

Iranian Attitudes toward the Kosovo Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Two threads have run through the Iranian government's attitudes toward the current crisis in the Balkans. The first is Iran's self-perceived role as leader of the Islamic community. This sentiment has existed since the 1979 revolution, and it was reinforced in 1997 when Iran assumed the leadership of the fifty-five-member Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The second thread is Iran's desire to pursue an independent foreign policy that is "neither East nor West." Despite this stated goal, the anti-Western aspect of Iranian foreign policy has been in greater evidence since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began airstrikes against Serbian forces conducting ethnic cleansing of mostly Muslim, ethnic Albanian Kosovars.

The Claim to Lead the Islamic Community

The main way Iran has asserted its leadership claim in the Muslim world is through action. Iran has demonstrated its commitment to the cause of Balkan Muslims through economic, military, and cultural activities in the Balkans since the early 1990s. In Albania, it established an agricultural school and staged trade exhibits. A clinic Iran set up in Tirana has helped 500 refugees, according to its director, Ahmad Reza Jalali. In April, Iran began shipping food, medicine, and shelter to Kosovar refugees in Albania and Macedonia.

There have been unsubstantiated reports of Iranian military aid to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) since 1998, when German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel claimed Iranians were fighting in Kosovo. On April 3, 1999, the New York Times reported claims by Albanian officials and arms traffickers that Iran sent up to four shipments of weapons to the Kosovo rebels. The Israeli Foreign Ministry claimed to have a "secret report . . . disclosing that the Albanian underground that is acting to secure independence for Kosovo is mostly or to a large part funded by Iran," according to an April 8 Israeli Defense Forces radio report.

There are indications that Iran might advocate an independent Kosovar state. For example, on April 8, Iran Daily -- affiliated with the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) -- published a Washington Post editorial that advocated arming the KLA. And in an April 13 IRNA interview, Albanian Mufti Hafiz Sabri Koci commented that "the Albanian people were very happy with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran," and "the Kosovars must now have an independent state." Whereas these can be interpreted as efforts to present all views, the fact that the official news agency published such views suggests advocacy. On the other hand, IRNA also presented the view of Albanian politician Neritan Ceka that Kosovo should become a "United Nations protectorate . . . guarded by NATO troops."

Besides its direct aid to Balkan Muslims, Iran has also engaged in active diplomacy. On March 27, Iran's moderate president, Muhammad Khatami, said, "Iran, as a Muslim country concerned about the fate of Muslims and as head of the OIC, would not tolerate the aggression against the rights of Muslims in Kosovo and the Balkans." Seeing Kosovo as part of the Russian sphere of influence, the Khatami government concentrated on persuading Moscow to use its powers. Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi, therefore, was in almost daily contact with his Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov. On March 27, they "called for an end to the aggression," and the next day Kharrazi urged Ivanov to "persuade Belgrade to respect the fundamental rights of the Muslim people of Kosovo." But Iran has come under criticism for not doing enough; for instance, in the first week of April, the Saudi-funded, Beirut-based al-Sharq

al-Awsat accused Iran of indifference to the Kosovars' plight.

'Neither East Nor West' -- But Especially Not West

On April 13, Mohammad Reza Baqeri, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's director general for Central and North European affairs, argued that Iran is taking a stand independent of both sides: "Part of the Iranian stance blaming NATO may be close to the stance held by Russia, while part of Iran's stance attacking the Serbs is not accepted by the Russians. This indicates Iran's independent policy."

Since as early as January, however, the Iranian government has been more prone to blame the West for the problems in Kosovo. On January 30, the English-language Tehran Times, which is published by a branch of the Islamic Guidance and Culture Ministry, complained that the West is bombing Iraq, but it is doing nothing about Serbian "oppression of ethnic Albanian Muslims." This demonstrated, said the daily, that "the West is following a double-standard policy which is always detrimental to the interests of Muslims."

On April 5, Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i described the NATO airstrikes as part of a plot directed toward "annihilation of the Muslims in Europe." He also said, "What is happening to the Kosovar Muslims today, the same thing which befell the Bosnian Muslims as well as the Muslim people of Palestine, is a consequence of Western democracy which deals with anyone and any group opposed to them in the severest manner." On April 6, Majlis speaker 'Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, a hardliner, said, "The Serbs and NATO have reached a consensus for the annihilation of Muslims and for helping the U.S. to realize its new world order scheme."

Another theme has been suspicion about NATO and especially the United States. On March 27, Iranian state radio complained about "America, Britain, and France" bypassing the United Nations and acting without evaluating the operation's "outcome and ramifications." On April 2, Expediency Council chairman and former president 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said during the Friday prayer sermon that although helping the Kosovars is good, "the problem is that this is being done by an organization like NATO led by America." On April 6, the English-language daily Kayhan International -- affiliated with Supreme Leader Khamene'i's office -- said the airstrikes would only serve as a precedent for America and its allies to attack any perceived enemies.

Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) -- whose chief, 'Ali Larijani, is appointed by the supreme leader -- has consistently presented the news in such a way that the NATO airstrikes are shown as the causal factor in the refugee's plight, when the refugees are discussed at all. On April 15, for example, IRIB led with a refugee story: "A number of Albanian refugees have been killed in the course of NATO airstrikes in Kosovo." The next day, IRIB reported that a Serb refugee camp in the south of Belgrade was attacked by NATO forces.

Conclusion

Iran finds itself in a quandary: As the self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic world, it wants the ethnic cleansing of the mostly Muslim Kosovars to stop, but it does not want to be seen as siding with the West. These conflicting goals have led Iran not only to oppose NATO as the mechanism for stopping the Serbs but also to claim that NATO airstrikes have hurt the Kosovars. The differences in the approaches advocated by Iran's moderate and hardline factions is generally no more than rhetorical. Iranian officials call for UN action but find themselves unable, overtly, to do much more than provide humanitarian assistance and maintain contact with other Islamic states. Yet, some in the Muslim world have derided Iran's offers of aid to refugees as a drop in the bucket, and the Islamic republic's ambiguity in advocating an independent Kosovo has belied its reported attempts to help the KLA.

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