

Kosovo's path to Jerusalem: Orientalist political communication and the free world discourse

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Abstract

This article proposes that the Kosovar political communication toward Israel exemplifies Kosovo's positioning as a proxy for the US, and highlights the significance and simultaneous absence of Palestine in the meaning-making of Kosovo's political identity and its place in the world. Through an analysis of Kosovo's recent political communication toward Israel, the author suggests that the Kosovar political elite has applied the Orientalist discourse of the 'free world' in order to establish analogies between Kosovo and Israel as brave and threatened democracies defending Western civilization and frontiers. A detailed engagement with the position of Muslim-majority Kosovo at Europe's periphery and Palestine as a site of European settler-colonialism situates the current narrative presented by the Kosovar political elite within the broader contexts of colonialism, Orientalism and Islamophobia, with particular focus on the 2020 Washington Agreement brokered by US President Donald Trump.

Keywords

colonialism, communication, Kosovo, Orientalism, Palestine, Serbia

Introduction

'I love Israel. What a great country. Kosovo is a friend of Israel', Kosovar politician Hashim Thaçi, a significant political figure who later served as prime minister and president, stated shortly before Kosovo proclaimed its independence from Serbia (Spritzer, 2017). It would take more than another decade of unilateral political communication by the Kosovar political elite aimed at gaining Israeli recognition, before official relations were eventually established between both entities in 2021. 'If Kosovo were recognized by Israel, I would place the Kosovo embassy in Jerusalem', Thaçi proclaimed in 2018 (The Times of Israel, 2018). The controversial inauguration of Kosovo's embassy in

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Jerusalem in 2021 was a direct result of the US-directed normalization agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. In September 2020, the US government under President Donald Trump announced the normalization amid similar agreements between Israel and the governments of Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. While the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo primarily aimed to improve economic ties and, although Palestine was not explicitly mentioned, Palestine played a central role in the diplomatic configurations. Both Serbia and Kosovo agreed to establish embassies in Jerusalem, thus breaking the international diplomatic consensus on the status of the city. The political communication around the normalization entailed Orientalist narratives, and highlighted both the communicative challenges facing Palestinians in a colonial context and the geopolitically subordinate position of Kosovo at the periphery of Europe.

The timing of the normalization agreement coincided with and, in fact fulfilled, a confluence of political aspirations. It improved Serbia's legitimacy with the US, provided Trump with another opportunity to present himself as a peacemaker, and sought to aid Israel's foreign reputation. The normalization and political communication around it also situated Kosovo within the so-called free world. For Kosovo's political elite, the initiation of official relations with Israel was a major foreign policy victory, following years of unanswered unilateral attempts. The rhetorical approach of Kosovo's politicians has entailed proclamations of love and admiration toward both the US and Israel within an Orientalist discourse that constructs Kosovo and Israel as representatives of a civilized free world, and reinforces their position as loyal US proxies.

Politically, Kosovo has promoted itself as a client state of the US, or, as Kosovar President Vjosa Osmani proclaimed in a speech at the Atlantic Council in November 2021, 'the biggest US foreign-policy success story' (Atlantic Council, 2021). Osmani affirmed that 'Kosovo really is the most pro-American and the most pro-European nation on Earth.' As former Kosovar ambassador to the US Vlora Çitaku claimed in her interview with *The Times of Israel* in 2019, 'Kosovo will always follow the American position' (Luxner, 2019a). Support for the US is widespread in Kosovo, which reportedly has the most pro-American population in the world. According to a Gallup poll from 2019, which revealed a record low of approval of the US leadership amongst Europeans, Kosovo's population showed the highest rate of approval of the US at 82 percent (Ray, 2020), which confirmed the constantly high support for US leadership in Kosovo already evidenced in previous surveys (Loschky, 2018). Kosovar diplomats have consistently reiterated Kosovo's loyalty to the US, as seen, for example, in the case of Çitaku who posted on Twitter about her 'opportunity to speak briefly to the President elect Donald Trump, Secretary of State nominee Tillerson, and National Security Advisor Flynn' and proclaimed that she 'told them that I am a proud ambassador of the most pro-American nation on the face of the earth' (Morina, 2017). US support for Kosovo during the war and Kosovo's proclaimed independence are significant factors contributing to the position of the US as a political enabler and guarantor of the proclaimed Republic of Kosovo.

The circumstances around the normalization agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as Kosovo's political communication toward Israel, clearly emphasize the entity's positioning as a staunch supporter of Israel through its political dependence on the US. This article will analyze how the Kosovar political communication toward Israel

reaffirms its positioning as a proxy for the US, and highlights the significance and simultaneous absence of Palestine in the meaning-making of Kosovo's political identity and place in the world. These dynamics are significantly shaped by Kosovo's position as a Muslim-majority space at the periphery of Europe and a result of colonial encounters and politics of racialization which also suggest potential interconnections between Palestinian and Albanian histories. Finally, this article seeks to contextualize the academically understudied relationship between Kosovo and Palestine/Israel, to analyze the discourse amongst the Kosovar political elite in regard to Palestine, and to highlight the epistemological meaning of Palestine for Kosovo's contemporary geo-political situating and adherence to Orientalist narratives around the free world. Although both Kosovo and Palestine are common topics in hegemonic Western political communication and discourses on conflict, there is a clear lack of analyses on the interrelation and interaction between the two contexts. Adding to the historiography of communication, this article addresses the crucial need for a study of the relationship between Palestine and Kosovo, and contrasts the hegemonic Western knowledge production.

