

How did Israel go from Pariah to become God's Chosen Nation in the Balkans?

Olsi Jazexhi looks at the often overlooked history of pro-Palestinian sentiment and pro-Israel lobbying in the Balkans. This history, he argues, is an essential portent for other countries.

The demise of the Soviet Union constituted a turning point in the relations of many Balkan states not only with the West, the United States and NATO but even Israel. The establishment of US hegemony over the Balkans after the fall of communism brought along major political changes in the perception of Israel and the Palestinian issue. If during the era of communism most socialist Balkan states, Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia sided with the Arabs and Palestinians, after the American takeover of Eastern Europe most established relations with Israel,¹ which before the 1990s was considered a tool of Western imperialism against the Arab peoples and states.

Albania was one of the strongest denunciators of Israeli imperialism in the Middle East. Enver Hoxha described Israel as the gendarmierie of US imperialism in the region, armed to the teeth in order to make **bloody wars** against the Arabs. Socialist Albania which refused to have any diplomatic relations with Israel hosted and **supported the Palestinian resistance** during the Cold War. Albanians compared the resistance of the Palestinians against Israel to the Kosovar resistance against Serbian colonialism. Across the border in Yugoslavia, the Kosovar national movement which struggled against Serbian occupation of Kosovo shared the same views regarding Israel. The Palestinian struggle against Israel and their *intifada* inspired the Kosovar leadership in their resistance. The **V sign for victory** that Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo adopted during their protests against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic was taken from Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian resistance.

After the fall of communism, relations between Albania and Israel continued to be tense despite the establishment of formal diplomatic ties on August 19, 1991. Israel had always enjoyed good relations with Yugoslavia and this was not received well by the Albanians of Kosovo and Albania. From 1991 to 1997 Albania established excellent relations with the Islamic World. It joined the Organisation of Islamic Conference and dozens of Islamic organisations, foundations, banks and companies opened their branches in Albania. Thousands of Albanian students went to study in the Islamic world benefiting from generous scholarships from the Muslim

Ummah, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia and Pakistan were some of the major Islamic countries which opened embassies in Tirana and supported Albanians with investments and training. These relations made Israel suspicious towards Albania.

The hostility between Albania and Israel was publicly demonstrated in 1999 when NATO intervened in Kosovo to stop the Serbian military suppression of ethnic Albanians. Israel did not welcome this. Its Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon protested the U.S.-led bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, **declaring that NATO intervention** could help transform an autonomous Kosovo into a springboard for Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Sharon warned the American Jewish leaders that Kosovo could “turn into a part of Greater Albania, and to serve as a base for radical Islamic terrorism—a core of which already exists there—that may spread throughout Europe.”

Relations between Albania and the Islamic world changed after the civil war of 1997 sparked by the failure of pyramid schemes in the country.² The Socialist Party of Albania which came to power in 1997 was dominated by ex-Communist officials and Orthodox Christians. It accused the previous government of Sali Berisha of “Islamizing the country”. Fatos Nano, the chairman of the Socialist Party declared a war against the Islamic legacy of Albania. He declared that his government would reverse the effects of the last 555 years of history – referring to the Ottoman period – and would stomp out without mercy “political, ordinary and Islamic criminality”. After 1998 the Socialist Party and the US Embassy in Tirana “launched a war on the Arabs”. Hundreds of Arabs who were working for Muslim NGOs or running businesses were illegally targeted, killed and expelled from the country. Albanians who had finished their studies in the Islamic world were also targeted. They were depicted as a threat to national security, put under surveillance and some were jailed.³ During the United States’ “War on Terror” **Albania supported** the US’ illegal torture and detention of Muslim prisoners.

The anti-Islamic policies of the Albanian governments were accompanied by the cooling of their relations with the Muslim world and warming with Israel. Countries like Pak-

istan and Malaysia closed their embassies and left the country. These policies were followed by the **government of Sali Berisha** (2005 – 2013) during which time Albania established direct flights with Israel (2008). In 2011 **Berisha declared Iran** a Nazi state and kept the side of Israel at the UN against the Palestinians bidding for statehood. The warming of relations culminated in 2012 when the Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Liberman **announced the opening** of the Israeli Embassy in Tirana. A few months later, in 2013, the government of Sali Berisha turned Albania into one of the major allies of Israel in the Balkans in its war against Iran. It offered asylum to 210 members of the **Iranian terrorist organisation** the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MKO, MEK). The final settlement of MKO ended in 2016 when Edi Rama was Prime Minister and **3000 fighters** settled in the country. During the premiership of Rama, Albania became the only country in Europe to host an ex-terrorist organisation and a paramilitary base on its soil. MKO and its cult-leader Maryam Rajavi used Albania to launch online and probably even direct attacks against Iran and its supporters in the world. On the other hand the leadership of the Sunni Muslim Community of Albania has been given over to the Fetullah Gulen network, an organisation which is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, but in Albania receives full government support.⁴

