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*Israel and the UAE:  
diplomacy and dates in the Balkans*

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The primary objective of the Israel–UAE agreement signed in 2020 was to provide for peace, cooperation and dialogue between the two countries. Still, it shifted some of the world political dynamics, including the Balkans’ near–distant region. For example, Kosovo’s recognition by Israel, and Kosovo’s and Serbia’s future establishment of embassies in Jerusalem reflected both these countries’ intentions to advance shared strategic interests and tackle regional threats wherever they are present, in the Balkans too. This policy brief, which relies mostly on my recent publication on Albania’s Europeanisation<sup>1</sup>, observes how Israel and the UAE advance their strategic interests in this part of the European continent by wielding smart power or exercising what is symbolically called *Medjoul dates diplomacy*. While a lot of research has gone into the Israel–UAE treaty, the interests and activity of the UAE with the countries of the region, analysis on Israel and its role in the Balkans is fragmented in time since the article of Jacob Abadi, *Israel and the Balkan States* in 1996.

### **The Balkans’ security context**

The Balkans’ main security concerns relate to religion, ethnicity and state informality, such as the phenomena of foreign fighters, ethnic institutionalisation, state regulation and informal economy. Added to the Balkans’ EU integration fatigue, these challenges seem to give the impression that the Balkans would instead prefer integrating into the non-Western community. The presence and contribution of Turkey and the Gulf states in the region’s social, institutional and political life exemplifies this. In other words, Eastern and Far Eastern powers develop their activity and foster their interests by “confronting the EU” in its geographic area.

#### *Religion*

Religion is everywhere. There are no human societies without it whether they acknowledge it or not. Long and complicated are the religious accounts for the Balkans, which only in the last decades experienced two crucial factors that marked the region’s modern history, in addition to its religious legacies from the past. The first are the genocides in Bosnia and Kosovo (1991–1999) and the second is the religious radicalisation owing to the surge and return of the foreign fighters. While the

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Balkan wars were characterised by a combination of religious and ethnic factors, as will be discussed below, the foreign fighters' issue is strictly religious. And in opposition to that is the prevalence of religious tolerance in Albania, a real rarity in the region, as the following paragraphs will show.

As per a survey based on WIN/Gallup International polls, religion in the Balkans is a strong identifier of the society for Kosovo (83%), North Macedonia (88%), Romania (77%) and Bosnia (65%) — which consider themselves as religious. Albania is the only country with a relaxed attitude to religion — only 39% of the population identify with the faith and the number of interfaith marriages is greater than those between people of the same religious group (Tanner, 2018; Pengili, 2021). However, even in Albania in recent years the revival of religion is “raising fears of foreign influence” (Varagur, 2019). Through investments or humanitarian assistance, countries like Turkey seem to instrumentalise the Balkans to foster their own foreign policy goals. For example, Lami suggests that Turkey is affected politically by any regional instability (Lami, 2017). This is explained by Turkish foreign policy and security having been historically connected to the former Ottoman Balkan Peninsula for nearly six hundred years. Also, while observing Turkey's behaviour towards any of the states in the region, be it in its role as an aid provider, economic supporter or political ally, it is easy to conclude that Turkey's self-reflection is present in this other part of Europe. For instance, since 1990 Turkey has been investing in North Macedonia economically, politically and culturally. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung report tells that trade between North Macedonia and Turkey in 2016 amounted to €379 million (Stiftung, 2018).

For the Balkan societies, religion is perceived as a uniting agent that transforms the community's values and therefore is an authority to be obeyed. The so-called “Islamic factor”, a dominant phenomenon in the region's life, encompasses precisely all this (Waardenburg, 1997). This political dynamic might be a plausible and coherent argument in explaining the foreign fighters' outflow from the Western Balkans (WB) into the Middle East. Shtuni (2020) reports that “by the end of 2019, about 1.070 nationals of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro travelled to Syria and Iraq. In particular, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have intensively engaged in jihadi militias”. During the same period, 485 nationals from the Balkans returned home (mostly Kosovan and North Macedonian), 260 others have been reported as killed, and those remaining are about 475 individuals (Shtuni, 2020). Attached to the issue of foreign fighters is the supply of weapons to ISIS. In 2019, *Le Iene*, an Italian investigative television programme, enquired into the smuggling of weapons from the Balkans to Syria (*Luigi Pelazzola vince il*

