

**AMID SEETHING IRAQI SECTARIANISM—KURDS EYE
INDEPENDENCE, TRUMP HAS “SADDAM NOSTALGIA”, &
EZRA’S TOMB MARKS JEWISH HISTORY**

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[ISIS Attack on Funeral Risks Reigniting Sunni-Shi'ite Bloodbath](#): Arutz Sheva, Feb. 29, 2016— A suicide bomber struck a Shi'ite funeral northeast of Baghdad Monday, killing at least 24 people, including militia commanders, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS) group, officials said.

[2016: The Year Kurdistan Finally Breaks from Iraq?](#): Seth J. Frantzman, *National Interest*, Feb. 26, 2016— In early February the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, called for a referendum on Kurdish independence.

[Trump's Saddam Nostalgia](#): A.J. Caschetta, *Daily Caller*, Feb. 29, 2016 — Remember when Sean Penn went to Iraq in December of 2002 in a bizarre attempt to meet with Saddam Hussein and prevent the inevitable U.S.-led invasion?

[Jewish Shrine Reminds Iraqis of Religious Coexistence](#): Adnan Abu Zeed, *Al-Monitor*, Feb. 14, 2016— Jews reportedly built the tomb of the Prophet Ezra in Iraq in the fifth century, and the site has undergone many changes since.

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[Iraq's Biggest Dam Could Collapse at Any Time, Killing Thousands](#): *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2016

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York Times, Feb. 26, 2016

ISIS ATTACK ON FUNERAL RISKS REIGNING SUNNI-SHI'ITE BLOODBATH

[*Arutz Sheva*](#), Feb. 29, 2016

A suicide bomber struck a Shi'ite funeral northeast of Baghdad Monday, killing at least 24 people, including militia commanders, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS) group, officials said. The blast in Muqdadiah, which also wounded dozens of people, threatens to spark another round of revenge attacks against Sunni Muslims in the area, like those carried out after bombings in January.

The latest attack targeted a funeral for a well-known Shi'ite member of the Beni Tamim, one of the main tribes in Diyala province, where Muqdadiah is located. Sadiq al-Husseini, the head of the Diyala province security committee, said that a commander from Asaib Ahl al-Haq and another from Badr - two powerful Shi'ite militias - were killed in the blast.

Officials in the province appealed for calm in the aftermath of the attack. Muqdadiah residents should "join hands to get out of the current crisis," said Ali al-Tamimi, the head of the Muqdadiah district council. And Diyala Governor Muthanna al-Tamimi said that: "Muqdadiah will not fall into the trap of sectarian strife promoted by some politicians."

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The Islamic State jihadist group claimed the attack in a ~~suicide bombing~~ ~~by~~ a suicide bomber who detonated an explosive belt targeted a gathering of militiamen in Muqdadiyah. It listed the names of some who were allegedly killed.

Suicide bombings are a tactic almost exclusively employed in Iraq by ISIS, a Sunni extremist group that overran swathes of the country in 2014. The Muqdadiyah attack came a day after bombings in a Shi'ite area of northern Baghdad killed at least 39 people and wounded at least 76, the deadliest attacks in the capital so far this year.

ISIS said in an online statement that two of its suicide bombers carried out the Baghdad attacks. ISIS also claimed an attack at a cafe in Muqdadiyah that killed at least 20 people and wounded dozens in January, after which revenge attacks targeted Sunni properties in the area. Human Rights Watch said Shi'ite militiamen abducted and killed civilians in the Muqdadiyah area after the attack, in addition to burning homes and mosques.

Amnesty International also said that militiamen destroyed Sunni mosques, shops and homes following the January attack, and that authorities subsequently "turned a blind eye to this shocking rampage." The death of militia leaders in the Monday bombing increases the odds of another round of revenge attacks in the area.

Iraq turned to Shi'ite militia forces in 2014 to help counter an ISIS onslaught that overran large areas north and west of Baghdad, and they have played a key role in halting the jihadist advance and later pushing them back. But they have also carried out repeated abuses during the conflict that ultimately feed mistrust of the government and are harmful to Baghdad's efforts to reassert and maintain control in recaptured areas. Diyala province was declared "liberated" from ISIS in late January 2015, but ending their open control of populated areas has not brought an end to attacks by the jihadists.