Another important step that the government of Edi Rama undertook to further its anti-Islamic policies against the Muslim community was the **establishment** of the Counterterrorism Police Directorate in 2014. Its main work has been the mass surveillance, blackmail and persecution of the Muslim community and disruption of its social and political activities. Hundreds of imams and Muslim believers have been blacklisted, sent to police stations and questioned about their ideas about Palestine, Syria and Israel. Many are harassed and not allowed to leave the country. In 2016 the counterterrorism **police arrested** dozens of Albanian and Kosovar Muslim and **detained more** than 200 on orders from the Israeli secret service, Mossad. Israeli security services claimed that they were planning to attack the Israeli football team which had come to play in Albania. To appease Israel the government of Edi Rama

gave total control of the roads from Tirana to the city of Elbasan to the Israeli secret service which landed in Albania to 'protect its football team'. Kosovo arrested 19 of its citizens as well on behalf of Israel. The Albanians and Kosovars, who were arbitrarily arrested, were tortured and beaten with guns. After four years in detention the group which Israel accused of planning a terrorist attack against its football team was declared innocent by Albanian courts - Israel having provided no proof against them. Albanians have been outraged by this Israeli infringement on their country's sovereignty as well as the mass arrests and police violence. They protested the brutal surrender of their government to a foreign country which treated them like Palestinians. Israel was accused of humiliating and dividing the Albanians, while many social forums and fans' groups have denounced the fascist behavior of Israel and Edi Rama's government. Well-known public intellectuals like Fatos Lubonja and Andi Bushati have called the mass arrests on behalf of Israel clear violation of human rights and 'a fascist act'.

However, Israel repeated the same violent behavior with Albanians even in 2018 when its football team returned to play in Albania. Mossad agents and 1500 Albanian police turned the Elbasan Arena stadium into a military zone in order to 'provide safety' for the Israeli players. The schizophrenic behavior of Israel with Albanians was demonstrated even in November 2018 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a planned visit to Albania 'for security reasons' and asked Albania to "take a harder hand against Iranian activity in its territory." In December 2018, Israeli media and security sources who in 2016 accused ISIS and Albanian Muslims of planning an attack against Israeli players in 2016, changed their story. Now they blamed Iran and its ambassador for planning the 2016 attack. Pressured by the Americans and Israel, Albania expelled the Iranian ambassador. After the expulsion, Benjamin Netanyahu thanked Albania. The attack on the Iranian diplomats was accompanied by many open and false flag attacks that the MKO and Israeli media carried out against Iranian cultural institutions in Albania. As a result of this pressure Kosovar and Albanian authorities have forced the cultural NGOs, Sufi orders and Darwish brotherhoods who were religiously and culturally connected to Iran since the Ottoman times to cut all their ties. The Bektashi Muslim Community which over the past three decades was heavily sponsored by Iran, has since 2018 sided with Israel and cut almost all its ties with Tehran. In 2015 Kosovan authorities closed down almost all the NGOs that were cooperating with Iran. In 2018 Albanian counter-terrorism police ordered all the banks to close the accounts of Iranian institutions and individuals in the country. The attack against Iranian institutions culminated in 2020 when Saadi Girl's Private High School was forced to close and leave the country and

Saadi Shirazi Cultural Foundation was told to close all its activities. The director of the foundation Ahmad Hosseini Alasat was declared persona non grata, 'an agent of Iran' and was deported from the country by counter-terrorism police.

Since the opening of the Israeli embassy in Tirana in 2012, the relations of Albania and Kosovo with Israel have reflected the war mentality of the Israeli state with its Arab, Turkish and Iranian neighbors. Albania and Kosovo have become proxy regimes which Israel uses in its war against Islamic political movements and states. Israel has invited dozens of Albanian and Kosovar journalists to Israel as part of a public relations offensive to burnish its image as a country of peace and tolerance. Apart from journalists, Israel has called Albanian ministers and chiefs of counter-terrorism police to Israel where they are instructed and trained to support Israel in its 'war against terrorism'. The International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT) which is hosted by the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in the city of Herzliya in Israel has become one of the most important Israeli institutions to receive, train and host different security and public officials from Albania and Kosovo who are taught how to fight Arab, Islamic and Iranian NGOs in the Balkans. The ICT, which does not reveal its sources of funding, but receives grants from European and possibly American institutions, behaves like an agent of Mossad and the Israeli Defense Forces. Many of its lecturers are ex-IDF commanders or directors of Mossad. Its founding director Boaz Ganor is an Israeli government official on counter-terrorism and lecturer at the High Command Academic Courses of the Israel Defense Forces. The Board of Directors of ICT include Uriel Reichman, a lieutenant of the Israeli Army who fought against Egypt, Shabtai Shavit, former head of Mossad, Aharon Scherf former director of Israel's Foreign Affairs Division and senior official in Israeli prime minister's office, Boaz Ganor and Tal Avner.

