

Recognize Kosovo? A Middle East Dilemma?²

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Recognition of Kosovo is one policy where the countries in the Middle East that matter most to the United States and its Western allies are on the same page—a rare occurrence. The Kosovars are a predominantly Muslim people who have been persecuted and are sympathetic to Israel, and that matters to the US. In addition, Kosovo is a secular country that opposes Islamist extremism and is tolerant of its inhabitants regardless of faith. Furthermore, those states that oppose Kosovo’s recognition include adversaries of the US and its Western allies.



Kosovo, formerly a province of Serbia, is one of only three Muslim-majority states in Europe, the other two being Albania and Bosnia. These political entities were under communist governments during the Cold War and rediscovery by indigenous Muslims of the religion of Islam has been a natural development since then. Yet these secular and Western-oriented governments have been receptive to good relations with Israel.

Since its independence in 2008, Kosovo’s economic difficulties and the spread of ideas from the Middle East have contributed to the radicalization of a segment mostly of its young Muslim population. This trend has concerned Kosovo’s government, which desires membership in the European Union. At the same time, it seeks further

recognition from Muslim-majority countries, as it is in need of foreign economic assistance as well as diplomatic support essential for joining the United

Nations. This would also need Russian and Chinese support. These countries currently oppose recognition of Kosovo as well as that country's membership in the UN.

Naturally, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo given that country's historical connection to the Ottoman Empire and its population of descendants of Balkan Muslims who had immigrated there. Subsequently, some Muslim-majority states, led by the United Arab Emirates, recognized Kosovo even before the International Court of Justice ruled in September 2010 that its declaration of independence in February 2008 did not violate international law. Since then, some other Arab and Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, which like Turkey regards itself as a leader in the Sunni Muslim world, have followed suit. Yet there are other Muslim countries such as Iran, which has developed close ties with Russia, that continue to refuse to do so, despite Turkey publicly committing itself to lobby in the Muslim world for recognition of Kosovo.

Unlike Turkey, Israel had been reluctant to afford Kosovo recognition for many years, despite Kosovo being a country where Jews live very peacefully. Israel especially feared that such action might give political legitimacy to the Palestinians' quest for statehood and would offend Serbia. However, less than a month after the Abraham Accords, Serbia and Kosovo reached an agreement on economic normalization, mediated by the

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United States; that agreement included a commitment for Kosovo to recognize Israel, while Serbia would move its embassy to Jerusalem. Serbia did not comply with this after Israel

recognized Kosovo and diplomatic relations were established in February 2021. Kosovo subsequently established an embassy in Jerusalem and faced criticism from Turkey and the Palestinians for doing so.

Kosovo is recognized by most Western countries and by most Arab and Muslim states who enjoy good relations with the former group. What explains this broad consensus? The Kosovar Muslims were persecuted during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia by the Serbs, who are aligned politically with Russia and China, while in Kosovo, Jews and Christians, with the exception of those who are actively politically aligned with Serbia, live together peacefully with a majority Muslim population in a secular state. In a world where divisions seem to grow, it is one place where cooperation is the norm.

This article will focus on the relations of Kosovo with the countries of the Middle East and how particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which disagree on a number of political issues, all have come to regard ties with Kosovo as being mutually beneficial.

Historical and Political Background from Ottoman Rule to Independence

In June 1389 on the Field of Blackbirds, a few miles northwest of Pristina, the capital of predominantly ethnic Albanian-populated Kosovo, the armies of Ottoman Sultan Murad

I and Prince Lazar of Serbia met in battle with both leaders killed in action and the Ottomans either being victorious or ending up in a draw as “few things [about the battle] are known with real certainty.”¹ Though Serbian statehood survived for the time being and the entire territory of Kosovo was not brought under direct Ottoman rule until 1455, for the Serbs the battle was an “important turning point” in history

not to be measured simply in terms of politico-strategic consequences. The story of the battle of Kosovo has become a totem or talisman of Serbian identity, so that this event has a status unlike that of anything else in the history of the Serbs.²

Besides the battle, the territory itself has a historical and sentimental connection for Serbs. Kosovo has been regarded by them as the “cradle of their civilization,” with the city of Peć (known as Peja in Albanian), serving as the seat of the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church on and off since the fourteenth century. Bishop Emilijan said at the Battle of Kosovo’s 550th anniversary in 1939, “Besides the name of Christ, no other name is more beautiful or sacred.”³ Almost fifty years later, in November 1988, at a mass rally held in Belgrade, Slobodan Milošević, then head of the League of Communists in Serbia, and the following year president of that entity within Yugoslavia, with regard to protests in Kosovo against the dismissal of that province’s ethnic Albanian leadership, which he believed was “separatist,” stated the following:

[E]ven though Serbia’s enemies abroad [a reference to Albania] are uniting with those inside the country.... We are not afraid. We enter every battle to win.... Every nation has a love which eternally warms its heart. For Serbia it is Kosovo. That is why Kosovo will remain in Serbia.⁴

When the Ottoman Empire was defeated in the First Balkan War in 1912, Kosovo became part of Serbia, and Serbs subsequently colonized the area, while those who remained loyal to the empire emigrated to its remaining territories. Kosovo remained part of Serbia after the First World War when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929) was established and later after the Second World War as part of Communist Yugoslavia under Tito.

