



# KOSOVO

## Quick Facts

Population: 1,932,774 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 10,887 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Albanians 92.9%, Bosniaks 1.6%, Serbs 1.5%, Turk 1.1%, Ashkali 0.9%, Egyptian 0.7%, Gorani 0.6%, Romani 0.5%, other/unspecified 0.2% (2011 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$7.094 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Islam's footprint in Kosovo dates back to the time of the Ottoman conquest. Although much of the ethnic Albanian-majority population practices a moderate form of Islam, the slow pace of social, political, and economic development since the 1999 NATO intervention has created fertile soil for Islamic radicalization. The post-intervention period (even after national independence in 2008) has seen amorphous and unaccountable UN and EU missions linger, with wide authority and influence. Kosovo Force (KFOR), a smaller NATO detachment led by the United States, also remains, though it has handed over most security duties to local governments.*

*While most Kosovars are still moderate, the highest number of foreign fighters per capita among European countries joining ISIS and al-Nusra Front have historically hailed from Kosovo.<sup>1</sup> While numbers dropped sharply with ISIS' territorial defeat in 2018, homegrown terrorists continued to be arrested in Kosovo throughout that year. As such, the issue of countering violent extremism (CVE) and the potential for attacks by returning fighters are prominent concerns for the government and its Western backers today. While the Kosovar government has tended to downplay the threat, it continues to deal with radicalization, passing laws against foreign fighters and arresting terrorists with the help of European governments and Europol.*

*In the long term, the development of education, health and work opportunities for local youth probably represents the greatest challenge Kosovo faces in countering violent extremism. However, throughout 2018, authorities admitted to media that chosen CVE strategies have not had the desired effect, and that re-orienting Islamic radicals has proven more difficult than expected. At the same time, ethnic linkages between Kosovars at home and those in Western European countries have resulted (and will result) in police actions elsewhere on the Continent against Kosovo-related terror cells linked to ISIS.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Modern Islamist activity in Kosovo was shaped by two factors: the use of neighboring Albania as a safe haven by Al-Qaeda, and the 1999 NATO intervention that replaced Serbian rule with a porous international administration. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was preoccupied with restoring basic services, addressing inter-ethnic violence and organized crime, and institution-building – rather than with fighting Islamic extremism. This created ideal conditions for extremism to take root (especially given the large youth population and high rate of unemployment) at a time when foreign Islamic charities were lavishing millions on the aspiring statelet. The narrative of an ethnic Albanian nationalist liberation struggle, meanwhile, was perceived to preclude a real danger of Islamic radicalism.

In this permissive environment, foreign Islamic donors created a new Islamic infrastructure, funding Saudi-style mosques, Islamic schools, and NGOs. Although most foreign sponsors have since left, they provided indoctrination and financial support for generations of impoverished Kosovars at a key post-conflict moment. Their lingering influence created a still present extremist fringe in the country, which has taken on a leading role in the long-running Syrian conflict.

The key Islamist charity to accompany NATO and UNMIK into Kosovo in 1999 was the Saudi Joint Commission for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya (SJCRKC). Its official Kuwaiti counterpart, the Kuwaiti Joint Relief Committee (KJRC), also set up shop there. These organizations entered Kosovo along with Kosovar refugees returning from Albania. The Saudis initially allocated over \$22.5 million for the construction (or reconstruction) of mosques and schools for Kosovar war orphan support.<sup>2</sup> However, Kosovo investigators of the now-closed charity found in 2016 that the Saudi money was mostly unaccounted for.<sup>3</sup>

