

American Foreign Policy Council

Kosovo

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,883,018 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 10,887 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Albanians 93%, other (Bosniaks, Serbs, Turk, Ashkali, Egyptian, Gorani, and Roma) 7%

Religions: Muslim, Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic

Government Type: Parliamentary Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$6.355 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated November 2016)

OVERVIEW

Islam's footprint in Kosovo dates back seven centuries, to the time of the Ottoman conquest. Although much of the ethnic Albanian-majority population practices a moderate form of Islam, the 1999 NATO intervention and subsequent, prolonged UN mission created the conditions for extremist penetration. Due to the unaccountable governance of a supra-national organization, numerous Islamic states and fundamentalist-oriented charities were allowed open access to this economically underdeveloped, war-ravaged corner of Europe. The result today is that, while most Kosovars are still moderate, the country has produced the highest number of foreign fighters per capita among European countries joining ISIS and Al Nusra Front, with 125 fighters for every million people.

As a strong U.S. ally keenly aware that it remains dependent on foreign aid, Kosovo has taken legal and police measures to crack down on extremism. An independent state since 2008, Kosovo (which has a 95% Muslim population) has seen in recent years an increasingly heated domestic discussion regarding the place of religion in society and politics.

While foreign Islamist charities left behind numerous new mosques and religious schools, they failed to re-orient most Muslims toward a strict Wahhabi interpretation of the faith. However, some Kosovar Muslims have sharply criticized their moderate counterparts, not to mention Catholics and Protestant missionaries. Protests over church and mosque construction, as well as the wearing of head scarves in schools, have also become politicized issues within the country.

While it has tended to downplay the role of Islam (and Islamic extremism), the Kosovar government is taking steps to deal with security and social issues associated with radicalization, passing laws against foreign fighters and arresting scores of previous or aspiring homegrown jihadists since 2014. While there are specific connections between Kosovo and the Syrian conflict, in the long term the development of education, health and work opportunities for local youth is probably the greatest challenge Kosovo faces in countering violent extremism. At the same time, the ethnic linkages between Kosovars at home and those in Western European countries has resulted (and will result) in police actions elsewhere on the Continent that in some way involve Kosovo.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Today's Islamist activity in Kosovo was expedited by the 1999 NATO intervention, which replaced Serbian rule with a porous international administration that was preoccupied with matters of inter-ethnic violence, organized crime and institution-building. Relatively little attention was paid to the possibility of Islamic extremism, in part because the narrative of an ethnic nationalist liberation struggle allegedly precluded this possibility. However, estimates made in 2006 that anticipated Kosovar participation in future *jihadist* activities have been proven abundantly correct.² The estimates for the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo vary widely, with the Kosovar government claiming an almost complete stoppage of *jihadists* exiting the country.³ The most recent reliable statistics put the number at some 232 Kosovo-born fighters had joined the ranks of *jihadist* groups, making Kosovo the highest exporter of *jihadists* per capita in Europe.⁴

Several factors account for this trend, not least a poor economy, stalled political and institutional development, a demographic imbalance between males and females and low youth employment rates.⁵ Ultimately, though, the participation of Kosovo Muslims in modern *jihad* owes to the support of foreign Islamic donors, who sought to build mosques, schools and NGOs in the country following the 1999 NATO intervention. Although many of these groups have since been closed or voluntarily left, they did provide indoctrination and financial support for impoverished Kosovars at a key post-conflict time. Their influence has lingered and, as we are seeing, has created an extremist fringe that took on a leading role in the Syrian conflict.

