
Israeli Security Concerns And The Balkans

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www.balkananalysis.com - 31/3/2013

Heading into April 2013, Israel is confronted with a complexity of issues in the greater Middle East. These include: chronic political disagreements at home; the Syrian conflict next door, with its possibility to affect Lebanon; volatile unrest in Egypt; the precarious condition of Cyprus and the effect of this on possible future joint energy projects; an intensified threat from Iran and Hezbollah, and strategizing how to handle Turkish diplomatic moves following the (US-brokered) rapprochement. These moves may include an emotive emphasis on the Palestinian issue, which would increase existing anti-Israeli prejudices in the larger Muslim world.

Space for the Balkans?

Given these distractions, nurturing the strategic relationships Israel has forged in the Balkans since the Turkish alliance deteriorated in 2010 would not seem a high priority for the new coalition. However, we do expect that Israel will continue to work with Balkan governments to monitor security vulnerabilities and threats (as it does elsewhere in the world), and possibly on a higher level than in the past. This will be due to both local developments and security issues on a more global level.

Even before the May 2010 Gaza Flotilla, Israel had enjoyed good relations with Balkan countries in diplomatic, economic and security cooperation. In some cases, these friendly ties went back to the early 1990s. However, in the aftermath of the Flotilla incident, the Turkish-Israeli falling out was so high-profile that many foreign media simply interpreted Israel's expanding diplomatic relations in the Balkans as implicative of reactive diplomacy, an after-effect of the suspended alliance with Turkey.

Yet while Israeli officials did certainly have to acknowledge a unique new situation unfolding then, it is also clear that Israel's growing regional presence had already been in development over many years, independent of any temporary problems with Turkey.

Nevertheless analysts will still want to follow how the revived Israel-Turkey relationship plays out, and also how both states' approaches to the Balkans on the bilateral and regional levels will be affected by it. Balkananalysis.com has monitored the fluctuations in Israeli-Turkish relations since the beginning; readers might thus enjoy, for some now historical context, our previous report from Israel, published in February 2011, when Egypt was on the edge of its turbulent transformation and Syria was still just a hazy conflict on the horizon.

A lot has happened since then. The following analytical survey draws upon interviews with numerous sources interviewed in recent weeks, including diplomats, high-level intelligence and military officials of regional states, informed journalists and other experts, as well as general field knowledge and secondary sources. It discusses current security issues for Israel in the Balkans and its relations with regional countries, in the larger context of the Iranian threat and the emerging rapprochement with Turkey.

Renewed, But Not Rethought, Interest in Terrorism in the Balkans

The 18 July 2012 Burgas terrorist attack that killed five Israeli

tourists and one Bulgarian national was unfortunate proof that terrorist attacks can indeed occur in the Balkans. This possibility had previously been considered doubtful by experts who view the Balkans as specifically a safe haven/logistics base for extremists- and as something altogether impossible by partisan supporters of local Muslim populations.

However, since the spectacle of an armed Islamist standoff at the US Embassy in Sarajevo on 28 October 2011, US security officials have started to take greater interest, though this has not resulted in overt policy changes (consonant with what Balkanalysis.com predicted at the time).

Since then, however, we have encountered greater interest in the topic from local and international security officials seeking insight, while media supported by the US government have started to frame terrorism as a regional security concern- striking, considering that they have historically tended to just ignore the subject altogether.

Yet while the Burgas attack and the Sarajevo embassy showdown did bring regional terrorism concerns back into the public spotlight, media assessment of these events failed to change the conventional wisdom. The prevailing media and political discourse that has shaped public opinion on terrorism in the Balkans has largely failed to discuss the issue, even hypothetically. This is because it tends to discount the possibility of terrorist attacks (usually, for partisan reasons), arguing for example that Iran cannot have influence over Sunni populations, that Muslims in the Balkans are somehow 'different' than those in conflict regions, that ethnic affiliation is more important than the religious one, and so on.

What these presuppositions ignore is that (as in Burgas) it takes very few people to execute a successful terrorist attack, and that the influence needed to execute such an attack is, as opposed to generational, long-term sectarian influence acquisition, an easily obtainable commodity that merely requires financial or in-kind incentives. They also ignore that the prevailing conditions on the ground make the region a 'soft target' for terrorists or insurgents.

In the following sections we will discuss breaking developments and provide brief threat assessments and vulnerabilities by country, to get a better understanding of how the Israeli security estimate may develop in years ahead concerning the region.

The Burgas Bombing and the Political Issue of Hezbollah in Europe

While the Burgas bombing targeted Israeli tourists and as such was a concern first and foremost for Israel, the event has since become a 'European issue' for international leaders. For example, Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird referenced the attack on March 4, 2013 in an interview with the Jerusalem Post, stating that "when terrorist incidents can happen right inside the European Union by Hezbollah, that compels civilized people everywhere to act." Baird said this while calling on the EU to declare the Lebanese group a terrorist entity.

More pressure for EU leaders to do this is expected to come now after the trial in Cyprus of a professed Hezbollah member believed to have been planning a near-simultaneous attack on Israeli tourists there when he was arrested last July, two weeks before the Burgas bombing. The conclusion of the trial on 28 March resulted in a guilty verdict and four-year sentence for Hossem Taleb Yaacoub. This Swedish-Lebanese

citizen, who had also used France and the Netherlands as a base for his activities, had been tasked by a handler known to him only as 'Ayman' with conducting surveillance on Israeli tourist targets in Cyprus.

Benjamin Weinthal, the Jerusalem Post's Berlin correspondent and a research fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, notes that this successful prosecution of a Hezbollah member - the first in an EU country - may put new pressure on the bloc to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist entity. The case takes on more weight too since the internationally-researched official Bulgarian report stated that Hezbollah was indeed behind the Burgas bombing.

"Until now, Germany has said there is not enough legal evidence to blacklist Hezbollah," says Weinthal for Balkanalysis.com.

"Germany and France particularly are also concerned that their diplomatic relations with Lebanon would be damaged by such an action." Currently, Holland has designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization in full, while Britain considers its military wing to be a terrorist entity.

The diplomatic ramifications of the Bulgaria terrorist attack provide insight into the intricacies of Israeli-Balkan relations. The lack of EU consensus regarding Hezbollah put member state Bulgaria in a difficult diplomatic position, and it has said that it will "not initiate" the technical process required for the designation, emphasizing the need for EU unity on the subject. However, when it concluded the case in early February, the Bulgarian government did announce that Hezbollah had been responsible- as Israel had suspected from the beginning.