The Washington Agreement

While Palestine was not a party to the Washington Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, the absence of any mention of Palestine in the agreement despite the agreement's negative implications for Palestinians is a realization of the broader colonial policies implicit in the US–Israeli alliance. The Washington Agreement entailed several normalization measures in the contexts of economy and infrastructure. Yet, Palestine was central to the normalization agreement. Accordingly, Israel would recognize Kosovo, both Serbia and Kosovo agreed to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Serbia would relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and both Kosovo and Serbia would designate the Lebanese political party and armed movement Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. These moves fulfil major Israeli and US foreign policy goals. In 2017, the US had recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, breaking with the international consensus that the city would become the future capital of both Israel and Palestine.

The political communication around the Washington Agreement was framed by the US administration in Orientalist terms evoking a religious and civilizational binary, with the agreement being presented as a rescue intervention into a hostile situation. Trump wrote on Twitter: 'Another great day for peace with Middle East – Muslim-majority Kosovo and Israel have agreed to normalize ties and establish diplomatic relations. Well-done! More Islamic and Arab nations will follow soon!' (Trump, 2020). However, neither Kosovo nor Serbia have been in a 'conflict' with Israel, nor has the Middle East been part of the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia. Trump emphasizes Kosovo as a 'Muslim-majority' country and references it to Islamic and Arab nations rather than identifying it as a secular, European country. According to Ferizaj, reading this statement in the context of the far-right Islamophobic discourse on Kosovo, 'one could suggest that Trump's use of racist semantics – denying Albanian indigenosity in Europe due to their Muslimness – is alerting. Taking into consideration Trump's political affiliations, which include the global Islamophobia network, reinforces this claim' (Ferizaj, 2021: 506). At a rally for his re-election campaign, Trump told supporters: 'We are stopping mass

killings between Kosovo and Serbia' and added that 'they have been killing each other for so many years. They are going to stop killing' (Bami and Stojanovic, 2020). While the war in Kosovo ended in 1999, Trump depicted the situation as one of ongoing armed conflict and death. Trump's implication of a strong US that had to intervene to save people elsewhere needs to be analyzed within an Orientalist framework.

Orientalism and discourses on the free world

Given that an Orientalist framing of Kosovo's perceived connection to Palestine/Israel has also been central to the political communication of Kosovo's political elite, it is essential to situate the Washington Agreement's implications as well as the wider discourse around Albanians and Palestinians as embedded within Orientalist structures. Orientalism represents a constructed archive of theory and practice about the East, 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"' (Said, 1978: 2). As Edward Said elaborated, Orientalism is a means of constructing authority and dominance over the East and represents 'a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world' (p. 12). Orientalist discourse creates a culturally inferior other who serves as a reference for the definition of the self. The East is thus constructed and represented as an intellectually backward time and space, and reduced to stereotypes. In particular, people identified as Middle Eastern, Arab, and/or Muslim are often portrayed as inherently threatening. Shaheen (1985) documented how US media coverage about Arabs reproduces harmful and distorted images. Likewise, the entertainment industry, and Hollywood in particular, have 'used repetition as a teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences by repeating over and over, in film after film, insidious images of the Arab people' (Shaheen, 2003: 172).

Palestinians have been victims of othering within a colonial context. It is essential to identify, in addition to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discourse which form crucial components of Orientalist depictions, anti-Palestinianism as a particular form of anti-indigenous racism. According to Podur (2021):

Anti-Palestinian racism is rooted in the racism of settler-colonists towards so-called 'natives'. It is 'anti-native' racism nearly all of whose tropes are derived from previous settler-colonial projects like Canada, Australia, the US, Apartheid South Africa, and France in Algeria.

Palestine is the site of an ongoing settler-colonial project that is constantly expanded by the state of Israel with considerable support from the US and the EU. The manifestation of the Zionist movement in Palestine has resulted in the Nakba, i.e. the 1948 expulsion of the indigenous Palestinians from their homeland (Pappe, 2006; Sa'di, 2002). The Nakba remains marginalized in dominant historiography, and genocide and trauma studies (Sayigh, 2013), although researchers have discussed it within the frameworks of genocide (Rashed et al., 2014). In addition to the military occupation of Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank, ongoing since 1967, Israel's structural violation of Palestinian rights entails an apartheid regime.

