

# Kosovo, Saudi Arabia, and the Long History of Illiberal Globalization

By Victor Swezey

In October 1999, Islamic fundamentalists entered a Muslim graveyard in northern Kosovo with an order for the villagers: demolish their ancestors' centuries-old graves. Special attention was paid to obliterating any shrines belonging to the saints of Sufism—a mystical Islamic tradition dominant in the Balkans that emphasizes tolerance and respect for other religions. In their place, a mosque would be constructed that was “twice as big and twice as Muslim” as any that had existed in the village before.

These intruders were NGO workers from the Saudi Joint Relief Committee (SJRC), an umbrella group of Saudi and Gulf State charities that has since been linked to jihadi terrorist activities across the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Since communism's decline in the early 1990s, NGOs and other political and financial tools of globalization have proven to be innovations with tremendous potential—to either strengthen or undermine democracy and human rights around the world. Long before Xi Jinping launched his Belt

and Road Initiative or Putin began interfering in elections around the world, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was using these tools to promote illiberalism and leverage their agendas. Saudi Arabia was able to turn NATO's bombing of former Yugoslavia—considered a proof of concept for Western liberal interventionism at the time—into a prime opportunity for religious radicalization.

On March 24, 1999, President Bill Clinton led the NATO alliance in a 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia's nationalist government, which had attempted to subjugate Kosovo's majority Albanian population through a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing. The U.S. intervention was regarded as a victory for democracy and human rights, with Clinton even triumphantly declaring in a speech to troops at the airport in Skopje, Macedonia, “We can do it now. We can do it tomorrow, if it is necessary, somewhere else.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the short war left Kosovo's economy in tatters and created a power vacuum that institutions established by the United Nations and

European Union were only partially able to fill. With the interim government struggling to distribute basic public goods and enforce the rule of law on the ground, local leaders were desperate for assistance from anyone who would offer it.<sup>3</sup>

In the years after the war, dark money from Saudi Arabia flooded into Kosovo. Disguised as grants to build infrastructure or teach computer classes, the funds were routed through charities, bilateral aid, and individual donors until they became virtually untraceable. Ever since the world's largest oil reserves were discovered on Saudi land in 1938, the ruling House of Saud has possessed the massive amount of wealth necessary to legitimize and promote Wahhabism—its ultraconservative brand of Sunni Islam and dominant faith.

Wahhabism seeks to restore spiritual purity to Islam through strict adherence to behavioral codes and intolerance of contradictory views. Some of its central tenets include takfir, or the rejection of any Muslim with differing religious practices, and jihad, or violent struggle against perceived enemies of Islam. Wahhabism is denounced by Muslims across the world as a “vile sect”—a rigid misinterpretation of Islam—that has inspired its followers across the world to engage in terrorist activities that do not promote true Islamic values.

Yet Saudi Arabia has used its tremendous oil wealth to spread Wahhabism and build soft power around the world. The liberalization of capital markets, growing prominence of NGOs, and increased connectivity brought on by globalization in the 1990s allowed Wahhabism to reach Islamic civil society around the world, creating an extensive network that touches everywhere from Sweden to Chad to Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

Ninety-five percent of Kosovo's Albanian population is Muslim, but the religion traditionally practiced there bears no resemblance to Wahhabism. Head coverings are a rare sight on the streets of Pristina or Prizren, and bars serving raki—the liquor of choice in much of the Balkans—are ubiquitous. This secularism can be traced back to deep-rooted cultural traditions: the traditions of the Ottoman Empire that ruled Kosovo for over 500 years, and the subsequent half-century spent under Communist rule.

Though Kosovo's minority Serbian population is almost entirely Eastern Orthodox, religious differences were an afterthought during

the brutal ethnic conflict of the 1990s. In the Kosovo Liberation Army, a guerilla group founded to fight Serbian occupation, Muslims fought alongside Albanian Catholics to realize a shared dream of national self-determination. As renowned Albanian poet Vaso Pasha once wrote, “the faith of the Albanian is Albanianism.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet Wahhabi influences have sought to tip these tolerant dynamics toward the extreme. Some of the SJRC's first development projects in Kosovo were a wave of mosques that sprung up across the country, filled with radical young imams preaching the tenets of Wahhabism. One prominent imam, Zekerja Qazimi, who hailed from a prominent Kosovar family and was educated in Saudi Arabia, amassed a congregation in the city of Gjilan, which he gradually worked to radicalize. He turned his students against moderate local religious officials and published videos stressing the importance of a violent jihad—unlike that preached by Islam. The older generation of imams did not hold him accountable, lest the stream of Saudi funds flowing into Kosovo's Islamic civil society dried up.

The most concerning effect of extremist influence in Kosovo has been the increase in terrorist activity. In 2016, police identified over 300 Kosovar nationals who traveled abroad to join the Islamic State in just two years. These figures give Kosovo the highest per-capita number of ISIS recruits in all of Europe, where Islamic extremism has been on the rise in recent years. To the triumphalist Clinton administration of the late 1990s, these developments would have been unthinkable.

With the global rise of right-wing populism and the gains made by authoritarian leaders in China, Russia, and beyond, the dominant narrative in the academic community at the time of the NATO intervention in Kosovo was that the outcome of the Cold War had proven liberal democracy and capitalism to be the only viable political and economic systems. Yet it has become clear that globalization is an innovation, not an ideology.

Over the past two decades, the actions of Saudi Arabia are just one piece of evidence that the most influential participants in the global economy are some of the world's least democratic nations. As long as we refuse to acknowledge the potential for illiberal globalization inherent in our international system, the influence of these malign actors will continue to grow.