Many, including from the US side, had not expected Bulgaria to take such a robust stand. There was reported pressure on authorities not to do so, and when they did, the domestic political opposition argued that the government had put the country at greater risk from Hezbollah and Iran. (Both have denied any involvement). An insightful analysis of Bulgarian diplomatic decision-making and influences on it in this case was written last month by Dimitar Bechev of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

The Balkans: An Attractive Target, Increasing Israeli Countermeasures

The Balkans has long had its share of dangerous groups: from organized crime rackets, extremist right-wingers, leftists and anarchists, volatile nationalistic protesters and varieties of sometimes violent Islamic causes. While the Israelis are of course concerned by the occasional manifestations of neo-Nazism, they are currently focusing on Hezbollah (and behind it, Iran) as the main potential threat to their own interests. Israeli diplomats, tourists and local Jewish populations are all regarded as potential targets.

In contrast to the case with Balkan Sunni extremists, however, relatively little research has been published on Hezbollah in the Balkans today.

Nevertheless with its porous borders, rampant corruption, underdeveloped regions and relatively lax security, the Balkans can be compared to other parts of the world in which Hezbollah and Iran are already known to be expanding their operations. And, as Israel continues to increase its diplomatic, commercial and tourism presence in the region, more potential targets are coming into existence as

well. The civilian nature of most of these targets makes them very difficult, if not impossible to secure. Even a cursory infrastructure analysis exposes numerous ways in which a dedicated and professional adversary could exploit security vulnerabilities and inflict damage.

Dr. Ely Karmon, senior research scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel spoke recently with Balkananalysis.com to discuss the tactics and strategy of Hezbollah and Iran, and where he sees potential trouble spots in the region, in the context of greater global trends. Worldwide, he points to a spike in Hezbollah plots in the past year. In 2012, "Hezbollah was responsible for 20 plots- all foiled except for the one in Burgas," he notes. A map illustrating these plots provided by Haaretz indicates that they were all planned for places as far apart as Georgia, Kenya, Turkey, Cyprus, India, Singapore and Thailand. This kind of global reach requires extended logistical and intelligence networks, and of course plenty of funds and supporters.

Iranian activities in the developing world indicate patterns that might be applicable to the Balkan theater. Dr. Karmon's vital analyses of Hezbollah and Iranian growth in Africa and in Latin America detail the pattern of how Iran has gained a foothold in numerous countries there, using them for sectarian purposes, terrorism logistics, and trade in illicit goods (as well as legitimate commerce and infrastructure projects). The general conclusion is that Iranian diplomatic expansion today is part of a strategy to "balance the pressure of the international community on its nuclear project and prepare the ground for subversive and terrorist responses in case of crippling sanctions or a military strike at its nuclear facilities." A key part of this strategy includes developing economic and political influence among Muslim states and others hostile to US and Western interests.

Dr Karmon tells Balkananalysis.com that "there is a clear pattern.

Iran begins [in small countries] with diplomatic relations, investment promises and cultural relations. But all Iranian diplomatic and cultural activities carried out are under the control of their intelligence services."

"For Iran, the Balkans is a good platform for two reasons," he adds. "First, countries like Bosnia have already been long penetrated. Second, the local security and law enforcement are not sufficiently prepared for an adversary like Iran." He points out that the plotters in Burgas and Cyprus were traveling with passports from Western European countries, making it much more difficult for local countries to detect anything suspicious.

Further, even though the Balkan Muslim populations are primarily Sunni, this is not necessarily an impediment to Iran. Dr. Karmon points out several cases, such as in Argentina, where "Iran actively converted individuals to Shia Islam and has carried out activities against Israeli and Jewish targets." In parts of Africa, Iran has also worked on converting Sunni Muslims to their own sect. Dr. Karmon also points out numerous cases of Hezbollah plots in which Sunni Muslims in places like Southeast Asia and North Africa were radicalized and took part in plots. If it happened there it could happen in the Balkans, we can conclude. "They adapt their operations to the situation on the ground," Dr. Karmon affirms.

Another Israeli expert, Yossi Melman, recently provided some significant commentary for Balkananalysis.com. A veteran journalist

specializing in intelligence matters, Melman is the co-author (with CBS News' Dan Raviv) of several critically-acclaimed contemporary studies, the most recent being Spies Against Armageddon: Inside Israeli's Secret Wars.

"Israeli agencies know that Iran's MOIS and the al Qods force have established sleeper cells of agents and helpers in various key countries in regions all over the world, from South America and Central America to Southeast Asia and East and West Africa, and they try to locate weak links in the European chain... one such a weak link is the Balkans," notes the Israel journalist. "They operated there during the wars of the 1990s (mainly, in Bosnia and Kosovo) and they are trying to establish some sort of presence in Macedonia."

The same local conditions that make the Balkans an attractive target for Hezbollah and Iran are also obliging Israeli security services to increase their focus. According to Melman, "the decision to expand the Israeli diplomatic presence [in the Balkans] is a byproduct of budgetary reasons, economic potential and yes, also the desire to challenge and stand up to Iran and Hezbollah terrorism."

A key question emerges: what would Iran do if, as has been speculated for years, Israel and/or the US decide to attack it?

"Iran will respond and retaliate where it will have the operational capabilities, as we have seen in Bulgaria," attests Melman. "Iran's operations are based on, and are a result of, the following considerations: its capabilities, targets (whether there are easy and soft to attack) and above all not to leave its fingerprint, where they believe they would get away with murder- even if their agents are caught red-handed."

"Having said that, this does not mean necessarily that the Mossad will open 'stations,'" Melman continues. "Embassies provide a good logistic cover for intelligence operations but you can also have 'jumpers'- liaison intelligence officers and officials who operate from HQ and 'jump' to countries where they are needed."

However, he adds that while Israel enjoys "excellent cooperation" with local Balkan services, the latter in some cases "lack technological capacities and are weak in analysis, and certainly in monitoring outside elements like Iran- here enter the CIA and the Mossad to help them. The Burgas inquiry is a good example of such an international cooperation, combining local and international knowledge and understanding."

Intelligence cooperation between Israel and the Balkan countries, whether Christian- or Muslim-majority, has increased in the past three years. Dr. Karmon reiterates that "Israel is working in cooperation with local security services, and much of the relevant intelligence obtained by Israel in the Middle East is then passed on to the [Balkan] services... it is an ongoing cooperation for them, not only with Israel, but with the US, UK and other partners."

Bearing in mind the developing trends of involvement in the Balkan countries from both Israel and its adversaries, the previously-seen or potential threats in each, and the possibility of a direct confrontation with Iran, we can make the following brief estimates for nine regional states. This list excludes Turkey, which would require a longer study, and Croatia and Montenegro, regarding which interesting information exists but has still to be confirmed.

Bulgaria: Repeat Attacks Less Likely

The Bulgarian announcement blaming Hezbollah for the Burgas bombing followed a lengthy investigation involving the Bulgarian intelligence and police, Mossad, Shin Bet, the CIA, MI6, Interpol and others.

Reportedly, Israeli intelligence had noticed a significant increase in telephone traffic between known groups in Lebanon and unknown parties in Burgas in the period before the attack- one of many clues indicating a Hezbollah connection.

