Issue Brief
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NATO's Strategic Engagement with Religious Landscapes: Navigating Sovereignty, Hybrid Warfare, and Sacred Spaces in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans

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This issue brief examines the strategic significance of religious landscapes in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean within NATO's evolving security framework. It argues that sacred spaces are no longer peripheral cultural concerns but constitute part of the broader strategic environment in which sovereignty, memory, mobility, and hybrid threats intersect. Through the empirical example of Kosovo and KFOR's protection of Serbian Orthodox heritage sites, it demonstrates how monasteries, pilgrimage routes, and religious infrastructure can become focal points of political mobilization, information warfare, and contested legitimacy. The analysis further situates these dynamics within NATO's emerging approaches to human security, resilience, and cultural property protection. Extending the discussion to the Eastern Mediterranean, it highlights how maritime insecurity, disinformation, and unresolved political disputes may transform symbolic religious sites into operational flashpoints. It concludes that NATO should adopt a landscape-based resilience approach integrating physical security, information resilience, cultural literacy, and institutional coordination in order to mitigate hybrid escalation and strengthen regional stability.

Introduction

In the contemporary framework of strategic analysis, religion is no longer considered a secondary cultural factor, unrelated to specific security interests. Within the framework of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, sacred space, pilgrimage routes, monastic complexes, and ecclesiastical authority structures are situated within contested sovereignty, borderlands, memory, and mobility. Sacred space is no longer considered merely a symbol of faith but a carrier of legitimacy, a repository of memory, and a potential catalyst for political mobilization. Sit-

uated within a framework of unresolved status conflicts, coexistence challenges, and hybridization pressures, sacred space may become a tool through which a micro-level conflict may escalate to a wider strategic conflict.

This issue brief argues that NATO's engagement with religious landscapes should no longer be considered engagement with theology and faith but as a tool of a wider resilience-based security strategy. Situated within a framework of hybridization, civilian vulnerability, and contested authority, sacred space may become a tool of strategic importance. Within this, the empirical case of the Western Balkans and, more specifically, Kosovo may offer the most compelling example of this argument. At the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean may offer a parallel environment within which a wider conflict may lead to the operationalization of religious geography. It is within this context that this issue brief seeks to critically evaluate the role of NATO's evolving human security, cultural property protection, and resilience strategy within a wider and more mature framework of strategic analysis of sacred space.

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Strategic Imperatives of Religious Geography

In the religious landscapes of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, the issue is not one of peripherality in relation to security but rather one in which the religious is embedded in transport corridors, borderlands, sea lanes, memory politics, and contested sovereignty. In regions where revisionist narratives, foreign information campaigns, and social fragmentation exist below the level of conventional warfare, NATO no longer views religious geography as a purely cultural and humanitarian issue, but rather as an integral part of its overall responsibility and mandate.

The core argument of the current article is that NATO's involvement in religious geography does not primarily focus on confessional issues; instead, it is part of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining stability in regions where religious geography intersects with contested sovereignty, hybrid threats, and civilian vulnerability. This is already the case in the Western Balkans, especially in Kosovo, where the Kosovo Force or KFOR mission includes the protection of Serbian Orthodox religious sites under the UN mandate. It becomes increasingly relevant to the Eastern Mediterranean, where maritime insecurity, competition, disinformation, and political conflicts may rapidly escalate symbolic religious sites into operational flashpoints. The recent policy development within NATO in human security and cultural property protection offers a useful doctrinal basis, albeit with implementation being patchy and conceptually undeveloped.

