

Babylon versus Zion: Changing Iraqi Perceptions of Israel*

Ofra BENGIO**

Abstract

Under the Ba`thi regime which ruled Iraq for thirty five years Israel was a major target for Baghdad's rhetorical, ideological, and military attacks. With the collapse of the Ba`th and the sea changes that have occurred in that country, the picture has changed significantly with regard to the Iraqi posture toward Israel as well. Thus, the harsh anti Israeli rhetoric has all but disappeared. Similarly, the vocal and actual commitment to the Palestinian cause has been reduced significantly. This essay will compare the Iraqi discourse toward Israel under the Ba`th with that in post-Saddam Iraq. It will argue that while the Ba`th needed Israel as the ultimative "other" for various domestic and foreign purposes the new Iraq is neither able or intersted in following the same policies.

Keywords: Saddam Hussain, Ba`th Party, Media, Post-Saddam Iraq, Anti-Israeli Discourse.

Babil Zion'a Karşı: Irak'ın Değişen İsrail Algılaması

Öz

Irak'ta 35 yıl boyunca hüküm süren Baas Rejimi süresince İsrail, Bağdat'ın söylemsel, ideolojik ve askeri saldırılarının baş hedefi olmuştur. Baas rejiminin devrilmesi ve ülkede yaşanan değişikliklerin neticesinde Irak'ın İsrail'e yönelik duruşu da değişmiştir. Sert İsrail karşıtı söylemler tamamen ortadan kalkarken, Filistin davasına gösterilen bağlılık gözle görülür şekilde azalmıştır. Bu çalışma,

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** Prof. Dr., Tel Aviv University, Moshe Dayan Center.

Baas dönemi ve Saddam sonrası dönemlerde Irak'ın İsrail'e yönelik tavrını karşılaştırmalı olarak ele almakta, bu çerçevede Baas'ın iç ve dış meselelerinde "öteki" olarak lanse etmek üzere İsrail'e ihtiyaç duyduğu, yeni Irak'ın ise bu tür politikalar için ne yeterli imkânının ne de isteğinin bulunmadığı öne sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Saddam Hüseyin, Baas Partisi, Medya, Saddam Sonrası Irak, İsrail Karşısı Söylem.

بابل ضد زيون، نظرة اسرائيل المتغيرة نحو العراق

بقلم : اوفرا بنكيو

كانت اسرائيل هدفا للهجمات الكلامية والعقائدية والعسكرية طيلة 35 عاما التي امتد فيها حكم نظام البعث في العراق. وبنتيجه انهيار هذا النظام والتغيرات التي عاشها العراق ، تغير موقف العراق ايضا نحو اسرائيل. فقد اختفت اللهجة الشديدة ضد اسرائيل تماما، كما ضعف اهتمام العراق بقضية فلسطين بشكل ملحوظ. وتتناول هذه الدراسة مقارنة بين موقف العراق تجاه اسرائيل خلال كل من فترة البعث الصدامي وبين الفترة التي تلي انهيار ذلك النظام. كما تستعرض الدراسة حاجة نظام البعث الى اسرائيل التي كان النظام يسميها بـ "الأخر" للاستهلاك المحلي والدولي. وفي مقابل ذلك عدم رغبة وعدم امكانية العراق الجديد في اتباع هذه السياسة.

The Ba`th 'Holy Rancor' towards Israel

On 18 January 1998 Iraq celebrated 'Science Day' (*yawm al-`ilm*), in commemoration of the launching of the Iraqi missiles against Israel in January 1991. In a portentous editorial entitled "Our missiles opened for us the door of the beginnings, theirs cut for them the tombs of the end", *al-Jumhuriyya's* editor, Salah al-Mukhtar, depicted the act as a turning point in Arab history. For, as he explained, although Iraq had lost hundreds of missiles at the hands of the UN inspectors ever since, it at the same time created "22 million new missiles [i.e. the Iraqi population], as every Iraqi who believes in his leader and the Arab nation and carries holy rancor (*hiqd muqaddas*) toward America and Zionism is a more effective missile than the ones launched seven years earlier".¹ This reflected the tone of the official stance toward Israel: rejection of Israel's right to exist, rejection of the Arab-Israeli peace process and the identification of Israel with all Iraq's mishaps. The Iraqi media which represent an omnipotent propaganda machine, were entrusted with the task of nurturing hatred toward Israel, Zionism and Jews.

In order to better understand this officially sanctioned hatred for Israel and the Jews, one should put it in the general context of the role of the Iraqi media in a regime such as the *Ba`th* and the place of the 'other', any 'other', in its world view. The questions that will be addressed therefore are the following: to what extent was the Israeli case unique? What end did the constant hammering on the Israeli theme serve? What was the connection between rhetoric and politics? And under what circumstances a change of stance toward Israel could take place?

Under the *Ba`th* the Iraqi media played the role of the regime's watchdog, thus contributing significantly to its survival and longevity. This role was all the more impressive in view of the crises and trials and tribulations that have befallen the country and that might have undermined any other regime. Acknowledging their role, particularly in wartime, President Saddam Husayn likened it to that of a military corps and depicted the entire information machine as the 'information corps' (*faylaq al-a`lam*). Indeed, they have fulfilled four-fold function: blurring or distorting reality and 'imbuing' it with rosy colors as

¹ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 18 January 1998. Mukhtar's propagandist talents would elevate him later in that year to a diplomatic post abroad.

much as possible; shielding the regime, especially Saddam Husayn, from any internal or external criticism; mobilizing the masses behind the regime and its ever changing goals; and finally, demonizing the 'other', whoever they may be.² The media have, thus, turned themselves into a coercive tool for controlling the minds of the people, becoming no less effective than other security apparatuses which have controlled their daily life. Why and how did the Iraqi media embrace this role?