Although the number of UNMIK personnel gradually diminished as the mission was progressively downsized, Kosovo remained vulnerable to foreign radical Islamist penetration. Kosovo's uncertain international status also meant a no-visa policy for incomers, and with essentially open borders, Kosovo became Europe's primary "safe zone" for foreign radicals. In 2013, the EU pressured Kosovo to impose visas on over 80 countries. But, as of August 2016, citizens from over 100 countries (including most of the Gulf states) still did not need visas to enter Kosovo.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Syrian conflict and rise of Al Nusra and ISIS after 2011 gave Kosovo's aspiring *ihadists* a cause to fight for, the government only acknowledged the problem once it began to garner international interest in 2015. Statistics that year claimed some 232 Kosovo-born fighters had joined the ranks of *ihadist* groups.<sup>5</sup> However, a December 2016 U.S. Institute of Peace study and a State Department country assessment from 2017 each put the total number of foreign fighter from Kosovo at 314.<sup>6</sup> With the defeat of ISIS in 2018, *ihadists* have largely stopped traveling to the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

The USIP analysis noted that "no correlation is readily observable between income and educational levels and vulnerability to mobilization."<sup>8</sup> While most Kosovar foreign fighters were men aged 17-30, they had relatively higher educational levels than did similar foreign fighters from Bosnia. Also, while in absolute terms urban areas (like the capital, Prishtina, and Prizren) were sources for Islamist fighters, the regular tours of Albanian extremist preachers from Macedonia created *ihad* pockets in tiny municipalities near the border which turned out a disproportionate number of fighters bound for Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the Syrian conflict, Kosovar extremists have exploited the large Albanian diaspora spread throughout Western Europe, as indicated by several arrests in Italy since 2015. In March 2017, three Kosovar Albanian ISIS devotees were arrested by Italian police after their plan to blow up Venice's historic Rialto Bridge was uncovered.<sup>10</sup> According to police wiretaps, the aspiring terrorists (one of whom had returned from Syria) had been inspired by the contemporaneous terrorist attack on London's Westminster Bridge. As with other cases, these men were living legally in Italy.<sup>11</sup>

Kosovo continues to be an exporter of instability and also faces the threat of domestic terrorism from returning fighters. Given the high rate of economic migration both during and after the 2015 European migration crisis, the potential for radicalization is growing among both embittered forced returnees and new diaspora members attracted to radical organizations in Western Europe.

Further, radical elements have infiltrated Kosovo's criminal networks. Cooperation between ethnic Albanian drug cartels and ISIS was concerning for local authorities while ISIS was at the peak of its power in the Middle East. This was for good reason, as Kosovars and Albanians have historically been involved in international heroin and cocaine smuggling.<sup>12</sup> As with Albania, Kosovars are known to be most active through their extensive diaspora networks in Western Europe. After a large-scale police operation destroyed vast cannabis plantations in southern Albania, the business became fragmented, with older clans replaced by more violent Islamists. Kosovo's most infamous ISIS member, the late Lavdrim Muhaxheri, was the key link between Albanian drug operations and ISIS recruitment for several years.<sup>13</sup>

Muhaxheri had previously worked for both UNMIK and NATO in Afghanistan, before allegedly being radicalized in the southern village of Kacanik in 2012.<sup>14</sup> He thereafter became infamous worldwide—and a source of great embarrassment to state authorities—by appearing in propaganda videos for ISIS, including one showing him beheading a captive.<sup>15</sup>

In August 2014, Interpol issued a red notice for Muhaxheri's arrest, and two months later then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry identified the Kosovar *jihadi* as a threat to American national security.<sup>16</sup> Muhaxheri's death was confirmed on June 8, 2017; he had been killed during an airstrike in Syria. Kosovar authorities estimated that another 50 of their citizens had also been killed in Syria by that point.<sup>17</sup> Muhaxheri had led ISIS' ethnic-Albanian brigade and oversaw its Albanian-language propaganda campaign. He was also an ideological protégé of the (now jailed) radical Kosovar *imam* Zekerija Qazimi, as was another field commander, Ridvan Haqifi.<sup>18</sup>

In June 2017, authorities charged nine men for plotting to carry out terrorist attacks in Kosovo and other regional countries, including a thwarted attack on an international soccer match between Israel and Albania. From Syria, Muhaxheri had been funding and guiding these radicals, investigators claimed. Some had learned to make homemade explosives similar to those used in terrorist attacks in Belgium and France.<sup>19</sup>