In its 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO identifies the Western Balkans and the Black Sea area as being strategically important, with a focus on resilience against coercion, as well as malign third-party influence. While the document does not specifically focus on religion, its emphasis on resilience, crisis prevention, and cooperative se-

curity has direct relevance to areas of religious significance.[1] The Alliance's Human Security Approach, agreed upon in Madrid, is more specific, with cultural property protection being one of the five domains through which the Alliance aims to reduce harm to civilians and increase operational understanding. As a result, the protection of churches, monasteries, archives, sacred art, and religious access routes shifts from being a sensitivity to a planning priority.[2]

Kosovo serves as a prime example. KFOR was deployed in 1999 and mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which authorized an international security force under UN auspices.[3] From the outset, KFOR was deployed in an environment in which community security and the protection of heritage were inextricably linked. NATO's record is a testament to this development. In reaction to episodes of violence, such as the one in March 2004, the Alliance condemned the assault on religious and cultural heritage sites. It also developed a structure to protect these sites and eventually transferred responsibility to local actors.[4] In its current official version, KFOR, under the auspices of NATO, had reduced its presence in all but eight sites by the end of 2013, with the exception of the Dečani Monastery, which is the only site currently under KFOR's permanent protection. The Alliance has used this site to promote regional stability, intercommunity reassurance, and international credibility.[5]

This matter is also significant because the Dečani Monastery is not only a local structure but also part of UNESCO's "Mediaeval Monuments in Kosovo," which consists of a quartet of prominent Serbian Orthodox structures that UNESCO continues to list as World Heritage in Danger.[6] From a strategic perspective, these structures can play a variety of roles, including serving as repositories of historical legitimacy, a foci of political discourse, and as points of contention in struggles for status and memory. When these structures are imbued with the character of the sacred, they can also be subject to exploitation