Some who have blamed the Burgas bombing on Hezbollah depict it as ultimately an Iranian-sanctioned operation. In the aftermath of the attack, an unnamed US security official told the New York Times that it was "tit for tat" retaliation for suspected Israeli assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. However, other experts read it differently and restrict responsibility to the Lebanese organization. "Since Hezbollah's 'operational leader,' Imad Mughniyah, was assassinated in Damascus in 2008, the organization has attempted numerous times to avenge his death by launching terrorist attacks against Israeli targets," says Sigurd Neubauer for Balkananalysis.com.

According to Neubauer, a foreign affairs specialist who works for a northern Virginia-based defense and aerospace consulting firm, "the Burgas attack should not be seen as an 'isolated' incident, but rather as the latest in a series of attempts to avenge Mughniyah's death."

On a larger level, adds Dr. Karmon, "I see in [the Burgas attack] not only avenging deaths, but as trying to push Israel into conflict with Lebanon, to take international attention away from the Iranian nuclear program. And, in the last six months Iran has also become much more active in the Syrian war with arms shipments to Assad."

In July 2012 former Bulgarian intelligence chief Lt. Gen.

Kircho Kirov disclosed for the New York Times that his service had information in 2011 on planned attacks against Israelis in Bulgaria, indicating that the Burgas attack was not an unexpected aberration.

In fact, Israel provided key intelligence that foiled a suspected Hezbollah attack on Israeli ski tourists going from Turkey to Bulgaria in January 2012. The fact that this had occurred irked some Israeli officials later, as they considered the January plot as a clear warning that should have led to the disruption of the Burgas plot.

In the months after the Burgas bombing, it was reported that Israel and Bulgarian police were cooperating to protect Israelis and Jewish sites in Bulgaria ahead of the Jewish holidays. Kirov had in October 2010 spoken publicly regarding a threat from Asbat al-Ansar, a group reportedly based in a Palestinian refugee camp in south Lebanon. The group's threat had been made in an interview for Bulgarian media, claiming that Bulgaria's military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq made it a 'legitimate' target. According to the 2010 report, Asbat al-Ansar was involved in recruiting mujahedin to fight Western troops in those countries.

The failed plot in January 2012 and the successful one in July of that year brought unprecedented international attention and foreign intelligence cooperation to Bulgaria, making it now a rather 'hot' place for terrorists. Further, Bulgaria's foreign intelligence

service has long been known for its offensive capabilities, which can only have been heightened during the past eight months of foreign cooperation. The only hiccup in this regard has been a pattern of oblique comments between Bulgarian and Romanian services, which can be read as a matter of pride (this will be discussed in the relevant section below).

It is thus our assessment that even though Bulgaria remains porous and difficult to secure in general, Hezbollah will be less likely to try and execute a repeat operation here than it will be elsewhere in the region.

Albania: Logistics Possibilities

"As NATO members, Albania and Croatia are [in addition to Bulgaria] countries where the Iranians focus in the region," one high-ranking Balkan security official told Balkananalysis.com recently.

Multiple informed sources, including Israeli diplomats and local officials, have told Balkananalysis.com that the opening of an Israeli embassy in Albania in August 2012 was partially motivated by future security concerns.

While Sunni terrorist groups and states, not Iran, have historically been more active in Albania, the Israeli-Albanian diplomatic alliance could provoke new interest from Tehran. Albania's shrewd Prime Minister Sali Berisha has attempted to ingratiate himself among the Israeli leadership by echoing their position on Iran in public statements. Berisha colorfully dubbed Iran and its leader the "new Nazis" in November 2011, winning him plaudits in the Israeli media. Perhaps not coincidentally, Albanian leaders in 2011 were actively promoting foreign investment opportunities, such as energy (as reported by Balkananalysis.com in February 2012) that have attracted interest from foreign companies, including an Israeli one.

As with Bulgaria and the politicization of Hezbollah among EU allies, tricky diplomatic issues exist for Albania in its relations with Israel and other allies. Albania abstained from the 2012 Palestinian UN vote, reportedly infuriating Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan—a public embarrassment for the informal leader of the Muslim world, making him appear unable to exert sufficient leverage over Europe's only OIC member state. A number of complicated issues were involved here, including Palestine's non-recognition of Kosovo, and Albania's relations with the US.

However, a veteran Israeli diplomat noted for Balkananalysis.com that Berisha seems more investment-oriented in his general approach.

"After all, he had his country join the OIC years ago because of the Islamic states' investment promises," said the official.

"Yes. Mr. Berisha is a charismatic speaker, but not necessarily pro-Israeli out of ideals alone." Given the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, it will be interesting to see how Albanian policymakers adapt in order to remain relevant to both allies. (A spokeswoman for Mr. Berisha did not immediately reply to our request for clarification on where he stands regarding Erdogan's recent controversial comments equating Zionism with a 'crime against humanity,' for an example of potentially divisive issues).

For his part, Dr. Ely Karmon places Albania after Bosnia as a

danger for Iranian infiltration and logistics in the region. While acknowledging that "here, political attitudes to Iran are far less positive to Iranians than in Bosnia," he adds that "pro-Iranian elements can support financial activities" on behalf of the Islamic Republic.

In our estimate, Albania remains opaque. The legacy of (Sunni) terrorist infiltration back in the 1990's, subsequent construction works in Tirana linked to al Qaeda supporters, and today's vocal Islamist groups indicate potentially fertile soil.

Further, the local economy has been affected by the economic downturn in Greece and Italy, from where Albanian diaspora workers have traditionally sent regular remittances. Distraction from local economic issues seems to be coming increasingly in the form of ultra-nationalism of an ethnic (not religious) inspiration, and Albania remains a strong US partner. However, the operative conditions for using the country as a rear logistics or even a platform for an attack do exist and as such the situation will be worth watching in the future.

Macedonia: Early Stages

Another investment-hungry Balkan country, Macedonia, recently came onto the radar when it welcomed its first resident Iranian ambassador, Saeed Sadegh Mohammadi, on 8 February 2013. There is currently an interesting analytical disagreement between certain local and foreign experts regarding whether this poses a security threat.

Israeli experts like Dr. Karmon believe that this new diplomatic presence "will be a platform for economic, cultural and even religious activities," fitting the pattern of Iranian activity in developing countries.

Macedonian officials downplay the threat. "The Iranian government knows their diplomats will be monitored 24 hours a day- there is nothing they can do," said one senior security official in the country for Balkanalysis.com, noting that it would be tactically difficult for a short-staffed diplomatic facility in a small country to stay off the radar. Rather, the upgrading of Iran's diplomatic ties is being considered as "merely symbolic" by Macedonian intelligence, and as a response to Israel's own strengthened relations with Macedonia; this has included the long-awaited opening in March 2011 of the Holocaust Memorial Center- one of only four in the world.