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2016: THE YEAR KURDISTAN FINALLY BREAKS FROM IRAQ?

Seth J. Frantzman

[National Interest](#), Feb. 26, 2016

In early February the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, called for a referendum on Kurdish independence. “The time has come and the conditions are now suitable for the people to make a decision through a referendum on their future,” wrote Masoud Barzani. He cautioned people that it did would not entail the “immediate declaration of statehood” but rather judging the will of the “people of Kurdistan” and to create the political landscape to “implement this will at the appropriate time and circumstances.”

On February 13, the German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier took to Twitter to express “serious concern” about plans for a referendum, after reportedly meeting Barzani at the Munich Security Conference. Serious concern would be diplomatic speak for “no.” Critics abroad see the independence referendum as a mix of political strategy and long time policy. Ibrahim al-Marashi, a California-based history professor, wrote at *Al Jazeera*, “Not only does a call for independence appeal to Kurdish constituents, it serves as a tool to empower the KRG vis-a-vis the central government in Baghdad.” Some have suggested that the referendum is merely cover for the Kurdistan Democratic Party to renew its electoral mandate. Elections scheduled for 2013 and 2015 have been postponed to 2017, an issue that ruffles feathers among the smaller parties in Kurdistan. Currently the KRG is governed by the KDP, the largest party, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

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~~the KRG as a government/~~
If a referendum was merely a cynical ploy, then why is being so hesitant about it? Perhaps because this has happened once before. The last time Kurdistan had a referendum for independence was in 2005, when 1.9 million Kurds voted in Iraqi national and KRG regional elections. 98 percent of those casting ballots said yes to independence. In 2014, Barzani told the BBC he wanted to hold a referendum. The Kurdish parliament was supposed to set a date for the decision. Then Kurdistan was attacked by Islamic State on August 3, 2014.

The war against ISIS has illustrated Kurdistan’s de facto independence better than any referendum could. Cut off from Baghdad, the region functioned independently. It had to control its own economy and develop its own oil resources. Its budget was cut from Baghdad as well due to the war, and the KRG was plunged into financial crises, having to support two hundred thousand Kurdish peshmerga fighters on the frontline against ISIS. Iraq’s Baghdad government condemns any attempt by the KRG to secede. “Any unilateral position from any party without coordination or approval will be against the constitution and illegal,” Saad al-Hadithi, a spokesman for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, told the press in late January.

The KRG has cited referendums in Catalonia, Quebec and Scotland as precedents. But in each of those cases, the national-level democracy accepted the regional referendum and did not actively oppose it, or try to prevent it by force. Neither did foreign governments express opposition to the concept of Scottish independence, or Quebecois independence, for instance. Perhaps a more interesting precedent would be that of Kosovo. In 1991, more than one million Kosovars voted in a referendum for independence from Yugoslavia. Although Serbs boycotted the vote, 99 percent of voters supported independence. After Kosovo had declared independence in 2008, ten years after a U.S.-backed intervention to push Serbian forces from the province, Kosovo Serbs voted in 2012 against accepting Kosovo administration. Unsurprisingly, more than 99 percent of the twenty-six thousand who voted refused to accept Kosovo.

In these instances, the referendums took place against the central government’s

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wishes. There are many other examples of such referendums, such as the one held in Somaliland in 2001, affirming independence from Somalia. While 112 countries recognize Kosovo, it is notable that many do not, despite the support it has received from the U.S., the EU and the international community. Countries that try to go it alone, such as Somaliland, do not face a bright future. Even countries that have won independence through a referendum, such as South Sudan, have found themselves plagued by internal conflict. The Crimea referendum, in which 96 percent were said to have voted to join Russia, was widely seen as discredited by the fact that the Russian army had occupied the peninsula.