The participation of Kosovar Albanian women in ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria has been another unique concern. In July 2017, Qamile Tahiri allegedly ran a *jihadi* training camp for women, making her one of the most radical Kosovar women in Syria. Along with another Kosovar woman, she was reportedly recruiting newcomers to the terrorist cause, using personal and online channels. While media coverage of the Syrian conflict focused on the role of women as "jihadi brides," Tahiri's case, among others, indicates a more complex and active role for radicalized women.<sup>20</sup>

According to a New York Times report, 314 Kosovars joined militant groups in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and May 2016. The report found that the training and mobilization of Kosovar *jihadists* 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."<sup>21</sup> While Kosovo's Interior Ministry stated in August 2016 that no new recruits had departed in the past year, some 50 Kosovars had died in battle and another 120 had returned. At the time, more than 100 people were under investigation by Kosovar authorities for fighting or recruiting on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup>

Both before and during the Syrian war, Kosovar Albanians have been involved in terrorist cells and organized crime. Despite the 1999 NATO liberation of Kosovo from Serbia, attacks targeting the U.S. military have occurred. In 2015, Ardit Ferizi, a Kosovar citizen, hacked into a U.S. company's database and harvested the personal information of over 1,300 military and civilian personnel. Ferizi was sentenced to 20 years in prison by a U.S. district court on September 23, 2016. Ferizi admitted to providing this data

to ISIS in hopes that the group would target the U.S. personnel and “hit them hard,” a U.S. State Department report recounted in 2017.<sup>23</sup> Earlier foiled attacks by Albanians against the U.S. military include the 2008 plot against Fort Dix in New Jersey,<sup>24</sup> and another against the U.S. Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia.<sup>25</sup> In 2012, the shadowy “Kosovo Hackers Security” group infiltrated the U.S. National Weather Service’s computer networks as part of “a protest against the U.S. policies that target Muslim countries.”<sup>26</sup>

There are renewed fears that Western targets—and local Balkan communities—could fall victim to a new breed of ISIS-inspired terrorists. In the June 2017 issue of ISIS’s magazine, *Rumiyah* (formerly, *Dabiq*) Bosnian *ihadists* threatened to bring their war to the Balkans, targeting Christian Serbs and Croats (allegedly, in revenge for the wars of the 1990s); insufficiently devout Muslims. Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania were other stated targets.<sup>27</sup> Although as of 2018 no such attacks have occurred, police continue to make arrests.<sup>28</sup> In June, Kosovo police arrested three local extremists in Prizren and Skenderaj during an operation coordinated with German police.<sup>29</sup> One month later, a Prishtina court convicted seven others of terrorism-related offenses, while two were on the run and a third was claimed to have been killed in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

Today, a major future concern is that new deradicalization programs are failing, as incarcerated and then released *ihadis* are showing “contempt for rehabilitation and strengthened radical beliefs,” experts found in 2018.<sup>31</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

According to estimates from April 2019, Kosovo has a population of roughly 1.8 million, 92% of which are ethnic Albanians.<sup>32</sup> The country’s poorly-performing 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; Germany alone received 102,000 ethnic Albanian migrants that year.<sup>33</sup> Their asylum attempts generally failed, however, and the individuals in question were returned to their homelands. Despite Kosovo’s location in the Balkans, it did not receive a significant influx of migrants because it was off the so-called “Balkan Route,” the path from Greece through the Vardar Valley corridor in central Macedonia and northward through Serbia, reaching Hungary and Austria that most migrants took to enter Europe.

Muslims (including some Roma, Turks, Gorani and Bosniaks) are estimated to comprise 95% of Kosovo’s population.<sup>34</sup> A small (but increasing) percentage of Kosovo’s Albanians are Catholic. Various foreign Protestant denominations have tried (with less success) to convert Kosovo’s Muslims. The beleaguered Serbian Orthodox minority of 120,000 persons is largely concentrated in a few enclaves, and in more compact northern municipalities around the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica. The Gorani, a small Serbian-speaking Slavic Muslim minority, primarily inhabit the mountainous southwestern area around Dragas, nestled between Macedonia and Albania. The small Roma minority is mainly Muslim but less politically active.