"It is a game for image. Iran feels it needs to respond wherever Israel makes its own presence," the official maintains. "So after the [Holocaust Center] was opened, this was what they decided to do. Of course we will monitor it, but we do not see this as a major security threat now."

However, other observers feel the 'game' could escalate in dangerous ways. A retired American diplomat with knowledge of the situation tells Balkanalysis.com that "this upgrading to ambassador status was definitely initiated by the Iranian side. They came in and said, 'we want to expand our trade and cultural relations.' The Macedonians frankly were afraid- do you have any idea what a highly-trained and experienced Hezbollah team could do here?"

"We tried to get [the Macedonians] to stop or at least delay it.

They can do this by dragging out the process bureaucratically to

keep Iran from starting to send diplomatic pouches, which they have used in the past to transport explosives and equipment," says this American source. "But it could take only a year for Iran to get the staff and set-up for operations."

At the same time, other deep background information obtained by Balkanalysis.com indicates that regardless of any potentially nefarious Iranian intentions, the US is confident in the capabilities of the Macedonian counter-intelligence and police forces, which are per capita more robust than in most other regional states. It is also the case for the last few years that Israel has supplied the Macedonian side with high-tech electronics useful for intelligence gathering activities.

Whether or not any Iranian-linked security problems emerge in Macedonia, the game is set to continue, with Israel probably making the next move: diplomatic sources have hinted that Israel's next full embassy in the region will be opened in Skopje, though the timetable is not clear. Currently, the Israeli Embassy in Croatia has jurisdiction over Israeli interests in Macedonia.

Nevertheless, as was the case with the Tirana embassy decision, what we are hearing from diplomatic sources is that security concerns (as well as flourishing trade and cultural ties) partly explain why an embassy will be built in Skopje. Indeed, recent minor vandalism of the Holocaust Memorial Center by Albanian nationalist/Sunni Islamist protesters was an unsettling development. Since the Jewish structure was not the focus of the protesters' anger or activities, there should have been no reason for attacking it. The incident served to remind that Macedonia continues to host a small but problematic Islamist underground. In this light, it is also interesting to remember that when the provocative Turkish blockbuster Valley of the Wolves: Palestine came to theaters in Macedonia, the 'sponsors' of local showings specified on posters were all Muslim and Albanian companies, including a security company with ties to local Wahhabi groups.

At present, we can conclude that while Iran may wish to establish a presence for possible trouble-making here, it is still at a very basic level and a proactive approach from local authorities will probably restrict this possibility. However, the very fact of fresh Iranian interest and the continued displays of anti-Semitism from some local Muslims will keep Israeli intelligence focused on the general situation.

Greece and Cyprus: Significant Vulnerabilities

The situation in maritime Greece and especially in the divided island of Cyprus to its southeast has a different flavor to it than the Balkans. In Greece, government rhetoric during the 1970's and 1980's fostered sympathies for the Palestinian and other Muslim causes, creating international relations for far-left and even student groups, some of which continue to this day. In Cyprus - until very recently one hub of the no-questions-asked global financial system - the geographical proximity to the Middle East has benefited terrorist groups and intermediaries (among many others) for decades.

Indeed, the usefulness of Cyprus as a logistics and financial base made it somewhat of a surprise that Hezbollah would be willing to risk this safe haven.

Nevertheless, as the recent terrorism conviction there indicates, Hezbollah in 2012 had an organized strategy involving surveillance of

a hotel popular with Israelis, and was willing to risk its position on the island. Perhaps, as Haaretz defense correspondent Amir Oren suggested in February 2012, in the context of a multiplicity of botched attacks in Asia, the "most worrying" aspect of those plots "was the evident drive to commit them even though they hadn't been properly prepared." With increasing focus on Lebanon and the Syria conflict, "the people available to carry out the attacks in India, Georgia and Thailand were probably not the star graduates of [Iran's] sabotage courses." The testimony of the amateurish 24 year-old Hezbollah operative in the Cyprus trial indicates that this might have been the case there as well.

As with Greece and Bulgaria, Cyprus is a popular holiday destination that benefited from the downturn in Israeli-Turkish relations after May 2010. All three countries have recorded a strong increase in Israeli tourists since then, which unfortunately also makes them more tempting targets for Hezbollah. A former CIA officer who visited Greece to assess tourist infrastructure security for a private consulting company tells Balkanalysis.com that "the large majority of the sites, be they the historical ones or the hotels, are not secured and cannot be, including the large and expensive resorts."

"Even were they to install a kind of police state, which they won't, the varied terrain and maritime nature of the country would make it almost impossible to stop a serious [terrorist] outfit hell-bent on causing trouble, unless the intel is very precise and timely," stated this source. "Add to that the large and impoverished illegal immigrant population, many of them Muslim, and you have a definite vulnerability that can be exploited."

According to Balkanalysis.com Research Coordinator in Greece Ioannis Michaletos, Greek security services are on constant alert regarding possible attacks against Israelis. "The authorities are keen to stop any possible attacks on Israeli targets in Greece, thus even when low-ranking Israeli officials visit the country, security measures are beefed up," he says. "One of the reasons of course is Hezbollah, along with other Islamist groups that may decide to strike."

One high-profile case was the Greek arrests in February 2011 of two "Lebanese of Palestinian descent." According to the IsraelDefense website "their assignment was to infiltrate terrorists from another organization by using fake passports."

Then, almost two months thereafter, the Israeli Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office "published a chilling warning to Israelis traveling abroad to be especially vigilant in 'Mediterranean Basin States' such as Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, and Malta." Although an attack did not occur, the Israeli security establishment would not have made such an announcement unless there was ample reason for suspicion.

In regards to Hezbollah specifically, Michaletos notes a sort of 'disappearing act' trend that reflects on both heightened Greek-Israeli security cooperation and on the group's more urgent needs elsewhere. "Their biggest exposure was back in the 1980s and 1990s, but from 2001 to 2006 they significantly reduced their presence, while they have spread across the globe...

and have increasingly redirected resources to Syria."

Further, adds the Greek analyst, since 2010 and "the convergence of Athens and Tel Aviv," the Greek security services have "started to

pay close attention to the activities of all Lebanese individuals in the country, so they themselves are keeping a very low profile." This has led to some successes; for example, a cigarette-smuggling Hezbollah cell active in the country was dismantled in 2009. Still, as Michaletos reminds, "Hezbollah works through intermediaries and has local allies as well. Back in January 2007, when the American embassy suffered a rocket attack by the leftist Revolutionary Struggle, the group's proclamation of responsibility ended with 'support to Hezbollah,' indicating again a nexus between Greek leftist terrorists and the Lebanese group."

Further, he adds, "Hezbollah has on various occasions sold weapons to Europe via Greek smugglers in Crete, though there have been no arrests... and surplus ammunition from Iraq found its way to Greece via Lebanese channels after 2003."

