



Israel and the Balkans: An Analysis of Current Israeli Relations with the Former Yugoslavia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, Israel has established diplomatic relations with each of the now seven countries that once comprised it. While Marshal Josip Broz (Tito) was party to a complicated relationship with Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization until his death in 1980, since their independence, each of the seven states has pursued and been subject to dramatically different ties with the Jewish state. This article observes each of the seven bilateral relationships as concise case studies of how predominantly regional actors interact with counterparts in other areas of the world and how adaptations to both internal and predominantly external factors shape these relationships.

The Yugoslav Wars, which engulfed the Balkans in the 1990s and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, drastically altered the political climate of the region. Since then, each of the seven states once bound by that federation has pursued its own foreign policy objectives in its own independent style. Israeli diplomacy has thus found dramatic variance in the partnership opportunities left in the wake of Yugoslavia's violent disintegration. These relationships are worth studying as windows into how these states and Israel have navigated each other diplomatically and as case studies into how primarily regional actors interact with states in their peripheral interest.

Slovenia

Firmly inclined toward the most liberal bloc within the European Union, Slovenia has frequently followed the EU's lead in bucking Jerusalem. In 2018, the northernmost ex-Yugoslav republic initially moved toward publicly recognizing a Palestinian state, a move that would have made it only the second EU state to do so after Sweden in 2014, but it ultimately stopped short of doing so. In June of this year, the Slovenian parliament and government formally granted recognition, following in the footsteps of Spain, Ireland, and Norway, which had done so shortly beforehand. This followed its vote to admit the Palestinian Authority to the UN with full statehood status and its advisory opinion in an ICJ case alleging Israeli violation of Palestinian self-determination rights.

In sum, Slovenia's policies fit neatly into its race from the Balkan states toward the forefront of the EU's left-leaning bloc, which often asserts itself against Israel. Nonetheless, Jerusalem has found a friend in the right-wing Janez Janša and his party, including a Slovenian abstention on the 2012 vote to grant the PA non-voting observer status at the UN and a 2024 parliament walkout against the recognition vote. Economically speaking, Janša has previously worked with Israeli governments to improve startup and cybersecurity cooperation, while investments and trade remained relatively unnoteworthy.

Croatia

Jerusalem has enjoyed a warmer relationship with Zagreb than Ljubljana. Though Israel didn't establish formal ties with the coastal republic until 1997, fearing President Franjo Tuđman's history of antisemitism and Holocaust revisionism, relations quickly strengthened. From 2012's vote to grant non-observer status to May's to grant full admittance, Croatia has offered a reliable record of abstentions, joining only North Macedonia of the other four ex-Yugoslav UN member states on such a path. In its May abstention, it aligned with just twenty-four other states. Yet, by this maneuver, Zagreb could avoid offending Jerusalem without expending the political capital utilized by the nine 'no' votes led by the United States.

In terms of shared interest, Israel has often focused on Holocaust remembrance (a concern projected in its relationships with most of the ex-Yugoslav states), while

Croatian concerns revolve heavily around Israeli tourists. This arises from Croatia's reliance on the tourism sector, given its profound significance within its economy, with 2023 yielding an estimated USD 13 billion thereto. Thus, while relations between Israel and Croatia are warmer than with Slovenia, this is largely because of Croatia's interest in boosting the tourism sector and disinterest in the kind of left-leaning character pursued by Ljubljana.

Montenegro

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Montenegro has claimed that its stance lies somewhere in the middle ground, as its greater interests lie elsewhere — particularly in its ongoing accession process for the EU. Thus, Podgorica has adopted less vocal positions similar to those of left-leaning powers, like Slovenia, given a lack of mutual interests with Israel and a desire to prove its adherence to the European mainstream. This explains its regular votes against Israel at the UN, including in 2012 and 2024, and its "expresse[d] concern" about former President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in 2017, showcasing alignment with the predominant EU position. This contrasted with early Israeli recognition of Montenegrin independence in 2006 and three significant arms sales to the former Serbian partner state over the last few years, which complemented an otherwise minute history of trade and investment.