Palestine is crucial in the meaning-making of Israel's position as a Western outpost in the East, and arguably serves as an imagined frontier of Western civilization. In fact, Palestinians are often depicted as the antithesis to Western civilization. The ideology of Zionism has by design been tied to Western imperialism with the Zionist colonial project functioning as a Western outpost in the East (Sayegh, 1965). As a European settler-colonial movement, Zionism 'would not have been able to achieve its goals without the overall support of the Western imperialist powers. The Israeli state was, and still is, central to the West's project in the "East"' (Masalha, 2012: 33). Thus, the idea of Israel embodies Western concepts of civilizational superiority, stemming from the colonial *mission civilisatrice* and remains an integral part of European identity. The realization of this Orientalist narrative entails the presentation of Israel as 'the only democracy in the Middle East', a small civilized Western outpost perpetually threatened by surrounding Arab and Muslim cultures which are depicted as irrationally hateful and committed to destroying the world's only Jewish state. As Palestinians are constructed as a danger to Western civilization, Israeli settler-colonialism and the crimes it entails are generally depicted as self-defense of this so-called Western civilization.

The Palestinian struggle for liberation is misrepresented in Western mainstream media due to a bias in favor of Israel (Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018; Sirhan, 2021; Zelizer et al., 2002) with Orientalist and anti-indigenous marginalization of Palestinians being prevalent in mainstream media representation which 'mistranslates the Palestinian struggle to international audiences and serves as a major strategic tool for the communication of the colonizer's engineered narratives that justify the continuous genocidal erasure of indigenous Palestine' (King and Jegić, 2024: 3). Dominant anglophone Western media representation on Palestine is characterized by a lack of historical elaboration, a prevalence of Nakba denial and reliance on Israeli narratives. The marginalization of Palestinians through settler-colonial inscription and colonial erasure (Erakat, 2019; Jegić, 2019) and silencing (Sayigh, 2019) is a structural obstacle which is manifest in the censorship in online and offline spaces that Palestinians and activists are confronted with (King, 2021).

While Palestinian realities have largely been restricted to subaltern spaces, Israeli narratives have received privileged access to Western media and politics. This positioning has been re-emphasized in particular following the Second Intifada and 9/11. Seizing on the centrality of the discourse around the 'War on Terror' and the strengthening of binary views following 9/11, Israel clearly positioned itself as part of the Western, pro-US 'free' world and claimed a central role in the so-called War on Terror. Ariel Sharon presented Israel as a leading force in defense of Western civilization and freedoms. Declared enemies of the US were equated with Palestinians and other declared enemies of Israel (Beinin, 2003: 125). The misery of Palestinians of a century of oppression could thus 'be framed as a battle of civilization against terror, of democracy against hatred, of the West against Islam' (Mitchell et al., 2003: 1). As a result, Israel's military importance was re-emphasized, while Palestinians were depicted as the ultimate threat to the Western free world.

Historical and political background

This Orientalist discourse around civilization and the free world forms the intersection of Palestinian and Kosovar experiences. An historical elaboration will identify the

positioning of Kosovo at the periphery of the Western-led so-called free world in order to provide a basis for the analysis of Kosovo's political communication toward Palestine/Israel. Palestine entails, at least symbolically, a significance for the identity construction of post-Yugoslav spaces, including Kosovo, within a European framework. Given that in the EU and US political discourse, the state of Israel is positioned as a representative of Western civilization in the East, the establishing of diplomatic relations in the 1990s between the newly independent post-Yugoslav states and Israel seemed a natural process. Reflecting on the Israeli regime's approach toward the Balkans, Jazexhi (2021: 4) identifies Israel's desire to 'recruit allies in its wars against the Palestinians'. Jazexhi claims that nowadays 'Albania and Kosovo have become proxy regimes which Israel uses in its war against Islamic political movements and states' (p. 4), showing how in recent history the Israeli regime has repeatedly intervened in domestic politics in Albania, contributing to the surveillance and arrest of Muslim Albanian citizens.

Palestine's significance within the spaces of the former Yugoslavia has shifted, from a partner within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to an entity overshadowed by Western liberalism's support for Israeli settler-colonialism. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's relations with Palestine had taken place particularly within the context of the NAM, which was proclaimed in Belgrade. Under the rule of Tito, Yugoslavia sought a leadership role in the Third World (Benson, 2001). In the context of the NAM, 'Tito's clever maneuvering between East and West brought great international prestige to his country and a foreign policy identity of its own, one that became an essential pillar supporting the Yugoslav understanding of state' (Calic, 2019: 189). Through close ties with the Global South and agile exchange with Muslim-majority countries, the NAM 'did allow Muslims from Yugoslavia to communicate extensively with Muslims throughout nonaligned countries. Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian students studied in Yugoslav universities, while Bosnians, Macedonians, and Albanians read the Qur'an in Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad' (Rexhepi, 2017: 61). Due to Tito's close relations to Abdel Naser and particularly since 1967, Yugoslavia had supported the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and cut ties with Israel following the war of 1967. After the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the newly sovereign republics shifted their geopolitical and ideological orientations. Yugoslavia's stance on Palestine/Israel was replaced by natural normalization of Israel among the internationally less significant successor states, facilitated by a shift in ideology and capitalist reconfigurations after the Cold War, as non-aligned policies were replaced with an orientation toward the US, NATO, and the European Union. While Kosovo's approach to Palestine/Israel is in many ways similar to that of the other post-Yugoslav states, its peculiar diplomatic ambitions are closely tied to its ongoing dispute with Serbia, its contested sovereignty, existential dependence on the US, and isolated position within global politics.