Historically speaking there was never a free press in Iraq, not to speak of the electronic media. Yet a quick comparison between the *Ba'th* period, which started in the late 1960s, with earlier ones, would show that under the *Ba'th*, they became much more controlled, monolithic, mobilized and almost completely stripped of any critical approach. The 'war for the media' was decided in the first two weeks of the *Ba'th's* advent to power on 17 July 1968. In these two weeks there developed a struggle for power between the two partners of the coup: The *Ba'th* headed by Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and the military, headed by 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Nayif. This struggle reflected itself in the media too. At the time there were only two major newspapers, *al-Jumhuriyya*, which was controlled by the *Ba'th* and *al-Thawra* controlled by the military. When the military attempted to get hold of *al-Jumhuriyya* as well, it was closed down by Bakr's group,³ to be reopened only after 31 July when the struggle for power was decided in the *Ba'th's* favor. The lesson from this episode was to be crucial for both the *Ba'th* and the media. The media would by no means be permitted to serve as a platform for airing opposing views or criticism of the *Ba'th*. Saddam Husayn who was already in the limelight, understood best of all the power of the media and moved quickly to control them, modeling them on the worst totalitarian examples of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

The Media and Political Mobility

Husayn's tried method for buying the loyalty of journalists and media people was to turn the media into a platform for social and political mobility for those who toed the line as well as the distribution of largesse especially to those at the top. To quote just a few examples: Tariq 'Aziz, who had been in the *Ba'th's* early days editor of *al-Thawra*, became a leading member of the regime; Sa'd

2 See E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, London, 1946, pp. 277-85.

3 *Al-Hayat*, 24 July 1968.

Qasim Hammudi, who started out as editor of *al-Jumhuriyya*, Latif Nusayyif al-Jasim, director general of the radio and television, and Muhammad Sa'id al-Sahhaf also director of the radio and television, all became at one time or another ministers in the *Ba'th* government. The other way was to appoint to the media political figures who were believed to be loyal and could, thus, be counted upon for propagating the *Ba'th* line. The most striking example was Saddam Husayn's elder son, 'Udayy, who in the 1990s became the omnipotent boss of the media, assuming the role of doyen of the Journalist's Union, running a radio station, several newspapers (one of which *al-Zawra'*, was published via the Internet) and all but controlling the rest of the media.⁴

The other side of the coin was punishment for journalists who did not toe the line. Thus, for example in 1992, and probably at 'Udayy's instance the Journalist's Union decided to dismiss all members "who had sold their soul and conscience" to the enemies of Iraq.⁵ In 1999, 'Udayy reportedly engineered the dismissal of 1,000 writers from the General Union of Writers, for not praising the president.⁶ The net result of all this was that the regime could manipulate the media at will, turning it into a most efficient propaganda machine, one of the most important tasks of which was to tarnish the image of the 'other'.

Not all the journalists, though, toed the regime's line all the time. One of those who traveled in the opposite direction was Sa'd al-Bazzaz, who until his dismissal in 1992, held the post of director general of the radio and television and then editor-in-chief of the *al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper. In 1992 Bazzaz published in Amman a book about the Gulf War,⁷ which though, on the whole, reflecting the *Ba'th* point of view, did not lack some criticism. Thus, for example, he attributed the origins of the war to what he termed "the complex of creating an enemy" (*'uqdat sina'at al 'aduww*) from which both the USA and Iraq suffered. The USA, he maintained, needed a new enemy to substitute for the crumbling Soviet Union, while Iraq needed one to substitute for Iran, following the eight-year war with Tehran.⁸ It is in this general context 'of creating enemies' that one should place the *Ba'th* stance towards Israel. But rather than speak of a 'complex', one should speak of a media machine geared to nurturing such 'enemies', or 'negative others'.

4 See for example *al-Zawra'* (online version), 9 December 1999. Others included *Babil*, *Sawt al-Talaba*, *al-Iqtisadi*, *Alwan*, etc.

5 *Alif-Ba'*, 6 May 1992.

6 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 October 1999 (DR).

7 Sa'd al-Bazzaz, *Harb Talid Ukhbra*, Amman, 1992.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-57.

Israel: The Negative Other

The nurturing of 'the negative other' became a constant feature of the *Ba'th*, although this 'other' changed from one period to another. Sometimes it was a domestic one, be it the Kurds or the Shi'is,⁹ at other times it was an outside one, Iran, Kuwait, the USA or the West in general. Since the authorities sealed Iraq to non-Iraqi media, the picture which the public received of the 'other' was one-dimensional and black and white. Little wonder then, that the *Ba'th* regarded the satellite channels (that could bypass the Iraqi media) to be no less dangerous than a 'fifth column', for they interfered in the internal affairs of countries, 'poisoning the air' there with talks about 'objectivity', 'freedom of expression' and 'democracy'.¹⁰ President Saddam Husayn himself warned of 'the influence of the hostile media' on people, describing it as 'even more profound than bombs and missiles'.¹¹