*premio “Caravella del Mediterraneo”: l’Isis dove compra i kalashnikov? | VIDEO*, 2019). The journalists filmed and reported on a smuggler’s day in Sarajevo and his journey to Slavonski Brod in Croatia. Balkan Insight conducted similar investigations in Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia — all three countries involved in arms deals directly with the Iraqi government (such as Serbia) or indirectly with the Syrian rebels. For example, a trade deal between an Albanian arms broker and the Bulgarian company Alguns Ltd. aimed at equipping Syrian rebels under training programmes run by the USA (Cela et al. 2017). Further to that, a *Balkan Insight* report traced the weapons to the central Serbian ammunition producer Sloboda Cacak and their path to Iraq via the Serbian firm Yugoimport-SDPR (Ristic et al, 2019).

However, the Balkan countries seem to fall considerably short of their fair share of institutional responsibility in terms of mitigation measures to address problems relating to the foreign fighters’ rehabilitation. Insufficient resources, a lack of proper infrastructure and of a professional culture ready to cope with and handle this daunting task, represent a long-term challenge for the Western Balkans (Shtuni, 2020). Following the UNSC Resolution 2178 adopted in 2014, the Western Balkan states amended their criminal legislation which now makes joining foreign conflicts a criminal act. Since 2015 Kosovo has new legislation in place to address the issue while the other countries have only added new provisions to their criminal codes (Avdimetaj & Coleman, 2020).

Besides the Muslim foreign fighters, many pro-Russian citizens of the Balkans, mostly from Serbia, have joined pro-Russian guerrilla units in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions (Velebit, 2017). In 2014, during the Crimean conflict, Ukraine’s ambassador to Serbia, Oleksandr Aleksandrovysh, stressed that “according to their information around 300 Serbs are currently fighting in the conflict in Ukraine” (Velebit, 2017). By mid–2019, Serbia had pressed criminal charges against 45 men for fighting on the pro-Russian side. Most of the sentences were reduced or suspended (Murauskaite, 2020).

Lastly, it is worth mentioning Albania and its religious tolerance that makes the country a unique case in the world. Albanians welcome the religious diversity present in the country and strongly reject the supremacy of a given religion, regardless of the size of the religious community. This attitude concerning the religiosity and religious awareness of Albanians shapes their perceptions of religious tolerance in Albania, how it is manifested, the factors that enable it and the threats to it.

While the national identity has been the ideological support behind the Albanian state's secularism since its establishment, present-day Albanian society still values greatly the slogan: the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism (UNDP, 2018). Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have prized these values in times of the abuse of religion, with an obvious consequence for all humanity (Il Messaggero 2014 in Pengili, 2021). Moreover, the so-called *besa* code (given word or pledge of honour) was vividly present in many cases in Albanian history, in the salvation of Jewish residents in Albania during the Nazi occupation. Albania, a European country with a predominantly Muslim population, succeeded where other countries failed. In his 1934 notes, the US ambassador to Albania, Herman Bernstein, wrote that Albania was one of few countries in the world where racist and religious prejudices did not exist (Israeli Sot 2018 and Sinani 2014 in Pengili, 2021). More recently the existence of a strong relationship between Albania and Israel was confirmed through the latter's immediate offer to provide expertise and financial support to the SAR operations and reconstruction of damaged houses after the 2019 earthquake (Eichner 2019 and Lajmi 2019 in Pengili, 2021).

### *Ethnic conflicts*

Ethnic conflicts are a defining constant in the political discourse in the Balkan states' formation and could cause an additional social and existential problem in Eastern Europe. For instance, separatism initiated by ethnic political parties, such as the case of North Macedonia inspired by increasing populism in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, could have consequences for both these geographical areas. While in the Balkans it might lead to the establishment of the emerging states of "Bosnia's Republika Srpska, North Macedonia's Albanian majority and Kosovo's Serb majority" as Prelec (2017) suggests, in the case of Visegrad states, it might reinforce the oppression of small ethnic groups.

In terms of international actors, the US seems to have been preoccupied with other priorities, having gladly let the EU take the lead of political mentorship for the Western Balkans (Serwer, 2017). But the Union, too, is busy with problems at home and obviously with the pandemic, problems which are on top of the migration crisis, the Schengen crisis and Brexit have soured EU attitudes on the enlargement process. It seems that the EU has lost its credibility and that the Balkan societies are exhausted from engaging in reforms that will never be rewarded with green light for membership.