The dispute around Kosovo is not merely of geographical or political nature. The territory is considered to be indigenous by both Serbs and Albanians, as well as minority populations. During Yugoslav times, the Albanian-majority region of Kosovo was administered as an autonomous province of Serbia, with changing degrees of autonomy. The relationship between Serbia and Kosovo has historically been characterized by an asymmetry of power relations. The dominant Serbian perspective represents a continuous colonial approach toward Kosovo rather than objective knowledge production. Kosovo's

declaration of independence in 2008 has thus been ‘traumatic’ for many Serbs who feel that Albanians stole something that belongs to the Serbian people, while for Albanians in Kosovo the independence represents ‘a righting of a historical wrong’ (Judah, 2008: xix) of the traumatic events at the beginning of the 20th century with the onset of Serbian occupation and settlement. Following the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Serbia had led colonization efforts in Kosovo in order to increase the Serbian population. During the interwar period, Serbs settled on land that had been confiscated from Albanian feudal families (Meier, 1995: 31) and the Serbian army implemented ‘a policy of terror designed to alter the ethnic composition of Kosovo in order to strengthen Serbia’s claims to the province’ (Benson, 2001: 19). The violence has possibly influenced grievances among Albanians and Serbs (Limani, 2017: 290). While there was ‘advancement and development in the Second Yugoslavia’ under Tito, and while Kosovo gained significant autonomy by the 1970s, Albanians, although recognized as a nationality, did not have the same rights as the Slavic people(s) living within the same country (Meier, 1995: 8–9). In fact, Albanians were subject to a public concern ‘about the fast demographic growth of Albanians considered by both socialists and nationalists alike as a strategic move by Albanians to claim Kosovo in the future’ (Rexhepi, 2022: 3). The emergence of crises in the 1980s and the ultra-nationalist nature of the Milošević regime in Belgrade accelerated conflict in which ‘each side was driven by historical grievance’ (Anscombe, 2006: 759). The Milošević regime canceled Kosovo’s autonomous status in the late 1980s and suppressed independence ambitions, which was met with resistance from the Albanian population.

For Serbia, Kosovo continues to be central for symbolic reasons. Many Serbs consider Kosovo an integral part of Serbian history and identity. The mythology of Kosovo is inherent to Serbian nationalism and to the identity of the Serb Orthodox Church (Hilton Saggau, 2019). The Ottoman Empire defeated Serbs in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This event was a crucial ethos in the formation of modern Serbian nationalism. Kosovo is today mystified as ‘the heart of Serbia’ and the ‘Jerusalem of Serbia’. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the geopolitical power configurations around Kosovo have been shaped by the Albanian struggle for self-determination, the Milošević regime’s nationalist campaigns, the trauma of forced displacement and refugee crisis among Albanians, the NATO intervention in Kosovo and Serbia, and the continuous struggle for international recognition as well as internal political instability. Since its proclamation of independence in 2008, Kosovo has struggled to gain widespread recognition. It has been officially recognized by slightly more than half of UN member states, including the US and most of Europe.

It is particularly the fragile position of Kosovo which, along with its framing within European histories of colonialism and whiteness, determines its diplomatic discourse. Kosovo’s pleas for Israeli recognition and its Orientalist perspective on the question of Palestine need to be analyzed within Kosovo’s own situation as a Muslim-majority space at the periphery of Europe, in which its political existence perpetually depends on the support of its Western backers. This dependence never allows full sovereignty and thus guarantees submission to the West. As Rexhepi (2022) explains, ‘the Euro-American mission in Kosovo installed after 1999 was not meant to generate self-governing entities or sovereignty but a subordinate and dependent polity’, claiming that ‘such interventions

. . . secure and secularize suspect populations around its racial and religious b/orders' (p. 34). In fact, Rexhepi argues that 'Albanians are kept under a state of suspension of sovereignty through frameworks of statehood that are never finished and require not only continuous Euro-American civilian and military presence but also affective manifestations for the conditional guardianship the West' (p. 92). The Trump administration's rhetoric and the Kosovar political elite's Orientalist outreach to the Israeli regime are thus symptoms of Kosovo's own position as a target of Islamophobia and Orientalism and its political elite's unconditional subordination to the Western powers that guarantee the contested entity only a limited sovereignty under the supervision of these powers whose hegemony is founded on concepts of whiteness and histories of colonialism.