North Macedonia

The southernmost former Yugoslav republic's primary political focus over the last several years has been its attempted entry into the EU and NATO, primarily obstructed by Greece over a name dispute, followed by Bulgaria for ethnic, linguistic, and minority-protection issues. Israel supported North Macedonia in the name controversy. North Macedonia has largely backed Israel in its own political interests, offering support within the Western blocs in the event of its accession and abstaining on the 2012 and 2024 resolutions. North Macedonia is also the only of the six UN member states currently with no Palestinian relations, formal or informal. While the two countries enjoy less frayed relations than Israel does with some of the other states, they exist firmly in each other's peripheral interests.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Assessments of Israeli-BiH relations must be traced back to the horrific Bosnian War of 1992-1995. Of specific importance was, and remains, the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which Bosnian Serb forces gathered and massacred upwards of eight thousand unarmed Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys as young as fourteen in the UN-designated Srebrenica safe area. By this time, the global community had largely cut off Bosnian Serb forces' arms supply. Israel, however, had continued to supply the Bosnian Serb army in exchange for guarantees of safe passage for Jews fleeing the conflict. While the international community, including the US and all ex-Yugoslav member states except Serbia, voted to recognize this massacre as genocide earlier this year at the UNGA, no Israeli vote was cast. This absence from the plenum shortly followed an outrage-drawing statement by the Israeli ambassador in Belgrade that no genocide had occurred, an airing of support for the Serbian and Bosnian Serb position, firmly rejected in most of Bosnian society.

Today's BiH is built around a complicated post-war power-sharing deal by Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, with a three-member presidency comprising one of each ethnic group. For years, Jerusalem and Banja Luka (the Bosnian Serb pseudo-capital) have fostered generally warm relations, while Israeli ties with Bosniak leaders and controversial, mainly Bosniak-backed Bosnian Croat President Željko Komšić have been deeply frayed. Within the context of the Israel-Hamas War, Bosnia has been deeply divided, as it often is, with Serbs and Croats more sympathetic to Israel than their Bosniak counterparts. However, when the UNGA voted to admit a Palestinian state to its ranks, Bosnia's 2012 abstention became a 2024 'yea.' BiH is today the only ex-Yugoslav state where citizens cannot travel visa-free to Israel, except for Kosovo, where a deal has recently been signed. In sum, the internally divided, plurality Muslim state and Israel hold deeply strained ties stemming from ethnic and religious internal divides and other international interests.

Serbia

Israeli political echelons often deem Serbia their closest ex-Yugoslav relationship, in part arising from shared Serb and Jewish plights in WWII and the Holocaust. For a quarter-century, Israeli officials have thrown bones to Serbian positions but, in turn, seen little diplomatic repayment. As an outstretched hand partially to Moscow, partially to Serbia itself, in 1999, Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon broke from the unified West by condemning the NATO bombing campaign against Belgrade

during the Kosovo War. Nine years later, and for twelve years after that, Jerusalem declined to recognize Kosovo's newly declared independence until 2020 and 2021 yielded mutual recognition and a Kosovar embassy in Jerusalem, respectively. In response to the 2020 Trump-brokered move, Serbia reneged on its own agreement with the Trump Administration to move its embassy to Jerusalem and downgraded its level of representation in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, in both the 2012 and 2024 votes, Belgrade shrugged off Jerusalem's gestures by voting 'yea,' though it also joined a US-led statement in calling for Hamas's release of Israeli hostages this year and has reportedly been selling arms to Jerusalem. The former moves may be attributable to Serbia's closeness to Russia and its claim on the foreign policy of the former Yugoslavia, once central in the Non-Aligned Movement; the latter moves to its complicated relationship with the West and general opportunism.

Kosovo

Despite prior attempts to please Belgrade and Moscow — the latter a staunch supporter of the former — by withholding recognition and fears that recognizing Kosovar independence would bolster the Palestinian cause, Kosovo has evolved into Israel's friendliest Balkan ally since 2020. Today, the majority-Muslim state still fighting for recognition by international bodies (such as the UN) has championed both Israeli recognition and its own support for Israel as one of five countries with embassies in Jerusalem at the time of writing, and the two countries signed a visa waiver agreement this June.

The Trump Administration pushed Kosovo's recognition of Israel as an election-year maneuver, while the US had long encouraged Israel to recognize the fledgling state. Thus, Israel-Kosovo relations have largely been shaped by the mutual navigation of other parties, such as the US, Serbia, and vis-à-vis Serbia, Russia. Nonetheless, Kosovo's willingness to continue engaging with and supporting Israel could only be encouraged by the Palestinian Authority's long-standing active opposition to Kosovar independence.

In all, Israeli relationships with the seven former Yugoslav states have been shaped largely by outside factors, though in part by decisively internal ones. Navigation of

the US, the EU, Russia, and in the context of Israeli relationships with BiH and Kosovo, Serbia, have greatly impacted how these countries have, and likely will continue to understand and act toward each other as their interests continue to merge and split with the changing dynamics of the world. This cumulative evaluation shows a unique view of how states interact with others at the periphery of their policy interests.

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