However, organized crime in Greece is a much larger phenomenon in which the major players are Balkan, Nigerian and Pakistani groups in areas including human and narcotics trafficking, document forgery, counterfeiting and racketeering.

Such groups are not direct threats to Israel, which (along with the US) is much more concerned with the influence and activities of Iran in a country severely affected by financial crisis. The US recently sanctioned a Greek businessmen allegedly involved in sanctions-busting ship-to-ship transfers of Iranian oil. On 14 March, the Greek government announced a probe into a foreign company for its "involvement in an alleged covert shipping network operated on behalf of the Iranian government." Israeli security experts have noted past cases of Iranian retributions for economic setbacks such as contracts cancelled under Western pressure, so it would not be without precedent for this to happen again here.

In general, however, our estimate is that Greece and Cyprus are not at the top of list of regional countries for Iranian-sanctioned or Hezbollah activity. Like Bulgaria, Cyprus has attracted greater international security attention due to its recent Hezbollah case, so it is likely that any plots here would be deferred for now. In Greece, a much larger country with a plethora of vulnerable targets, opportunity certainly exists but Iran probably realizes that any attack on Greek soil would endanger (licit and illicit) oil export to the cash-strapped country.

Bosnia: A Deep Involvement

Rather, we expect Israel to remain most focused on Bosnia as a possible site for Iranian and Hezbollah activity. Unlike other Balkan countries, Tehran has an actual footprint here, going back to its deep involvement during the wars of the 1990's (as is described in detail in former NSA officer John Schindler's excellent book, *Unholy Terror*). While Bosniaks are Sunni Muslims owing to the Ottoman occupation, they also have a diminished sense of ethnic nationality compared to Albanian Muslims, who tend to use religion as a nationalizing tool in areas where it suits their interests, such as southwestern Macedonia. So in comparing populations, a non-Sunni actor such as Iran would have greater success in Bosnia than in Kosovo or Albania. There is also greater inter-cultural activity on a regular basis between Iran and Bosnia, as for example with the January 2013 visit to Sarajevo of Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini.

According to Dr. Karmon, Bosnia is the most dangerous Balkan country in

terms of Iranian influence. The late Alija Izetbegovic welcomed Iranian military trainers during the 1990s' war, and cultivated strong ties with the Islamic Republic. While the Israeli expert acknowledges that the Iranian 'penetration' in Bosnia was largely diminished following the 1995 Dayton Accords, he maintains that "there remain pro-Iranian elements in the government, and Iran is active through the embassy in Sarajevo and charities."

Israel has however attempted to forge new corrective diplomatic alliances in Bosnia due to the country's singular political structure. Thanks to the pro-Israeli, Orthodox Christian Republika Srpska entity, the Sarajevo government's hope of supporting the 2012 Palestinian resolution at the UN was foiled. (The country abstained). This added to pre-existing anti-Serbian sentiment among local Muslims, which have led to rumors that also tend to take on anti-Israeli sentiments. Indeed, one prominent local Muslim in Skopje complained to us that "the Serbs always support Israel" and that "[former Israel Foreign Minister Avigdor] Lieberman owns four villas in Banja Luka, that city where [Israeli leaders] spend a lot of time!" The trickle-down effect of such negative speculation and rumor will fuel existing anti-Israeli sentiment among Muslims in the region.

At present, it is difficult to say whether Bosnia could be the launching-pad for Iranian or Hezbollah terrorism, but there is unquestionable Iranian influence in the country. In fact, the major competition for control is being waged now between the Saudis, Turkey and minds' of Bosniaks, but this does not preclude the possibility that it could organize terrorist activities via its established logistical infrastructure in Bosnia. The country's proximity and Muslim diaspora connections to Austria, a country singled out by Israeli, American and Balkan security officials for being especially soft on terrorists is another worrying indicator. It is well known that Vienna is a hub not only for Iranian intelligence activity, but also a nerve center for radical Islamists with Balkan origins and great influence among radical circles in the region.

Serbia and Kosovo: A Truly Complicated Situation

The most complex diplomatic situation in the Balkans today remains that of Serbia and Kosovo. This has unsurprisingly led to a knotty situation for the international relations of Israel, Iran and these Balkan states.

While archrivals Israel and Iran can't seem to agree on anything, they have so far both agreed on not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state. After Prishtina's February 2008 unilateral declaration of independence, the Israeli government was concerned that the Palestinians could use this as a precedent, and chose not to recognize Kosovo, though they did realize the importance of fostering good relations. Humorously enough, in January 2009 the task of nation-branding Kosovo to win more international recognitions was awarded to Saatchi & Saatchi, the Israeli subsidiary of France's Publicis.

For their part, the Iranians perceived the Kosovo independence process as a US-backed project, which it certainly was, and as such remain happy to oppose it. Thus Tehran's own sectarian archrival, Saudi Arabia, is along with Qatar and Turkey in a much stronger position among Muslim countries when it comes to Kosovo. Iran's support for Serbia was also a legacy from the days of Yugoslav leadership in

the non-aligned movement under Tito. In fact, Tito cut off diplomatic relations with Israel when the Six-Day War of 1967 occurred; they would only be renewed on January 31, 1992, when Milosevic was in charge in Belgrade and the other republics were breaking away in the various wars. Israel understood then that its Iranian rivals were supporting the Bosnian Muslims against the Serbs.

Since both Israel and Iran do not recognize Kosovo, it has been difficult for either to advance institutional relationships in key areas, though both nations are believed to have key 'agents of influence' among the local business and political elite. The other major power interested in Serbia is Russia (that sometimes ally of both Iran and Israel), which of course brings the US and NATO states into the game as well.

Considering that both Serbian and Kosovar authorities claim to want EU membership, all of these competing interests makes the situation very complex. Serbia has somehow managed to fairly successfully balance its relations with all parties, inviting Iranian investment and even allowing Iran Air flights to refuel in Belgrade between March and June 2011, until alleged US pressure forced it stop. At the same time, Belgrade and Israel are trying to develop deeper diplomatic and economic relations, and the number of Serbian tourists to Israel continues to rise year-on-year. The sheer complexity of Serbia's balancing of interests makes for a situation that is both very interesting and very difficult to read.

We can reasonably assume that Iran will not risk its entrenched interests in Serbia by trying to conduct any operations on its territory. And while we have obtained reliable intelligence on the presence of at least 120 (Sunni) Muslims from Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro among Syria's rebel ranks, these fighters are opposing the Iranian-supported Syrian government. So, even if they are deeply anti-Israeli, they are in some way on the 'Israeli side' in this very complex and constantly-shifting conflict. The real question for the future is how Israeli and Iranian approaches to Serbia and Kosovo will shift in the long term, after the latter two come to some sort of eventual compromise.

