THE SPILLOVER EFFECT:
The Gaza Conflict and Potential Ramifications to the Western Balkans

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Introduction

The new conflict was triggered on October 7 2023, when Hamas launched a series of terrorist attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets, killing more than 1,389 Israelis and taking approximately 250 soldiers and civilians to Gaza as hostages. Israel responded with air and artillery strikes against Gaza, in which at least 22,185 Palestinians are estimated to have been killed by early January 2024, most of them civilians, with 1 out of 7 casualties estimated to be women and children. The current conflict also resulted in 57,035 injured Palestinians and up to 7,000 missing persons. In light of these realities, the moral and reputational pressure on Israel worldwide is growing.

The geopolitical consequences of this war are profound, and what is needed is to assess the potential security challenges to the Western Balkans looming from the ongoing conflict. Namely, while none of these security challenges are inevitable, they are possible. Potential scenarios need to be identified by analysing secondary source material and taking into account the Balkans’ geographical proximity to the Middle East, the recent history of the Western Balkan countries with Middle Eastern affairs and local political realities. Depending on whether the conflict in Gaza continues in its current form or whether it escalates in intensity and number of the belligerents, there are at least three potential ramifications for the Western Balkans. The first concerns the potential radicalisation in the local Muslim communities involving anti-Semitism and acts of violence that could disrupt harmony between local religious communities. The second concerns the risk that if the conflict expands to engulf Iran and Hezbollah and potentially other regional actors, there is a risk that this security rivalry between Middle Eastern players like Israel and Iran will spread to the Western Balkans. Thirdly, depending on the geographical scope and duration of the conflict, there is a potentially high risk of a new refugee crisis impacting the region.
Local Extremism

The first potential spillover of the Gaza conflict onto the Western Balkans is the risk of radicalisation that may lead to acts of violence. The risk of radicalisation in the Western Balkans is always possible, but the continuation of the Gaza conflict and its potential intensification make this security risk more acute. In October 2023, thousands of Bosniaks protested in Sarajevo after the news of the Israeli bombing of a Gaza hospital. Sandžak, a Muslim-populated Serbian region, also had a gathering of support for Palestinians. The rallies were peaceful and not a rarity in the sense that many Western countries and other countries worldwide have also seen a rise in protests of solidarity with Palestinians. Nevertheless, this shows that the plight of Palestinians in Gaza has become an emotive issue for the Muslim communities in the Balkans. An emotion that extremist actors not just in Bosnia and Herzegovina but across the Western Balkans can potentially misuse and try to frame the sympathy towards the Palestinians not as part of civic activism but as a conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic communities.

In that context, the level of unpredictability is associated with the citizens of the Western Balkan countries who used to fight in Syria and have returned home in recent years. By the end of 2019, about 1,070 nationals of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Jihadi militants like the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra. At the end of 2019, 485 individuals returned or were repatriated, and at least 260 others were reported killed, with an uncertainty over whether the region has the culture, infrastructure and resources to reintegrate these individuals. Sandžak, a Serbian region vulnerable to Takfiri ideology frequently financed by the Arab Gulf sources, mostly from Saudi Arabia, is the perfect example of this challenge. The extremism in this region is less pronounced now since the defeat of the Islamic State and toning down of the Syrian conflict, but the domestic sources for extremism, like socio-economic woes, remain present.

There is no evidence that Hamas has any meaningful network or links to the Balkans. Moreover, the groups for which the Balkan returnees used to fight, like the IS, are not the allies of Hamas. On the contrary, there is a history of the IS conducting attacks against the Hamas targets that the IS perceives as apostates. Consequently, the risk of extremism is not necessarily generated by the existence of an organised network but by individuals who can be triggered by the ideas and passions generated from the Middle East appealing to the emotions of the global Islamic community, like the Palestinian issue. The war in Gaza has the potential to ignite the tinder box, particularly because many of the potential extremists have been exposed to the ideas salient in the Middle Eastern context, like the notions of caliphate, Shia-Sunni sectarian divides and Israeli-Palestinian issue. Also worth pointing out is that in case the conflict in Gaza triggers a new migrant crisis, this would also ignite far-right extremism that is feeding on the anti-migration politics. In the recent years, the Western Balkans have already
witnessed a rise in hateful anti-migrant rhetoric, first by the right-wing radicals on the society’s fringe and then by the mainstream politicians and media under their control in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Albania.⁹