Despite the distinct differences in the political challenges facing Albanians in Kosovo and Palestinians, their contexts and histories are affected by Orientalism and racialization. In fact, the tension between Kosovo's position as a Muslim-majority country in the Balkans and its subordination to the US and Western Europe within a context of continuous colonial racialization provide a crucial base for its political elites' own Orientalist discourse. In the Albanian context, and in the Balkans more broadly, Islamophobia and whiteness appear as crucial concepts in the political identity-making. As Ferizaj (2023a: 368) argues, 'the most common form of Islamophobia in Kosovo is internalised Islamophobia.' Ferizaj (2023b) further explains that:

the tendency to downplay Muslimness is ever present in Kosovo, as well as other Albanian cultural spaces. This creates a tension between the lived experiences of most Albanians as Muslims and the way secular elites anxiously construct Albanianness through the disavowal of the Ottoman (that is, Islamic) past. This anxious disavowal is internalized Islamophobia, which has become so normalized in public discourse that it frequently goes unacknowledged and unchallenged.

The Kosovar political elite's insistence on the society's secular character needs to be seen in this context of European islamophobia. Rexhepi (2015) shows how Islamophobia has been 'a constitutive part of mainstream European Union enlargement processes' (p. 189) with 'academic and policy work on security in the Balkans' having 'frequently linked Muslim populations, explicitly and implicitly, with organized crime and terrorism' (p. 192). Thus, the EU enlargement strategy shifted from a focus on governance and democratization towards securitization and counter-terrorism (p. 197). In their quest to accommodate EU strategies, the governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia have engaged in this anti-terrorism discourse. Rexhepi observes:

As EU-oriented elites reiterate the notion of Balkan Islam as a depoliticized and secular religion, they reinforce the idea that the EU representational mandate for Balkan Islam will serve as a defense measure against the Balkans operating as the gateway of the crime-terror nexus to Europe. This defensive iteration of the difference between Islamic communities also functions as a normalizing tool for policing Muslim communities in the larger civilizational debates that continue to project Islam in opposition to the West. (p. 202)

These dynamics are reflected in Kosovo's communication toward Israel, itself a representative of Europe in the Levant. For Thaçi, it was important to reassure the Israeli

public that Kosovo would not become an Islamic nation. In fact, the title of the article referencing him in Israeli newspaper Haaretz was ‘Kosovar PM: Our Independent Nation Will Not Be Islamic’ (Primor, 2008). This rhetoric can be identified as part and parcel of the internalized Islamophobic discourse. It entailed an emphasis on Kosovo’s secular identity and a downplaying of its Islamic history and character.

Despite the Kosovar political elite’s dismissal of the country’s Islamic characteristics, both the US and Israeli administrations used exactly this perceived Islamic identity in their announcement of the normalization which was thus presented, in sectarian terms, as a peace between a Muslim country and Israel. Netanyahu exclaimed: ‘Kosovo will be the first Muslim-majority nation to open an embassy in Jerusalem. As I said in recent days the circle of peace is expanding and more nations are expected to join’ (The Times of Israel, 2020). This stressing of Kosovo’s perceived religious Islamic character is based on Orientalist assumptions of religious conflict.

Kosovo’s pro-Israel communication

The discourse about the free world has been an integral component of the Kosovar political elite’s communication about Palestine/Israel and has been visible among representatives throughout the political spectrum. Former ambassador Çitaku portrayed Kosovo as analogous to Israel, framing both as small states that are aligned with the US and, as such, form an exception within the allegedly dangerous regions they are situated in. She told the Israeli newspaper *The Times of Israel*: ‘Israel and Kosovo have much more in common than one would realize. We’re both small countries and we’re both neighbors with “frenemies”’ (Luxner, 2019a). Businessperson Behgjet Pacolli, who formerly served as president, deputy prime minister, and minister of foreign affairs, identified the establishing of diplomatic relations as ‘a historical day in [Kosovo’s] path to become a full member of the community of free nations’ (Pacolli, 2021). The analogy with Israel and self-depiction as a constantly threatened frontier of the Free World was echoed more recently by Kosovo’s foreign minister Donika Gërvalla-Schwarz, who told Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom*: ‘We are in many aspects quite similar countries’ (Beck, 2023). She added that ‘Kosova, like Israel, is used to constant threats. That does not define our lives. We are part of the West.’ The context of this conversation was the war in Ukraine, with Gërvalla-Schwarz juxtaposing Kosovo’s position as part of the West with Serbia being ‘a proxy of Putin’, and crediting the fact that there is no armed conflict in Kosovo to ‘the restraint of our government and the presence of US troops in Kosova’. This rhetoric shows an Orientalist outlook by presenting Kosovo’s geo-political and ideological position as akin to that of Israel, constructing Kosovo as a threatened, small state that embodies Western values and needs protection against malign neighbors.