This leaves Kurdistan in an unenviable position. Sero Qadir of the Institute for Research and Development in Kurdistan argues that the referendum is a way to show the public’s approval for independence, but he stresses that with or without the referendum, Kurdistan has a right to independence. “In my view the referendum is connected with independence and I believe we could have independence anyway without the referendum,” Qadir explained. “When Barzani speaks about it,” he said, it “is because he wants to bring together the political parties and collect them in one idea. . .” Qadir added that in such an event Barzani would have a stronger hand in dealing with Iraq and the international community. He expects to see independence in 2016: “There are three who support it formally: Israel, Saudi, France. But some smaller countries, we estimate around 40 others, support our independence.”

Dr. Kemal Kirkuki, a former speaker of the KRG parliament, member of the KDP politburo and a peshmerga commander near Kirkuk, wrote in a response to a query about independence that the “self-determination is a natural right” of all nations. “Self-determination is a right that the International Law, the UN charters and covenants, and Human right laws all agree on—it is an international legitimate legal right for people.” He asserts that any independence would not violate the Iraqi constitution, an issue raised by Baghdad, because the constitution states the various components of the country have taken it upon themselves to “decide to unite by choice.” They can therefore separate by choice.

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He also asks why the international community has watched Iraqis defend the world against ISIS but does not demand that Kurdistan receive its full budget from Baghdad. “The international community should be also willing to recognize our natural and legal right to practice self-determination, and conduct our referendum...”

Qadir argues that as time goes on, the KRG’s independence goals will be eroded and undermined by Iran, and by the region’s Sunni-Shia sectarianism. “If we stay in Iraq we lose what we have, we will be a small government in Iraq which has ethnic-sectarian war and we will end up as [a] slave of Iran.” There is a sense that Iran works behind the scenes to encourage other parties in the KRG, such as the Goran (Change) movement, to oppose independence. Publicly, these other parties claim to support independence, but have not spoken out about the need for a referendum with the gusto of the KDP. Contending with pressure from within as well as outside Kurdistan’s borders, Barzani will surely face no end of challenges between today and the referendum.

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TRUMP’S SADDAM NOSTALGIA

A.J. Caschetta

[Daily Caller](#), Feb. 29, 2016

Remember when Sean Penn went to Iraq in December of 2002 in a bizarre attempt to meet with Saddam Hussein and prevent the inevitable U.S.-led invasion? Upon returning home, the activist/actor told Americans they were being lied to and that Iraq was “a happy place. They had flowery meadows and rainbow skies, and rivers made of chocolate, where the children danced and laughed and played with gumdrop smiles.”

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Actually that line comes from the parody of Sean Penn in “Team America: World Police” (2004). But Penn’s actual performance in his greatest role as Saddam’s “useful idiot” (the phrase is Lenin’s) may be his most enduring work. The assertion that the world would be better off if Saddam Hussein still ruled Iraq never went away entirely. But it reemerged with new relevance after Donald Trump lit into Jeb Bush in the February 13th Republican primary debate with accusations from the Code Pink playbook: President Bush knew there were no WMDs in Iraq and lied about it.

After the debate, Trump offered more to CNN: “Iraq used to be no terrorists. He (Hussein) would kill the terrorists immediately, which is like now it’s the Harvard of terrorism...If you look at Iraq from years ago, I’m not saying he was a nice guy, he was a horrible guy, but it was a lot better than it is right now. Right now, Iraq is a training ground for terrorists.” This selective and nostalgic look back at Saddam’s Iraq is a muddy and sentimental vision, almost a form of amnesia in its failure to recall the threats Saddam posed. And it is entirely dependent on faulty logic.

The “hypothesis contrary to fact” fallacy occurs when an argument is made expressing with certainty how a situation would be different were the facts of history different (Trump’s claim that the world would be “100 percent better” with Saddam). This sophistry assumes a priori only the best possible outcomes and ignores all others in a single-minded drive to prove a point.

Saddam nostalgia assumes that if 2003 went differently Saddam would have stopped invading his neighbors, trying to assassinate U.S. presidents, cheating on the UN inspections imposed by the surrender terms of 1991, and massacring Shiites and Kurds (America’s one true ally in Iraq). Saddam murdered Kurds with special aplomb, as the 1988 chemical attack on the village of Halabja demonstrates.