While the risks of violence by large groups remain remote, they should not be discounted. The “lone wolf” attacks are also possible and are not unknown to the region. In 2011, a militant Salafist from Sandžak’s Bosniak community opened fire at the US Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina with an AK-47 assault rifle.¹⁰ Even more localised violence in the form of skirmishes would upset the local societal fabric and potentially fragile harmony between ethno-religious groups. This prospect is not inevitable, but the risk remains present. Kosovo’s police had to raise security for the Israeli national football team that, on November 12, 2022, played a EURO 2024 football qualifier in Kosovo.¹¹ In 2018, the Kosovo judiciary sentenced nine individuals for planning a terrorist attack against an Israeli football team in 2016 when it played a game in Albania.¹²
Middle Eastern Rivalries Come to the Western Balkans

The presence of Middle Eastern players like Israel, Iran and Arab countries in the Western Balkans also generates the possibility of a spillover from the current Gaza conflict. Presuming that the conflict in Gaza continues for a prolonged period, and particularly if it spreads to become a direct or indirect clash between Israel and Iran, the possibility that the Balkans will become a sideline theatre of security rivalry between the countries like Israel and Iran increases. This is primarily because of the region's geographical proximity to the Middle East and North Africa. Given this strategic reality, in case of an intense security competition between the Middle Eastern powers, these powers will try to suppress the influence of their rivals in the Western Balkans and strengthen their own. What also makes the conflict overspilling possible is the fact that there are potentially easy targets like Israeli tourists, investors and embassies that actors like Iran and Hezbollah can target in case of a conflict. This competition would most likely take the form of the Middle Eastern countries making political and economic overtures to build closer ties with the local governments, political and religious fractions and most probably enhanced intelligence operations.

Israel has its presence in the Balkans that is largely driven by the change that happened in the Israeli national security doctrine twelve years ago. In 2011, Israel experienced the shock of its Arab neighbourhood being in turmoil during the Arab Spring and the fallout with Turkey over the Israeli deadly Mavi Marmara raid on Turkish humanitarian ships. These changes forced Israel to evaluate its foreign and security policy doctrine, devised by the founding Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and popularly known as the “Periphery Doctrine”. This doctrine entailed Israel’s need to foster the ties with non-Arab states in its periphery, like the Shah's Iran and Kemalist Turkey, to compensate for being surrounded by hostile Arab nations. The hostile relationship with theocratic Iran, troubled relations with Turkey led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the turmoil of the Arab Spring caused Israel to expand its periphery and form new partnerships.13

Among these partnerships have been the countries of the Western Balkans with whom Israel has been maintaining diplomatic, military and commercial cooperation.14 In North Macedonia, Israeli defence company Elbit Systems trains military helicopter pilots and upgrades the helicopters with modern electronic systems.15 Serbia’s intelligence agency, the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), uses spyware purchased from Israeli security firms, including NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware and Cytrox’s Predator, and has shown interest in purchasing spyware from Israeli firm Cognyte, known to be used against journalists and human rights activists worldwide.16 Cytrox was founded in North Macedonia as a joint stock company in March 2017, only for its ownership to be passed to the Hungarian-based Cytrox Holding in 2020.17
Israeli investments are also present in the Western Balkans. In Serbia, between 2000 and 2020, Israeli real estate companies constituted the bulk of more than two billion euros’ Israeli investments of in business parks, retail parks, shopping malls and condominiums. In April 2023, a direct flight between Belgrade and Tel Aviv was established after a three-year freeze due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Israeli group BIG Energia Holdings won a tendering contract for constructing a combined wind and solar plant in Bileća worth 108 million euros. Israeli businessman Amir Gross Kabiri, president of M. T. Abraham Group, took over the aluminium manufacturing company Aluminij in the town of Mostar, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, in 2020. In recent years, Israeli tourists have slowly discovered the Balkan countries as the vacation site.