The Yugoslavian leader in 1974, six years before his death and seventeen years before the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia, established a constitution granting Kosovo autonomy, which Milošević abolished in March 1989. At the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, a few months later, Milošević declared:

The Kosovo heroism does not allow us to forget that at one time we were brave and dignified and one of the few who went into battle undefeated. Six centuries later we are in battles and quarrels. We are not in armed battles,

¹ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 58.

² Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 61.

³ Quoted in Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 72.

⁴ Quoted in Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 63.

though such things should not be excluded yet.⁵

Indeed, that is what occurred two years later, beginning with Slovenia in 1991 and following with Croatia, Bosnia, and finally Kosovo in 1998-1999.⁶ However, writing in 1990, before the breakup of Yugoslavia, British journalist Misha Glenny, while highlighting a secular and progressive trend in Kosovo, may not have wanted to believe the dire situation that lay ahead:

The conflict in Kosovo is political and not confessional, as some people, Serbs in particular, like to present it. The great majority of Albanians are Moslems, but the attraction of Islam among the younger generation in Kosovo in particular is not great. Indeed, there is a serious generational conflict in Kosovo as young people look to the West for their political and social values. No Albanian has ever demanded an Islamic state in Kosovo, and recently agreements to end the system of blood feuds between families and the growing strength of the women's movement among Albanians have testified to the power of Western influences in Kosovo. Quite simply, Albanians want Kosovo to be granted the status of a republic [similar to Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia,

Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia] and the right to vote in democratic elections.... [T]he most powerful current argues for the creation of autonomy for Kosovo within the Yugoslav federation.⁷



Map of the Republic of Kosovo

But two years later, Glenny notes that the “Kosovars’ principled position” was “full independence from Serbia under international ... protection” and that “secession means war between Serbs and Albanians.”⁸ The conflict in Kosovo was only brought to an end through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) bombing campaign. An international peacekeeping force known as KFOR was subsequently established and included participation from countries mostly in NATO

⁵ Quoted in Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 72.

⁶ Both Macedonia, known as North Macedonia since 2019, and Montenegro, became independent through peaceful means in 1991 and 2006, respectively.

⁷ Misha Glenny, *The Rebirth of History: Eastern Europe in the Age of Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 134.

⁸ Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 181.

such as Turkey, which still is active with 309 personnel—and currently the fourth largest contingent behind Italy (638), the US (635), and Hungary (469)⁹—as well as the UAE and Morocco, which have since withdrawn from participation.

On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia; Costa Rica became the first country to recognize that status, doing so a day before the US, Britain, France, Turkey, and Albania. As for Kosovo's Constitution, it confirms that it is “a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs” (Article 8), “freedom of belief, conscience, and religion is guaranteed” (Article 38.1), and members of the various communities residing within the country's border have the right to “express, maintain and develop their culture and preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and culture” (Article 59.1).¹⁰ Indeed, in the autumn of 2008, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Pristina told a visiting journalist, “Here people are Muslims, but they think like Europeans.”¹¹ While an American reporter who covered the Kosovo conflict stated that “never once” did she see “the mujahideen fighters that I saw in Bosnia, or here KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] soldiers

even allude to any kind of commitment to Islam.”¹²

Let us now examine Kosovo's relations with the Middle Eastern countries of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel as well as the interactions of these countries with Kosovo's respective ethnic Turkish, Sunni Muslim, and Jewish populations. Iran has had no interactions with Kosovo for reasons that will be mentioned below in the second of the three following sections.

Turkey and the Situation of Kosovo's Turkish Minority

Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website notes that Ankara enjoys “excellent relations” with Kosovo “on the basis of common history and friendship.”¹³ Before Turkey became one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence, in July 1999 it had established a coordination office in Pristina, which, of course, was immediately upgraded to an embassy in 2008, as well as one in Prizren, where 1,000 Turkish soldiers were deployed as part of KFOR.¹⁴ In September 2015, Turkey established a consulate-general in Prizren, Kosovo's second largest city and a center of Turkish culture and heritage where Turks represent 4 percent of the municipality's population.¹⁵

⁹ NATO, KFOR, “Contributing Nations.” <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/welcome-to-kfor/contributing-nations>, accessed February 15, 2022. There are currently 28 countries contributing 3,370 personnel.