The *Ba'th* regime 'inaugurated' its advent to power with the hanging in January 1968 of 9 Jews whom it accused of spying for Israel. Not leaving anything to the imagination, the bodies were displayed in Baghdad's Tahrir (liberation) Square, where 150,000 to 500,000 Iraqis were brought to watch and celebrate. As Radio Baghdad had it: "Only moments after the hanging of the first body, Tahrir Square was crowded with thousands of citizens overwhelmed with joy". Announcing the hanging, Muhammad Sa'id al-Sahhaf Director General of radio and television, lauded the move, saying:

the struggling masses who saw today for the first time the hanging corpses of the spies – this great revolutionary action – will frankly face their historic duties without shirking but with the understanding that a new era of fierce opposition to imperialism and imperialist agents – reactionary and Zionist spies – has begun with this immortal dawn in our people's immortal life.¹²

This move which was unprecedented in Iraq and the rest of the Arab world,

9 The Shi'i writer Hasan al-'Alawi, who had fled the country in 1981, later published a book describing the treatment of 'the other' – the Shi'is – in Iraq. Hasan al-'Alawi, *Al-Shi'a wa-al Dawla al-Qawmiyya fi al-'Iraq*, 1914-1990.

10 *Al-'Iraq*, 7 September 1999.

11 Iraqi Television, 16 June – SWB, 18 June 1999.

12 R. Baghdad, 27 January – SWB, 29 January 1969. For the number of participants see K. Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, Berkeley, 1998, p. 52.

was to set the tone for the Iraqi stance towards the Jews and Israel for the next thirty years. In fact, the media continued to portray the executions as an avant garde action.¹³ Israel thus held a place of honour among all the 'others', in that it remained for more than thirty years a fixed object for attack, vilification and demonization by the Iraqi media.

Several factors accounted for this phenomenon. Unlike its predecessors, the *Ba'th* felt ideologically committed to the liberation of Palestine, this being one of its central tenets. And while it did shed other principles of its dogma, such as socialism, it remained loyal, or at least vocally, to this. Thus, *Ba'thi* Iraq remained one of the last bastions of the anti-Arab-Israeli peace process. The fact that the same regime remained in power for such a long period made the complete dismantling of all ideological tenets even more difficult. Similarly, the subjugation of the media to the totalitarian *Ba'th* regime ensured total adherence to this line.

What were the images and stereotypes propagated by the media? From where did they draw their inspiration? And what practical political purposes did they serve? As it was depicted in the Iraqi media, Israel is the symbol of evil, past, present and future. Accordingly it has been the main enemy of Iraq and the entire Arab nation. The conflict with Israel was not like any other – it was much deeper and more comprehensive. It was a clash between two civilizations that cannot coexist. Israel was termed an 'historical error' which posed a severe threat to Arab civilization.¹⁴ The clash with it was therefore existential, or, as one paper put it, a question of 'to be or not to be'.¹⁵

The denial of Israel's legitimacy or its right to exist found its expression in various forms in the press. One was the use of quotation marks around the word Israel, which was implemented shortly after the *Ba'th*'s advent to power.¹⁶ Israel was called, 'a deviant entity' (*kiyan shadhdh*) an 'implant entity' (*kiyan mazru'*) or the 'monstrous Israeli entity' (*kiyan Isra'ili maskh*).¹⁷ Although the term 'entity' is apparently a neutral one, in Arabic as in English, connoting status or existence, when it is used as a modifier for Israel it conveys the pe-

13 *Al-Siyasiyya*, 14 September 1999.

14 *Alif-Ba'*, 22 May 1996; *Al-Thawra*, 18 October 1996.

15 *Al-Thawra*, 21 May 1987.

16 See for example, *Al-Thawra*, 18 October 1996.

17 E.g., *Al-Thawra*, 5 January 1969, 1 November 1978, 17 October 1990; *Al-Jumburiyya*, 18 October 1978.

porative connotation of something illegitimate or short-lived. When, the word 'state' (*dawla*) is used for Israel, it is given a pejorative connotation, such as 'the state of war' (*dawlat harb*); 'gangster state' or 'rapist state' (*dawla ghasiba*). The propagation of fear and hatred toward Israel entailed the use of other expressions or terms such as 'monstrous state', 'cancerous growth', 'dragon', 'poisonous snake', 'Zionist virus', and the most popular of all 'octopus'.

The delegitimization of Israel went hand in hand with the delegitimization of Zionism – the Jewish national movement. Zionism was equated with the Arabs' most deadly enemy – 'imperialism'. In fact there was a symbiosis between the two as it was expressed in a new term forged for it 'zio-imperialism' (*Sahyu-imbiryalliyya*). According to the Iraqi media there developed a deep interdependence between the two. It was imperialism which had conceived the creation of 'an artificial Zionist state' back in the nineteenth century in the region. This state was to serve as a bridgehead or a 'forward guard post' for promoting imperialist interests in the Arab lands, such as dominating the Arab region and keeping it backward and divided while at the same time exploiting its riches and its strategic position. For its part, Zionism which was itself an imperialist movement, and depended for its very existence on imperialism, sought to foster an entity in Palestine which would serve imperialism's aims in the region.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Iraqi media blamed 'International Zionism' for concocting a series of plots against Iraq and the entire Arab nation, including igniting the Iraqi-Iranian war and imposing sanctions on Iraq following Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait.¹⁹

Anti-Semitism As a Mobilizing Tool

The hanging of the Jews in the early days of the *Ba'th* set the stage for anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish propaganda which grew with Iraq's hardships in the wars and the post-Kuwait invasion sanctions. The media lent itself enthusiastically to the task. Thus, shortly after the end of the Gulf War, *al-Jumhuriyya* found it appropriate to publish the 'contents' of 'the Protocols of the Elders of Zion' (a well-known forgery written by the Czarist secret police). Others

18 E.g., *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 14 May 1979; *Al-Thawra*, 17 April 1973; *Al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya*, 1 March 1983, pp.51-2; *Al-Qadisiyya*, 13 June 1990.