Iran also has its presence in the Balkans. During the Bosnian Civil War (1992-1995), Iran provided weapons and training to numerous Muslim armed formations, and its intelligence established a strong foothold in the country during this period. While the Iranian influence in the country is lower now than during the war years, it is not plausible that Iranian influence is fully eliminated. To compete with Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the hearts and minds of the Balkan Muslim populations, Iran has relied on transnational civil society organisations, including the Ibn Sina Institute in Sarajevo that it helped establish, as well as through the Quran Foundation, supported by the Organization of Madrassas Abroad (Sazman-e Madares-e Kharej az Keshvar), Al Mustafa University and the Flladi Foundation.

In case the Gaza conflict becomes a direct conflict between Iran and Israel, there is a risk that the Balkans could be engulfed with the growing security rivalries between Israel and Iran and its proxies, particularly since there are potentially attractive targets like Israeli investors, tourists and diplomatic representations throughout the region. The region already experienced this once in 2012, when Iranian proxy Hezbollah conducted a terrorist attack against Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in retaliation for the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and Hezbollah's commander. Porous borders, corruption, organised crime and national security services unaccustomed to fighting sophisticated adversaries like Iran and Hezbollah make the Balkans vulnerable to subversive activities of Middle Eastern powers. Today, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are potentially vulnerable regarding potential clashes between Israel, Iran or another Middle Eastern player. Albania is probably even more vulnerable in that context. Since 2013, Albania has been providing refuge to a militant Iranian cult-like opposition group, the People's Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK), leading to the straining of relations between Tirana and Tehran. In late 2022, Albania severed diplomatic ties with Iran over alleged cyber attacks orchestrated by the Iranian government.
A New Refugee Crisis?

Ultimately, the longer the Gaza war lasts, the higher the risk of a new refugee and migrant wave heading for Europe, with the Balkans being the main route, given its vicinity to the Middle East. The last refugee crisis of 2015 demonstrated that in the XXI century, the Western Balkan governments would not be able to stay oblivious to conflicts and humanitarian crises in the Middle East and North Africa. Now that fear is back. Greek Migration Minister Dimitris Keridis warned that even before the outbreak of the Gaza conflict, Greece had already recorded the highest surge in illegal migration in the recent years, as the country counted more than double the 18,780 illegal entries its authorities recorded for of the entire 2022. Before the Gaza war, Palestinians accounted for 22 per cent of illegal entries to Greece.29

The level of population displacement is staggering. By early January 2024, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which has lost 146 staff members in Israeli strikes on Gaza, was hosting nearly 1.4 million displaced Palestinians in 155 UNRWA facilities. Up to 1.9 million people (85 per cent of the population) have been displaced in Gaza.30 It is estimated that in Gaza, approximately 65,000 residential units have been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable, with another 290,000 damaged, leaving about half a million people homeless. Moreover, 23 of 36 hospitals in Gaza have been rendered completely inoperable and 104 schools have been destroyed or damaged, which means that 70% of school buildings have been damaged, with those still standing being used mostly as shelters for internally displaced people.31 Hossam Shaker, a Vienna-based researcher on migration, is already fearful that these trends could lead to a refugee crisis in Europe that equals to 2015, when one million migrants and refugees entered Europe.32