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, pp. 2, 11 and 17, respectively. <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/repository/docs/ConstitutionIKosovo.pdf>, accessed February 16, 2022.

¹¹ Quoted in Michael J. Totten, “The (Really) Moderate Muslims of Kosovo,” *City Journal* (Manhattan Institute for Policy Research), Autumn 2008. <https://www.city-journal.org/html/really-moderate-muslims-kosovo-13128.html>, accessed February 16, 2022.

¹² Quoted in Michael J. Totten, “The (Really) Moderate Muslims of Kosovo,” *City Journal* (Manhattan Institute for Policy Research), Autumn 2008. <https://www.city-journal.org/html/really-moderate-muslims-kosovo-13128.html>, accessed February 16, 2022.

¹³ Republic of Turkey (hereafter Turkey), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter MFA), “Relations between Turkey and Kosovo.” https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-kosovo_en.mfa, accessed February 18, 2022.

¹⁴ Sylvie Gangloff, “Turkish Policy towards the Conflict in Kosovo: The Preeminence of National Political Interests,” *Balkanologie*, Vol. 8, No.1 (2004), pp. 111-112. <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/517>, accessed February 18, 2022.

¹⁵ Minority Rights Group, “Kosovo's Turks.” <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/turks-4/>, accessed February 18, 2022.

Turkey's MFA website, after a discussion of bilateral political relations highlights information on the "Turkish Community of Kosovo." According to the April 2011 census, the last taken, there were 18,738 Turks,¹⁶ constituting 1.1 percent of the population, the fourth largest ethnic group in Kosovo after Albanians (92.9 percent), Bosniaks¹⁷ (1.6 percent), and Serbs (1.5 percent).¹⁸ According to Turkey's MFA, approximately 300,000 Kosovars speak Turkish,¹⁹ but as the minority rights group points out:

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[I]n combination with bad economic conditions and a lack of jobs in which Turkish language can be used ... many Turks are migrating to Turkey for higher education, or permanently. Despite having lived in Kosovo for five centuries, they feel that, with the lack of widespread official recognition of Turkish language and identity, the only other option is assimilation.²⁰

However, the two most recent parliamentary governments have included ethnic Turks in

the position of minister of regional development: Enis Kevran (June 2020 to March 2021) and Fikri Damka (March 2021 to the

present); both have promised to defend the interests of Kosovo's Turks in education, culture, and health issues,²¹ while the latter has a degree in economics from Istanbul University.²² In addition to historical and ethnic connections, Turkey has developed its political, economic, and cultural interests in Kosovo.

In April 1999, Turkey began accepting 20,000 Kosovar refugees from camps at Macedonia's border with Serbia, in addition to the 6,000 already present in Turkey. At the time, Turkey's President Süleyman Demirel asserted that it was Turkey's "duty to save our Kosovar brethren," while Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit stated during a visit to where refugees were being housed in Turkey that "the Kosovars are our brothers and the legacy of our history."²³ Turkey was cooperating with its NATO allies as the US also had granted temporary asylum to an additional 20,000, while Germany accepted the largest number of refugees, some 40,000.²⁴ These

¹⁶ Turkey, MFA, "Relations between Turkey and Kosovo."

¹⁷ This term is used for Bosnian Muslims.

¹⁸ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (hereafter CIA), *World Factbook*, "Kosovo." <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kosovo/>, accessed February 18, 2022.

¹⁹ Turkey, MFA, "Relations between Turkey and Kosovo."

²⁰ Minority Rights Group, "Kosovo's Turks."

²¹ "Kosovo Turks to Best Serve Their Country," *Turkish Press* (Independent website) June 8, 2020. <https://turkishpress.com/kosovo-turks-to-best-serve-their-country/>; and "Turkish Community in Kosovo to be Represented in Best Way Possible," *Yeni Şafak* (Istanbul), October 8, 2021. <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/turkish-community-in-kosovo-to-be-represented-in-best-way-possible-3581843>, both accessed February 18, 2022.

²² Republic of Kosovo (hereafter Kosovo), Ministry of Regional Development, "Minister." <https://mzhr.rks-gov.net/page.aspx?id=2,9>, accessed February 18, 2022.

²³ Quoted in Gangloff, "Turkish Policy towards the Conflict in Kosovo," p. 113.

²⁴ "Turkey Welcomes First Mass Resettlement of Kosovo Refugees," *CNN*, April 6, 1999. <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9904/05/kosovo.refugees.04/index.html>, accessed February 18, 2022.

refugees returned to Kosovo in the summer of 1999 when KFOR began operations.

