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Country snapshot Kosovo

By Leonie Vrugtman and Diori Angjeli

Located in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula, Kosovo is of great historical and political importance for the entire region.⁴¹ As with most Balkan countries, the dominant religion of Kosovo has fluctuated over time, in accordance with its cultural and political contact with its neighbours. Christianity first reached the area during the Roman period, and Eastern Orthodoxy eventually became the state religion in the ninth century, amid competition in the Balkans between the Bulgarian and Byzantine empires. Later, under the Serbian Kingdom, the church split with Greece and the Serbian Orthodox Church was established in Kosovo. When the Ottoman Empire took over, Islam became the official religion and gradually supplanted Christianity as the largest faith by the seventeenth century.⁴²

Kosovo experienced major demographic changes between the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and its declaration of independence in 2008. During the Kosovo War (1998–1999), a large number of ethnic Albanians were forced to flee or were expelled from the area. In a subsequent resurgence of civil unrest a considerable proportion of ethnic Serbs were also displaced.⁴³ Today, Kosovo has a population of approximately 1,830,700 people.⁴⁴ According to the 2011 official census, 95.6% of the population is Muslim, 2.2% is Roman Catholic, and 1.4% is Serbian Orthodox.⁴⁵ However, this census was boycotted by ethnic Serbs, resulting in the underrepresentation of this ethnicity and of Orthodox Christians.⁴⁶ The Serbian Orthodox Church, the representative of the Orthodox community in Kosovo, claims that the actual Serbian Orthodox community in Kosovo is composed of 120,000, or 6.3% of the general population.⁴⁷ Other religious communities, including the Tarikat (a branch of Sufi Islam) and Protestant populations, also contest the census data. The Protestant community claims 20,000 followers throughout the country, or 1.1% of the population.⁴⁸ Judaism is listed as one of the five traditional religions of Kosovo, but there

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41 T. Judah, *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2008).

42 G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London, 2000), p. 14.

43 Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Minorities and indigenous peoples*, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/kosovo/>.

44 World Bank, *Population, total – 2017*, via <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=XK&view=chart>

45 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 'The final results of Population, Households and Housing Census Released', 26 September 2012, <http://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/the-final-results-of-population-households-and-housing-census-released>

46 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, *Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 - Final Results: Quality Report*, via <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censusb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10700.aspx>

47 US Department of State, *2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo*, 30 May 2018, p. 2, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281166.pdf>

48 Ibid.

are currently only 56 Jewish people living in Kosovo.⁴⁹

Religious communities and the State

Kosovo is a secular state and its constitution guarantees the freedom of belief, conscience and religion.⁵⁰ Expressions of faith are only limited ‘to ensure public order and safety, to protect public health and morals, human rights and fundamental freedoms of others’.⁵¹ In 2017, under this provision, the former imam of the grand mosque, Shefqet Krasniqi, was arrested on grounds of encouraging terrorism and religious extremism but was later cleared of all charges.⁵² While Kosovo is multi-confessional, the government does not have a designated ministry or department responsible for religious affairs and current legislation prevents religious communities from registering as legal entities. This has the effect that the concerns of religious communities often remain unaddressed; that religious communities receive no financial support from the state; and that they are not able to conduct administrative activities such as buying or renting properties.⁵³ As a result, religious communities seek funding from elsewhere, including foreign governments and non-governmental organisations, whose support often comes with caveats. In recent years, concerns have been raised over Turkey’s religious influence in Kosovo,⁵⁴ and the further spread of conservative Islam through activities funded by Gulf countries.⁵⁵

Religious tension

Although religion was not the primary driving force behind the war, it was an inseparable part of how the conflict parties identified each other. Since most Albanians are Muslim and most Serbs are Orthodox Christian, political leaders in the region emphasised