19 *Al-Qadisiyya*, 5 June 1996.

followed suit. One spoke of the 'Torah', 'Talmud' and the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion's' directives to kill foreigners (*ajanib*) especially Arabs and Muslims because they were not considered human beings but animals.²⁰ Another discussed the connection between this 'document' and the old British imperialist designs and the new American scheme for a 'New World Order'.²¹ A much older 'collusion', so the Iraqi media maintained, was between the Jews and the Persians which went back to the Babylonian era and was reactivated in modern times especially during the Iraqi-Iranian war. And while the Zionist-Imperialist alliance was based on common interests, that between the Jews and Persians, it was argued, was based on shared hatred of the Arabs in general, and Iraq in particular.²² Sometimes Jews acted 'single-handedly'. Thus Israel was accused of having planned to invade Kuwait since 1974, with an eye to turning Arab oil into 'Jewish oil'.²³ Another facet of anti-Jewish propaganda was the depiction of the Holocaust as a 'Zionist fiction'.²⁴

While anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propaganda was mostly propagated in verbal form, there were other means, more popular and easier to grasp for the common people, namely cartoons, caricatures and posters. The villain in the story has invariably been the Jew with his symbol, 'the star of David', figuring in endless numbers of caricatures. The Jew became a 'companion of evil' for all of Iraq's and the Arab world's enemies, be they Iran, Kuwait, the USA or any other. To give just a few examples: caricatures published on the eve of the invasion of Kuwait showed the USA helping Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to burn the Middle East. In another, the Jew figured as a crocodile swallowing British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, while a third showed the three symbols of evil, the US, Britain and the little Jew walking hand-in-hand in the dark. As against these, the most ominous involved three figures: a Palestinian holding a stone over his head, the Iraqi, a nuclear weapon over his head, and in the middle a Jewish soldier with an inscription over his head – 'binary chemical weapons'. Reference to the chemical weapon was made in another caricature which showed an 'Iraqi-made pesticide' killing a Jewish insect.²⁵ Others had to do with Jews and the Palestinians. One of these

20 *Al-'Iraq*, 5 January 1999.

21 *Al-Jumburiyya*, 18 November 1991; *Al-Qadisiyya*, 5 February 1992; *Babil*, 30 May 1992.

22 *Al-Jumburiyya*, 18 May 1983, 12 November 1987.

23 *Alif-Ba'* 17 January 1996.

24 *Alif-Ba'* 14 June 1995.

25 *Al-Qadisiyya*, 10 April 1990.

showed a Palestinian demanding his rights from the American secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who ignores him altogether, and fondles instead a *Sturmer*-like Jew.²⁶ Another showed an Israeli soldier sawing off the hands and feet of a Palestinian woman while the Arabs were turning their back to the scene.²⁷

Posters were another means for propagating the *Ba'th* message. Two examples will suffice to give the general tone. One showed three 'snakes' – Iran, Syria and Israel – colluding against Iraq.²⁸ In another one, Saddam Husayn figured standing near a tank while his hand saluted Salah-al-Din al-Ayyubi who had reconquered Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the year 1187. The inscription underneath the picture read: "The liberation of Palestine is a mission from Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi to the victorious, by the help of God (*al-muntasir bi-allah*), Saddam Husayn".²⁹

The media's main source of inspiration was President Husayn himself who dictated the radical anti-Israeli line, which, with one or two exceptions, was followed consistently throughout his political career. The main points which he repeated in different variations and on various occasions were that Israel had no right to exist; that Palestine should be liberated by force, with Iraq playing a leading role; that the peace process with Israel was an act of treason against the Arab nation and that since peace was struck between governments and not peoples its chances of survival were slim.

Even before he became president, Husayn played a key role in ostracizing Sadat's Egypt because of its peace with Israel. Simultaneously he publicized his views that Israel was the 'enemy of the Arab nation', 'that it was not a nation with a humanitarian mission' and 'that its prosperity should be impeded'.³⁰ Speaking just a few months after his advent to power on the possibility of a nuclear war he stated: "we must also be determined to create all the requisites for triumph over the enemy in order to restore our holy land in Palestine".³¹ The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in June 1981 came

26 *Al-Thawra*, 30 September 1998.

27 *Al-Itihad*, 16 February 1999.

28 S. al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, Lonon, 1991, p. 13.

29 *Al-'Iraq*, 1 October 1999.

30 R. Baghdad, 30 January – DR, 31 January 1979.

31 Iraqi News Agency (INA), 25 October – SWB, 27 October 1979.

as a great surprise to him yet he recuperated quickly, promising to turn the lessons of the attack into programmes for enhancing Iraqi greatness.