The officially recognized Muslim organization in the country is the Islamic Community of Kosovo (in Albanian, *Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës*, or BIK).<sup>35</sup> It is intended to represent the totality of Islam in the country, though there are traditional Bektashi Sufi communities with 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. Wahhabi Muslims, however, are 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 other sects in Albania.

Of Kosovo’s approximately 800 mosques, about 240 were built following the 1999 NATO interven-



tion of “a deliberate, long-term strategy by Saudi Arabia to reshape Islam in its image, not only in Kosovo but around the world.”<sup>36</sup> 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. Meanwhile, “Kosovar youth are also becoming increasingly conservative, with their main reference points for spiritual and intellectual guidance being local imams.”<sup>37</sup>

Overall, the social and political trends toward increasing Islamic conservatism in Kosovo are not surprising to anyone who has paid 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 try to depict Kosovo’s brand of Islam as harmless.<sup>38</sup> This narrative has, however, increasingly been challenged by the reality of Kosovar participation in the Syrian 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, beginning in 2017, 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.<sup>39</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kosovo’s disputed independent status continues to hamper its ability to cooperate in formal international law enforcement bodies. For example, Kosovo was not admitted to Interpol in 2017 due to Serbian efforts to lobby China, which hosted the annual Interpol General Assembly meeting.<sup>40</sup> Although Kosovo successfully lobbied to get on Interpol’s admission agenda in March 2018, the Serbian Interior Minister stated in a press conference with a Chinese official that his government would try to block Kosovar membership at the UAE meeting in November 2018.<sup>41</sup>

There have of course been some successes, even without formal Interpol membership, due to strong support for Kosovo from the West. In August 2014, Kosovo police arrested 40 people suspected of supporting  *jihadists*  in Syria and Iraq.<sup>42</sup> In March 2015, the country passed a “foreign fighters” law at the request of the United States,<sup>43</sup> criminalizing the act of traveling to another country to participate in a foreign conflict. The law is designed to deter people from joining  *jihadi*  groups. 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.<sup>44</sup> One of the key radical clerics associated with ISIS, Zekerija Qazimi was found guilty of recruiting for the terror group and of inciting hatred, and was jailed for 10 years.<sup>45</sup> In a rare move, Kosovar police further targeted a Shiite organization in 2016 run by an Iranian cleric reportedly linked to Iran’s ayatollahs and accused of funding terrorism.<sup>46</sup>

However, the government’s success in arresting returned fighters and other radicals has also created a new problem: prison radicalization. Inspections by state authorities through 2017 indicated the presence of more radical (if often, unattributed) works of theology. An RFE/RL study in 2017, quoting the country’s justice minister, stated that radical Islam was drawing adherents from convicts who had been arrested for other crimes, and who had shown no previous signs of religious radicalization. To help remedy the situation, the state and prison system began a program with Kosovo’s official Islamic community, to send moderate  *imams*  and religious content to the prisons.<sup>47</sup>

This and other CVE and deradicalization programs remain works in progress. A combination of governmental and NGO outreach efforts had been made in Kosovo to attempt to reintegrate foreign fighters and to empower women; who, in traditional Albanian society, have generally been kept in subservient

positions.<sup>48</sup> The U.S. State Department's 2016 *Country Reports on Terrorism* noted that the country's CVE program includes a "referral mechanism in the municipality of Gjilan that will bring together local officials, religious leaders, and civil society to address community concerns of radicalization to violence. Kosovo's CVE strategy includes the preparation and promotion of counter-narratives to weaken the legitimacy of violent extremist messages."<sup>49</sup>