The unwillingness and lack of capacity of the neighbouring countries to accept the Gaza refugees is also not playing to the advantage of the Western Balkans. Israel has unsuccessfully tried to convince neighbouring Egypt to accept Gaza's refugees in exchange for Israel using its lobby influence in the World Bank to write off half of Egypt's international debt.33 However, while Egypt will likely profit from the conflict by eliciting foreign financial aid, Cairo is uninterested in accepting the Gaza refugees. This is because Egypt is not interested in taking on new financial burdens but, more importantly, for security reasons. The Egyptian government does not want Hamas to establish a foothold in Egypt's Sinai to wage new wars against Israel, destabilising the fragile region. Also, Cairo does not want to be perceived by its own and the Arab public as assisting the new plight of the Palestinians.34 Jordan, which hosts the world's second-largest number of refugees per capita, is fearful that the conflict will spill over to the West Bank and is explicitly stating that it will not take on new refugees.35 Lebanon, a country that hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, including both Palestinian and Syrian refugees, is in no shape to take on new refugees.36
The prolonged conflict with high humanitarian suffering, the countries of the wider neighbourhood that cannot take additional refugees and the proximity to the Balkans and Europe put the local countries at risk. This brings us to the point of Europe as the final destination of a potential refugee wave and Turkey as a key migration transit country. In Europe, the Gaza conflict and fear of new refugee waves are already raising concerns that right-wing populist parties will grow in power, which will make European governments less willing to take on new refugees. The electoral win of populist Geert Wilders in Dutch parliamentary elections based on an anti-immigrant stance is potentially a sign of things that are yet to come in Europe. Turkey, which hosts the largest number of refugees in the world (3.6 million), is already denying the possibility of accepting one million Palestinian refugees. This would put the Western Balkans in an unfavourable situation of being a transit route for a new migration wave and between the EU and Turkey disputing over how to handle the crisis.

If that possibility materialises, the old fear of the Western Balkan countries that they will be the EU’s buffer zone vis-à-vis the migrant flows from the Middle East will resurface. The region’s relationship with Brussels would become more fractious in that case. Suppose the Gaza conflict triggers a new migrant crisis, particularly in the context of migration again becoming the major issue in the European politics. In that case, the already thwarted prospects of the EU membership for Western Balkan countries will become even more remote, solidifying the region’s status as a European periphery. This scenario would also harm democratic development in the Western Balkans as the local elites would use the migration crisis to leverage European governments and trade their cooperativeness on migration for European acquiescence to their democratic transgressions. Ultimately, as already mentioned, the new migrant crisis would trigger right-wing extremism based on anti-immigrant sentiments within individual Western Balkan countries.
Conclusion

It must be underscored that most of these potential ramifications are not inevitable. The outlined security risks stemming from the Gaza conflict are still in the realm of possibility and not of probability. Nevertheless, the longer the conflict lasts, the higher the chances that the spillover effect on the Western Balkans materialises. The seriousness of the threats should drive the policymakers in the Western Balkans to dedicate a due amount of attention and effort to planning a potential step to counter any contingent negative scenarios.

The local security services need to remain vigilant. The Western Balkan nations should boost the practice of political and security consultations on the current conflict in Gaza and generally on Middle Eastern issues, as that would help the local countries develop a cooperative response in case threats like extremism and migration become acute as a result of the Gaza conflict. In that same context, stronger communication and coordination regarding the potential fallout from the Middle East needs to be established between the Western Balkans and relevant security providers, like the US, the EU and NATO. The Western Balkan countries should be advised to boost their diplomatic presence in the Middle East and North Africa. In the long term, the Western Balkan countries need to invest more in developing Middle Eastern expertise in public administration, academia and civil society to boost local analytical ability that can provide strong input on tackling the challenges to the Western Balkans generated by the Middle Eastern instabilities.

Historically, the fate of the Balkans has often been shaped in relations and as a consequence of the developments in the Middle East and North Africa. This proximity has become even more relevant in the modern world as security threats tend to spill over. Migration, terrorism and the presence of Middle Eastern countries in the Balkans confirm this reality. Down the road, the local nations in the Western Balkans need to pay more attention to the Middle East in their foreign and security policies.

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Sources and Notes


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