



KOSOVO

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Kosovo as a “Muslim state in Europe”: False fears and false hopes

By Konrad Clewing, The Yemen Times

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The newest member in the community of states, Kosovo, brings with it an assorted baggage of hopes and joys, but just as much in the way of troubles and worries.

Hope is centred on the belief that a line has finally been drawn under the long-standing territorial conflict between the country's Albanian majority and Serbia – a struggle that has taken a heavy toll on both sides. Joy has been in evidence mainly in Kosovo itself, where February 17th's declaration of independence was greeted by scenes of delighted celebration among 95 per cent of the population.

Trouble, meanwhile, has been brewing in Belgrade and in Serbia, where the feeling is that the country has been robbed of a part of its territory.

The worries are worldwide and centred on the possible repercussions for international law if it should turn out that a precedent has now been set with regard to the right of self-determination of peoples at the expense of national law where territorial integrity is concerned.

There is worry, too, about the potential consequences for international diplomacy, about the new state's feared lack of viability, about the repercussions for Serbia – and about the emergence of Kosovo as a “Muslim state”.

Islamist terror or democratised Islam?

Here, in the middle of Europe, a future stronghold of global Islamism is being nurtured, which will serve as a springboard for Islamist terror. So, at least, runs one argument that is finding favour not only in Belgrade, but also in neighbouring countries such as Romania, as well as on German Internet forums, for example.

There are also very different hopes being aired with regard to “Muslim Kosovo”. In the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper of February 20, for example, Avi Primor, former Israeli ambassador to Germany set out his vision of how Kosovo could become the first truly democratic, secular Muslim country in a Western sense, as well as becoming a model for the entire Islamic world and for Muslim minorities in Western Europe.

The US government is hoping, as it did ten years ago when it gave its support to the Bosnian Muslims, that its actions in Kosovo will show to Muslims all over the world that Washington is by no means anti-Muslim.



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Kosovo's Muslim majority

But both the worries and the hopes that are circulating over the “Muslim state” of Kosovo are wide of the mark. It is certainly true that over ninety per cent of the population of Kosovo consider themselves Muslims or at least as people of a Muslim background. The Kosovar Albanians, who make up around ninety per cent of the population, fall almost entirely into this category, a small Roman Catholic minority notwithstanding.

Among the local minorities only the Serbs are non-Muslim. The smaller groupings of Turks, Bosnians, other Slavic-speaking Muslims and Romanians, on the other hand, are all, in the traditional sense, followers of Islam.

A national rather than a religious project

Contrary to the illusions harboured by the international community operating there, however, the state of Kosovo is not primarily a multi-ethnic country and the state project that is “Kosovo” certainly cannot be properly understood as anything other than an Albanian national project.

In paragraph 2 of its independence declaration, this state is already referring to itself not only as “democratic,” but also as “secular”.

And the contradiction inherent in the spectacle of Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi being accompanied by Mufti Naim Tërnavaj at the televised announcement that preceded the declaration of independence on February 17th, was one that was more apparent than real.

Because, while Thaçi was flanked by the Mufti on one side, the Catholic bishop of the diocese of Kosovo was on the other. It was a gesture clearly intended to provide a vivid counter image to offset the tendency among Serbs to equate Albanians with “dangerous” Muslims

Nation before religion

The scene does point to something fundamental, however. It is not just the case that Kosovo Muslims are generally and rightly regarded as not being particularly religious, or that strict observance of Muslim beliefs and practices is a rarity in the country, or that the mosques are usually to be found deserted, with hardly a visitor in sight.

No, it is also the case that since in its earliest beginnings in the late Ottoman period, modern Albanian nation-building has been based to a very large extent, both within and beyond Albanian national territory, on the idea that the nation must take precedence over religious belief.



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One of the foundations of this nation-building, that has taken place in a religious environment around eighty per cent Muslim (Sunni and various Sufi groups) and twenty per cent Christian (orthodox in the south, Catholic in the north of the Albanian language area), was, and is, that there is no Muslim core to the nation, no fringe of non-Muslim minorities that are at best tolerated.

In this respect, it appears that Albania really is a special case in the Muslim world. Whenever religious loyalty has endangered or shown signs of endangering national loyalty, the defenders of national Albanianhood and the Albanian societies have taken to the barricades to ensure that religion knows its proper place. In this sense the Albanians are not a “Muslim” nation at all, that is to say, not a nation dominated by the religion.

It is much more the case that all three (or four) traditional confessions are seen as equally national Albanian (or during the period of the atheist communist dictatorship as equally anti-national).

Organised Albanian religion

The representatives of organised Albanian Islam, which is spread over Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, express themselves in national rather than religious terms when referring to Kosovo.

On his first visit to the new Kosovo, or more precisely to the Islamic community of the new neighbouring state, Reis ul Ulema of Macedonia, Sulejman Rexhepi, passed on his congratulations on the independence of the “new Albanian state”, which he praised as the realisation of a “centuries old dream whose fulfilment the Albanian people deserved”. No mention here of Islam or Muslims.

And although, since 1999, Arab money has been increasingly in evidence as a source of pressure or incentive towards the promulgation of “Middle East” style Muslim attitudes in Kosovo, it is unlikely that this will make any serious inroads against the dominance of nationalism in the coming years.

Looking ahead

Reassuring for “Europe”. At the same time, however, the role model function attributed to an “Islamic” community that is hardly discernible as such, is unlikely to be of any significance. And whether the American support for Kosovo will do anything to improve the standing of the US with Muslims in the rest of the world must also remain doubtful. The Muslim component of the Kosovo question, then, remains marginal.



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Most of all, perhaps, it is likely that the secular majority of Kosovo's Muslims may just succeed in making some of their European neighbours begin to wonder whether Islam really is as all-pervasive an influence on the life and political attitudes of all Muslims as people here like to think.