Romania: An Established Presence

An interesting and potentially important theater of activity for Iran and Hezbollah is Romania where, like Serbia, economic cooperation with Iran and other Islamic states originally owed to the politics of former communist times. A Balkananalysis.com survey of Romanian security services discusses the domestic intelligence service, the SRI, and its foreign intelligence counterpart, the SIE, a developed agency with offensive capabilities and strong US ties.

Nevertheless, the country is large, underdeveloped in some regions and has a very significant and well-documented Iranian economic presence, making it a potential area for Iranian-sanctioned operations. It is therefore reasonable to expect Israel to also be active in monitoring the country with its local partners.

While they were long aware of the general problem, the Burgas bombing put the Romanian services on a state of heightened alert. In August 2012, following a request from the SRI, Romanian public prosecutors asked the Bucharest Court of Appeals to declare eight Middle Eastern resident persona non grata for 15 years. According to Ziare, "they were accused of having strong connections with Hezbollah and Hamas, of

having intended to organize a group on Romanian territory to support illegal immigration from the Middle East to be used by Hezbollah and Hamas terrorists. Two of the eight had diplomatic status."

The Romanian media had already taken an interest in terrorism back in April 2011. Citing Wikileaks cables, Jurnalul reported that some 90 persons and 40 firms in Romania were actively financing terrorist organizations in late 2004. Another cable from July 2005 revealed concerns over a suspected Lebanese Hezbollah member involved in drug dealing. In 2005, his request for permanent residency in Romania was declined.

Then, in July 2011, Romania Libera reported on a DEA undercover investigation, which led to the extradition to the US of Iranian citizen Siavosh Henareh and Turkish citizen Cetin Aksu. US authorities had accused the two of intending to procure arms for Hezbollah, through using economic cover- the method noted by Israeli experts elsewhere. Henareh, a Romanian resident, had been a partner with Romanian businessmen in a baking company and owned a holding company.

How extensive is the Iranian economic presence in Romania? In November 2011, Balkanalysis.com published a comprehensive study on this issue. It revealed that Iranians have capital in over 2,600 Romanian companies across a variety of sectors, and also provided a variety of relevant statistics and information on recent governmental visits and bilateral parliamentary friendship groups. This extensive degree of economic and diplomatic cover would allow Iran the opportunity that Israeli experts have found in other similar states where Iran or Hezbollah has operated against Israeli and Jewish interests.

Iran is, however, far from the largest investor in Romania. The Arab Muslim world, however, is well represented and it seems that this partly has to do with a reaction against Iran. Official statements from President Basescu made at the February 2012 Romania-Lebanon Business Forum noted that Lebanon was the leading Arab state investor in Romania, with total investments of over 2 billion euros. More recent data on bilateral accords was made available in a December 2012 report (.PDF) released by the Romanian Ministry of Economy, Department of Foreign Trade and International Relations.

At the business forum, it also emerged that the Romanian-Lebanese partnership extends as far as military training for Lebanese troops, and weaponry donations for their army. The leaders also discussed the situations in Syria and Egypt, plus the Iranian nuclear program. Such discussions and initiatives to strengthen Lebanese military capacities against possible threats from Syria or Hezbollah conceivably indicate Israeli or American influence at work in Romania.

One interesting result of the Burgas investigation has been a low-key disagreement between Romanian and Bulgarian services. This should not affect cooperation, but it has taken on unusually public dimensions.

This was fuelled by initial speculation that the Hezbollah plotters used Romania either as a logistics base for planning the attack or as an escape route after it. This has led the Romanian security establishment to conduct an internal investigation.

On 6 February 2013, then-Bulgarian Interior Minister Tsvetanov declared that two of the surviving suspects fled through Romania, and from there flew to Lebanon. According to him, they had also entered Bulgaria from Romania, on foot. If true, this would somewhat

embarrass the Romanian security services- or, it could just be a case of Bulgaria passing the buck.

Either way, the announcement did have an effect. In a press release noted by Mediafax on 19 February, the SRI specified that 'up to now' no evidence exists to support the claim that the plot 'had been prepared' or 'supported' from Romania. The SRI press release added that "during the verification and common evaluation one person suspected of being involved in the terrorist action in Bulgaria was identified. Up to now, there are no elements or clues that the identified persons would have realized activities of preparing or supporting' the attack in Burgas." The SRI did also mention that the investigation is ongoing.

According to Balkanalysis.com's Elena Dragomir in Romania, "the somewhat vague SRI communiqué of 19 February seems to be the official Romanian response to the declarations of the Bulgarian minister, an apparent matter of prestige for the SRI."

Adds Dragomir, "the SRI has announced a series of 'specific measures' to be taken, which include collaboration with the Bulgarian authorities and other international partners. But the security agency also points out that Romania cannot prevent such actions and cannot intervene if the people transiting Romania are not on any international list of terrorism suspects- a clear allusion to the Burgas case."

For now, we can estimate concerning Romania that due to the deeply embedded Iranian economic presence, and the 'soft target' nature of the country, that Israel will take a greater interest in goings-on here. While this attention may not be on the same level as Bosnia or even Albania, it will still be significant. At the same time, the Israelis will also feel more confident in the abilities of their local partners here than in those Balkan states with Muslim majorities or less robust services.

IDF Cooperation in the Balkans: a Valuable Asset

In addition to indirect influence via discreet intelligence cooperation, Israel has taken an active and direct presence in the Balkans through its military. The IDF and IAF have stepped up cooperation with several Balkan states. And this partnership does have specific technical benefits for Israel, not only for the host countries.

According to Sigurd Neubauer, "for the IAF, a critical component for strengthening ties with the Balkans is its ability to steadily improve its capabilities by conducting complex exercises beyond Israel's small and familiar terrain."

This expert recounts some important examples of Israeli Air Force activity since the 2010 Gaza Flotilla incident interrupted the previous cooperation with Turkey. Since then, "the IAF has conducted two joint exercises with the Hellenic Air Force (HAF). The first exercise, carried out in mid-October the same year, apparently included four IAF Apaches helicopters on the Greek island of Crete.

The second half of that drill was carried out the Peloponnesian peninsula in which four Black Hawks were used."

Balkanalysis.com's Ioannis Michaletos also points to the general increase in military cooperation between Israel and Greece in recent years- a trend continuing now. "In the first two months of 2013, four

high-level Israeli delegations came to the Greek ministry of defense, which is more in absolute terms than other EU countries such as the UK or France," he notes.

Elsewhere in the region, Neubauer points out similar IAF training exercises in the central Romanian Carpathian Mountains, specifying that in 2011 the IAF carried out "two exercises with Greece and one with Romania." Further, "following Netanyahu's visit to Sofia, the Bulgarian cabinet approved a bilateral military cooperation agreement. The agreement in question included, among other things, the IAF training its Bulgarian counterparts and utilizing Bulgarian airspace for military exercises."