In its articles and analysis ICT shows open hostility and Islamophobia against Balkan Muslims, the Arab World and Iran, while it defends the Iranian terrorist cult the Mujahedin-e-Khalq which it calls the "Iranian opposition". Dr. Shaul Shay an ex-IDF colonel and intelligence officer who now serves as Director of Research for the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) of Herzliya is one of the most interesting researchers who writes about the Balkans. Shaul's analyses are quite extraordinary. He writes about Islamic terrorism and the Balkans on themes ranging from ISIS to Iran. His articles and books are published in media throughout the Balkans. Quoting Yellow Press journalism, local conspiracy theories and fake news articles he blames the government of Bosnia for the "Talibanization" of the Balkans, claims that ISIS has plotted to poison the water supply of Prishtina in Kosovo. Also, by relying on fake news produced by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MKO) he claims that

Iran planned a "Nowruz terror plot" in Albania in March 2018, or that it plans to commit terrorist attacks in the Balkans. Dr. Shaul was contacted by the author of this article via e-mail (August 31, 2020) and invited for a debate on his findings about Albania and the Balkans. To date he has not responded to a request for a public conversation about his allegations.

The attitude of Dr. Shaul Shay or other research fellows of the International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT) reflect the general attitude of Israeli officials towards the Balkans. They are obsessed with Islamophobia, war against Islam, Muslims, Palestinians, Arabs, Turks and Iran. Most of their officials who deal with the Balkans including the present Israeli ambassador in Tirana, ex-IDF captain Noah Gal Gendler are ex-military officials. During an interview that ambassador Gendler had with Gazeta Shqiptarja on May 12, 2021 when he was defending the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, he said that his criteria for befriending the Albanians was their support for Israel during the war. The declaration of ambassador Gendler summarises the desperate mentality which drives Israeli policies in the Balkans. Israel wants to recruit allies in its wars against the Palestinians. Since the opening of their embassy in Tirana, Israel has indirectly supported the Iranian MKO and has tried to gain support from the Gulenist run Sunni Muslim Community and the Bektashi Muslim community. Gulenist and Bektashi clerics have been invited to Israel, sent to Jerusalem and Yad Vashem.

To convince the Arabs and Muslims that some Muslims have no problem with Israel, the Israeli government has promoted the myth of Besa which claims that Albanian Muslims saved Jews during the Holocaust. While this might be true of Albania (even though some of the Catholic clergy sided with Hitler and defended his extermination of the Jews), this is not true for Kosovo. Many Kosovars supported Hitler in his war against the Jews. The attempts of Israel to manipulate Albanian Muslims into supporting them against the Arabs has very often backfired. This is what happened on May 12, 2021 when the Bektashi Community organised an iftar with the US and Israeli ambassadors in Tirana. This iftar which critics dubbed the 'iftar of shame' was denounced by 50 Albanian imams in an open letter. They condemned the Mufti of Tirana for taking part in a gathering where the ambassador of Israel, whose regime was killing Muslims and desecrating Masjid al-Aqsa, was taking part. They asked for the resignation of the Mufti and a public apology by the Muslim Community of Albania.

The strategy of winning allies in its war against Arabs and Muslims can be seen even in Israel's relations with Kosovo. If in 1999 Israel stood against the independence of Kosovo since Sharon feared a 'Greater Albania' becoming a centre of radical Islamic terrorism", after the establishment of US hegemony, Israel and the Americans have done all they can to establish a secular anti-

Muslim regime in Prishtina.