In the meantime, political expediency made him somewhat tone down his anti-Israeli rhetoric. Preparing the ground for the resumption of relations with the USA (cut in 1967), Husayn stated that 'Israelis', (but not the State of Israel) were entitled 'to conditions of security' (*wad` min al-aman*).³² But such tactical moderation remained a rare phenomenon. Indeed, no sooner had relations with the USA resumed, then he went back to his earlier stance, adding anti-Semitic undertones. Thus on one occasion of reversals in the war with Iran, he declared: "our main enemy is the Arab nation's enemy – Zionism".³³ As time went by his anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist rhetoric escalated, the most famous cases being his threat to burn half of Israel³⁴ and his call for *Jihad* against it, on the very eve of the occupation of Kuwait. Husayn has ever since declared his stance against the peace process and repeated, year in year out, his call for the liberation of Palestine. One of these was in the July 1999 speech in which he declared that Palestine was Arab 'and Zionism must leave it'.³⁵

His son 'Uday, the doyen of Iraqi journalists, cited above, began early on to take the lead in anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric. Thus, he published in his paper *Babil* a series of twelve articles in which he challenged Israel's right to exist, finding 'support' for his ideas in the *Qur'an* itself. For Arabs, he maintained, this was a question of life and death: "In order for us Arabs to survive, the Jews must die and if the Jews live, the Arabs will die".³⁶ Later he was quoted as saying that Saddam Husayn was preparing one generation of Iraqis after another for the task of burning Israel, as throwing it into the sea would not suffice 'because the Jews that can swim may survive'.³⁷ Explaining on another occasion the reason for awarding his newspaper the name *Babil*, he said: "Babil represents the inferiority complex of the Jews, because

32 *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, 7 January 1983. This line fits in with the PLO line, prevalent at the time, that Oriental Jews could remain in Palestine.

33 *Al-Thawra*, 11 February 1986.

34 *Al-Thawra*, 3 April 1990.

35 *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 18 July 1999.

36 *Babil* 12, 18, 20, 26, 27 April 1993.

37 Voice of Iraqi People, 3 June – DR, 5 June 1995.

it was built on their dead bodies”.³⁸ ‘Udayy’s strong anti-Semitic tendencies were also evidenced by the fact that newspapers owned by him abounded with anti-Semitic articles and caricatures, even more so than the old ‘official’ ones, such as *al-Thawra* or *al-Jumhuriyya*.³⁹

Having discussed the main trends in the Iraqi media, we should set them once again in a more general context. It will be remembered that anti-Israeli rhetoric has until quite recently characterized the media in most of the Arab countries. The Iraqi media, however, excelled at being consistently and unequivocally hard-line. And while in certain countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco the stance was not monolithic (with the official line being more moderate than that of the opposition), in Iraq, where officially-sanctioned opposition did not exist, the stance on Israel has been more or less monolithic. Similarly, while in many Arab countries anti-Israeli rhetoric has been attenuated significantly by the peace process, in Iraq, which regarded itself as the last bastion against the process, no such development took place. Moreover, there was an accumulation of factors which contributed to the escalation. It is outside the scope of this study to analyze Iraq’s role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its ‘bilateral relations’ with Israel, but one should mention briefly the following points:⁴⁰ Mutual hostility between Iraq and Israel deepened significantly under the *Ba`th* because of the latter’s harsh treatment of the Jews; Baghdad’s participation in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the launching of missiles against Israel in 1991. Israel also contributed its share by its support for the Kurds against the *Ba`th* (until 1975); its bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981; and the covert arm sales to Iran in the mid-1980s, in the course of the Iraqi-Iranian war.

Nevertheless, it must be said that in the course of this long period, the dark picture was ‘coloured’ by occasional reports of ‘contacts’ between Iraqi and Israeli officials abroad, but these reports were either ignored or vehemently denied by the Iraqi media. Nor was there any echo in these media of more moderate statements of Iraqi officials abroad. Indeed, the media was mobilized for one major task: using Israel, Jews and Zionism as a propaganda tool

38 *Babil*, 31 March 1998 (DR).

39 See e.g., *Al-Musawwar al-Arabi*, 20, 27 February 1999; *al-Ittihad*, 16 February 1999; *Babil*, 3, 28, 30 January, 1, 8, 11, 20, 23 February 1999.

40 For a discussion, see O. Bengio, ‘Crossing the Rubicon: Iraq and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process’, *MERIA*, vol. 2, March 1998, pp. 36-46.

for various domestic and foreign purposes.

These included letting off steam and diverting public pressure away from the regime to an outside enemy; mobilizing domestic, Arab and Islamic support for the Iraqi cause by portraying Israel as the greatest danger to them all as well as by demonstrating 'ideological purity' on the Palestinian issue; putting the responsibility for Iraq's predicament on an outside element and justifying the regime's blunders; and finally using Israel as a tactical diversion for the regime's strategies. Thus, for example both on the eve of the Iraqi-Iranian war and the eve of the occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Husayn and the media escalated their anti-Israeli propaganda. On the other hand, when Iraq was bogged down in the eight year war with Iran and in the 'sanctions' war' with the allies, it put all the blame for Iraq's misfortunes on Israel. In short, Israel, Jews and Zionism became the most popular scapegoat for all of Iraq's mis-haps.