Israel and Kosovo: Zionism’s fear of a greater Albania

The construction of analogies remained one-sided as Israel did not include Kosovo in its own discourse of the Free World. On the contrary, Israel’s approach toward Kosovo was not amicable and, at times, was vehemently opposed to Albanian self-determination. According to an Israeli journalist, when visiting Israel, Thaçi sounded like a child

recalling his last trip to Disneyland (Primor, 2008). Taçi claimed he ‘met so many great leaders’ when he was there, ‘Netanyahu, Sharon – I really admire them’ (Spritzer, 2017). Sharon, however, had expressed anti-Albanian views. A detailed engagement with Sharon’s rhetoric is helpful to understand the core of Israel’s problem with Albanian self-determination in Kosovo, and situate it within the broader framework of European Islamophobia and racialization.

Sharon placed Kosovo, Albanians, and Islam on the evil end of the binary ‘Free World’ discourse. In an interview with a Serbian newspaper during the Milošević era, Sharon proclaimed ‘we stand together with you against the Islamic terror’ (Fisk, 2006: 647). As foreign minister, Sharon sharply criticized the NATO intervention in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999. Sharon similarly took a pro-Serbian stance and opposed Albanian sovereignty in Kosovo (Fisk, 2006: 647). The establishment of an Albanian state in Kosovo would, according to Sharon, lead to a ‘Greater Albania’ and serve as a base for ‘Islamic terror’ (Fisk, 2006: 647; Primor, 2008). He reportedly claimed that Muslims in Kosovo were aligned with Israel’s imminent enemy Hezbollah (Hockstader, 1999). During the conflict in Kosovo, Israel maintained good relations with Serbia. For years, Tel Aviv refused to denounce Milošević under Israeli presidents Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu only condemned the atrocities committed by Serbian forces after he was criticized for his initial silence, while his condemnation was directed against massacres by ‘the Serbs or any other group’ (Hockstader, 1999). While Israel did send assistance to Albanian refugees, including medicine, tents, and clothing, this aid did not match the efforts of other Western governments. As Fisk (2006) elaborated, the reasoning behind Sharon’s support for the Serbian regime was his fear of providing legitimacy to NATO intervention into ‘regional disputes’. Sharon was quoted as saying:

The moment Israel expresses support for the sort of model of action we’re seeing in Kosovo, it’s likely to be the next victim. Imagine that one day Arabs in Galilee demand that the region in which they live be recognized as an autonomous area, connected to the Palestinian Authority

and he referred to the NATO bombing as ‘brutal interventionism’ (Fisk, 2006: 647). Thus, Sharon’s opposition to the NATO intervention shows not only Israel’s fear of foreign intervention in Palestine, but may represent a fear of potential analogies between the situations of Palestinians and Kosovar Albanians. Sharon’s discourse on Kosovo Albanians entails Orientalist tropes and civilizational binaries, which are essential for Israel’s construction of its national narrative. In this Orientalist imagination, both Palestinians and Albanians have been presented as obstacles and, in fact, demographic threats to Serbia’s claim on Kosovo and Israel’s claim on Palestine.

Concurrent to Israel’s objections toward Kosovo’s independence, Israel maintained solid relations with Serbia during times of crises. When Sharon died, Serbian governmental minister Aleksandar Vulin thanked him in the name of the Serbian people: ‘The Serbian people will remember Sharon for opposing the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against the former Yugoslavia and advocating respect for sovereignty of other nations and a policy of not interfering with their internal affairs’ (Serbia Times, 2014). A year after Kosovo’s independence proclamation, Israel’s ambassador in Belgrade affirmed that Israel would not recognize Kosovo and asked the Serbian people and government to appreciate Israel’s position as a sign of friendship (*RTS Radiotelevizija Srbije*, 2009). In

2014, Aleksandar Vučić, then-prime minister and president since 2017, visited Israel and declared that Serbia was very proud of its friendship with Israel (Israel, Prime Minister's Office, 2014). On an official visit to Israel in July 2017, Vulin discussed potential plans for increased cooperation in the military, education, health, and defense industries. Vulin praised Israel's alleged 'policy of neutrality' from which Serbia could learn and continued with the Orientalist myth of Israeli exceptionalism within a dangerous part of the world 'since Israel is positioned in a turbulent area where it is required to show not only military stamina and strength, but diplomatic capability and skill as well' (Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Defence, 2017). Vulin also met the Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, who has referred to Kosovo as the 'Serbian Jerusalem'. These examples point to the centrality of Palestine/Israel as a geography for the meaning-making of Serbian national narratives.