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But it ignores the possibility of a worse regime run by Saddam’s heirs: Qusay, the efficient bureaucrat and Uday, the monster who brought the term “rape room” to the American lexicon. It also ignores Saddam’s funding of Palestinian and international terrorism. One can doubt the Czech Republic’s claim that Mohammad Atta met in Prague with an Iraqi intelligence agent, but no one can refute the existence of Salmon Pak, Saddam’s premier terrorism training center 15 miles south of Baghdad.

Those who deny Saddam’s WMD threat often cite the final report of the Iraqi Survey Group (ISG), but James Lacey showed a decade ago that doing so requires focusing selectively on the report’s assertion that no new stockpiles of WMDs were found while ignoring the assertion that Saddam “was preparing to rapidly reconstitute his WMD program the moment he broke out of sanctions.”

The ISG report itself shows symptoms of Saddam nostalgia, for its assertion that the various nerve and mustard agents found in Iraq post-2003 did not constitute “a secret cache of weapons of mass destruction” overlooks the fact that Saddam successfully hid these prohibited weapons from UN inspectors throughout the post-Gulf War era. Strangely, the absent-WMD narrative endures even after C.J. Chivers’ detailed October 14, 2014 expose in *The New York Times* proved what many Iraq War vets know - there were many chemical weapons found in Iraq - the only dispute is over the vintage of those weapons. And what of the 55,000 metric tons of yellowcake uranium (for which there is only one known use) quietly taken out of Iraq in the summer of 2008?

Finally, Saddam nostalgia ignores the debate over a massive transfer of something from Iraq to Syria that took place days prior to the 2003 invasion. The head of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency stated in 2003 that “satellite imagery showing a heavy flow of traffic from Iraq into Syria, just before the U.S. invasion in March, led him to believe that illicit weapons material ‘unquestionably’ had been moved out of Iraq.” That official was James Clapper, Obama’s Director of National

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Intelligence.

The Bush administration might be faulted for a number of policies concerning Iraq, but the argument that things would be better if Saddam were still around is preposterous. Saddam nostalgia says that Bush was lying when he said “we’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq.” Actually that line comes from an Obama speech, just over four years ago.

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JEWISH SHRINE REMINDS IRAQIS OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE

Adnan Abu Zeed

[Al-Monitor](#), Feb. 14, 2016

Jews reportedly built the tomb of the Prophet Ezra in Iraq in the fifth century, and the site has undergone many changes since. Although the tomb of Jewish Prophet Ezra was turned into an Islamic landmark over the years following the Jewish exodus in the 1950s, clerics there say they are preserving the Jewish character of the shrine. The tomb is in the town of Uzair, which is the Arabic version of the name Ezra, and the shrine has taken on many Islamic aspects. The shrine contains Hebrew scriptures and Jewish symbols, and Quranic verses and Islamic inscriptions. It was turned into an Islamic landmark following the mass exodus of the Jews of Iraq to Israel in the 1950s.

Iraqi journalist and author Abdulhadi Mhoder found in this area a symbolic harmony between Islam and Judaism. He told *Al-Monitor* that this harmony

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“reflects religious tolerance and confessional coexistence. Harmony can also be seen in the tomb of Jewish Prophet Dhul-Kifl [Ezekiel] in Babil, which Muslims still visit.”

An Iraqi Jew who lives in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region stirred controversy a year ago when he told *Al-Araby al-Jadeed* newspaper that “the Shiite endowment’s takeover of the Prophet Ezra’s Tomb and a Jewish shrine beside it is a Muslim persecution of Jews.” *Al-Monitor* asked cleric Ali al-Mhamadawi, one of the supervisors of Ezra’s tomb, about the issue. He denied the statement of the Jewish man, who had spoken to the newspaper on condition of anonymity.

“Muslims are the ones who took care of the place and rebuilt it after it was deserted following the Jewish exodus from the city,” Mhamadawi said. “These accusations are refuted by the fact that Islam considers Ezra a holy prophet, as he was mentioned in the Quran. That is why religious rituals are held in his shrine.” He added, “Jews can visit the shrine; they are always welcome.”