Until just a couple of years ago, Turkish-Kosovar political ties developed extensively through the close personal relationship between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's prime minister from 2003 to 2014 and president since then, with Hashim Thaçi, an important leader in KLA and later Kosovo's first prime minister from 2008-2014, minister of foreign affairs from 2014-2016, and president from 2016 to November 2020. Thaçi considered Turkey (and Albania) as Kosovo's greatest allies in view of Turkey's lobbying for Kosovo's recognition; indeed, Erdoğan was instrumental in getting Pakistan, Egypt (when Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was president), and Brunei to do so.²⁵ Thaçi made several informal visits to Turkey in addition to Erdoğan's presidential inauguration ceremony in July 2018²⁶ and the opening of Istanbul's new airport in April 2019, while Erdoğan visited Kosovo twice (in 2010 and 2013) when Thaçi was in office, both during election campaigns in that Balkan country.²⁷

During Erdoğan's second visit in October 2013, the Turkish president made a speech in Prizren, with Thaçi in attendance, during which he stated "We all belong to a common history, common culture, common

civilization; we are the people who are brethren of that structure. Do not forget. Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey";²⁸ this expression of paternalism caused some annoyance in Kosovo, but Thaçi did not comment, giving the impression of "tacit consent."²⁹ In April 2016, Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş visited Pristina and after meeting with Thaçi and the speaker of parliament, stated: "Kosovo's recognition [by Muslim countries] would add strength to the Islamic world... . Kosovo is a European country which at the same time has a great Islamic culture, therefore it is one of the most important Islamic countries in the western world."³⁰ In June 2021, Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu—who succeeded Thaçi, the latter resigning in November 2020 after being indicted for war crimes by a special prosecutor in the Hague—visited Turkey and met with Erdoğan discussing matters of trade, health, and defense. She also attended the Antalya Diplomacy Forum where she stated that "there's practically no reason whatsoever for any country to hesitate to recognize Kosovo," despite acknowledging that it "is a path facing quite a lot of challenges and hurdles" due to the efforts of Serbia and Russia.³¹

Turkey-Kosovo ties also were facilitated through cultural channels such as the Gülen movement, which in 2000 established an

²⁵ Gentiola Madhi, "'Our Brother Erdogan' – From Official to Personal Relations of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President," *Western Balkans at the Crossroads* (Prague Security Studies Institute), February 2021, p. 13. https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8474_our-brother-erdogan-from-official-to-personal-relations-of-political-leaders-of-albania-and-kosovo-with-the-turkish-president.pdf, accessed February 20, 2022.

²⁶ Other foreign presidents attending included those from Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Mauritania and Djibouti as well as the Emir of Qatar. Ilkay Guder, "22 Heads of State to Attend Erdogan's Inauguration," *Anadolu Agency* (Turkey), July 8, 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/22-heads-of-states-to-attend-erdogans-inauguration/1198135>, accessed February 20, 2022.

²⁷ Madhi, "Our Brother Erdogan," pp. 13-14.

²⁸ Quoted in Yavuz Baydar, "Erdogan: Kosovo is Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, October 28, 2013. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/10/erdogan-kosovo-turkey.html>, accessed February 20, 2022.

²⁹ Madhi, "Our Brother Erdogan," p. 14.

³⁰ Quoted in Talha Öztürk, "Turkey Urges Muslim Countries to Recognize Kosovo," *Anadolu Agency*, April 22, 2016.

³¹ Quoted in "Turkey's Support Crucial for Kosovo to Gain Global Recognition," *Daily Sabah* (Istanbul), June 21, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkeys-support-crucial-for-kosovo-to-gain-global-recognition>, accessed February 20, 2022.

educational institution known as Mehmet Akif College, located in Lipjan, for kindergarten through twelfth grade providing instruction in Albanian, Turkish, and English, and with campuses also in Prizren and Gjakova; it was the first private school built since the war against Serbia. However, at the time of the unsuccessful coup against Erdoğan's government in July 2016, the Gülenists were blamed. In February 2018, Turkey appealed to Kosovo to close down the schools and offered as an alternative two others opened by the Maarif Foundation.³² The following month, six Turkish nationals suspected of being connected with the Gülenist movement, five of whom were teachers at Mehmet Akif College, were arrested, on orders of Kosovo's minister of interior and intelligence chief, and handed over to Turkish intelligence officials at Pristina's airport, from where they were flown back to Turkey. Both Kosovar officials were subsequently sacked by the prime minister,³³ who earned the wrath of Erdoğan.³⁴ Despite the Turkish president's outburst, relations were subsequently smoothed over, and Kosovo has been grateful for Turkey's foreign assistance and investment.