Primarily, funding for the wartime resistance, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), came from other means—from the personal donations of patriotic diaspora Albanians, and from Albanian mafia structures involved with heroin distribution in Europe.⁶ These smuggling rings were powerful and well-entrenched; over a decade later, in 2011 and 2012, European police in Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy were still combating them.⁷

Cooperation between ethnic Albanian drug cartels and ISIS is today a growing concern. Kosovars have historically been involved in heroin smuggling from Asia and some cocaine smuggling from South America, along with Albanians. But, as with Albania, they are most active through their extensive diaspora networks in Western Europe. After a large-scale police operation to destroy vast cannabis plantations in southern Albania, the business became fragmented, with older clans replaced by more violent adherents to radical Islam. A January 2016 report named Kosovo's most infamous ISIS member, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, as the key link between Albanian drug operations and ISIS recruitment. This is said to mark an increasingly violent and religiously-oriented drug-smuggling outfit in the region, with ties to the Italian and other mafias.⁸

Muhaxheri (born circa 1987) is the best-known Kosovar *jihdist* associated with ISIS (ironically, he previously worked for both the UN administration in Kosovo and NATO in Afghanistan before being radicalized in the small south Kosovo village of Kacanik in 2012).⁹ Since 2012, he has appeared in several propaganda videos for ISIS, including one showing him beheading a captive. In an unsettling attempt to justify the crime to Kosovar nationalists, Muhaxheri claimed that he had done “the same thing” as the nationalist KLA had done against the Serbs, in 1999.¹⁰

Muhaxheri has led ISIS' ethnic-Albanian brigade, and its Albanian-language propaganda campaign. He was also the ideological protégé of the (now jailed) radical Kosovar imam Zekerija Qazimi, as was another field commander, Ridvan Haqifi.¹¹ In August 2014, Interpol put Muhaxheri on the organization's wanted list. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry blacklisted the Kosovar *jihdist* as a threat to American national security in the Federal Register on October 2, 2014.¹² Lavdrim Muhaxheri was widely speculated to have died in battle, but new photos indicated that he was alive as of December 2015.¹³

By May 2016, the number of Kosovars (including women and children) who had joined militant groups in Syria and Iraq had reached at least 314 persons, not counting pre-2014 fighters, according to a *New York Times* investigation. This report found that the development and mobilization of a Kosovar *jihdist* force had been accomplished by a “corps of extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab gulf states using an obscure, labyrinthine network of donations from charities, private individuals and government ministries.”¹⁴ While

Kosovo's interior ministry stated in August 2016 that no new recruits were believed to have departed in the past year, some 50 Kosovars had died in battle and another 120 had returned.¹⁵

Detailed discussion of Islamist activity in Kosovo must begin with an acknowledgement of the complexity and singularity of prevailing local conditions, which cumulatively have created a friendly environment for a certain kind of Islamism to take root. Powerful clan structures and pervasive organized crime have long fueled allegations of criminality and corruption on the part of local and international leaders alike. Frustration among the general public after 1999 was also driven by the perceived lack of political and economic change in the post-Yugoslav "transition" period. The unaccountable and uninvolved nature of an international UN mission that changed staff frequently and had no long-term responsibilities for Kosovo's well-being also hindered prospects of real change.

Kosovo has also been kept in limbo due to a continuing political impasse with Serbia, which refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence. Local and foreign diplomacy since 2000 has thus been almost completely preoccupied with big-picture status issues. With solving this issue seen as a necessary prerequisite to other things, the economy and social services have been neglected. In this situation, Islamists have presented their ideology as a long-term social solution.

The first foreign Islamist actors came to Kosovo in 1999 via in an assortment of Islamic charities. The most important was a Saudi government umbrella organization, the Saudi Joint Commission for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya (SJCRKC). It was matched by its official Kuwaiti counterpart, the Kuwaiti Joint Relief Committee (KJRC). Along with then-returning Albanian refugees, representatives of these groups (and the Islamic charities organized within them) entered Kosovo from neighboring Albania, where Albanian and U.S. authorities had been monitoring, and working to control, suspected international terrorist suspects. The Saudis initially allocated over \$22.5 million for the rebuilding or new construction of mosques and schools, and also for supporting orphans in Kosovo.¹⁶ However, Kosovo investigators of the now-closed charity found in 2016 that most of the Saudi money could not be accounted for, and that very little has ever actually been given to help orphans.¹⁷

Aside from charities, a major opportunity for foreign Islamic development, recruitment and intelligence activity came as a result of the broad participation of many nations (including major Muslim states) in the interim UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping units authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Muslim states like Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey used this rare "official cover" in a previously closed part of Europe to develop their own interests. In October 1999 alone, Saudi sponsors donated 200,000 copies of the Koran in Albanian/Arabic translation as part of efforts to promulgate the Kingdom's official brand of Islamism in the Balkans.¹⁸

