

Kurdish Students Call for Relations with Israel

A group of Kurdish students has made its voice heard in clamoring for relations between Iraqi Kurdistan and the State of Israel.

More than 200 students at the University of Kurdistan recently took part in a debate on whether the Kurdish region in Northern Iraq should have relations with the State of Israel. Upon hearing both sides, a panel of judges determined that Iraqi Kurds should have relations with the Jewish state. One of the judges reported, "The arguments of the winning team focused on the historic relations between Jews and Kurds."

Head of the university's student union, Uda Sarhang, claimed: "The central argument for those calling for open ties with Israel was that a majority of Mideast countries have ties with Israel; ties conducted peacefully despite their dislike of Israel. So, why can't we have the same ties?"

Sarhang, a supporter of Israeli-Kurdish relations, claimed that an additional argument made during the course of the debate was the current relations that exist between Kurdish Jews and the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Prof. Ofra Bengio of Tel Aviv University, who has conducted extensive research on the Kurds, told *Yedioth Achronot*, "This is not a common thing, not in Kurdistan and not anywhere," adding that "from what I gathered from meeting Kurds from different regions of Kurdistan, there is some kind of sense of a shared fate between us and Kurds, at least in the sense that we are both minorities in a region not interested in our self-determination."

Israeli-Kurdish Ties

Regardless whether such an occurrence is common or not, there is huge potential for increased relations between Israel and Northern Iraq. Iraqi Kurds, who number around five million people, have enjoyed autonomy in a region cushioned between Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey since the 1991 Gulf War. This autonomy has been further enhanced as a result of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, despite the existence of autonomy, "The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without an independent state," said Dr. Sherkoh Abbas, President of the Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria.

Nevertheless, should the Kurds, at least the ones of Iraq, Syria and Iran, be granted a state, they will not be a hostile one toward Israel. The president of Iraq's Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani, has publicly stated: "It is not a crime to have relations with Israel. If Baghdad established diplomatic relations with Israel, we could open a consulate in Erbil."

In the past, Israeli television has broadcast photographs from the 1960s showing Massoud Barzani's father, Mustafa Barzani, with former Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan. Furthermore, a 2009 poll conducted by Maariv found that 66.9 percent of Iraqi Kurds support having diplomatic relations with Israel. Additionally, Israel has offered agricultural assistance to Kurdish farmers in Northern Iraq.

In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Middle East specialist Dr. Harold Rhodes said that Kurds and Israelis would make good potential allies because of "shared challenges."

"Like Jews, the Kurdish people have lived under foreign domination for millennia," Rhodes said. "Kurdish suffering under Arab and Iranian rule infuses them with a natural affinity for Jews and Israel. There are an estimated 35 to 45 million Kurds in the Middle East, many of whom have been secretly sympathetic to Israel for years and have even been labeled 'Zionist agents' in Iraq, Syria and Iran."

“The addition of millions of potential Kurdish friends, for micro-sized Israel with a mere eight million inhabitants, could enhance the Jewish state’s security and regional position. While Jews were always considered politically and socially inferior in the Arab Middle East, Kurds generally did not discriminate against Jews, nor have they demonized Israel. In short, geography, history and destiny create natural affinities and interests between Kurds and Israelis.”

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