Barzani wrote his famous letter to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, complaining of that the US abandoned the Kurds (see [Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976](#), Document 278). High expectations on both the part of Israel and the Kurds impacted their relationship until the chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein’s government launched what is known as al-Anfal Campaign against the Kurds in northern Iraq. The campaign reached its peak in 1988 when civilians were gassed by chemical weapons in the Kurdish town of Halabja. According to [Human Rights Watch \(1993\)](#), 50,000 to 100,000 Kurdish people were killed because of the campaign. Some Kurdish officials have claimed the figure could be as high as 182,000 ([Human Rights Watch 1993](#); [Johns n.d.](#)). “Many have considered the event to be an act of genocide and one could hypothetically describe it as the ‘Kurdish Holocaust,’ given the similar narratives the Kurds and the Jews have” (Naghi 2017).

In fact, the Jewish and Kurdish genocides also became symbols of the alliance of analogy between the two nations. They both experienced mass genocide in the 20th century, and their nationalist sentiments were delegitimized by neighboring Arab, Iranian, and Turkish states (Naghi 2017). Following the Kurdish genocide, and a critical humanitarian situation in which tens of thousands of Kurds became refugees, Jewish organizations all

over the world were among the first to mobilize their resources to collect aid for Iraqi Kurds, while Jewish lobbying groups tried to pressure governments (especially the US) to force Iraq to stop oppressing the Kurds (Barron 1991, p. 64). Israel expressed sympathy for the Kurds by launching a massive relief operation, sending medical supplies, clothing, and blankets to refugees along the Iraqi-Turkish border. The clothing collection campaign was organized mostly by the 100,000-strong community of Kurdistan Jews in Israel. Kurdistan Jews even demonstrated in front of Prime Minister Itzhak Shamir's Jerusalem office while he met with US Secretary of State James Baker, calling on the American government to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussain (Barron 1991, p. 64). This may have been what pushed Shamir to urge US Secretary of State James Baker to take action to help the Kurds. The US, United Kingdom, and France eventually helped establish a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan, which granted the Iraqi Kurds autonomy that remains in place to this day. The Jewish community was among the first in the world, and the only in the Middle East, to recognize the Halabja incident as genocide. Ever since, many Jewish organizations and scholars have demanded that the Israeli Knesset recognize the Halabja incident as genocide, as a first step toward Israel supporting the establishment of an independent Kurdistan (see Bengio 2013).

Similar to the Jews following the Holocaust and mass displacement of Jews during and after the Second World War, and the large numbers of 'displaced persons' liberated from the concentration camps, the Kurds used their national trauma and displacement as a springboard for national sovereignty and state-building (Bengio 2013). Until the end of 20th century, the Halabja and Sardasht massacres were often compared with Hiroshima (Efty 1991; Homa 2017; Mohammadpur 2018; Ramadan Zada 2019). However, since the beginning of the 21st century, both Kurds and Jews refer to the parallels in their persecution with respect to the Holocaust and Halabja (see Bengio 2013; Naghi 2017; Qadri 2021; Kawusii 2010). In fact, as early as 1991, The Jewish Federation of Orange County in California applauded the George H. W. Bush administration for providing initial humanitarian assistance to the Kurds who were facing, according to the federation, 'A Kurdish Holocaust' (Friedman 1991). The most celebrated Kurdish poet of the 21st century, Sherko Bekas (1940–2013), uses Jewish and Christian suffering in his long poem '*awabûn û bûmelerze*' (disappearing and earthquake), describing the 1988 Halabja Massacre (Bekas 1993). Externally, the Kurds attempted to win international recognition for classifying the events as genocide. As early as 1993, after an extensive investigation, Human Rights Watch concluded that Iraq had committed genocide against the Kurds. Kurdish efforts to promote awareness only began to bear fruit in 2012 when Norway became the first country to describe Iraq's attacks as genocide, followed by Sweden and Britain. Other countries, including Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, and France, are discussing taking the step, too (Bengio 2013).

After the establishment of the Kurdish autonomous region in north of Iraq, and following the 2003 Iraq invasion and the overthrow of the Ba'th regime, Israeli-Kurdish relations significantly improved. The Jewish and Kurdish struggles for statehood in the Middle East, also made an alliance of analogy between the two nations. These parallels between the two nations can be found in the works of Kurdish poets and intellectuals from as early as the 19th century. There was feeling among Kurds of having a fate and struggle similar to that of the Jews. The father of modernism in Kurdish poetry, Hecî Qadirê Koyî (1817–1897), highlights the dispersion and diaspora of Kurds, Jews, and Gypsies in the following words:

سێ قەبیلە حەقیر و بێ روومەتن
کورد و دۆم و یەهوودی گۆمراهن

Three nations live in exile, expelled from their place of honor:
the Kurds, Gypsies, and Jews have gone astray. (Koyî 2011, p. 258)

Their common circumstances took further shape after the creation of the State of Israel. Many Kurdish poets and intellectuals of the mid-20th century looked at Israel as a successful recent example for creating their own state. The Kurdish poet, Mala Mustafa

'Asi (2008), calls on the Kurds to follow in the footsteps of the Jews in creating their own state:

بههیزی یهککهتی سمیری که جوو چی کرد و چی لیهات
له حالی خۆت بکه تۆش که چهند مههتووک و بهندناوی

Look what the Jews have done by dint of unity, what they have achieved.