In Albania as well as Kosovo, evangelical Christians have played a detrimental role in lobbying for Israel. After the fall of communism they have converted thousands of Albanians into Zionist evangelicals. They have established hundreds of foundations, churches, organisations, radio stations and even a university where they brainwash the Albanians with love for “God’s chosen nation”, Israel. Organisations like Ambasada Ndërkombëtare e Krishterë e Jeruzalemit në Shqipëri - [ICEJ Albania](#), pray for Israel and lobby local politicians to support Israel against the Arabs. US Embassies in Tirana and Prishtina and the US government have been instrumental in forcing the governments of Kosovo and Albania to support Israel against the Palestinians. The promotion of Israel has come in two forms. One through the promotion of evangelicals into Albanian politics. An example is Erion Vëliaj, the mayor of Tirana and his group of evangelical supporters who now are deputies in the parliament and top officials in government. They were promoted and funded by different American institutions, inserted into politics and now have great influence in the ruling Socialist Party of Albania. The other example is in Kosovo, where during the era of the Trump administration top US state officials like the evangelical Richard Grenell, Special Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo, Ambassador Philip Kosnett and Matthew Palmer US Representative for Western Balkans on Kosovo did all they could to convince the Kosovar government to sign a “Normalisation Agreement” with Serbia and make Kosovo the first Muslim majority country [to send its embassy](#) to Jerusalem. In order to appease Israel, the Americans pushed the Kosovar government to [designate Hizbullah](#) as a terrorist organisation and Israeli lobbyists in Prishtina are [requesting that even Hamas](#) be officially designated a terrorist organisation.

The Americans’ pressure on the government of Kosova to move ever closer to Israel can be seen in their behavior towards Prime Minister Albin Kurti, whose party officials have declared in the past their support for the Palestinians. When Kurti won the general elections on February 17, 2021 he responded to a request by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who invited him to open the embassy in Jerusalem, by stating that his government will review the decision for opening the embassy, either in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. The deputy leader of Kurti’s Vetevendosje Party and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Glauk Konjufca said that the decision to open the embassy in Jerusalem was not smart. Richard Grenell, the Evangelical representative of Trump who was the major architect of Kosovo’s Jerusalem embassy affair, went mad. He [attacked Kurti](#) on twitter calling him an ‘anti-American’ who had ‘resorted to terrorism’.

Facing all these open and hidden threats the government of Albin Kurti in Prishtina was forced to keep its embassy in Jerusalem and [even supported Israel](#) in its May 2021

aggression against Gaza. Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his Party, Levizja Per Vetevendosje (Movement for Self-Determination - LVV) have in the past [issued documents condemning](#) the Israeli aggression against Palestinians. During the latest Israeli aggression in Gaza, LVV MP’s organised a [march in support](#) of Palestine and condemned the Israeli aggression in Gaza. However, the Kosovar government which was ousted from power by the Americans in 2020 has learned its lesson. Making a stand against Israel and being pro-Palestine in the Balkans is dangerous. The Americans will come after you and you will be ousted from power and probably end up in jail.

That is why politicians and the governments of Tirana and Prishtina have been siding with Israel over the past years. Albanian authorities are aware of massive [investment scams](#) that many Israelis and some Mossad and [military officials](#) are running in Albania but prefer to turn a blind eye. They believe that the Americans would never tolerate any politician, a prosecutor, a government or a political party in the Balkans that will dare for a moment to criticise what Israel does in the Middle East or what many Israeli officials do in the Balkans. If any politician or public figure thinks otherwise, he will face the consequences and end up like Adriatik Lalla, Albania’s Prosecutor General who made public the illegal requests that the US Ambassador was making to him against the President.

Israel and the Americans are forcing Balkan countries to fear and cooperate with them. While many people and politicians

have sympathy for Palestine, as Niccolo Machiavelli would have put it, “fear triumphs over love.”

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¹ Abadi, Jacob. “*Israel and the Balkan States.*” Middle Eastern Studies, vol. 32, no. 4, 1996, pp. 296–320. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4283829. Accessed 7 June 2021.

² Christopher Jarvis, The Rise and Fall of Albania’s Pyramid Schemes, Finance & Development: A Quarterly Magazine of the IMF, March 2000.

³ Jazexhi, Olsi. 2011. “The Muslim Community of Albania from the Turkish Caliphate to the Turkish Djemat.” Presented at the Conference on Dealing with Change: Islamic Leadership in the Balkans and the Baltic, Sofia. Google Scholar

⁴ Olsi Jazexhi, “Albania” in the Yearbook of Muslims in Europe, Vol 9, eds. Jørgen S. Nielsen, etc. Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2017.

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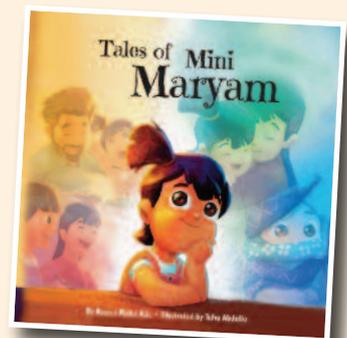
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