Between 2005 and 2020, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has carried out more than 650 projects in the fields of health, education, and agriculture as well as in historical

preservation. These have included among other things, renovating hospitals, providing equipment and training health personnel, constructing schools, and assistance with



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) meets with Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti in February 2023.

animal husbandry, beekeeping, milk production and greenhouse growing of crops, while encouraging women involved in agriculture, as well as restoring mosques.³⁵ In addition, Turkey's Albin Kurti *Diyanet*, Directorate for Religious Affairs, is overseeing the construction of the Central Mosque in Pristina, costing \$1.8 million; it is based on the design of Ottoman architect Sinan's sixteenth century Selimiye Mosque in Edirne³⁶ in Turkey as Kosovo's population is 95.6 percent Muslim and there is already a large Catholic cathedral in the capital city constructed in 2007 although adherents of that

³² "Turkey Tries to Counter Gülenist Schools in Kosovo," *TRT World*, February 20, 2018. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-tries-to-counter-gulenist-schools-in-kosovo-15337>, accessed February 20, 2022.

³³ "Kosovo Security Chiefs Sacked after Six Turks Departed," *BBC News*, March 30, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43596926>, accessed February 20, 2022.

³⁴ "Turkey's Erdoğan Slams Kosovo Criticism of Deportation of Gülen-Linked Turks," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (hereafter RFE/RL), March 31, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-investigation-arrest-deportation-turkey-teachers-gulen/29137309.html>, accessed February 20, 2022.

³⁵ Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, "Turkey Strengthens the Ties of Friendship between Turkey and Kosovo through Hundreds of Projects," June 2021. https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika_strengthens_the_ties_of_friendship_between_turkey_and_kosovo_through_hundreds_of_projects-64043, accessed February 20, 2022.

³⁶ Maxim Edwards and Michael Colborne, "Turkey's Gift of a Mosque Sparks Fears of Neo-Ottomanism in Kosovo," *The Guardian* (London), January 2, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>, accessed February 20, 2022.

faith only represent 2.2 percent of Kosovo's population.³⁷

As for economic investments in Kosovo, between 2007 and 2017, Turkey contributed the third largest foreign direct investment (FDI) after Germany and Switzerland.³⁸ About 500 companies operate in Kosovo engaged in construction, mining, banking, textiles, furniture, and production of food.³⁹ Turkish firms operate Pristina airport, Kosovo's electricity network, and are constructing major highways in the country⁴⁰ and Turkey is Kosovo's third largest importer of goods, accepting 9.6 percent of that country's exports.⁴¹ In 2019, Turkey and Kosovo signed a free trade agreement and Turkish companies were employing about 10,000 Kosovars.⁴² The investments in and trade of other Middle Eastern countries with Kosovo are dwarfed by those of Turkey.

The Rest of the Muslim World and the Growing Appeal of Islam

In May 1999, Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy wrote:

Arab Middle Eastern reactions to the Kosovo conflict can be

described as deafening quiet. Arabs are generally distraught by the plight of ethnic Albanian Kosovars and tend to blame Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic for their suffering.... [They] tend to feel ambivalent about the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ... [while Yugoslavia's role] in the non-aligned movement and its training of various Palestinian groups ... is still deeply entrenched in the minds of some Arab countries.⁴³

Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan were concerned about humanitarian aid and bringing the problem to the United Nations, but "exercised very limited clout," while other states such as Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Saddam Hussein's Iraq had military connections with Yugoslavia and an adversarial relationship with the US.⁴⁴

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei described the NATO airstrikes as a plot designed for the "annihilation of the Muslims in Europe,"⁴⁵ while his country preferred to let Russia take the lead in

³⁷ CIA, *World Factbook*, "Kosovo." Orthodox Christians constitute 1.5% of Kosovo's population.

³⁸ Arben Sahiti, Ard Ahmeti, and Arbana Sahiti, "FDI Trends and Characteristics in Kosovo," *Baltic Journal of Real Estate Economics and Construction Management* (Riga Technical University), Vol. 8 (2020), pp. 16-17. The others in the top five were the United Kingdom and Austria, in that order. <https://sciencedirect.com/article/10.2478/bjreecm-2020-0002>, accessed February 20, 2022.

³⁹ Turkey, MFA, "Relations between Turkey and Kosovo"; and Jeton Mehmeti, "The Economic and Social Investment of Turkey in Kosovo," *Adam Akademi Journal of Social Sciences* (Ankara Thought and Research Center), Vol. 1 (2012), p. 101. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/230539>, accessed February 20, 2022.

⁴⁰ "Turkey's Erdogan Slams Kosovo," *RFE/RL*.

⁴¹ CIA, *World Factbook*, "Kosovo." Germany and Serbia were numbers one and two, while China was the fourth largest, followed by Italy, North Macedonia, Albania and Greece, in that order according to 2017 figures, the most recent available.