Although the volume of such personnel would gradually diminish over time, and in some cases disappear completely with the progressive downsizing of the UN mission, Kosovo was clearly vulnerable to foreign Islamist penetration in the early years of post-Yugoslav rule. Kosovo's internationally uncertain status also meant a no-visa policy, and with essentially open borders, Kosovo became Europe's primary "safe zone" for foreign radicals. Pressure from the EU – which Kosovo hopes to join someday – led the government to plan to impose visas on over 80 countries in 2013. But, as of August 2016, citizens from over 100 countries (including most of the Gulf states) still did not need visas to enter Kosovo.¹⁹

From early on, Western experts raised concerns over the arrival of Wahhabism. However, Kosovar Islamic leaders tended to maintain that the appeal of such worldviews was limited and represented no threat to the traditional fabric of Islamic society.²⁰ Indeed, overly aggressive Wahhabi sponsors angered local Albanian Muslims on a number of occasions, such as when they desecrated tombs and demolished parts of shrines belonging to the traditional Bektashi order of Islam—a more relaxed, Shi'ite-influenced hold-over from Ottoman times that is considered heretical by many Sunnis (including the Wahhabis).²¹ This aggressive strategy caused a backlash among local Muslims, leading Wahhabi groups to cease their destruction of "heretical" structures and simply concentrate on building new mosques in the distinctive Arab style.

The dynamic of Islamist activity in Kosovo has changed gradually along with the country's political and social situation. The chronically antagonistic relations between Albanians and Serbs have largely been ethnic in character but, as a 2010 U.S. Department of State report noted, "the close link between ethnicity and religion [have] made it difficult to determine if events were motivated by ethnic or religious animosity."²²

The motivations behind these animosities and related attacks are indeed difficult to ascertain, though there has undeniably been a religious aspect to violence on both sides. According to Albanian sources, 216 of the 513 mosques that existed in Kosovo in the year 2000 had been damaged in fighting during the 1990s, while over 80 Christian churches and mosques were attacked by Albanians (*after*, not before, the arrival of 40,000 NATO peacekeepers in July 1999).²³ And there is no question that the major post-war conflagration—the country's March 2004 riots, in which 50,000 Albanians targeted Serbs and foreign nationals across Kosovo—had an Islamic aspect as well. For example, after over 30 Serbian Orthodox churches were attacked, DVDs of the destruction were soon being circulated in radical Western European mosques; furthermore, a confidential NATO document subsequently indicated that the alleged masterminds of these pre-planned riots had had ties to Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.²⁴

Whereas Kosovo's traditional antagonisms were ethnic in nature (albeit with religious overtones), recent years have seen an emergence of intra-ethnic tensions within the Albanian Muslim community, as well as hostility from Albanian Muslims toward Al-

banian Catholics and toward local and foreign members of the Catholic and Protestant denominations. This is due to two factors: first, the steady decline of the Serbian minority and Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, both of which minimized the Serbs' traditional status as the primary oppressive force restricting the freedom of Albanians; and second, the internal struggles for control between rival Muslim factions, as a young generation trained abroad or exposed to foreign versions of Islam openly contests the worship practices of their elders.

There is potential for this intra-ethnic divide to worsen, as hardline Muslims have expressed anger over the government's perceived preference for promoting a Christian agenda.²⁵ The enormous Cathedral of the Blessed Mother Teresa occupies a square in downtown Pristina, commemorating the ethnic Albanian nun who is considered an Albanian national hero. She was canonized on September 4, 2016, which will help the Vatican develop its "brand" in Kosovo. The Catholic Church also runs numerous charities and NGOs, as well as a Jesuit boarding school, all of which cause indignation among Muslim extremists.²⁶