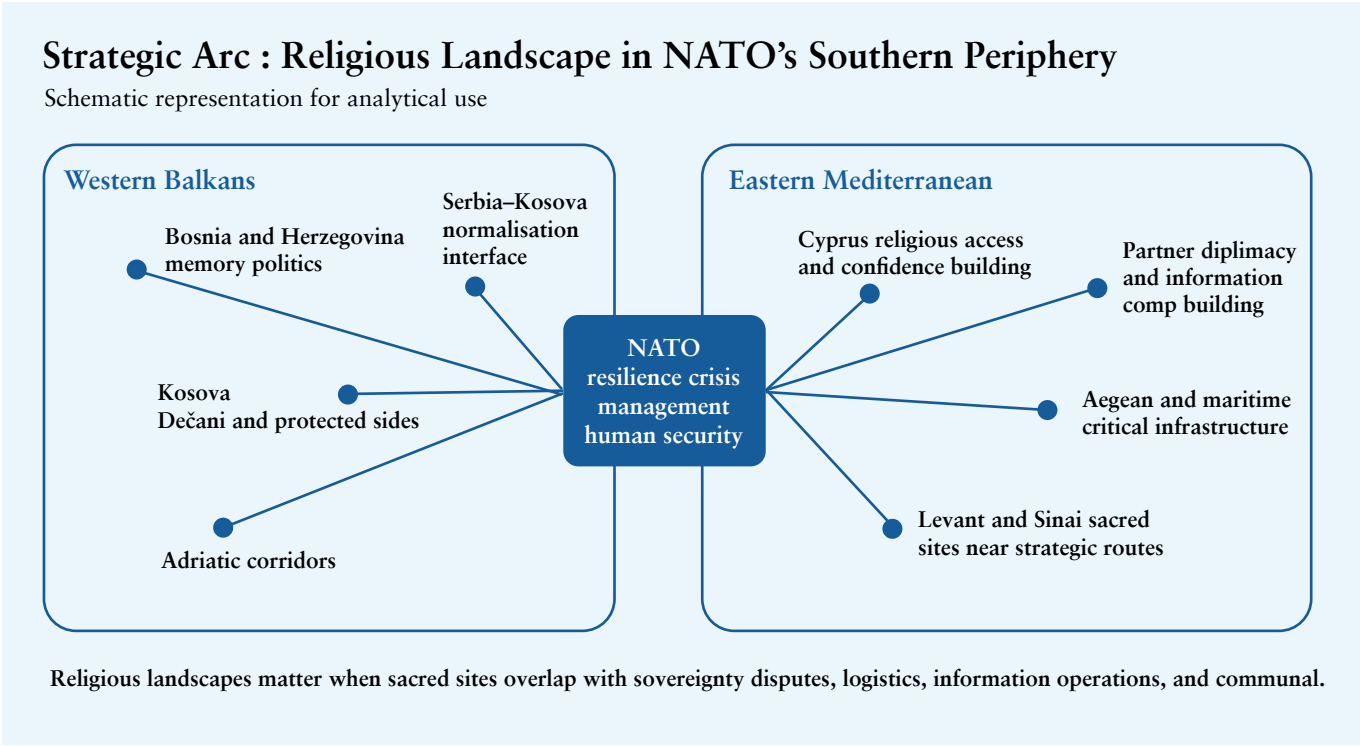

Figure 1. Schematic strategic arc linking the Western Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. Source: Author

by the state and other actors. In this sense, actions taken with respect to, or in the vicinity of, these structures, or the narratives associated with them, are not necessarily gratuitous but can be designed to precipitate conflict, mobilize publics, and delegitimize institutions, as well as export conflict to the international stage.

The existing body of literature on hybrid threats is full of useful insights. The analyses affiliated with Europe and NATO generally stress that hybrid warfare activities take advantage of weaknesses in the political, informational, social, and infrastructural realms and do not rely on direct military confrontation.[7] In the case of the Western Balkans, weaknesses are increased by issues of identity, incomplete reconciliation, low levels of trust, and the lasting presence of external actors.[8] Religious landscapes, in particular, are weak points that unite emotional and highly symbolic value. A church, a monastery, a mosque, a cemetery, or a pilgrimage corridor is a potentially effective tool for strategic communication, easy to narrate, difficult to depoliticize, and highly capable of mobilizing both internal and external attention. Therefore, external information manipulation of sacred sites has the potential to produce results disproportionate to the physical scale of the sacred site.

For practitioners—diplomats and planners—what does this mean? It means that the protection of religious landscapes is not simply a matter of securing a particular territory. It is a matter of developing a multi-layered resilience strategy. Physical security is needed when the threat assessment is high. As shown by the continued presence of KFOR at Dečani, sometimes a visible security presence is indispensable. Institutional coordination is needed, too.[9] Military actors, police, civil authorities, religious communities, and international heritage bodies need to cooperate. NATO's cultural property protection

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agenda is increasingly recognizing that this is a situation where shared situational awareness is key to success, and military action is no longer enough.[10] Information resilience is also needed. Fabricated or selectively used information on incidents related to sacred sites, circulating within information networks, may create a situation where on-the-ground calm is combined with strategic destabilization in the information domain.[11]

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina supports this argument. NATO's military engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina largely follows the pattern of the previous phase, but the political legacy of the conflict shows the ways in which religious architecture can remain linked to strategic order even after the end of large-scale conflict.[12] In the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia, the destruction of mosques, churches, monasteries, libraries, and cemeteries has repeatedly been used to destroy

presence and rewrite memory. Such practices, according to the Council of Europe, have been identified as a deliberate attempt to destroy the culture, identity, and existence of others.[13] What does this mean for hybrid warfare? It means that, for contemporary conflict planners, religious architecture and landscapes are a reminder of the ways in which hybrid warfare often reactivates, rather than creates, grievance. It means that they exploit existing landscapes already charged with grievance, injury, and sanctity. As a result, religious landscapes become a source of mobilizable memory. Where this memory is transnational, reaching out to diasporas, kin states, and external patrons, so too is the scope of the strategic problem of a particular incident.