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- 49 L. Luxner, ‘With US help, Muslim-majority Kosovo plans its first synagogue and Jewish museum’, Times of Israel, 22 December 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-us-help-muslim-majority-kosovo-plans-its-first-synagogue-and-jewish-museum/>.
- 50 Republic of Kosovo Official Gazeta, Law No. 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo, 24 August 2006, Preamble, available at: http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=28&lang=en.
- 51 Ibid. Art. 1.3.
- 52 ‘Kosovo court clears Grande Mosque imam of inciting terrorism’, Reuters, 23 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-terrorism-verdict/kosovo-court-clears-grande-mosque-imam-of-inciting-terrorism-idUSKBN1GZ14P>
- 53 J. Mehmeti, ‘Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country’, in A. Elbasani and O. Roy (eds.), *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*. (London, 2015) pp. 62–80; and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018: Kosovo*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/kosovo>
- 54 M. Edwards and M. Colborne, ‘Turkey’s gift of a mosque sparks fears of “neo-Ottomanism” in Kosovo’, Guardian, 2 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>
- 55 C. Gall, ‘How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS’, New York Times, 21 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>

religious differences even if it had little or nothing to do with faith itself.⁵⁶ This had a significant effect on how ethnic groups perceived each other and fuelled tensions between communities of different faiths. Following the withdrawal of Serb and Yugoslav forces, some Kosovo Albanians engaged in acts of retaliation such as destroying churches and other Orthodox sites between 1999 and 2004⁵⁷. In the last ten years, such incidents have declined, but the country remains vulnerable to incidents of religious – or ethnically – motivated violence, hate speech and vandalism, especially between Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians. The government has stepped up its efforts to respond to ethnical or religiously motivated violence and vandalism, including protecting religious and cultural sites. Despite this protection, theft and vandalism continues and there have been some instances of attacks being planned on Serbian Orthodox.⁵⁸ In 2016 for example, four ethnic Albanians with firearms, suspected to have links to the Islamic State, were arrested in front of the Visoki Decani Monastery.⁵⁹

Cases of religiously motivated incidents impact other denominations as well. Islamic sites, including mosques, have been vandalised by ethnic Serbs during and after the war – most notably the Ibar River Mosque in North Mitrovica, which was never rebuilt.⁶⁰ In some cases, rival Muslims groups have launched attacks on each other's religious leaders.⁶¹ In the past, the Protestant and Jewish communities have raised concerns over Kosovo's freedom of religion provisions, especially over discrepancies in their ability to obtain construction permits for places of worship or their properties becoming subject to vandalism.⁶²

Both the Muslim community of Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church have also accused the government of discrimination towards their communities, albeit for different reasons. The Muslim community has complained that, due to rules prohibiting religious dress in public schools, female Muslim students wearing headscarves had been sent home and thereby denied access to education.⁶³ The Orthodox community claims it has received no financial support to rebuild destroyed religious sites. Meanwhile, the government has

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56 G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (2000); and L. Dunn, 'The Roles of Religion in Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 16 no. 1, January 2015, available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol16/iss1/3/>

57 Amnesty International. (2006). *Kosovo (Serbia): The UN in Kosovo - a Legacy of Impunity*. Retrieved via: <https://www.amnesty.org/>

58 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269074.pdf>

59 K. Rexhepi and E. Qafmolla, 'Kosovo Gunmen Arrested Near Serb Monastery', 1 February 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/02/01/terror-incidents-distress-kosovo-mosques-and-monasteries-02-01-2016/>

60 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269074.pdf>

61 US Department of State, 2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 30 July 2012, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193037.pdf>

62 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 30 May 2018, p. 1, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281166.pdf>; and US Department of State, 2015 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 10 August 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256417.pdf>

63 Bashkia Islame e Kosove, Deklaratë për Opinion, 24 October 2013, <https://bislame.net/prsdntj/>

expanded its Interfaith Kosovo programme to promote religious tolerance by organising conferences and workshops on the topic,⁶⁴ with state officials and religious representatives also attending the consecration of the Catholic St. Theresa Cathedral in Pristina.⁶⁵

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64 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kosovo's interfaith initiative echoes around the globe, June 2015, <https://frantic.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/kua-peacemakers/2015/06/Kosovos-interfaith-initiative.pdf>

65 P. Çollaku, Pristina Inaugurates Cathedral for Mother Teresa, 7 September 2010, <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/09/07/pristina-inaugurates-cathedral-for-mother-teresa/>