You [Kurds], consider yourselves and see how disreputable you have become (2008).

After the establishment of Kurdish autonomous region in north of Iraq, and following the 2003 Iraq invasion and the overthrow of the Ba'th regime, the Israeli-Kurdish relations significantly improved. "Many Jews of Kurdish origin frequented the region and helped establish economic links" (Bengio 2021, p. 834). The establishment of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) with pro-western tendency 'provided an umbrella under which Israel could resume its tacit ties with the KRI. Israel's strategic aims included the weakening of Iraq and Iran and later ISIS as well' (Ibid., p. 839). As for the Kurds, Israel is helping with selling the Kurdish oil, providing humanitarian and military support, and lobbying in western capitals, particularly in Washington for the Kurds (Ibid., p. 839). Israeli leaders including President Shimon Peres, foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu publicly declared their support for Kurdish independence (Ibid., p. 841). After the genocide of the Yezidis by IS, several Israeli and Jewish relief organizations were established to support them. Many Jews outside of Israel also supported the Kurds and their desire for independence (see Ibid., pp. 835–36). Israel was the only country that publicly supported the creation of an independent Kurdish state.

C. Kurdish-Jewish-Israeli Relations in post-2017 Kurdish Independence Referendum

In a show of gratitude for Israel's support, Kurds waved large Israeli flags at massive rallies held ahead of the referendum for an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq in 2017. In fact, the Kurdistan Regional Government allowed the waving of the Israeli flags even in demonstrations attended by Masoud Barzani himself, in an attempt to dismantle the perception among the Kurds that they were alone and abandoned by the international community. Waving the Israeli flag created a sense of fraternity with a strong nation that Kurds needed in 2017 (Frantzman 2017). Until 2017 Kurdish referendum, many Kurds saw Israel as an ally and a successful recent example for creating an independent state. In a 2009 poll in Iraqi Kurdistan, 71% said they support establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, and 67% said establishing such relations are an important step towards Kurdish independence (Bengio 2014). However, Israel's position in supporting the referendum, as well as widespread waving of the Israeli flag at Kurdish rallies in the semi-autonomous region led to conspiracy-laden comments by Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey that the entire independence movement was engineered by Israel to hasten the breakup of Iraq and the region (Salim and El-Ghobashy 2017), and to establish 'second' or 'greater' Israel. The Iraqi Parliament voted to activate a lapsed law that criminalizes displaying the Israeli flag in public. In the most recent event, and in September 2021, a meeting was held in Erbil that discussed normalizing ties with Israel. A group of Sunnis and Shiites from across the country met in Erbil and called for Iraq to join the Abraham Accords, a US-led Middle East peace initiative that saw Bahrain, Morocco, the UAE, and Sudan forge ties with Israel. However, the Iraqi government issued a strongly worded statement saying it rejected 'illegal meetings' in Erbil that discussed normalizing ties with Israel (Rudaw 2021).

Following the 2017 Kurdish Independence Referendum with its catastrophic outcomes for the KRI, Trump's withdrawal of US troops from Western/Syrian Kurdistan and the 2021 US Withdrawal from Afghanistan led to frustration among the elite as well as wider public in Kurdistan over what was regarded as the international community's indifference and betrayal of the Kurds. This frustration was especially strong toward Israel and the US. For the Kurds, there is a certain parallel between them and Israel in seeking international support. In fact, both have sought the support of international community and outside powers in order to overcome adversities and "to counterbalance military threats or political pressures; and at times dealing with those outside powers have been very disappointing'

(Bishku 2018, p. 71). This parallel is also could be found in the “attitudes of the major powers at the time of the establishment of the state of Israel and the Kurdish referendum (Ibid., p. 72) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The international community, particularly the Arab and Islamic world opposed the partition of Palestine as it opposes the partition of Iraq, Syria and the Middle East today.