At the same time, the IAF maintains specialized cooperation with smaller Balkan countries like Macedonia, where airspace is basically as limited as it is in Israel. Here they have simply adapted by using other craft. Currently, therefore, an Israeli firm and the IAF are involved in helicopter pilot training activity for professionalizing the Macedonian military, police and firefighters.

Interestingly, despite Muslim perceptions of an Israeli 'Serb favoritism,' one senior ranking military official in Belgrade does not see significant results from actual joint efforts, despite last summer's bilateral military cooperation agreement. "I can estimate that we have 'average' cooperation, which means it is not so much as it could be," said this official for Balkanalysis.com. "Our military cooperation mostly regards counter-terrorism units and signal equipment- [the Israelis] don't even have a defense attaché in Belgrade, instead the attaché from Rome is charged with interacting with us." Adding the possibility that the Israeli embassy is more active with cooperation, this Serbian military official concluded, "this would not be in the military area... probably we are guilty for [the lack], not being so clever diplomatically."

Turkey and Israel: Alliances New and Old

One obvious aspect of the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement (and the US involvement in brokering it) is the US desire to get both countries united on Syria. The groundwork for the now famous phone call, diplomatic sources indicate, was laid out a few weeks earlier during Secretary of State Kerry's visit to Ankara in February. However, Erdogan is seeking to maximize what is perceived as a new advantage, and has recently made guarded comments about the speed and extent to which ties will be normalized, while also stating his plan to visit Gaza in April. If past experience is anything to go by, the Turkish leader will use his platform there to give a sort of victory declaration concerning the Gaza flotilla, and further enhance his standing in the 'Muslim street.'

Still, even before the Gaza Flotilla incident, Israel had already begun a strategic process of developing its diplomatic, economic and cultural relationships in the Balkans. Both before and after May 2010 this approach has unnerved some in the Turkish policy community, and left Bosnian and other local Muslim leaders uneasy as well.

Thus, the key question that will have to be asked going forward is (as discussed previously in the case of Albania) how the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement will affect the relations of both powers with specific Balkan states and interests, especially when it comes to bilateral military cooperation plans. Israel is aware of this concern, as was indicated by Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent reassurances to Greece

that Turkish rapprochement would not affect Israeli-Greek cooperation.

Until recently, almost all of the feedback and discussion among Israeli experts and media over this issue had not been raised, as their views were predicated on the assumption that ties with Turkey would not resume, and could not resume, so long as Erdogan remained in power. The fact that the impossible seems to have happened says more about US influence and desire for clarity on Syria than about any innate Israeli-Turkish trust. It is also possible that blocked deliveries of Israeli-produced military components and intelligence technology for Turkey were starting to become problematic for the latter, increasing internal pressure on Turkish leaders to act.

Whether or not it was really Turkey or Israel who 'needed it more,' cooperation has been restored and the next step for both sides is how to 'sell' the rapprochement before domestic supporters and rivals. This is much more challenging for Erdogan than for Netanyahu, as the former's aspirations are far greater and more diverse: to change the Turkish constitution in his favor, to make peace with the Kurds, to redirect an ambitious foreign policy centering on several fronts, and to remain the most influential politician in the Muslim world. This is why the Turkish prime minister's public handling of the rapprochement is bound to be 'predictably unpredictable'- something that will irritate Israel and the US, but that will not be a surprise to longtime observers.

The Tenor of the Revived Israeli-Turkish Relationship and Effects on the Balkan Alliances

Despite any further controversial comments to come from politicians, it does appear that bilateral relations will eventually improve, even if these once and future partners will stay more wary of each other in future.

Shimon Hefetz is a retired Brigadier General, and former Aide-de-Camp to former Minister of Defense Yitzhak Rabin and past Presidents Ezer Weitzman and Moshe Katzav. Regarding the tenor of the renewed relationship with Turkey, Mr Hefetz tells Balkananalysis.com that he believes "it will certainly start out as a more cautious relationship... not what it was some 11 years ago."

On a similar note, Dr. Ely Karmon recently wrote in Haaretz that "although the diplomatic and economic relations between Israel and Turkey could be reestablished quite quickly, the sensitive military and strategic cooperation is much more difficult to achieve, in view of the deep changes in the ranks of the Turkish military and intelligence echelons and of mutual mistrust - which will not disappear overnight."

Analysts believe that the resumption of ties will also benefit Israel, as the new Balkan alliances are limited. "It is not clear whether an alliance with Cyprus and the Balkan states can fully substitute for Israel's former strategic military partnership with Turkey," says Sigurd Neubauer. "Given Greece's significant financial problems and Israel's own budgetary restraints, it also remains doubtful whether either of the two countries can 'afford' prolonged military tensions presented by an [potentially] adversarial-inclined Turkey."

A similar analysis had been made just over a year earlier by Dr.

Josef Olmert, who raised the question of whether a Balkan alliance could replace the previous one with Turkey: "It is premature to

pass a definitive judgment, but the odds are that the answer is negative," Olmert wrote in the Huffington Post. "Turkey is by far the strongest country in this neighborhood, economically, militarily and politically. The closure of the Turkish market for the Israeli military industries is significant, and it is inconceivable, that a bankrupt nation like Greece, impoverished states like Albania or small nations like Cyprus can make up the difference."

Interestingly, Olmert's view that Erdogan would not 'change course' and restore relations with Israel was shared by many Israeli experts right up until Netanyahu's apology was made.

At the present moment, Neubauer believes that the resurrected Turkish-Israeli relationship will primarily focus on events in their immediate neighborhood. This would mean that the current reduced cooperation in the Balkans should continue in the medium-term.

"Even if Turkey and Israel are able to overcome their differences and jointly focus on Syria policy," he says, "it is doubtful whether the two countries will be able to muster enough trust to take on issues related to combating terrorism in the Balkans... at the present stage, both Turkey and Israel are arguably focusing their attention towards the Levant as opposed to the Balkans."

However, concludes Neubauer, Israel may "continue to assist various Balkan countries with the following areas of cooperation: anti-terror training, homeland security technologies, airport and seaport security, and assistance on transnational counter-narcotics operations."

It has been a long time since the glory days of Israeli-Turkish relations in the late 1990s, when cooperation was so high that Israel reportedly provided intelligence leading to the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan (the degree and character of Israeli involvement, denied wholesale by the government at the time, have been intensely debated, with wildly differing tales told). The great irony here is that Ocalan, held in a Turkish island prison ever since, is now a sort of trump card vital for Erdogan in his outreach campaign to win a peace with the Kurds.

A certain trend in Turkish media visible since the Mavi Marmaris incident has revealed a concern, or attempts to create concern that Israel and Turkey could in some way become competitors in the Balkans. However, according to Yossi Melman, "Israel does not see Turkey as a competitor, certainly not in the Balkans. Israel wishes to restore its old intelligence and military ties with Turkey... the civil war in Syria provides a common ground for Israeli-American, and Turkish interests to end the war and stabilize Syria."