Foreign governments are cooperating with Kosovar CVE efforts. In November 2015, Italian authorities arrested four Kosovars in the Brescia region, where they had been running an ISIS logistics network linked with Lavdrim Muhaxheri.<sup>50</sup> At home, the Kosovar government is exploring complimentary CVE strategies. One plan (in line with similar programs elsewhere in Europe) would offer "jihad rehabilitation" opportunities for some of the arrested men involved in the Syrian conflict.<sup>51</sup>

Kosovar-EU relations have been rocky in recent years, with allegations that Kosovo's top leaders profited from wartime organ trafficking and drug smuggling met by allegations of corruption leveled at the EU's Kosovo delegation in 2014.<sup>52</sup> The relationship between Kosovo's government and its Western partners has also been troubled because of internal political infighting (rival Kosovar parliamentarians attacked each other with tear gas in 2015 and 2016).<sup>53</sup> The combination of internal political feuding, the unresolved international status of Kosovo and Serbia's non-recognition of the country, and endemic economic and social challenges all negatively affect the country's institutional capacity to manage challenges like Islamic extremism. However, as of 2018, Kosovo had still avoided any sort of political transition, with former wartime allies Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj remaining key state leaders.

Amid the turmoil, Turkey has sought to increase its presence in Kosovo. Unlike Saudi Arabia and other Muslim states, Turkey has a significant historic and cultural legacy in Kosovo. Since 1999, the Turkish government has funded impactful development projects, capital investment, and Kosovar diplomatic missions. Turkey'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 held a cabinet minister post in the previous government. In 2010, the party attempted to pass legislation calling for religious education and an end to the state ban on *hijabs* in public schools. While these attempts failed, close voting results indicate that individual parliamentarians from a wide range of parties sympathize with Islam on social grounds.

Kosovo's relationship with Turkey was complicated by the failed July 2016 military coup against President Erdoğan. As elsewhere in the Balkans, Kosovo's government was asked by Ankara to close schools linked with the alleged coup mastermind, U.S.-based cleric Fethulah Gülen. The Turkish government also demanded that Kosovo punish a local journalist who made satirical comments about the coup attempt. The Kosovo government did neither, and many Kosovars bristled against the perceived intrusiveness. However, the quashed coup has only increased Erdogan's popularity among average Muslims in the Balkans. Additionally, 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.

Indeed, the German MP Sevim Dagdalem upbraided her government in May 2017 over its perceived unwillingness to tackle Islamic extremism funded by Arab states in Kosovo, despite maintaining a German KFOR brigade there. She also noted that the Erdoğan-Gülen rift has given the former "a free hand" to win support for his government among Kosovars. A German parliamentarian of Turkish background, Dagdalem charged that "it is scandalous that, thanks to the presence of German troops, Saudi preachers of hate and violence have been able to, unimpeded, set up the ideological foundation" for radical Islam.<sup>54</sup> The hands-off attitude of Kosovo's international minders has been brought up repeatedly since 1999, who initially tolerated Albanian violence against Serbs; since then, they increasingly turn a blind eye to Islamic radicalization trends.

A major issue going forward will be whether Kosovo can develop the economic and educational con-

ditions to retain its young people. While a strong spirit of optimism characterized the country following the February 2008 unilateral declaration of independence, this spirit has long since waned as the reality of economic torpor remains. Kosovo Albanians (along with their kin from South Serbia, Macedonia and Albania proper) comprised a significant number of asylum-seekers in Western Europe during and after the 2015 migration crisis. While many were sent home immediately, official Pew research data suggests that, by the beginning of 2017, some 77% of Kosovar asylum applicants were still awaiting a decision on their asylum applications in countries like Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden.<sup>55</sup>

Kosovo's major challenge is creating an economically- and educationally-developed society, one in which a large young population can feel a sense of belonging and purpose. National and international authorities have identified social, economic and educational shortcomings as main drivers of radicalization; we can expect future counter-terrorism programs will continue to have this wider scope. At the same time, Kosovo-born radicals in Western Europe can plan and operate freely; as a result, they will pose a significant hard security challenge to Europe and the U.S.

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