Serwer (2017) thinks that the Balkans' enlargement fatigue is associated with rising tensions amongst separatist groups in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, suggesting different secession scenarios in the region in line with these groups' interests. Another problem with ethnicity, besides uproars and revolts, is its institutionalisation in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Deliso in his book *The coming caliphate in the Balkans* (Deliso, 2007, p. 14; 23) talks about Islam's institutionalisation, especially at lower levels of governance in North Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. At these low levels of power-sharing and decision-making, local governments seem influenced by international actors.

A case in point is the *sui generis* relationship between Albania and Kosovo. In January 2014 Prime Minister Rama travelled with Albanian cabinet members from Tirana to Prizren to meet their Kosovar homologues. A year later, during a similar occasion, Rama delivered the message that national unification could happen through the EU's mediation in 2015 (Pengili, 2021). If not unification, the nationalistic rhetoric might suggest a symbolic annexation of its mother state's smaller state. While Rama offers "a single president for Albania and Kosovo and a single national security policy" and threatens that if the two fail to integrate into the EU, they will unite in a single state, other Western Balkan countries and international partners consider his declarations problematic and capable of destabilising the region (Notizie Geopolitiche 2017 and Janjević, 2018 in Pengili, 2021). As a NATO member, Albania should prioritise positive nationalism to ensure coexistence with its partners in the region; in fact, Kosovo is a partner, an independent republic, and per its constitution, adopted following its proclamation of independence in 2008, "[Kosovo] shall seek no union with any State or part of any State" (Office of the Prime Minister 2008 in Pengili, 2021).

### *State informality*

The Freedomhouse report (2020, p. 5) *Nations in Transit 2020*, which records the reform process in post-communist societies, states that "positive news emerged elsewhere in the Balkans, as Kosovo and North Macedonia earned multiple score improvements." Both countries increased their Democracy Score by 3,75 and 3,18 for 2020, yet they still face challenges with the electoral process, civil society and media freedom (Freedomhouse, 2020). On the contrary, Serbia and Montenegro, in the same report, dropped into the Hybrid Regime category. Obstacles in this field are related to the

Balkan '*coffee culture*' where informality is another name for the state structures' institutional activity. For the Balkan mentality, state structures are neither trustworthy nor capable of tackling societal concerns. In contrast, the private sphere can solve issues faster and with the desired outcomes (often with win-win solutions) (Giordano 2013, 31 in Cveticanin et al., 2019). This mentality entails the region's historical legacies related to the Ottoman invasion, delayed modernisation and the socialist state (Cveticanin, et al., 2019).

Another phenomenon is the informal economy. The increase in hidden employment in the Western Balkans economies has societal and security costs, such as a high crime rate. While Serbia is the only exception, Kosovo has more than 80% of employment relations framed by informality (European Western Balkans, 2020). Causes of informality are high unemployment levels, lack of business regulatory framework, poverty and corruption. Yet the framework of a free-market economy is the basis of the Copenhagen economic criteria for EU membership, which means that at some point the Western Balkans must seriously tackle the informal economy issue (European Western Balkans, 2020).

Moving beyond borders, another challenge to the Balkans is the intermingling of foreign political actors with national institutional structures. In post-conflict societies, the state-building process is often associated with informal relations between interested political and economic players centred around ethnicity. For example, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, these actors actively engaged with "transnational actors for those necessities which could not be resourced locally, either because of a disruption in the local economy or/and international sanctions" (Kostovicova & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2011). As a result, the state's collaboration with those actors whose activity is illegal inescapably leads to weak states and weak democracies, adding to the fatigue resulting from the dimming prospects of becoming full members of a progressive political community such as the European Union.

### **Need for strategic influence: Israel and the UAE**

To start with some general considerations corroborated by the facts illustrated below, Israel and the UAE have quite different strategic necessities in the Balkans. On the one hand, Israel pushes for a classic securitisation policy, i.e., secure the state beyond its borders by not missing any single opportunity to do so by military and intelligence cooperation, political deals, participation in energy



agreements and offering supplies in crisis management operations in the region. On the other hand, the UAE pushes for a hegemonic predominance by leveraging state informality and poor economic performance in the Balkans. Only time will tell whether these strange bedfellows' different strategic goals complement or exploit each other.