Indeed, while Turkish (and generally pro-Muslim) supporters in the media have shown some concern about Israeli expansion in the Balkans, these fears are overblown. "Israel with its limited size, capabilities and financial means is not a player in this game," contends Melman.

"Israel via its intelligence and security is concerned almost solely about its immediate national interests: Iran's nuclear desire, Iran's support of terrorist groups, the developments in Syria, terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and to a lesser degree al Qaida (only in a direct regard to Israel, like the growing fear of Islamists in Syria)," he continues. Still, "Israel is taking part in exchanging information with friendly services so occasionally if Israel will come across information which is valid to other nations it will provide

it to the interested parties."

>From the purely entrepreneurial side of things, it is also interesting to note that while the three-year rift with Turkey had an effect, it did represent a helpful challenge in some ways. During the long suspension of activities, businessmen from both countries had to find alternate connecting points, which actually increased the value of countries like Macedonia, Albania and Romania. So regardless of the diplomatic impasse, says an informed local businessman, "Turkish businessmen have considered the Balkans to be a good place to meet Israeli counterparts... despite politics, business always finds a way." There are currently plans for several joint private ventures in the region, for example in the health care and high-tech sectors.

Turkey and Israel, beyond the Balkans: the Caucasus and Africa

Reaching out to mutual allies - the most obvious and most extensively involved of course being the US - has also helped both Israel and Turkey sustain relations during the three-year impasse. US diplomatic sources reveal that despite the apparent lack of progress since May 2010, it was not due to lack of trying; in addition to the official visits, former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made several secret trips to Ankara to try and get some traction from a stubborn Turkish leadership.

There are other mutual, but sometimes overlooked allies too, which play a key role in Israel's containment of Iran but which are never mentioned in the context of wider bilateral Israel-Turkey relations in other areas like the Balkans. In this light, Azerbaijan is a vital ally to both Israel and Turkey, borders on Iran, and thus becomes potentially important in a number of ways. Is it possible that the country has facilitated or could facilitate information-sharing between Turkey and Israel more discreetly during periods of public political discord?

Veteran Canadian war reporter Scott Taylor, who has traveled in and written extensively on Turkey and Azerbaijan, notes for Balkanalysis.com that "intelligence agencies work on entirely different circuits than that of the diplomatic corps- policy differences would not preclude the necessity to share information on common threats, if necessary."

Interestingly, as with Albania under Berisha, Baku has shown a bit of independence from its ethnic kin in Turkey. This owes less to nationalism (as is the case with Albania) and more to a new confidence and prominence as its wealth and geostrategic value have increased. A senior Azerbaijani diplomat addressed the question for Balkanalysis.com thus: "I cannot comment on the matter of intelligence cooperation in particular, but in general terms our relations with Israel is strong and multifaceted, and we don't look for the approval of this relationship from a third state, for example, Turkey."

"The only common approach between Azerbaijan and Turkey towards Israel (or more precisely Israeli-Palestinian conflict) is that we are both for the two-state solution and we are supporting the independence of Palestine," the diplomat continued. "Azerbaijan's stance on this matter sits ok with Israel, and does not hinder Azerbaijan-Israel bilateral cooperation."

There are a number of other issues (the Holocaust, anti-Semitism) where our position is also clear, and appreciated by Israel."

Something that was particularly appreciated by Israel (as stated by President Shimon Peres) last January was Azerbaijan's disruption of a terrorist plot involving Iranian and Azerbaijani citizens.

Authorities in Baku stated that terrorists had planned to attack Jewish schools and to bomb the Israeli embassy, "to avenge the death" of Hezbollah's Imad Muganiyah (a possible similar motive behind the Burgas bombing mentioned above). Just a few weeks after, the London Times published a feature in which an unnamed Israeli operative spoke of Baku as being "ground zero for intelligence work," and discussing the presence of Iranian, American and Israeli intelligence in this Caucasus country bordering Iran.

These comments and the general context become even more interesting in light of recent publications on the Israeli-Azerbaijani strategic alliance. A comprehensive article by Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh for the IDC Herzliya's GLORIA Center discusses the intricacies of Israeli-Azerbaijani relations and active regional players Iran, Russia and Armenia. The author also discusses Baku's proactive role during the breakdown in Israeli-Turkish relations.

"Azerbaijan has attempted to play the mediator between the two countries following tensions and disagreements that emerged as a result of the Mavi Marmara incident," he writes.

"Undoubtedly, this type of mediation can expand Baku's role in Middle Eastern affairs and strengthen Azerbaijan's international standing."

Another region in which the future relationship between Israel and Turkey is going to be significant is Africa. The extent of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement across approximately 40 states here was assessed in the above-cited analysis by the IDC Herzliya's Dr.

Ely Karmon. In this case, Turkey has cleverly taken steps to expand its diplomatic and commercial presence- thus making it a vital ally for the US and Israel in the region, both in terms of mediating local intra-religious disputes and providing intelligence on Iranian moves.

Although the foreign media has only become aware of Turkey's tilt towards Africa in the last few months, Balkananalysis.com devoted attention to it over two years ago in this interview.

The present article cannot go into detail concerning the complexities of the evolving Israeli-Turkish relationship and how both North and Sub-Saharan Africa will affect it. However, it can reasonably be assumed that Turkey's developed presence on the emerging continent will place it in a strong position for its dealings with both Israel and the US. The leverage that Turkey has due to its established economic presence, and particularly in terms of its shared Islamic faith in African countries with Muslim populations, may well be exerted in ways favorable to Ankara, not only here but in other regions as well. However, indicators of such diplomacy in action will probably not be immediately visible or relatable except in a small number of individual cases.

Nevertheless, if Israel does eventually decide to limit its Balkan activities, it may not be because of simple budgetary reasons: rather, if it perceives Turkey as being essential to eliminating any Iranian threats emanating from Africa, Israel would probably choose to become less prominent in Turkey's European backyard, if the latter demands it.

Considering the politicians involved, this is not as unlikely as occasional observers might think. Knowing what factors motivate Turkish decision-making politically, emotionally, and strategically is necessary for deducing the likelihood of future 'compromises' to come in the Balkans.

In the end, it will be up to the Israeli leadership to game-plan for all of the possible outcomes and to convince their Balkan partners (as they recently attempted with the Greek government) that they really are 'here to stay.' With American interest waning and the European Union mired in its own financial and other problems, it is a good moment for any outside aspirants to gain influence in the Balkans. The issue, for all concerned, is to what extent their potential involvement will be guaranteed, compared to other possible compromises with interested parties in other areas or other spheres of interest.

<http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2013/03/31/israeli-security-concerns-and-the-balkans/>
