

Baghdad slams Erbil conference's call for 'normalization' with Israel



More than 300 Iraqis, including Sunni tribal figures, attend conference of peace and reclamation in Erbil on 24 September. (Photo by SAFIN HAMED/AFP via Getty Images)

The Iraqi government has strongly condemned a controversial meeting held in Erbil that called for the normalization of ties between Iraq and Israel, while the Kurdish authorities sought to distance themselves from it and launched an investigation into the conference.

The Iraqi judiciary also issued arrest warrants for several people who had either helped organize the event or attended it.

Dozens of Iraqi Sunni tribal leaders took part in the closed-door conference in Erbil's five-star Divan hotel on 24 September which was organized by the New York-based Center for Peace Communications, which advocates for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Israeli PM welcomed the conference in a tweet.

Neither Iraq nor the Kurdistan Region has diplomatic relations with Israel. The Iraqi Penal Code metes out strong penalties up to life imprisonment to anyone "promoting Zionist principles".

For decades there have been claims that relations exist between Israel and Iraqi Kurds,

particularly the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). More recently, there have been claims that Kurdish oil has been sold to Israeli buyers.

The KRG has consistently denied having links with Israel, which is in line with the wider Iraqi policy that considers Israel an enemy state.

Back in 2006, the BBC's flagship Newsnight programme claimed that Israeli experts train Iraqi Kurdistan's peshmerga

Conference

Sunni tribal leaders from well-known tribes such as Al-Dulaimi, Al-Jubur, al-Jumaili and Al-Hadidi from the provinces of Anbar, Salahaadin and Ninawa took part in the conference entitled "Peace and Reclamation" (Al-Salam and Al-Istirdad).

The tribal figures have been living in Erbil after they had left their homes when Islamic State (IS) militants attacked their areas.

The tribal leaders called for reconciling relations between the Iraqi Sunni community and Israel "as a way to end the hegemony of Iran and the Shiite in Iraq," *INSIGHT* has learned.

One participant told *INSIGHT* that "Iraqi Jewish people are our brothers who have long lived in Iraq".

Security at the conference was strict and media outlets, except for the French news agency *AFP*, were not allowed in and mobile phones were taken from the participants.

INSIGHT has learned that organizers of the conference thanked KDP leader Massoud Barzani and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities "for providing the security" at the conference.

AFP reported that more than 300 people took part in the event during which a statement was issued saying that "we demand our integration into the Abraham Accords," a US-led joint Middle East peace initiative between Bahrain, Morocco, the UAE, Sudan and Israel.

All four Arab countries have begun normalizing ties with Israel since 2020.

Iraqi cabinet 'categorically rejects' meeting

In a statement published on Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's official website yesterday, 25 September, the Iraqi cabinet expressed its "categorical rejection of illegal meetings held by a number of tribal figures residing in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region, raising the slogan for normalization with Israel".

The government said that these meetings "do not represent the people and residents of the dear Iraqi cities, which these figures are desperately trying to speak on whose behalf".

"Proposing the concept of normalization is constitutionally, legally and politically rejected by the Iraqi state", it said, adding that these "represent only the positions of those who participated [in the meeting]".

The government has "clearly expressed Iraq's consistent historical position in support of the just Palestinian cause, defending the rights of the Palestinian people, chief among them their right to an independent state with Quds Al-Sharif [Jerusalem] as its capital, and rejecting all forms of settlement, aggression and occupation practiced by Israel against the brotherly Palestinian people," the statement concluded.

The Iraqi Presidency also said in a statement on its website yesterday that it “reiterated Iraq’s categorical rejection of the issue of normalization with Israel”.

For his part, Speaker Muhammad Al-Halbusi, a prominent Sunni Arab leader, said on *Twitter* yesterday that the Erbil meeting would not change Iraq’s stance that “rejects the so-called normalization with the Zionist entity”.

He called for “severe legal measures to silence these deviant voices” who have, according to him, tried to distort Iraq’s position towards the Palestinian question.

Influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr called on the KRG to prohibit such “terrorist, Zionist meetings”, adding that the Iraqi government should otherwise “criminalize and arrest” all those who had attended the meeting.

Baghdad issues arrest warrants

Today, Iraq’s Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) reported on its website that Baghdad’s Karkh Investigative Court has issued arrest warrants for Wisam Al-Hardan, Mithal Al-Alusi, and Sahar Kareem (an employee at the Culture Ministry) for their role in the “crime” of calling for normalization with Israel.

The warrants were issued based on information submitted by the National Security Advisor’s office, the SJC noted, adding that measures would be taken against the rest of the participants.

Later today, the SJC reported that the Ramadi Investigation Court in Anbar province issued arrest warrants for Wisam Al-Ithawi, Ali Wisam Al-Ithawi, Risan Al-Halbusi, and Abdullah Al-Jughaifi for attending the meeting.

The latter warrants were issued after Anbar Governor Ali Farhan Al-Dulaimi filed a complaint against all those who had participated in the meeting, the SJC added.

However, former MP Mithal Al-Alusi, against whom an arrest warrant was issued, denied attending the meeting.

Shafaq News website cited him as saying today that he had not attended the meeting as he was receiving treatment in a hospital in Germany.

However, Alusi said, the Iraqi constitution “guarantees freedom of opinion, thought, and the media, and all I can say is that these arrest warrants are an Iranian political whim, and do not represent the Iraqi constitution”.

Erbil to probe meeting

The KRG’s Interior Ministry issued a statement on its *Facebook Page* yesterday saying that “the meeting was held and organized without the knowledge or participation of the KRG and this meeting does not at all reflect the KRG’s position.”

It added that the ministry would take “necessary measures” vis-a-vis the organization of the meeting.

The ministry issued a second statement on the same day that appeared to be backpedaling from its earlier claim of not being notified about the meeting. It said that the organizers had first intended to discuss “the concepts of coexistence and implementing the principles of federalism in Iraq.”

However, it added that some of the organizers “diverted” the workshop and used it for their own

political ends.

The ministry would take legal measures against those who “diverted” the course of the workshop and “they will be banished from the Kurdistan Region as they cannot be hosted in the region,” it added.

KR Presidency calls for ‘calm’

The Office of Kurdistan Region’s Presidency also issued a statement saying that it “was not, in any way, informed about that event or the topics discussed in it.”

“The remarks issued by the meeting, on no account, reflect the views, policies or positions of the Kurdistan Region.”

It went on to say that Iraq’s foreign policy positions fall under the authority of the Federal Government according to the Iraqi constitution, and the Kurdistan Region follows Iraq’s foreign policy.

It then called on Iraqi sides to adopt “a calmer tone” towards the issue pending a probe by the KRG’s Interior Ministry.

Israel welcomes conference

Israeli Premier Naftali Bennett said on *Twitter* that “this call for peace with Israel is a call that comes from below and not from above, from the people and not from the government, and the recognition of the historical injustice done to the Jews of Iraq is especially important. The State of Israel is reaching out to you for peace.”