On the other hand, recent developments in the Middle East, particularly after the Arab Spring and war against IS, have allowed for the viability of the Kurds as a people not only in Iraq, but in Syria and Iran as well. Recent reports indicate some relations between Israel and the Kurds in Syria and even Iran (Abramson 2019). Israelis were ‘allegedly engaged in covert intelligence operations in Kurdish areas of Syria and Iran’ (Bishku 2018, p. 53). Since the US pullout from Syria, many Jewish and Israeli politicians and journalists ‘offered numerous statements of solidarity and support’ to the Syrian Kurds. Israel has been providing diplomatic and humanitarian aids to the Western/Syrian Kurds; “Israel strongly condemns the Turkish invasion of the Kurdish areas in Syria and warns against the ethnic cleansing of the Kurds by Turkey and its proxies,” Netanyahu said in a statement (The Times of Israel 2019). ‘While Israel has been cautious to avoid any noticeable contact with the PKK due to Turkish sensitivities, such has not been the case with Syrian and Iranian Kurdish groups where they appear to be amenable to interactions or future possibilities’ (Bishku 2018, p. 70). However, it seems that Israel is still in quest of a solid policy toward the Kurds in Eastern/Iranian and Western/Syrian Kurdistan, and maybe for the first time toward the Kurdish nation in general.

2. Conclusions

With all the developments surrounding the ‘Kurdish question’ in the 21st century, many Kurds share the belief that they have been abandoned once again by the local, regional, and international communities. This sense of abandonment is linked primarily to the aftermath of 2017 Kurdish Independence Referendum, Trump’s withdrawal of US troops from Western/Syrian Kurdistan, and the 2021 US Withdrawal from Afghanistan. ‘No friends but the mountains,’ is the most famous Kurdish proverb. It signifies Kurds’ feelings of abandonment and isolation due to a history of betrayal, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Their status corresponds to the conditions of the excluded ‘pariah people’ of the civilized world in the 21st century. Pariah people are characterized by being ritually separated from their surroundings and by being in an inferior position relative to the surrounding society. Weber defines a pariah people as follows in his sociology of religion in *Economy and Society*: “in our usage, ‘pariah people’ denotes a distinct hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by internal prohibitions against commensality and intermarriage originally founded upon magical, tabooistic, and ritual injunctions. Two additional traits of pariah people are political and social disprivilege and a far-reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning” (quoted in Swedberg 2005, pp. 193–94). Weber’s use of the term ‘pariah’ in connection with the Jewish people has been further discussed. According to Talcott Parsons, “the term pariah is used by Weber in a technical sense to designate a group occupying the same territorial area as others but separated from them by ritual barriers which severely limit social intercourse between the groups” (quoted in ibid., p. 195). Some Kurdish scholars have attempted to expand Weber’s definition of the pariah people to a “distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization with inferior position. The lack of a political organization refers to the absence of a sovereign state” (Dag 2019). In this context, Dag (2019) claims Weber used the notion of ‘pariah people’ to describe “different aspects of the political, economic and cultural calamity of Jews and other deprived groups who were considered as outsiders in the beginning of the 20th century. These people were strangers in the world dominated by the new emerging nation states”. He expanded the concept of the pariah people to “comprise different legally and structurally stateless communities. They do not possess a political organization that is committed to collectively provide its members the political, social, security and civil rights, protect these rights and bear overall and collective responsibility.

Thus, the pariah people in the 21st century are applied to the stateless people who failed to establish their political organization, as a sovereign statehood" (Ibid). They are, in Hannah Arendt's words, 'rightless' who 'no longer belong to any community whatsoever'. In her 1951 work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1973, p. 295), Arendt wrote of refugees and stateless people: 'the calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, [. . .] but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever.' It is no secret that many Kurds, particularly from Western/Syrian Kurdistan, have been deprived of citizenship and the right to have rights. Kurds in other parts of Kurdish speaking world, also might be citizens of different countries, but these countries do not see Kurds as part of the national community. In other words, and in the best situation, the constitute second-class citizens of those countries.

There is common agreement among scholars on internal tensions (such as Kurdish division and the role of Kurdish leadership), regional factors (Arab, Turk, and Persian/Farsi chauvinism, and the ruthless suppression of the ruling regimes), global influences (the deference of the UN and international community to the central governments), and other geographical, political, economic, religious and historical reasons behind this unique 'pariah status' of the Kurds (see Rubin 2003; Dag 2019). However, while some scholars put the entire Kurdish community in a pariah status (Dag 2019), others place only the Kurds of Eastern/Iranian and Western/Syrian Kurdistan in a pariah status (Rubin 2003). Either way, the pariah status of the Jews through so much of the 20th century is comparable to that of today's Kurds. This shared history and relations among the two nations, render the Kurds, at least for the time being, the Pariah and the Jews of the 21st Century.

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Notes

- ¹ This article draws substantially on Sabar (1982), Zaken (2007) and Ammann (2014) regarding Kurdistan Jews and the Kurdish-Jewish relations until 1948.
- ² For 'negative' and 'positive' myths in Kurdish-Jewish relations, see: Bengio (2021).
- ³ For the story of King Dāhḥāk, the origins and appearance of the Kurds in pre-Islamic Iran see: (Limbert 1968).
- ⁴ All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- ⁵ This article draws substantially on Mamikonian (2005), Liga (2016), Bishku (2018), and Bengio (2021) regarding Israeli-Kurdish relations from 1949 to 2022.

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