These circumstances have been retrospectively appropriated by Kosovo's political elite which has engineered a narrative of shared solidarity, cooperation, and identity between Kosovo and Israel. A discrepancy could be observed between the Kosovar political elite's imagination of Kosovar–Israeli historical interactions and its declarations of admiration for Israel, on the one hand, and the lack of Israeli response, on the other. It is worth noting that both Kosovar and Serbian political elites have perpetuated the Orientalist framing of Israel as a brave, small, civilized state surrounded by perpetual conflict. Articulations of love and fascination for Israel have been accompanied by pleas for acceptance of Kosovo and attempts to demonstrate that Kosovo, as a self-declared member of the 'Free World' is worthy of being part of the international community and Western-led alliances. Before proclaiming independence in 2008, Thaçi expressed his hopes of Israeli recognition: 'We would like and we expect Israel to be on board with all those democratic countries of the world which will immediately recognize Kosovo's independence' (Primor, 2008). It would take more than a decade of an exhaustive charm offensive and an eventual intervention by US President Trump for Israel to acknowledge Kosovo. Some Israeli analysts had warned that supporting Kosovo independence would not be in Israel's interest, arguing 'that recognition sets a precedent for foreign interference in bilateral disputes that could affect negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians' (Spritzer, 2017). Furthermore, there was a 'general concern among Israeli officials over encouraging Muslim separatist movements and that Kosovo's independence will help create a new Muslim corridor within Europe where radical Islam could take root' (Spritzer, 2017). These considerations are in line with Israel's Islamophobic policies and its stance toward the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s war.

For many years, Kosovo's unilateral efforts remained unanswered. The absence of Israeli reactions did not prevent Kosovo's politicians from doubling-down on their efforts. In fact, Kosovar politicians have invested efforts in comforting Israeli concerns. In 2016, Thaçi reiterated: 'I am interested in working on developing our relations with Israel, to promote the relations between the citizens of the two nations until the moment that Israel feels comfortable with recognizing us' (Beck, 2016). At times, Israel's passivity was presented as an actual political gain for Kosovo. When Kosovo applied to join Interpol, Israel abstained from the voting. For Pacolli, 'that meant it was a success' (Luxner, 2019b). Hence, the mere fact that Israel did not actively agitate against Kosovo was embraced as a victory. Pacolli explained: 'It's the first time that Israel is thinking seriously about Kosovo, and this is so important to us' (Luxner, 2019b).

An imagined past

In addition to the centering of Israeli comfort, another component of the communication by Kosovo's elite has been the construction of an imagined past of alleged ties between Kosovo and Israel. It may seem unclear what Thaçi meant when he attempted to identify Israel as a friend of Kosovo. In an undated statement, Thaçi's office wrote: 'Declarations on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds, directed against the people and the state of Israel, which has *supported Kosovo at all times*, are unacceptable' (President of the Republic of Kosovo, nd, emphasis added). Thaçi had informed Israeli media in 2016 about his intent to 'work with the Israeli leadership in order to increase our friendly relations' and hoping to be the first Kosovar president to visit Israel (Beck, 2016). These statements project Israel retrospectively as a supporter of Kosovo's struggle. Former Kosovar prime minister Ramush Haradinaj claimed in an interview with *The Times of Israel*: 'We are very connected with Israel, so I've never understood why Israel has not recognized Kosovo' (Luxner, 2019a), implying that Israel needed to recognize Kosovo due to alleged historical ties that were, in fact, rhetorically engineered by the Kosovar political elite.

This political communication also entailed a focus on the suffering of European Jews, and presented the Holocaust as one of the reasons why Israel should recognize Kosovo. When Pacolli wished Israel a 'Happy #IndependenceDay' in 2019, he added 'Our ppl enjoy traditionally good rel & we've proudly offered our #Besa to European #Jews during #WW2. Time for @IsraelMFA to establish dipl rel w/& bring to new level our ties' (Pacolli, 2019b). Similarly, after the signing of the Washington Agreement, Çitaku tweeted: 'During #WWII we opened our homes & sheltered Jewish people. 21 years ago @IsraeliPM. Netanyahu welcomed refugees from Kosovo at Ben Gurion Airport. Now our people will meet again. This time, to celebrate! #Kosovo #Israel' (Çitaku, 2020). Çitaku (2019) participated in a trip to Israel/Palestine organized by the American Jewish Committee, a Zionist advocacy organization, 'as the first diplomat from Kosovo'. In Twitter posts during that trip, Çitaku (2019) claimed that she 'cannot but remember the powerful messages of support that came from #Israel to #Kosovo in our darkest hour of need! Shalom' and reiterated her admiration for Israel. Similarly, following a conversation he had with Israeli governmental minister Israel Katz in July 2019, Pacolli tweeted his hopes that the diplomats 'will explore areas of mutual interest to the benefit of our nations and *traditional ties*' (Pacolli, 2019c, emphasis added). Given Israel's previously clear opposition to Kosovo's independence, its support for Serbia, and its placing of Albanians within the evil end of the free world dichotomy, the reference to these 'traditional ties' and the emphasis on alleged Israeli support for Kosovo appear ahistorical.