While Catholicism has an even longer history than Islam does in Kosovo, Islamist activity has also targeted non-native Christian groups. Unsurprisingly, evangelical Christian attempts to convert local Muslims, particularly in more violence-prone provincial areas, have provoked a severe response. Protestants have in the past reported threats and intimidation from local Islamists; in one high-profile case, personal data on members of the Protestant community was reproduced by up to 100 Islamic websites. Subsequently, in May 2010, a missionary reported being physically attacked by Islamists in Prizren, a long-acknowledged center of Islamism in Kosovo.²⁷ Further, in 2011 Protestants in western Kosovo also complained that dubious legal rulings and local Muslim pressure prevented them opening a church and a cemetery; this restriction "frequently resulted in Protestants being buried in Muslim graveyards and Muslim clerics performing funeral services for Protestants," reported the U.S. State Department in its *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011*. The report also discussed several cases of attacks against Serbian Orthodox shrines and the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in the same year.²⁸

More recently, in October 2015, two Serbian churches (including one in the ISIS-linked village of Kacanik) were vandalized. And, in early 2016, police detained four gun-toting men near the Serbian Decani Monastery in western Kosovo. Near that time, explosive material was also found outside a mosque that was known to be critical of *Wahhabi* extremists.²⁹

Indeed, tensions within the Muslim community in Kosovo over control of mosques and other religious institutions have long been witnessed, and tend to figure in the longer narrative of alienation and radicalization that finally manifested in the exodus of Kosovar *jihadists* to Syria. For any early example, an elderly *imam* in the Drenica area was attacked in January 2009 by bearded Wahhabis in an act of intimidation,

revealing their desire to “take over” the mosque.³⁰ When mosques have been unavailable, Islamists (especially during the UNMIK period) often appropriate public facilities such as sports halls for fundamentalist preaching. For example, the State Department’s 2009 *Country Reports on Terrorism* noted that Kosovo police and the UN Mission in Kosovo “continued to monitor suspected terrorist activity,” believing that several NGOs were involved in “suspicious activities.” These authorities were also trying “to prevent extremists from using non-governmental organizations to gain a foothold in Kosovo,” and “to prevent misuse of facilities for events that had no consent from the relevant religious community.”³¹

Even before the Syrian war, Kosovar Albanians were involved in both terrorist cells and organized crime.³² In the United States, these extremists were implicated in the foiled 2008 attack on Fort Dix in New Jersey,³³ and in a similarly foiled plot against the U.S. Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia.³⁴ In 2012, the shadowy ‘Kosovo Hackers Security’ group made headlines when it successfully infiltrated the U.S. National Weather Service’s computer networks; this was reportedly meant to be “a protest against the U.S. policies that target Muslim countries.”³⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

A 2015 estimate pegged Kosovo’s population at almost 1.9 million.³⁶ Ethnic Albanians comprise 92% of this population, which is on average one of the youngest in any European country. However, the poor economy has led many Kosovars to look for options abroad, and there is a large Kosovar diaspora in Western Europe. Kosovars and Albanians sought to take advantage of the 2015 migrant crisis for economic reasons, comprising one of the largest numbers of asylum-seekers by nationality. Their asylum attempts, however, generally failed, and the individuals in question were returned to their homelands. Germany alone received 102,000 ethnic Albanian migrants in 2015.³⁷ Despite Kosovo’s location in the Balkans, it did not receive a significant influx of migrants during the migrant crisis, because it was off the path that most migrants took to enter Europe, known as the Balkan Route. The Balkan Route runs in from Greece through the Vardar Valley corridor in central Macedonia and northwards through Serbia, reaching Hungary and Austria. Since Kosovo was not on the Balkan Route, it was never really impacted by migrant flows that passed through neighboring Macedonia and Serbia.

Muslims (who include small populations of Roma, Turks, Gorani and Bosniaks) in total are estimated to comprise 95 percent of Kosovo’s total population.³⁸ Approximately three percent of Kosovo’s Albanians are Catholic, though this population seems to be increasing, while various foreign Protestant denominations have tried (so far, with less success) to convert Kosovo’s Muslims. The beleaguered Serbian Orthodox minority of 120,000 persons is largely concentrated in a few scattered central

enclaves, and in more compact northern municipalities around the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica. However, there is also a small Serbian-speaking Slavic Muslim minority, the Gorani, who primarily inhabit the mountainous southwestern area around Dragas, nestled between Macedonia and Albania. The small Roma (Gypsy) minority is mainly Muslim as well, but it is less active, limited by the idiosyncratic Roma lifestyle on the margins of society.

