

Albania and Israel: Survivor Nations with a Common Heritage and a Common Future

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During World War II, people faced the most horrible barbarism of modern times. Both Albanians and Jews are survivor nations. But what can we show for that experience?

Once Israel re-emerged as an independent nation, its people demonstrated extraordinary energy and built the future that they deserve—a bright and free future. No nation suffered more than the Jewish people did and no nation accomplished as much. In many respects, the sacrifices of your ancestors, of your predecessors, became the source of the bright energy propelling Israel toward the future.

We Albanians did not suffer the Holocaust, but our history was also a very difficult one. I have read a lot about wars and I have seen a great deal in my life, but I have never seen a country that even in war suffered what my nation did during the Communist dictatorship. Albania was devastated.

In 1996, I visited Israel in my capacity as president of Albania; at that time your minister of education, Amnon Rubinstein, told me, “Mr. Berisha, I listened to Radio Tirana and I was so disappointed, so disheartened when I heard the propaganda directed against Israel and the Israeli people and I could not but think about what Albanians did during World War II.”

As a matter of fact, the Communist regime in Albania also disseminated the worst propaganda against Israel. It did not, however, spread the lies that the Nazis used against the Jews, but its ideological hatred for the Jewish State was almost the same.

But World War II was a different story and a source of pride. As you know, Albanians stood by you during the Holocaust. Our historical relations may not

be as intense as those that existed between other nations, but one thing is certain: Whenever our nations did interact, they met as friends and the stance of Albanians during the Shoah was no coincidence. Time and again, waves of Jews driven out of other European countries found shelter and lived in peace and harmony with Albanians. Historians have suggested that in ancient times, there were villages with a Jewish presence in Albania. But later on—and about this there is no doubt—Sephardic Jews came from Spain and Romaniote Jews came from Salonika. And there was not a single recorded incident of hostility between Albanians and Jews. There was not a single recorded incident of religious intolerance toward Jews. We are a nation of religious tolerance par excellence.

Old nations learn certain lessons. When one is poor from the material standpoint, one's wealth is one's morality. This was the case with the Albanians. In the capitals of the most developed countries of Europe at that time, the regimes and large numbers of collaborators—politicians—accepted and applied laws against Jewish people just because they were Jewish. This occurred despite their tremendous contribution to the development of the countries in which they lived, including in science and culture—but it did not happen in Albania. It did not happen in the most remote villages and towns of Europe, which were those of my country. As a matter of fact, this was not acceptable to the official Albanian authorities of the time. Just the opposite was true and large numbers of Jews sought sanctuary in Albania. Albanian tradition is based on a very old code of honoring one's guests. You never betray your guests. You must sacrifice everything for their protection, otherwise your honor and morals are compromised. Albanians did the same with Italians when they were defeated by the Nazis. Hundreds and thousands of them, who came as invaders, were protected by Albanians. That is why the wartime story of Albanians and Jews is such a brilliant chapter in the history of the relations between our two nations. Jews seeking shelter arrived safely and later left the same way.

Even without an intense historical relationship, we have a very positive and promising common heritage upon which to build excellent future relations. The Jews who left Albania for Israel, and a smaller number to the United States, are the best ambassadors of my country and my nation. We are very proud of them and very grateful to them. Once our country was opened, we looked to learn from Israel and to strengthen our relations with it. We have arrived here in Israel determined to learn and profit from your experience and to benefit from the education available in your country. We have begun to fruitfully cooperate in all domains. As I noted, I came here as president of the country twice. Once I came to pay tribute to [the late] Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; I later came on an official visit and I received support and help from your country.

Today I am here not only to help advance the friendly relations between our countries, but also because I am deeply convinced that my country can offer Israeli investors enormous possibilities. I am here also deeply convinced that the Israeli government is doing its best to help Albania achieve its potential and to aid in its development. I received great news yesterday evening during the official dinner held in my honor: Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman announced that his ministry has decided to open an Israeli embassy in Tirana next year. I would like to thank the Israeli government very much for this great decision. I would also like to thank Ambassador David Cohen and his predecessor for the great contribution they provided in the development of our friendly relations.

Albania supports a two-state solution and we believe that it is very positive that Israel has accepted and is supportive of it. However, as you have probably heard, we are not supporting the PA's request for UN membership, because we believe that shortcuts are not healthy in this process. The solution must include security—the full security of two countries, of two nations. We also believe that the international community has a role to play, and we are happy that the Israeli government supported the Quartet's statement during the UN assembly. I think it is also in the best interest of the Palestinians to support the Quartet statement, which has many elements, like a roadmap to be formed. Short cuts will not produce the desired result—peace.

We watch, with great concern, the development in Iran of nuclear capability. This is certainly the greatest threat to peace and stability in the region and in the world. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one man I know of today who is using the same language that the Nazis used seventy years ago and that is President Ahmedinejad. No one can accuse him of not speaking his mind or saying what he thinks. The last report of the UN Atomic Agency clearly indicates that Iran is working to obtain nuclear weapons. At the same time, Iran refuses to accept international monitoring of its facilities. That is why we definitely believe that the UN Security Council must decide on steps and measures that will prevent it from becoming a nuclear power—prevent Iran from becoming a great, great threat to the entire region, and, of course, to Israel. Ahmedinejad has expressed his views—his wish to wipe out a country, a nation, because of his racist hatred and pathology.

My conviction is that different religions should never hurt people or create obstacles to living together, and this is shown in my country. But I also maintain that Islam is abused by those who prefer to be kept in power by abusing religion. We welcomed the Arab Spring, although for the moment there are still complications and serious problems. But I do believe it is a process that will end in a democratic system.

We are trying to establish contact with the authorities of the Arab countries. Fortunately, soon we are going to be chairing the Council of Europe. We have started talking with our partners in that organization, and have suggested it body should be ready to help with institution building in the Arab world. I met the leader of the Libyan Council in the UN; he was very eager to work with Albania to prove to his own people that Islam and democracy are fully compatible. Once the political changes are consolidated, they will have no reason to think otherwise. The relationship between Muslims and Jews in my country has always been a humane one. Likewise, I am confident, that the time will come when Islam will be freed from the politicians who are abusing it.

The major purpose of this visit is to work with the Israeli government in order to facilitate cooperation in all fields. Our political relations are excellent. We are trying to ensure that our country becomes an especially friendly country for foreign investors. I am happy that several Israeli companies have demonstrated great interest in working in Albania. Just like Israel, Albania is a small country on the map. But when one examines it more closely, one discovers that it is a country of extraordinary potential. We could become, and will become, a small renewable energy superpower in the region. We are a country full of water. We are going to build hundreds of hydropower stations, and one of the best is going to be built by Telemeia. But other Israeli companies are also most welcome to participate in this green development of my country. We are licensing wind parks, geothermal and solar energy facilities. Going green means going west. The best way to go west is to go green. Pushing our country in that direction is the best thing we can do for their future.

Albania carries the lowest fiscal burden by far of any country in Europe. I am a firm believer in low taxes. I learned a great lesson from one of the most admired personalities of the world, Ronald Reagan—and that was the importance of low taxes. I came from the field of medicine and I had to learn politics and economics. Reagan wrote that money in the accounts of private people is worth more than in the public coffers. So I have ensured that my country has the lowest possible fiscal burden, and with predictable results. Albania enjoys double-digit growth. Despite the very serious global financial crisis around us, Albania did not feel the recent recession. That is why I would be very happy to see Israelis investing in Albania in the energy sector, in tourism, mining, and manufacturing. Albania is a country full of possibilities, and I think Israeli involvement and investment in our development would be the best way to strengthen and consolidate our relations.