Speaking on Iraqi experimentation with democratization in 1989, 'Uday Husayn harshly attacked those journalists who at the time 'had jumped on democracy like scorpions'.⁴¹ Indeed, democracy and free expression, haunted the *Ba'th* ever since its advent to power, and it did its best to smother them. Postwar pressures, however, did move the regime to initiate some opening up of the system in 1989 and 1992, although these experiments were short-lived. Nevertheless, they indicated that despite years of strict control, those in the media preserved some vitality and the natural instincts of genuine journalists, and that if only allowed some freedom of expression they would be likely to reassume their role in society. Thus, some of them took up the challenge and began criticizing and questioning various phenomena of public life. One of them even justified the call for democratization by quoting the Talmudic saying (though not mentioning the source itself): "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, and if I am only for myself, who am I, and if not now, then when?".⁴²

Clearly in Iraq democracy and free expression were a *sine qua non* for a change of stance toward the 'other' in general and Israel in particular. Elsewhere in the Arab world, Arab intellectuals have already reached the conclu-

41 *Babil*, 21 January 1992.

42 *Al-'Iraq*, 6 March 1989.

sion that democracy and peace with the 'other' – the Israeli – were closely related. Accordingly, they initiated a courageous debate about the need to encourage this 'democratic peace'.⁴³

Until the second Gulf War the political system in Iraq, and with it the media and the intellectuals, remained as far removed from democratization and the peace process as ever. In such circumstances, it seemed that two developments could have ushered the way for change: that the Iraqi media revolt against their fixed role and start speaking their mind or that a future regime would itself allow a more pluralistic, liberalized and democratized system. This is indeed what has happened with the collapse of the Ba`th and the sea changes that occurred in Iraq's domestic and foreign policies, including its stance towards Israel.

The Change of Stance in Post-Saddam Iraq

The change of stance toward Israel in post-Saddam Iraq had to do with various tactical and strategic factors. Any analysis of these factors must begin with Baghdad's need to devote all of its energies to domestic issues; the atomization of the political system which allowed for different foci of power to develop different agendas; Baghdad's ongoing inability to develop independent and clear cut foreign policy lines of its own; and Iraq's frustration with many Arab Sunni regimes, which chose to ostracize Iraq in the years after Saddam's fall.

The deeper causes of the change in Iraq's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict are directly related to the American presence in Iraq and its moderating influence on its present partners there; the urge of the present government in Baghdad to rid itself of Ba`thi influence, including the Ba`th's ideological baggage; the more liberal, pluralistic and open society and polity which has been developing in Iraq in spite of opposite currents; and most importantly the strengthening of the Kurds in their autonomous region and, even more importantly, in Baghdad.

⁴³ See for example the Egyptian Amin al-Mahdi, *Azmat al-Dimuqratiyya wal-Salam*, Cairo 1999; and the Kuwaiti of Palestinian origin, Shafiq Nadhim al-Ghabra, *Isra'il wal-'Arab: min Sira' al-Qadaya ila Salam al-Masalib*, Beirut, 1997.

On the political level, a certain change in atmosphere was noticeable, through some small individual gestures and in direct and indirect moves by the Iraqi government. Thus for example when Iyad `Allawi was the prime minister in 2004 he shook hands with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom when their paths crossed at the UN.⁴⁴ Allawi later explained that he acted out of politeness, but if we remember Syrian President Bashshar al-Asad's refusal to shake hands with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, we can say that the handshake was not without its significance. Another famous handshake was that between Talabani and Israeli defense minister Ehud Baraq, in July 2008 at a conference in Greece. Subsequently, Talabani attempted to downplay the gesture, describing it as a 'civilised social act' without special significance. Maintaining that he was acting as leader of his Kurdish party and deputy president of the Socialist International, not as Iraq's president, he emphasized: "It does not mean any obligations for the state of Iraq".⁴⁵ Still, one could have never expected such a gesture from President Saddam Husayn. Moreover, Talabani's explanation indirectly justified relations between the Kurds and Israel.

The visits to Israel in September 2004 and September 2008 of the head of the Democratic Party of the Iraqi Nation and member of the Iraqi parliament Mithal al-Alusi is another case in point. It was true that upon his return from Israel, the Iraqi parliament voted to remove his parliamentary immunity and the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs even sought to prosecute him for 'visiting a country that Iraq considers an enemy,' a crime which could carry the death penalty.⁴⁶ However, Alusi appealed to the Supreme Federal Court, which overturned the lifting of his immunity, ruling that it was unconstitutional as no crime had been committed.⁴⁷ Thus, more than the visit itself, the ruling of the parliament is of the utmost importance as it establishes a precedent which could be followed by other Iraqi politicians.

On another level, Iraq's reaction to the Israeli war in Lebanon in 2006 and the war in Gaza in early 2009 was not as harsh and as vitriolic as those of

44 Ynet, 21 September 2004 (<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-2979898,00.html>) last accessed 29 June 2009.

45 BBC News, 1 July 2008 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7483844.stm) last accessed 29 June 2009.

46 *Jerusalem Post*, 22 September 2008.

47 Ynet, 24 November 2008 (<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3627884,00.html>) last accessed 29 June 2009.

other radical Arab states or even non-Arab Turkey. It is true that the Parliament condemned the wars, as did Ayatollah `Ali al-Sistani.⁴⁸ However, there was no serious attempt to mobilize the wars for domestic purposes. Another indication of the more moderate Iraqi stance was that it did not participate in the Arab Summit in Qatar at the end of March 2009 which convened to discuss Israel's war in Gaza. As such, Baghdad aligned itself with the more moderate Sunni Arab countries, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which did not participate either.

Legally speaking, Israel and Iraq are in a state of war. In fact, Iraq is the only Arab country which had participated in the 1948 war but did not sign a cease fire agreement with Israel. Hence any contacts or deals between the citizens of the two countries might be considered as an act of treason. To overcome this difficulty certain moves were taken on both sides to help facilitate such contacts.