⁴² "Turkey Fully Supports Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue: FM Çavuşoğlu," *Hürriyet Daily News* (Istanbul), December 29, 2020. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-fully-supports-serbia-kosovo-dialogue-fm-cavusoglu-161229>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁴³ Patrick Clawson, "The Arab World, Iran, and the Kosovo Crisis," *Policy Watch* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), No. 391, May 24, 1999. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-world-iran-and-kosovo-crisis>, accessed February 20, 2022.

⁴⁴ Clawson, "The Arab World, Iran, and the Kosovo Crisis."

⁴⁵ Clawson, "The Arab World, Iran, and the Kosovo Crisis."

opposing the actions of the United States and its allies.⁴⁶ When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, Iranian officials remained silent, but were disturbed by the new country's embrace of the United States.⁴⁷ Since then, it has been wary of those ties and fearful that Kosovo's secession and international recognition of its independence were setting a dangerous precedent. Indeed, in April 2021, Serbia's Nikola Selaković visited Tehran after a trip to Moscow and thanked his Iranian counterpart Muhammad Javad Zarif for his country's "principled and continuous support ... of the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia in Kosovo."⁴⁸

Saudi Arabia recognized Kosovo in April 2009, followed by Bahrain the next month and Jordan in July. Saudi Arabia noted that this was done in "line with existing religious and cultural bonds."

Over the years, Iran has continued to take Russia's lead and has had no interactions with Kosovo. Reasons for this stance include the following: 1) Kosovo owes its independence to support given by the US and its Western allies; 2) like other countries, Iran fears that its own ethnic minorities could follow Kosovo's example; 3) Saudi Arabia's early and well-developed ties with Kosovo; and 4) Iran's adversarial relations with the US necessitate being on

good terms with Russia, for which the Kosovo issue is very important.

After the Kosovo conflict was over, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates joined KFOR, both coordinating with the French. The Moroccans participated until 2014, with a total of 11,000 soldiers serving during that time, and among other things provided medical services.⁴⁹ As for the UAE, its contingent constructed houses, built roads, reconstructed mosques, and provided medical services, but left in 2001, given the timing perhaps connected with 9/11.⁵⁰ The UAE recognized Kosovo in October 2008, the first Middle Eastern country outside of Turkey to do so, stating that it was

giving "support for peoples' legitimate right of self-determination,"⁵¹ Morocco still has not done so, most likely not wanting to give political legitimacy to the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic as it claims sovereignty over the territory of Western Sahara.

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⁴⁶ Bill Samii, "Iran: Tehran Looks to Moscow in Kosovo Crisis," *RFE/RL*, April 9, 1999. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1090964.html>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁴⁷ Raz Zimmt, "Iran's reaction to Kosovo's Declaration of Independence," *Iran Pulse* (Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University), March 2008. https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/publications/irans_pulse/2008-10, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁴⁸ "Serbia's FM: Iran Supports Serbia on the Issue of Kosovo," *NI* (Serbian News Channel), April 18, 2021. <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/serbias-fm-iran-supports-serbia-on-the-issue-of-kosovo/>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁴⁹ NATO, KFOR, Media Center, "After 14 Years Moroccan Contingent Leaves KFOR." <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/media-center/archive/news/2014/after-14-years-moroccan-contingent-leaves-kfor>, accessed February 20, 2022.

⁵⁰ "UAE Mission in Kosovo Concludes," *Gulf News*, September 29, 2001. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/uae-mission-in-kosovo-concludes-1.425864>; and "UAE Forces' Role in KFOR Explained," *Gulf News*, October 11, 2001. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/uae-forces-role-in-kfor-explained-1.426896>, both accessed February 20, 2022.

⁵¹ Quoted in "UAE Recognizes Kosovo Independence," *Balkan Insight*, October 15, 2008. <https://balkaninsight.com/2008/10/15/uae-recognises-kosovo-s-independence/>, accessed February 21, 2022.

cultural bonds ... and in respect to the will of the people of Kosovo to obtain independence” and hoped that such action would “positively contribute to enhancing the pillars of security and stability in Kosovo and its other neighboring countries.”⁵² Bahrain also mentioned “cultural and religious ties” (interestingly in reverse order to Saudi Arabia).⁵³ In January 2010, Mauritania recognized Kosovo after a lobbying effort by Kosovo’s Foreign Minister Skënder Hyseni of Arab and Muslim countries;⁵⁴ Djibouti and Somalia followed suit in May 2010. Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, in that order, did so in 2011, following the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) providing legitimacy for Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, while Yemen, Egypt, and Libya, in that order, followed suit in 2013. Since then, except for Bangladesh in 2017, no Arab or Muslim country has recognized Kosovo’s independence.⁵⁵

Under the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK), created at the same time as KFOR in June 1999, which provided civil administration, policing, and legal services until Kosovo became independent, Saudi-based humanitarian agencies and private charitable organizations operating under the umbrella of the Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya were permitted to operate. They

built mosques, where imams began preaching Salafism and established Quranic schools in rural areas, especially devastated by the war. In these communities, small numbers of young men began growing beards, while women and girls started wearing *niqab* (face veils).⁵⁶ Following Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008, that state while emphasizing its secular character also has acknowledged a debt to those countries that have had a history of providing diplomatic support; indeed, Saudi Arabia was one of 35 countries that submitted statements to the ICJ in its September 2010 decision legitimizing Kosovo’s independence.⁵⁷ In 2012, Kosovo appointed the former mufti of Kosovo, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, where he served until 2018.