The rhetoric employed by key members of Kosovo's political elite has implicitly equated the state of Israel with the Jewish people and, at times, Holocaust victims. Thus, the romanticization of Israel has also entailed an equation of Jews with the political ideology of Zionism. Çitaku claimed: 'We both are pro-American, and we both have a very strong diaspora which played crucial roles in our liberation and state-building' (Luxner, 2019a). Çitaku's implication that the state of Israel is representative of and synonymous with the Jewish diaspora is visible in her claim of a 'Jewish society' rather than an Israeli one. In her interview with *The Times of Israel*, Çitaku claimed she had 'never seen anything like what [she has] seen in Israel', adding that it was 'consistency' that made

‘Jewish society’ different. This same equation has been voiced by Haradinaj. When welcoming a group of investors from the US, Haradinaj placed the Israeli flag alongside the flags of Kosovo and the US in his office. He proclaimed:

We are very proud of our cooperation with the US and the Jewish people, and Israel as a nation is a good model to follow . . . We share the same values and beliefs, and we take the same positions internationally. (Luxner, 2019b)

Besides equating Israel with Jews and romanticizing the state as a blue-print for Kosovo to follow, Haradinaj’s evocation of Kosovo’s ‘cooperation with the US and the Jewish people’ constructs ‘the Jewish people’ as a political monolith on a par with a government.

Finally, this imagined past has entailed a glorification of Israel that has included a confluence of romanticized depictions of the Zionist project and an idolization of Israel as a model of nation-building that Kosovo should follow. In her attempt to project similarities between Kosovo and Israel, Çitaku praised the Zionist project, claiming that ‘our people look up to Israel as an example of how a state can be built’ (Luxner, 2019a). The Zionist narrative views the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians of 1948 as an act of liberation. Given the historical and continuous struggles of Albanians in Kosovo, their experience with colonial oppression and histories of ethnic cleansing, the implicit identification of the Nakba as a blueprint also contests Kosovo’s own founding narrative, and places Kosovo on a par with the colonizer. Such an equation furthermore obscures structural parallels and possible intersections between Kosovar and Palestinian experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

Kosovo’s communication toward Israel has been characterized by a discrepancy of power relations between Kosovo and Israel, Orientalist tensions of the ‘Free World’ discourse, and Kosovar politicians’ projections of alleged traditional ties with Israel. While both Kosovo and Israel existentially depend on US protection to varying degrees, Kosovo’s political elite has been comforting Israel that Kosovo is in a subordinate role and would follow Israel’s decisions. Israel is primarily central for Kosovo in order to affirm Prishtina’s clear self-positioning as a US client and increase its overall visibility in the world. Kosovo’s communication toward Israel shows clearly the impact of what Beinín (2003) had defined as ‘the Israelization of US foreign policy’, i.e. the placing of Israel in the center of US foreign policy strategies. Amongst the offers extended by Kosovo’s elite to convince Israel to acknowledge Kosovo was the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. The Trump administration’s intervention that eventually allowed Kosovo to open the embassy was presented through an Orientalist framing by the US government as a step towards peace, with reference to Kosovo being the first Muslim-majority country to open an embassy in Jerusalem. This, however, contrasts with Kosovo’s insistence on being a secular, Western, liberal democracy. Trump’s normalization deal did not do much to improve Kosovo’s situation nor to solve the issues with Serbia. The eventual opening of the Kosovar embassy in Jerusalem in early 2021 was met with generally negative reactions internationally, and criticized by Kosovo’s close allies such as the EU and Turkey.

Kosovo's political communication is informed by Kosovo's own positioning as a contested entity whose marginal sovereignty existentially depends on Western and, in particular, US support, thus rendering de-colonial approaches impermissible. As a result, despite its Albanian populations' history of suffering with colonialism and contemporary discursive marginalization in the contexts of Orientalism and European Islamophobia, Kosovo's political elite placates the country as a fragment of US hegemony. Despite similarities in the histories of Albanians in Kosovo and Palestinians in Israel, and in spite of demonstrated solidarity with Palestine amongst Kosovo's population, on the diplomatic level Kosovo has been positioned as a staunch ally of the settler-colonial regime of Israel. While Kosovo's stance on Palestine is characteristic of the ideological shift that occurred following the breakup of Yugoslavia, which resulted in the emergence of several smaller states situated at the periphery of EU and NATO that have been largely oriented toward inclusion into a US-dominated Western block, its approach differs in its distinctively colonial communication and charm offensive towards the Israeli regime as it projects Zionist foundational myths on its own identity. This rhetoric projects Israel as a perpetually threatened civilization in an inherently dangerous, backward Orient. Palestinians are constructed as the ultimate threat to Western civilization. The Kosovar political elite has attempted to place Kosovo in similar terms, establishing analogies of both Kosovo and Israel as threatened representatives and frontiers in defense of Western civilization within the 'Free World' discourse that exploits Orientalist constructions of the self and the other in order to evoke Israeli sympathy.

While more research is required on the particularities of Kosovar, Serbian, and Israeli intersections in recent history, Kosovo's imagination of Kosovar–Israeli historical interactions stands in stark contrast with the Israel stance that had previously entailed both an outright refusal to acknowledge Kosovo as well as support for anti-Kosovar narratives. The Israeli recognition of Kosovo appears to have been a major foreign policy victory for Kosovo's political elite. Kosovar political communication toward Israel exemplifies its positioning as a proxy for the US, and highlights the significance and simultaneous absence of Palestine in the meaning-making of Kosovo's political identity and its place in the world.


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