In Kosovo, Islam has played an important role in affecting national identities. The country is often referred to as the “cradle” of the medieval Serbian empire, which left abundant reminders of its presence in the scores of Orthodox Christian churches and monasteries that remain today. However, the area was captured by the Ottoman Turks in the late 14th century, and the Albanian Catholic warlord Skanderbeg (the main national hero) is celebrated today for his resistance to the Turks.

Islam thereafter became the dominant religion, with considerable privileges conferred on those who converted (such as the gradually expanding ethnic Albanian population). During Communist Yugoslav rule, all religions were strictly controlled, while Kosovo’s demography underwent two important changes: the Kosovo Albanian population increased even further, and several thousand ethnic Turks and Albanians migrated to Turkey.

The officially recognized Muslim organization in the country is the Islamic Community of Kosovo (in Albanian, *Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës*, or *BIK*).³⁹ It is intended to represent the totality of Islam in the country, though there are traditional Bektashi Sufi communities, particularly in western Kosovo, that have certain differences in doctrine and practice. Nevertheless, both the Bektashi and Hanafi Sunni Muslims generally get along and are united by a strong sense of ethnic Albanian nationalism. However, Wahhabi Muslims influenced by foreign ideologies fall outside the structure of the BIK and its control. Their numbers are notoriously difficult to calculate, as there is no strict doctrine or separate institutions governing them; they simply consider themselves “better,” more committed Muslims than the rest.

Of Kosovo’s approximately 800 mosques, some 240 were built following the 1999 NATO intervention—part of “a deliberate, long-term strategy by Saudi Arabia to reshape Islam in its image, not only in Kosovo but around the world.”⁴⁰ This mosque-building program and other Islamic activities have been driven not only by the Saudis but by other competing actors like Turkey and Iran. Cumulatively, this rivalry between external powers has damaged social cohesion and led to increasing conservatism. A 2016 study revealed that 57% of Kosovars had greater trust in religious institutions than in state ones, while “Kosovar youth are also becoming increasingly conservative, with their main reference points for spiritual and intellectual guidance being local imams.”⁴¹

As discussed, in the aftermath of the NATO intervention, Muslim charities made extensive efforts in the areas of proselytization, orphan care, Islamic education, bank-

ing and loans, and so on. Although their more aggressive efforts met with resistance from Albanians determined to preserve their own traditions and local control, these foreign endeavors have succeeded in some respects. With unemployment remaining high and the social needs of the country's poorest and neediest still often neglected, Islamic groups have sought to style themselves as alternative service providers. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries thus have built numerous mosques and educational facilities with a clear strategic goal: in the words of one Kosovar commentator, "to create a new generation of loyal Muslims – not (loyal) to Kosovo but to the Islamic international."⁴²

Islamists have typically used Islamic NGOs and youth groups to foment protests and shape common policies on these controversial issues. For example, in May and June 2010, Islamist groups organized multiple street protests after a high school student in the town of Ferizaj was expelled for wearing a headscarf. While the Kosovo government has sought to implement strictly secular laws in this regard, a local court gave Islamists room for hope by overturning another similar ban in Vitina. The tension over this issue extends to the workplace, as veiled Muslim women have frequently complained that employers will not hire them.⁴³

An indication of the government's concern over religious polarization has been attested to by a new inter-faith body (led by Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic leaders) that meets regularly to discuss better cooperation and references Mother Teresa; though she was born in neighboring Macedonia, the famed nun of Calcutta is considered an ethnic Albanian national hero.⁴⁴ The Interfaith Kosovo initiative also holds annual conferences featuring high-profile international speakers, with a common aim of promoting interreligious harmony and confronting extremism; for example, its 2016 event was dedicated to the role of women in countering violent extremism.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, emerging discord between Albanian Muslims and Catholics became apparent in September 2010, when the new Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Mother Teresa was opened in the capital, Pristina. The building drew the ire of Muslim groups, who chafed at the apparent preferential treatment from the government received by Catholics (who comprise only about 3 percent of the population). They complained with good reason; a 2004 Muslim demand for a grand mosque had been turned down by authorities. Ferid Agani, chairman of the pro-Islamic Justice Party of Kosovo (a small but vocal conservative party which holds three out of Kosovo's 120 parliamentary seats), deemed the refusal "unacceptable," and imams in media testimony derided it as a "political decision."⁴⁶ Soon after the Pristina cathedral was opened, threatening graffiti began to appear throughout the city proclaiming that Islamist worship would be conducted in it.⁴⁷ Other pro-Islamist figures at the time argued that "fairness" now required a mosque to be built—an argument identical to the one that their co-religionists continue to make throughout the region.