The Middle East crisis determined Israel's relations with most countries in the Balkans until 1990. Except for Romania, the rest of the region broke diplomatic ties with Israel (Progonati, 2017). Israel supports bilateral relationships, especially with countries that are either NATO or EU members — “two organisations considered as strategically important for the Middle East stability” (Hart, 2016). Israel is represented in NATO since 2016 and has participated in exercises in the Balkans. The country is an important industry partner in different Alliance projects, e.g., in 2019 Israel won a vital tender worth \$4,5 billion (Schneider, 2018). Israel, next to the good relations with Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro, seems since 2020 (after the Abraham Accords), to follow a path of normalisation with Serbia and Kosovo (Vuksanovic, 2020). Considering the influence of Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the region, Israel “collaborates with Balkan countries at the highest levels of security and intelligence” (Hart, 2016).

*Radical Islam* is another security concern for Israel. The Burgas terrorist attack in 2012 that killed five Israeli tourists showed that terrorist threats do not spare the Balkans. Also, Israel is increasingly involved in preventing Iran and Hezbollah's attempts as a leading potential threat to its interests (Deliso, 2013). Therefore, Israeli embassies in the region increasingly share intelligence information and logistics with local partners (Progonati, 2017). In addition to that, Israel tries to foster military cooperation with Bulgaria, Romania and Greece by urging them to open their air space to Israeli aircraft. In this sense, Israel aspires at least since August 2017 to a fruitful cooperation with Kosovo too, considering the US military presence there under KFOR (Gorin, n.d.).

Besides, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) and Israel Air Force (IAF) have stepped up their mutually beneficial cooperation with some countries in the region (Deliso, 2013). According to official sources in the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence, in 2012, the Bulgarian and Israeli Ministries of Defence have signed two military agreements. The first agreement provides for joint military activities and training, while the second concerns cooperation in the military industry (Novinite, 2012). The same applies to Greece, Israel and Cyprus, which agreed in 2020 to cooperate in the military and defence area, increase employment and bolster security in this tense area of the Mediterranean (AP News, 2020).



Until 2020 the state of Israel did not recognise Kosovo's independence. The Israeli government previously pushed for *Kosovo* to come to peaceful terms with Serbia — reflecting Israel's expectation regarding the conflict with the Palestinians. But, as mentioned above, unexpectedly the Abraham accords made Israel consider its position towards Kosovo and Serbia (Hart, 2016). Israel and Kosovo (a Muslim majority country) established diplomatic ties on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2021. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Israel and Kosovo signed a joint declaration to formalise links. Kosovo committed to opening its embassy in Jerusalem (Al Jazeera, 2021), contrary to the Arab parties to the Abraham accords that will base their diplomatic missions to Israel in Tel Aviv. Serbia also said that it would follow suit and establish its diplomatic mission in Jerusalem. However, "Serbia has failed to honour its pledge" (AlJazeera, 2021).

*Energy needs* are a strategic issue for Israel in the Balkans, a route for energy pipelines. Therefore, negotiations with the Balkan countries on this subject are fundamental for Israel. Considering that the Mediterranean is rich in gas and oil, the government is engaging in establishing a solid partnership with the Balkan countries. North Macedonia is one example of a growing collaboration (Tagliapietra, 2020; Bowlus, 2020) (Energypress.eu, 2021). These emerging relationships with WB countries lead to multilateral aspects of UN voting and aspire to avoid what's happened with the resolution on Jerusalem in 2017: Balkan states were split between the US and the EU. Only Albania had the courage and decency to explain its vote (Buyuk, 2017). If Balkan countries continue to support Israel openly at the UN, soft diplomacy can be a successful and intelligent instrument for Israel to meet its political targets. Putting it in the words of the Israeli ambassador to North Macedonia, Dan Oryan, "of course, we have a particular interest in the Balkans because it is close to Israel, geographically. And many of the Balkan countries are entering the European Union (EU). Also, some are already members of NATO, like Albania ... We want more lands in NATO that support Israel. Every country has *a vote in the UN*, and it is not only the UN, but also its agencies" (Progonati, 2017, p. 211).