Hybrid actors using religious architecture to mobilize grievance prefer ambiguity. They benefit from the fact that a vandalized church wall, a doctored video of a religious procession, or a decision over the management of monastery lands can be attributed to a variety of sources, from religious extremists and criminals to careless administrators and anonymous online communities. Ambiguity speeds up emotional response but slows down attribution. NATO's new approach to hybrid warfare is starting to recognize the importance of attribution and resilience, but incidents involving religious dimensions require particular care in operational craft, as misattribution can lead to increased mistrust.[14]

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A related problem is that of access. Security organizations tend to think in terms of sites, but the religious landscape is mediated through routes, calendars, festivals, monastic support infrastructure, and the daily movements of clergy or pilgrims. A secure monastery with an insecure road to the site is not secure. A secure shrine in an insecure information environment may be secure but socially isolated.[15] In Kosovo, the experience of designated special status sites over a generation indicates that a site-specific approach to security management must also consider the site's ecosystem, including perceptions of equity. An organization that can protect one community's holy site but appears indifferent to others' concerns is likely to create the very instability it seeks to manage.

Therefore, NATO's future engagement should shift from a site-based to a landscape-based approach to conflict resolution.[16] A landscape approach considers not only the site but also the surrounding settlements, road networks, communication networks, rituals, and triggers of symbolic escalation. It would also integrate heritage site protection with civil preparedness, including emergency planning, cyber resilience in heritage institutions, and communication planning in the event of incidents. This is particularly relevant in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is so compact that instability can quickly spill over into sea, air, cyber, and diplomatic space.

This framework also helps to clarify why the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be thought of as a region in a kind of analytical quarantine. The region's strategic context brings together maritime rivalry, a fragile regional environment, grievances, and a complex cartography of religion, which stretches from Cyprus and the Aegean, through the Levant and into the Sinai. NATO is not, and should not be, a manager of sacred spaces in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is, however, a security actor in a region in which a significant act of damage, obstruction, or politicization of a major monastery, shrine, or ecclesiastical enclave has the potential for broader alliance, partner, and legitimacy consequences, particularly in a context in which other actors might be keen to characterize it as a "civilizational attack" or as a symptom of Western apathy or lack of interest.[17]

Cyprus is a similar case in point, albeit with indirect NATO involvement. UN records have long highlighted the significance of religious site accessibility in the buffer zone, demonstrating the connection between sacred mobility and building trust. The broader point for NATO is strategic rather than organizational: in long-running conflicts, religious site accessibility and heritage protection are not peripheral concessions but rather a gauge of whether a security order is seen as legitimate, inclusive, and sustainable. Similar observations could be made regarding NATO's own historical record in the Balkans, where the desecration of religious sites was understood not only as a crime but as a negation of coexistence itself. Any security alliance that claims to uphold a rules-based order must therefore acknowledge that the security of sacred space is linked with the security of pluralism.[18]

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The more relevant issue is the one that is not yet at the point of violence. A dispute over a monastery road, a false report of desecration, drone images