On the Israeli side, decrees were issued on a yearly basis, starting from 2003, allowing Israelis to do business with Iraqis.⁴⁹ As far as is known, no such act was taken by Iraq. Nevertheless after the 2003 war, Israel benefited indirectly from certain agreements which were signed with the Americans. Thus, for example, on July 11, 2005, Iraq and the U.S. signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) as a first step toward creating liberalized trade and increasing investment flows between the U.S. and Iraq.⁵⁰ Since many of the transactions between Israel and Iraq were made through the Americans and for the American army, Israeli businessmen stood to benefit from the agreement as well.

On another level, the huge devastation wrought to Iraq by 25 years of intermittent inter-state and civil wars, has shaped Iraq's choice of investors and investments in the country. Thus, the investment law of October 2006 which was adopted in the worst period of the factional strife in Iraq did not mention

48 See *Aswat al-Iraq*, (<http://ar.aswatiraq.info/?p=117953>); Sistani's site, 27 December 2008 (<http://www.sistani.org/local.php?modules=extra&eid=2&sid=136>) last accessed 29 June 2009.

49 *Globes*, 14 December 2008 (<http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=750786>) last accessed 29 June 2009.

50 See the agreement at Office of the United States trade Representative site, 11 July 2005 (http://www.ustr.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/agreements/tifa/asset_upload_file836_13617.pdf) Last accessed 29 June 2009.

any ban on Israel or Israelis.⁵¹ It is true that Iraq did not declare its intention to put an end to the Arab economic boycott on Israel. Still, shortly after the collapse of the Ba`th, Israeli firms began dealing with Iraqis through third parties. In this, Iraq was no different from other Arab states which had benefitted from Israeli goods and technological know-how through third party agents, in spite of the official boycott. In fact, the softening in other Arab countries of the Arab boycott against Israel eased Iraq's ability to take such a move.

To be sure Saddam Husayn's regime itself made use of such deals. What was different now was the intensity of these exchanges, thanks first and foremost to the presence of the Americans and their own need for immediate supplies to their huge army. The Kurdish factor also played an important role.

The Kurdish Positive Role

Israel and the Kurds appear to be natural partners, with their ties going back to the 1950s when the idea of the peripheral alliance and the establishment of contacts with non-Arab minorities was first launched by Israel. In fact, discrete relations were maintained sporadically ever since. Thus, having been Israel's tacit partners, the Kurds could now become an important moderating link between Baghdad and Israel. The fact that since the establishment of the new regime in Baghdad the Kurds have held crucial posts in it has helped this trend. Thus, Khoshyar Zibari has been Iraqi foreign minister, Jalal Talabani the president and Babakir Zibari the chief of staff.

On the economic level, different factors could have made the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) attractive for Israelis. The openness and relative quiet and security which this region enjoyed in comparison with other more turbulent regions was a case in point. The danger of being penetrated by Iranian agents also seemed lower there than in the center and the south of the country. Similarly, the fact that the Kurdish region has opened its doors to companies and enterprises from all over the world could have made it much easier for Israeli entrepreneurs to act there too.

According to non-Israeli sources, Israeli activities in Iraq, especially in the KRG, have been quite widespread. Seymour Hersh, for example, claims that Israeli intelligence and military operatives are now quietly at work in the Kurd-

51 Translation of this law to English see at the International Trade Administration of USA site (http://www.trade.gov/static/iraq_investmentlaw.pdf) Last accessed 29 June 2009.

ish region, providing training for Kurdish commando units and running covert operations inside Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria. He further contends that the Israeli operatives include members of the Mossad, Israel's clandestine foreign-intelligence service, who work undercover in the region as businessmen and, in some cases, do not carry Israeli passports.⁵²

Another source claimed that Israel was behind the creation of a Kurdish central bank in Kurdish northern Iraq, and that there were 'mysterious' Israeli American advisors to Iraqi Kurdish leaders.⁵³ Similarly, Iraqi sources, especially Shi'i ones, have published lists of scores of Israeli companies and enterprises active in Iraq through third party agents.⁵⁴ While one cannot corroborate all these reports, Israeli sources reported on some of these matters as well. For example, *Yedi'ot Aharonot* published an exclusive regarding Israel's training of the Peshmergas.⁵⁵

On another level, individual Israelis, most of whom are of Kurdish origin, started frequenting the Kurdish region already in the 1990s. After the 2003 War the circle was enlarged to include other Israelis as well.⁵⁶ Indeed, the affinity between these two non-Arab nations have made visiting Israelis quite welcome there. President Barzani himself called on Israelis of Kurdish origin 'to come and visit Kurdistan'.⁵⁷

Generally speaking, the Kurds are quite eager to develop relations with Israel but they are wary of the reaction of the Arab world in general and Arab Iraqis in particular. The Arab media criticism of the Kurds is encapsulated in such expressions as 'the second Israel' or 'Kurdistan' that is following on the footsteps of 'Yahudistan'.⁵⁸ Kurdish leaders and thinkers issued some apologetic and ambiguous statements in this regard. Thus for example, while denying the existence of any non-official relations with Israel, Nechirvan Barzani the

52 "Al-Qissa al-Haqiqa li-'Ikhtiraq Isra'il al-'Iraq", *al-Muntada*, 16 April 2005.

53 Seymour M Hersh, "Plan B", *New Yorker*, 28 June 2004; Laura Rosen, War and Piece, 21 June 2004 (<http://www.warandpiece.com/blogdirs/000831.html>) last accessed 2 July 2009.