Although the Catholic population of Kosovo is a mere 60,000 persons, it carries disproportionate weight for both historical and contemporary reasons. Before the arrival of the Turks in the late 14th century, Albanians were Catholic. However, as a group, they subsequently converted to Islam for the social benefits granted by the Ottoman conquerors. Therefore, some Albanians tout the idea of “returning” to an “original religion.” Furthermore, many believe that becoming Christian will give them a better chance of acceptance in Western Europe⁴⁸ — a view again shared by many in the wider Balkan region. In 2005, former Albanian president Alfred Moisiu provoked uproar from Islamist groups following a speech he gave in England in which he stated that Albanians follow a “shallow” sort of Islam, and in fact have deeper Christian roots.⁴⁹

Furthermore, following the erection of the Pristina cathedral, the Vatican upgraded the Catholic Church there to the status of diocese. This action fits a broader trend in recent events indicating the Roman Catholic Church is taking a greater interest in spreading Catholicism in Kosovo. Significantly, on February 10, 2011, the Vatican commissioned its first apostolic delegate to Kosovo, Papal Nuncio in Slovenia Juliusz Janusz. The Church has thus sought to promote Catholicism more strongly against Islamic expansionism.⁵⁰ The 2014 visit of Pope Francis to neighboring Albania, and plans for regional celebrations of Mother Teresa’s September 2016 canonization, confirm this theory.⁵¹

Overall, the social and political trends toward increasing Islamic conservatism in Kosovo are not surprising to anyone who has paid close attention to the country since NATO’s intervention. Protecting the legacy and righteousness of that intervention has long led U.S. and NATO officials to downplay the presence of Islamism in Kosovo. Western governments in recent years tried to depict Kosovo’s brand of Islam as harmless, a sort of “Islam-lite.”⁵² This narrative has, however, increasingly been challenged by the reality of Kosovar participation in the Syria conflict and related radicalization.

Naturally, the Kosovo government—which aspires to join the EU someday—also wishes to downplay any association with radical Islam. However, as of 2016 contemporary developments and anecdotal evidence point to a new trend toward using Islam as a way to define social identities, ideological beliefs, and cultural choices, and no longer simply as a way of making income, as had been the case with the initial Arab “investment” in Kosovo’s people.⁵³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In August 2014, Kosovo police arrested 40 people suspected of supporting *jihadists* in Syria and Iraq. In March 2015, the country passed a “foreign fighters” law at the U.S.’s request, as have several other Balkan countries.⁵⁵ The law penalizes the act of traveling from one’s country to another, typically to the Middle East, with penalties including prison sentences. The law is meant to be a deterrent to prevent people from

going to join jihads and keep control of those who have done some and could pose a threat after returning. In May 2016, police “charged 67 people, arrested 14 imams and shut down 19 Muslim organizations for acting against the Constitution, inciting hatred and recruiting for terrorism,” according to the *New York Times*.⁵⁶ One of the key radical clerics associated with ISIS, Zekerija Qazimi from Ferezaj, was found guilty of recruiting for the terror group and of inciting hatred, and was jailed for 10 years.⁵⁷ Kosovar police further targeted (in a very rare move) a Shi’ite organization in Kosovo run by an Iranian cleric reportedly linked to Iran’s *ayatollahs* and accused of funding terrorism.⁵⁸