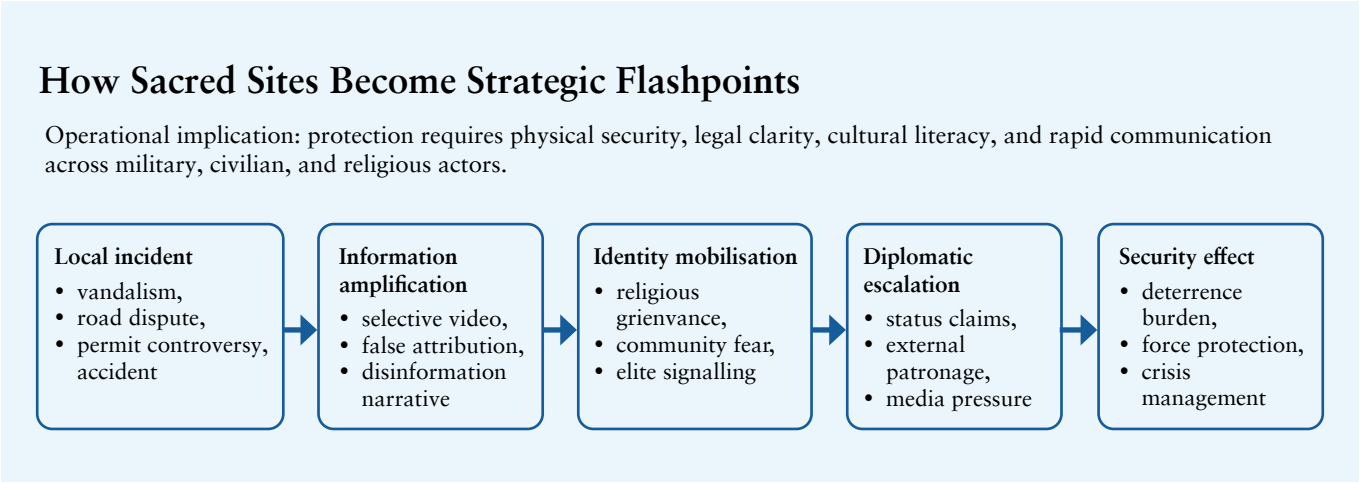

Figure 2. Pathways through which a sacred site incident can become a strategic flashpoint. Source: Author

shared without context, or a coordinated disinformation campaign claiming threats to pilgrims could each be seen as a relatively minor incident in isolation. Yet together, they could represent a hybrid escalation ladder. These incidents involve sovereignty, identity, and historical trauma in a complex interplay that defies compartmentalization. They lend themselves to patronage from the outside, grandstanding from the diplomatic class, and media cycles driven by emotion. The threat to NATO is not only surprise but also strategic capture—being forced to respond to a narrative that has been dictated by another.[19]

Conclusion

Last but not least, a more mature alliance paradigm would be built on five key principles: First, legal modesty: NATO must act within its remit and in accordance with international law, not as an arbiter of theological debates or historical claims of ownership. Second, cultural literacy: military commands operating in sensitive areas must be trained before deployment on the local religious topography, calendar, access, and symbolic red lines. Third, integrated attribution: incidents regarding suspicious activities at sacred sites must be analyzed by integrating military, civil, and information perspectives in order to avoid conflating sabotage, opportunism, and misinformation. Fourth, partnership: UNESCO, the European Union, the United Nations, local religious authorities, and civil society networks have knowledge that military structures cannot access. Fifth, anticipatory communication: when adversaries aim at weaponizing sacred symbolism, silence is as dangerous as a statement. Public communication is part of the solution.

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> ***NATO's strategic engagement with religious landscapes can be seen as an integral part of building resilience in contested border areas. The issue is neither decorative nor civilizational in nature but rather one of managing symbolic infrastructure in areas where symbols can potentially generate coercion, mobilization, and conflict escalation.***

Such an initiative would also strengthen NATO's position in sovereignty disputes: Religious topographies often serve as a backdrop for the performance of sovereignty, rather than its assertion. Processions, flags, property registrations, road access, restoration permits, and policing protect and assert claims of authority and security. In Kosovo, any change in the security architecture of a sacred site may be viewed as a status-related action. This aspect emphasizes the importance of KFOR's experience, which has shown that an international military force can help create space

for diplomacy, without prejudging final status, provided it remains impartial, predictable, and integrated into a broader framework of diplomacy.

Ultimately, NATO's strategic engagement with religious landscapes can be seen as an integral part of building resilience in contested border areas. The issue is neither decorative nor civilizational in nature but rather one of managing symbolic infrastructure in areas where symbols can potentially generate coercion, mobilization, and conflict escalation. The Alliance has learned from experience in the Balkans that monasteries and religious sites can be part of a nodal security governance approach. In the Eastern Mediterranean, it is warranted to integrate religious landscapes into planning considerations rather than waiting for a significant crisis. A smart alliance will view religious landscapes as part of the civilian environment, where hybrid actors can potentially target them for their ends and where effective security institutions need to be aware of their potential.

Faith does not change NATO's primary military purpose. Geography shaped by faith can potentially influence coercion mechanisms, crisis contagion, and legitimacy considerations, particularly in how these factors affect the behavior of hybrid actors and the responses of security institutions. In an era of hybrid confrontation, religious landscapes are no longer outside strategic considerations but part of the strategic environment where successful strategies are achieved or failed.

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Endnotes

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