However, in May 2016, Fatos Makolli, the director of Kosovo’s counter-terrorism police, when discussing the 314 Kosovars who had joined the Islamic State, the highest number per capita in Europe, blamed “extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab gulf states.” He continued:

They spent a lot of money to promote it [political Islam] through different programs mainly with young, vulnerable people, and they brought in a

⁵² Saudi Press Agency, “Saudi Arabia Announces Recognition of the Republic of Kosovo,” April 20, 2009. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?newsid=656348>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁵³ “Bahrain Recognizes Kosovo Independence,” *Balkan Insight*, May 20, 2009. <https://balkaninsight.com/2009/05/20/bahrain-recognises-kosovo-s-independence/>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁵⁴ “Mauritania Recognizes Kosovo’s Independence,” *Balkan Insight*, January 14, 2010. <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/01/14/mauritania-recognises-kosovo-s-independence/>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁵⁵ Kosovo, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora (hereafter MFA), “List of Recognitions.” <https://mfa-ks.net/en/politika/484/lista-e-njohjeve/484>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁵⁶ Gëzim Krasniqi, “The ‘Forbidden Fruit’: Islam and Politics of Identity in Kosovo and Macedonia,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 11 (2011), pp. 16-17 in the open access version from the University of Edinburgh. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/28961937.pdf>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁵⁷ Lulzim Mjeku, “Kosovo 2010 Victory at ICJ Has Boosted Balkan region’s Stability,” *Arab News* (Riyadh), July 21, 2020. Mjeku is Kosovo’s current ambassador to Saudi Arabia. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1708081/world>, accessed February 21, 2022.

lot of Wahhabi and Salafi literature. They brought these people closer to radical political Islam, which resulted in their radicalization.⁵⁸

After two years of investigations, Kosovo's police charged 67 people, arrested 14 imams, and shut down 19 Muslim organizations for "acting against the constitution, inciting hatred, and recruiting for terrorism." However, Makolli admitted that there was no evidence of direct payments enabling people to travel to Syria.⁵⁹ According to Lulzim Peci, who did a study on Kosovar identity in 2016 for the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, 57 percent of Muslim Albanians feel Albanian first, while 32 percent defined themselves as Muslims first. Sociologist Smajl Hasan blames the poor educational system for the failure to develop a Kosovar identity "based on religious tolerance and a multi-religious identity," while Florian Qehaja, director of the Kosovar Center for Security Studies, asserts that radical Islam appeals to people disturbed by Kosovo's poor economic situation and governmental corruption and incompetence.⁶⁰

Israel and Kosovo's Small Jewish Community

Between 1998 and 1999, Israel dispatched humanitarian aid to Kosovo. However, when Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, Israel declined to recognize the new state as it felt that doing so would give legitimacy to the Palestinians' quest for statehood and also it

did not want to damage ties with Serbia. Indeed, a few months after Israel and Kosovo established relations in May 2021, Israel's ambassador Jahel Vilan in an interview with Serbia's Prva TV stated that recognition of Kosovo was done "under US pressure," a claim that Serbia's Foreign Minister Selaković not only refused to accept, but labeled a "unique kind of disrespect."⁶¹ However, Kosovo was elated as it was almost three years since any additional country had granted it recognition. Kosovar Foreign Minister Meliza Haradinaj-Stublla on the occasion in February 2021 stated that the two countries shared a "historic bond" as both "had witnessed a long and challenging path to existing as a people and becoming states."⁶² At that time, Israel and Kosovo also signed a cooperation agreement in agriculture, water management, health, education, and innovation. The following month, Kosovo opened its embassy in Jerusalem, becoming the third country to do so. The father of its Chargé d'affaires Ines Demiri (Votim Demiri) is considered the head of the Jewish community in Kosovo, numbering about 80 people with some 60 living in Prizren, where a synagogue and museum are being constructed with funding coming from American donations and Kosovo's Ministry of Culture; most of Kosovo's Jews who survived the Second World War emigrated to Israel, while the Communist Yugoslav government tore down Kosovo's last synagogue in 1963. There is a Holocaust memorial on the grounds of Kosovo's parliament and anti-Semitic literature is

⁵⁸ Quoted in Carlotta Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS," *New York Times*, May 21, 2016.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Carlotta Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS," *New York Times*, May 21, 2016.