*Crisis management* is another area where the Israel Defence Forces were keen to get involved in providing support to Albania (in 2019) and to Croatia (2020) when both countries were severely hit by earthquakes. The IDF engaged in SAR (search and rescue) operations and emergency inspections in evaluating the safety of damaged buildings. Israel also contributed by building new houses for earthquake victims by paying tribute to what Albania did for the Jews during WWII (Eichner 2019

and Lajmi 2019 in Pengili 2021). Albania succeeded where other major European countries failed: it did not deliver any of its Jews to the Nazis (Yad Vashem, 2008; Sinani 2014 in Pengili 2021).

The *United Arab Emirates'* presence in the Balkans relies on two crucial considerations: investments and leverage of the 'Islamic factor'. According to Prelec (2019), "the informal way of conducting business and politics in the Balkans finds correspondence in the Arab practice of the *majlis*"— semi-informal gatherings where authorities sit down with interested citizens and allocate the resources on the basis of favouritism (Prelec, 2019).

Four critical junctures catch the eye when it comes to the *economic relationship* with the Balkans. First, in 2015 the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development awarded the Montenegrin government a loan worth \$50m. The loan was meant to contribute to the expansion of the country's exports and improve the job market in agriculture (Tomovic, 2015). Second, Etihad bought 49% of the Serbian airline industry JAT, to manage the new Air Serbia. Etihad saw Air Serbia as a critical component in Etihad's further growth (Launey, 2013). Unusually, Etihad is not part of any airline alliance such as One World or Star Alliance but buys stakes in other carriers. The investment in Air Serbia was made because the Balkans, as a crossroads of the world, has tremendous potential (Launey, 2013). Third, there is no visa regime between the Emirates and the Western Balkans. In addition to that, the Serbian–Kosovo agreement will enhance the potential for other countries of the Arabian Gulf to enjoy free travel and free movement of people, goods and services with the Western Balkan countries. The Emirates already hosts the largest community of Serbians in the Middle East and is increasingly becoming a preferred destination for many young Albanians too (Mejdini, 2017; Emirates News Agency, 2020). Fourth, the "UAE's influence in Albania has significantly expanded since 2010, indicating an increase from 0,03% to 0,81%."(Rrustemi et al, 2019, p. 38) The indicator of influence is interpreted with the increase or decrease of total of economic, political and security relationships of the UAE through the years in Albania.

The UAE performed several *political and military tasks* in the region, such as humanitarian assistance, KFOR peacekeeping, renovation and re-leasing of existing properties, while at the same time being a strong political supporter of the local Muslim community (Rrustemi et al, 2019). This plethora of roles is very telling of the real influence of the UAE in the Balkans. Between 2003 and 2006, the UAE supported the construction of the international airport in Kukes, Albania, investing \$22M. The

airport, inaugurated in 2010, is named after Shaikh Zayed in recognition of the UAE's contribution (Balkan Investing, 2016). Further to that, in 2008 the UAE recognised Kosovo formally through the country's involvement initially in the humanitarian operations during the conflict (Nowais, 2019) and then its military contribution to the KFOR, Kosovo's international peacekeeping mission (NATO, 2007).

Serbia is another country targeted by the UAE. Experts suggest that there is regional competition between Turkey and the Emirates, given that both countries have invested heavily in Serbia's economy (Rrustemi et al.; Serbia Business, 2019). The Emirates has strengthened defence cooperation with Serbia with a particular focus on the defence industry. Between 2008 and 2011 exports by Serbian defence companies to the UAE increased by \$1,2 billion. In 2014, the UAE and Serbia signed a defence cooperation agreement on the acquisition of defence technologies (Malek 2015 in Rrustemi et al., 2019). One such example is the Advanced Light Attack System's design and construction, a land-based anti-ship missile for the Emirates (Bartlett, et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics between each of these two Middle Eastern powers and the Balkan states are very particular and seem like a theme and variations. While Israel constructs its strategy in the Balkans by securitisation and making friends quietly, the UAE invests in its post-oil hegemonic future by leveraging its economic performance. As this paper showed, the Western Balkan countries benefitted from the relationship with both Israel and UAE. They will continue to do so because neither of these countries sees the other as a competitor. These strange bedfellows made by politics are expected to build bridges and not walls. The *Medjool dates diplomacy* of Israel and UAE conveys the message that fruits belong to all and land belongs to no one.

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