Al-Monitor asked Mhamadawi about stories in the media claiming that the Muslims overseeing the place had deliberately removed all Jewish symbols and replaced them with Islamic verses. Mhamadawi did not answer the question. Instead, he pointed out Jewish symbols and Hebrew writing on the walls of the hall and on a hanging plate. He said, “If we wanted to erase them completely, nobody could have stopped us. But we respect other religions.” He admitted that “some Jewish [symbols], including the Star of David, were removed in the 1980s unintentionally during maintenance operations that the Ministry of Awqaf [Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs] conducted during Saddam Hussein’s era.”

There was no trace of Ezra’s story in the shrine. Instead, Islamic books, written prayers and photos of Shiite figures filled the place. Ezra lived from about 480 to 440 B.C. Some Muslim Iraqis still have good memories about the Jews who lived in Iraq until the 1950s. The ancient conflict was replaced during that time with peace and cooperation. Ali al-Saadi, a teacher who was born in Uzair and is interested in its history, told *Al-Monitor* that the senior citizens of the city still remember the

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names of dozens of their Jewish neighbors. He confirmed that Jews and Muslims lived together in peace and that Jews freely practiced their religious rituals.

Jews lived in Iraq more than 2,500 years ago in Babil, Baghdad and Mosul, among other places. But in the 1940s and 1950s, they were the victims of theft and murder, and they left the country for two reasons. First, they thought that the 1941 Iraqi coup d’etat happened in collusion with the Nazis. Second, Iraqi Jews faced a wave of anger in the wake of the global Jewish emigration to Palestine to build a Jewish state. Most of them were displaced between 1949 and 1950 after Israel was established. Saadi said, “Jews owned houses and green fields that surrounded the shrine. These are still officially registered in their names in the real estate departments, although Jews are no longer present in Uzair. These houses have a special architecture characterized by wooden ornamented columns and oriels [bay windows].”

The shrine of Ezra has withstood centuries in an area inhabited by a deeply religious Shiite majority, unlike a nearby school that was once a synagogue. “Its landmarks have been completely altered,” Saadi said. “It included an underground vault that was demolished in the 1980s during maintenance operations conducted by the Ministry of Awqaf.” At the shrine, there are some eroded Jewish inscriptions exposed to neglect and unfavorable weather conditions. These inscriptions are endangered unless they are given appropriate care. At the top of the main entrance is an ancient corroded silver plate inscribed with Hebrew words.

Islamic symbols completely dominate the place. Umm Hassan, who was visiting, did not know about its Jewish history. But she was certain that it is linked to numerous healing miracles, and many Muslims here share this faith. *Al-Monitor* talked to author and researcher Ali Hasan al-Fawwaz about the shrine. He said, “People visit the place because of their attachment to religious sanctities. Even if Prophet Ezra was a Jew, he is part of the collective conscience of the followers of monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism, which honor the savior.” ...

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On Topic

[Iraq’s Biggest Dam Could Collapse at Any Time, Killing Thousands](#): *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2016—American officials in Baghdad are warning that a critical dam in northern Iraq may collapse, and that more than a million people could be drowned or left homeless if it gives way.

[U.S. Special Operations Forces Capture Islamic State Operative in Iraq](#): *Gordon Lubold, Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 2, 2016—The U.S. military has detained an Islamic State operative after a recent raid in Iraq, U.S. officials said, in an instance of the new U.S. emphasis on ground operations meant to capture extremists and obtain intelligence, instead of killing them from the air.

[Iraqi PM's Plan to Include Shiite Militias in Mosul Offensive Underscores Iranian Influence](#): *John Rossomando, IPT*, Feb. 22, 2016—Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi plans to include the Iranian-backed Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi militias, many of which are trained or controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in any planned offensive to retake Mosul.

[Amid Iraqi Chaos, Moktada al-Sadr, an Old Provocateur, Returns](#): *Tim Arango, New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2016—They came from the slums of this city’s underclass, the alleyways and the simple halls of the seminary in the Shiite holy city of Najaf, and the outer reaches of the rural south.

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