⁶⁰ "Is Kosovo a Breeding Ground for Islamists?" *DW* (Germany), December 23, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-kosovo-a-breeding-ground-for-islamists/a-36898392>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁶¹ Quoted in "Ambassador: Israel Recognized Kosovo under US Pressure," *EURACTIV* (Brussels), May 13, 2021. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/ambassador-israel-recognised-kosovo-under-us-pressure/, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁶² Rami Ayyub, "Israel and Kosovo Establish Diplomatic Relations in Virtual Ceremony," *Reuters*, February 1, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-kosovo-relations-idUSKBN2A12S0>, accessed February 21, 2022.

banned in the country.⁶³ Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki wrote the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, demanding that its members—which includes Turkey and all Arab states—break off relations with Kosovo for establishing an embassy in Jerusalem, while his ministry called the move by Kosovo “a blatant attack on Palestinian people, their rights and a flagrant violation of international law.”⁶⁴ Turkey was more subtle in its criticism of Kosovo’s decision, preferring to express its opposition through diplomatic channels.

Recognition of Kosovo has proven beneficial for Israel as few countries have their embassies in Jerusalem. At the same time, the Kosovo precedent of secession from an established state followed by international recognition has not benefitted the Palestinians as originally feared, while there have been no evident repercussions in Israel’s relations with Serbia. Indeed, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Israel has faced a similar dilemma of not wanting to offend Russia due to its presence in Syria. However, it voted to suspend Russia’s membership in the U.N.’s Human Rights Council and has provided some assistance to Ukraine, while some voiced criticism of Russia’s actions in Ukraine once again without any evident repercussions.

Conclusion

Kosovo has a secular Western-oriented government and desires to join the European Union and the United Nations. This

necessitates recognition from all countries willing to engage in diplomatic relations.

It should be noted that according to international law, as determined by Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention, which became operative in 1934, a state should possess the following: 1) a permanent population; 2) a defined territory; 3) a government; and 4) a capacity to enter into relations with other states.⁶⁵ Kosovo possesses all of these, is at peace, and attempts to balance its relations especially with the US, European countries, the Muslim world, and Israel. On the other hand, the Palestinian territories are not officially defined as the boundaries of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are ceasefire lines from the First Arab Israeli war in 1948 agreed to by Jordan and Egypt, respectively. Yet Israel mistakenly believed that recognition of Kosovo would give legitimacy to Palestinian claims for statehood. Despite the fact that Kosovo is recognized by only 117 countries, while “Palestine” is recognized by 138 states, the US did Israel a favor in forcing the issue and Israel has benefitted from ties with Kosovo.

This article has focused on Kosovo’s relations with the countries of the Middle East. While its population is rediscovering Islam, and some especially among its youth have become radicalized, Kosovo has always sought friendly relations with Israel. It is noteworthy that in recent years as the US and Turkey have disagreed on issues concerning the Middle East, both have been very willing to assist Kosovo in expanding its international

⁶³ Larry Luxner, “With US Help, Muslim-Majority Kosovo Plans its First Synagogue and Jewish Museum,” *Times of Israel*, December 22, 2018. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-us-help-muslim-majority-kosovo-plans-its-first-synagogue-and-jewish-museum/>; and Jakob Weizman, “Kosovo’s Jews in Race to Preserve Heritage,” *Balkan Insight*, December 11, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/11/kosovos-jews-in-race-to-preserve-heritage/>, both accessed February 21, 2022.


⁶⁴ “Palestinians Demand Cutting Ties with Kosovo,” *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), April 15, 2021. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2920036/palestinians-demand-cutting-ties-kosovo>, accessed February 21, 2022.

⁶⁵ The Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States signed December 26, 1933. http://www.hudok.info/files/1114/3526/0588/Evi-Doc_12_Montevideo.pdf, accessed February 22, 2022.

connections. Also, while many states in the West have recognized Kosovo, some countries in the Middle East have been reluctant to do so or dragged their heels for some time like Israel. Such a position placed Israel out of step with its allies in the West, especially the US.

Indeed, with regard to the issue of diplomatic relations with Kosovo, this is one area where the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel are all on the same page, though for different reasons. Turkey and Saudi Arabia regard themselves as leaders in the Sunni Muslim world and seek to act as guardians for a fellow religious population that has been persecuted in the past, while Israel is pleased with having another embassy based in Jerusalem. The US and most of its Western allies as well as countries that matter most to them in the Middle East are acting on principle and in accordance with the September 2010 decision

of the ICJ legitimizing Kosovo's independence.

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