54 Al-Wikala al-Shi'iyya, 20 November 2008 (http://ebaa.net/2008/07/06/ريڤرت/يربَخ_ريڤرت/55_ريڤرت/يڤرَبَخ_ريڤرت/1372.html)

55 *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 2 December 2005.

56 *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 19 July 2009.

57 See NRG Maariv, 24 October 2006 (<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/46/ART1/495/708.html>) last accessed 16 July 2009.

58 Kurdroj website, 3 July 2008 (http://ar.kurdroj.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1197&Itemid=27) last accessed 2 July 2009.

Prime Minister of the KRG asserted that 'Kurdistan harbors no hostile intentions toward Israel and the Jews.'⁵⁹ Repeating these assertions on another occasion, he stressed that the KRG would like to develop relations with all world countries, including Israel.⁶⁰ The Kurdish historian `Abd al-Fattah al-Botani stated while in a visit to Cairo: "we cannot deny the existence of ties between the Kurds and Israel...and even if there were such ties this is a natural development..."⁶¹ Other Kurdish officials keep emphasizing that as Arab countries were doing business with Israel there was no reason why the Kurds would not be allowed to act likewise.

Some Negative Factors

These positive pronouncements and developments should be weighed against more negative ones. Most troubling are the deepening ties between Baghdad and Tehran in post-Saddam Iraq. In fact, Iraq is now moving in the orbit of Iran, which will do its utmost to frustrate any reconciliation between Baghdad and Jerusalem. Understandably, as long as the US is in Iraq, Iran's negative influence can be contained to some extent. Furthermore, American's ability or willingness to challenge Iran on this matter is limited. In fact, there are limits to Washington's own willingness to promote relations between Israel and Iraq. Thus for example, on 5th June, 2008, a non-binding resolution demanding Iraqi recognition of Israel was introduced in the USA House of Representatives, gaining the support of more than 60 Congressmen, including several senior members of the Foreign Relations Committee.⁶² However, considering such a move risky for the Iraqi government, the White House did not press for its adoption and let it die a quiet death. Similarly, the new Obama administration's move to open a dialogue with Iran might also further reinforce Teheran's position in Iraq, thus frustrate any possible overtures by Baghdad towards normalizing relations with Israel.

The dangers emanating from Teheran are likely to increase in the longer term, especially once American troops leave Iraq. Iran is likely to intensify its ideological, political and religious pressure on Iraq, especially on the Shi'is, to join

59 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 June 2006.

60 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 May 2008 .

61 *Al-Watan al-'Arabi*, 14 March 2007.

62 *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 12 June 2008.

in what the Bush Administration called 'the axis of evil'. Worse still, Iran might use Iraq as a launching pad for attacks against Israel. The existing close ties between Tehran and certain Iraqi Shi'i groups are the best vehicle for such a move.

Another negative factor is the urge of the radical Shi'i groups, especially that of Muqtada al-Sadr, to bandwagon with Hizbullah of Lebanon. Similarly, the fear of acting in opposition to a supposed consensus in Iraq and the Arab world regarding ties with Israel is still an important consideration for Iraqi policy makers.

As for the Kurds, notwithstanding the fact that the leadership of most of the parties has had certain ties with Israel over the years, and that there exists certain affinities between the two non-Arab nations, there remained strong reservations among the Kurdish rank and file towards Israel. This is due to the lingering historical perceptions of the Jew as being inferior even to the Christian, let alone the Muslim, and more importantly Israel's image as a country which betrayed the Kurds in 1975 and has been supporting Turkey against the PKK. The rise of Islamic trends in the Kurdish society especially among the youth, including university students could be another stumbling block for such ties.

Conclusion

A comparison between the Ba'thi perception of Israel with that of post-Saddam Iraq shows great discrepancy. While under Saddam Israel was seen and portrayed as the source of all evil for Iraq and the Arab nation as a whole, in the new Iraq Israel receded to the background. The dismantling of the Ba'thi authoritarian system and with it its huge propaganda machine assisted greatly in attenuating the anti-Israeli rhetoric which had dominated the Ba'thi media for thirty five years. As for post-Saddam Iraq, it had to divert its attention and energies to the renewed process of state-building and nation-building; to combating terror and anarchy at home; and to addressing real challenges emanating from its six neighboring states, especially the two major regional powers Turkey and Iran. In this sense, Israel was not perceived as posing an immediate danger, hence the relative moderation in the discourse towards it. Similarly the new regime's dependence on the United States for its very

survival as well as the advent to power in Baghdad of the Ba`th's staunchest enemies, namely the Shi`is and the Kurds, have contributed to different outlook toward Israel.

Accordingly, the 2003 War and the changing strategic map of the region have opened new potential vistas for Israel in Iraq. However, these are still fraught with dangers, risks and no small amount of difficulties and complexities. The most promising venue for such ties is the KRG but this too is controversial because it might jeopardize relations with Turkey and because in the past such ties did not fulfill all Israeli expectations. Some Israelis even warn of the Kurds' 'shifting sands' because of their ties with Iran, for example, which might endanger Israeli investments and other activities there.

On the whole the situation in Iraq is still in a great flux, but one thing is quite clear. Post Saddam Iraq has distanced itself from Baghdad's traditional radicalism, adopting a more pragmatic posture. However, it remains to be seen if Babylon has indeed shed its historical and more modern enmity toward Zion or that it is a mere tactical move.

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