Elsewhere in Europe, international cooperation with Kosovar authorities has occurred. In November 2015, Italian authorities arrested four Kosovars in the Brescia region, where they had been running an ISIS logistics network linked with Kosovo’s most-wanted *jihadist*, Lavdrim Muhaxheri.⁵⁹ At home, the Kosovo state is also seeking to counter extremism by other means. One possibility being recommended (in line with similar programs elsewhere in Europe) would offer “*jihad* rehabilitation” opportunities for some of the arrested men involved in the Syrian conflict.⁶⁰

Kosovar-EU relations have been rocky in recent years, with allegations that Kosovo’s top leaders profited from wartime organ trafficking and drug smuggling offset by charges of EU corruption in its own Kosovo delegation, in 2014.⁶¹ The relationship between Kosovo’s government and its Western partners has also been troubled because of internal political infighting (as when rival Kosovar parliamentarians attacked each with tear gas in 2015 and 2016).⁶² The combination of internal political feuding, the unresolved international status of Kosovo and Serbia’s non-recognition of the country, as well as endemic economic and social challenges all negatively affect the country’s institutional capacity to deal with important but not essential challenges like Islamic extremism.

Amid the turmoil, one country that also saw considerable turmoil in 2016—Turkey—has sought to increase its presence in Kosovo. Unlike Saudi Arabia and other Muslim states, Turkey has a historic and cultural legacy in Kosovo, and thus significant legitimacy there. Since 1999, it has performed considerable development work, investment and political engagement within Kosovo, with significant impact. Among other things, the Erdogan government’s Justice and Development Party was the model for Kosovo’s Justice Party (*Partia e Drejtësisë*). Although it was not significantly represented in parliament, its leader was given a cabinet minister post in the previous government. In 2010, the party attempted to pass legislation calling for an introduction of religious education and an end to the state ban on the *hijab* in public schools. While these attempts failed, the closeness of the vote result indicated that individual parliamentarians from a wide range of parties have sympathies with Islam on social grounds.

Kosovo's relationship with Turkey has also been complicated by the failed July 2016 military coup against President Erdogan. As elsewhere in the Balkans, in its aftermath Kosovo was asked by Ankara to close schools linked with the alleged coup mastermind, U.S.-based cleric Fethulah Gulen. The Turkish government also demanded that Kosovo punish a local journalist who had made satirical comments about the coup attempt.⁶³ The Kosovo government did not do either, and many in the country bristled against perceived intrusiveness. However, the coup has only increased Erdogan's popularity among average Muslims in the Balkans—and Turkey runs Kosovo's airport and electricity supply, while Turkish companies are heavily involved with its road infrastructure development. Kosovo thus faces a delicate balancing act in preserving relations with Turkey, the West and the Islamic world in the years ahead.

ENDNOTES

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[3] "Kosovo Hails Sharp Drop in Middle Eastern Fighters," *Balkan Insight*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-pledges-to-work-closer-to-islamic-community-to-fight-radicalism-10-24-2016>.

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[5] Adrian Shtuni, "Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, April 30, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>.

[6] For the first, see Dutch filmmaker Klaartje Quirijns's 2005 documentary *The Brooklyn Connection* (www.thebrooklynconnection.net), which details how Albanian-American Diaspora leaders were able to raise \$30 million for weaponry which they then smuggled to the KLA. There is a vast literature on the second aspect; for example, read the very detailed contemporary testimony of then-Interpol Assistant Director Ralph Mutschke, who gives an impressive assessment of the range of activities, geographical scope, profits and international crime partners of the major Albanian syndicates, as well as comments on links between such organized crime proceeds and terrorism. See Ralf Mutschke, *Testimony before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee*, December 13, 2000.

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- [18] Frank Brown, “Islam Builds a Future in Kosovo, One Mosque at a Time,” *BeliefNet*, September 12, 2000, <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2000/09/Islam-Builds-A-Future-In-Kosovo-One-Mosque-At-A-Time.aspx>.

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[22] See United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2010.

[23] Brown, "Islam Builds a Future in Kosovo, One Mosque at a Time."

[24] See Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, 65-67.

[25] Gjergj Erebara, "Kosovo's New Cathedral Stirs Muslim Resentment," *Balkan Insight*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanians-vie-for-religious-sites>.

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