

The Arab World, Iran, and the Kosovo Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Arab Middle Eastern reactions to the Kosovo conflict can be described as a deafening quiet. Arabs are generally distraught by the plight of the ethnic Albanian Kosovars and tend to blame Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic for their suffering. Many Arabs feel that the Kosovars are not pious Muslims, however, so they are less inclined to see the issue as an Islamic one. And many governments are influenced by their fear of inflaming political Islamic trends.

Furthermore, Arab Middle Easterners tend to feel ambivalent about the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) -- especially the United States and, to a certain extent, Britain. Moreover, for historic reasons -- namely, Yugoslavia's role in the nonaligned movement and its training of various Palestinian groups -- support for the Balkan state is still deeply entrenched in the minds of some Arab countries. Russia's active diplomatic role in Kosovo is generally welcome. Virtually every Arab country has been uncomfortable about the loss of Russia as a countervailing force in the Middle Eastern equation and the one-sidedness of U.S. influence.

The Arab dilemma is reflected in many local cartoons and caricatures. Usually clear-cut about the issues, cartoons in the Arab media on the Kosovo crisis can often be interpreted in numerous ways. While expressing concern about the suffering of Kosovars, some cartoons question NATO's effectiveness. Others suggest the Balkan conflict diverts attention from more important issues, such as the Gulf War and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Moderate Arab countries -- such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, and Jordan -- have focused on humanitarian aid and on bringing the problem to the United Nations. These moderates have exercised very limited clout; indeed, the Kosovo crisis has shown the limited influence of Arab countries in affairs outside the region. Their potential influence on countries like Russia, which is interested in selling military equipment to some of them, has not been brought to play.

The "pariah states," on the other hand, have been much more active. Libya and Iraq have a long-standing military relationship with Yugoslavia. There is a certain sense of community and shared interests among these countries -- in part owing to a sense of having a common adversary. Both Libya and Iraq have an interest in seeing an erosion of U.S. resolve and a diminution of congressional support for the international presence of U.S. troops.

The main lesson that can be drawn from the Arab Middle Eastern reactions is that there is no single causality in

most policy decisions. In the case of Kosovo, religion and realpolitik to some extent cancel each other out, and governments make their decisions based on what they see as their national interests.

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Armed militants from the Muslim world: Some reports -- usually Serb in origin -- indicate that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) receives support from the Muslim world. Some Islamists report they have been active, although intriguingly some complain about a lack of cooperation from the KLA. Iran's well-established record of shipping weapons to various terrorist movements could lead one to believe that it would support the KLA.

There are several reasons why reports of radical Islamic involvement should be viewed with skepticism. It is hard to imagine that aid to Kosovo -- which would go through Albania -- would remain undetected, given the large presence of the international news media and of Western intelligence agencies in Albania. And there is little peripheral Iranian presence to cover potential Iranian arms shipments; only in February 1999 did Tehran dispatch an ambassador to Tirana. As for aid from other pariah states, it would be implausible to suggest that the KLA receives aid from Iraq and Libya, which have chosen to side with Milosevic. Plus, the Kosovar movement is not particularly Muslim-oriented. And the Kosovars seem to feel that if Muslim militants were encouraged to join the battle, relations with the West would be endangered. This is very different from the situation in Bosnia, where the Bosniacs felt isolated and that they had to take aid offered them from whatever sources were available.

Iran's reaction to the Kosovo Crisis: The conflict in Kosovo demonstrates to what extent Iran can cooperate with the West on issues of mutual interest. In the summer of 1998, when the Serb government made initial moves against Kosovo, the Iranian press frequently and systematically called for cooperation with the West over the Kosovo issue. A June 16, 1998, editorial in Tehran Times called for immediate actions by NATO and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) against Milosevic. Other editorials expressed a willingness to cooperate with the West to safeguard the rights of Muslims in Kosovo and even criticized NATO for delaying airstrikes against Yugoslavia.

The strong calls in the summer of 1998 for cooperation with NATO underwent a dramatic shift by the time the Rambouillet Conference was convened in February 1999. The official Iranian media reflected a change of Iranian policy, stating that the situation had to be solved by the UN and that any action by NATO would be inappropriate. The traditional suspicion of the West predominated, illustrated by the April 3 Iran Daily newspaper editorial, "It is difficult to swallow that Christians are fighting amongst each other to save the Muslims of Kosovo." Once the NATO airstrikes commenced, Iran quickly allied itself with a position similar to that of China and Russia: namely blaming NATO attacks for the flow of refugees, with little mention of the Serbs. Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i described NATO airstrikes as part of a plot toward "annihilation of the Muslims in Europe," and Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Khamene'i's representative to the relief headquarters for Kosovar Muslims, claimed on May 8, that "[t]he U.S. double standard policy toward the Balkan crisis on the one hand and Washington's support for independence of Kosovo on the other provoked the Serbs to attack Muslim Kosovars."

Iran's 1999 stand on Kosovo can be evaluated only as a missed opportunity. It would have been extraordinarily appropriate for President Muhammad Khatami as the head of the OIC to ask for consultations with NATO on the Kosovo issue. This would have served the interests of Iran in a variety of ways. It would have been an excellent way to illustrate the important role Iran plays in the Muslim world. It would also have helped chip away the automatic hostility to working with the United States in multilateral organizations. Unfortunately, the strong anti-Americanism of Iranian hardliners has not been counterbalanced by those who want Iran to play a more constructive role in world affairs. The deep suspicion of the United States among the hardliners has been setting Iran's agenda on Kosovo.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam.

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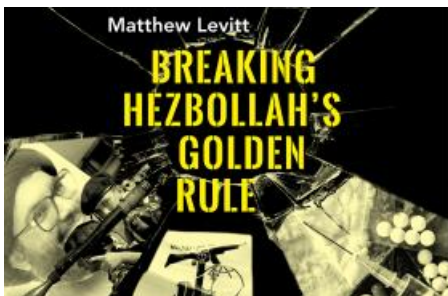
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