

ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN KOSOVO AND THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION

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Abstract

Kosovo and the region of the Balkans in general had always been areas where different cultures and the influences of major powers clashed. The influence of the Roman Catholic Church collided with that of the Byzantine Orthodox Church, Islam clashed with Christianity and the geostrategic interests of the East collided with those of the West. These cultural and religious clashes on the same territory as well as the impacts of the different geostrategic interests resulted over the course of the past centuries in the development of different competitive cultures and religions sometimes opposed to each other in Kosovo. Irrespectively of this religious and cultural diversity, the Kosovar people have not been treating these ideological divides as separations of the entire nation based on a religious basis. Rather, they have been cultivating feelings of harmony, tolerance and understanding with respect to members of other faiths. But unfortunately, the traditional model of harmony and interfaith tolerance that had existed in Kosovo for centuries has come more and more under attack in recent times.

Keywords: *Islamic terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic extremism, Kosovo, Western Balkans.*

JEL Classification: H83, K33

1. Introduction

During the 90s of the XX century, in Kosovo and in Albania reigned a situation characterized by political tensions, with deep economic crises and with the failure of the state apparatus to function properly. These circumstances, coupled with the rapid decline of communist ideology as inspiration ideologies, have led to an increase in the rate of corruption, the destruction of the education system, the degradation of the health system and the disruption of many family structures. In these social circumstances, there have been two events of crucial importance for the presentation of Islamist extremism in Kosovo:

a) Albania became a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). After the Albanian Democratic Party had obtained the absolute majority in the parliamentary elections in 1992, Sali Berisha, who was then President of the State, had Albania join the Organization of the Islamic Conference when he had just been in office for some months because he was hoping that Albania would be granted economic aid.

The OIC gave the country full membership rights. After Albania had become a member of the OIC, Albanian authorities unilaterally facilitated granting visas to citizens of the most Arabian countries or even excluded them from visa requirements², which was used for the unhindered penetration of various radical Islamist terrorist structures from the Arab world into Albania, Kosovo and other Balkan countries.

This was also evidenced in the "Balkan Arabs" trial, which was held in Cairo in 1999, against 107 people charged with terrorism, including Osama bin Laden's deputy, Al Zawahir, who was sentenced to death (in absentia). During this trial it was argued that Osama bin Laden along with some other terrorist structures have established or have been co-founders of several humanitarian organizations in the Balkans who have sponsored the creation of the first Islamist extremist cells in some Balkan regions, have also served to shelter terrorists from the Near East, for international arms trafficking, money laundering, etc.

Undoubtedly, Albania's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference has influenced the awakening of religious awareness and empowerment of Islam in Albania and Kosovo. During that time, dozens of young Albanians from Kosovo, Albania and other countries in the

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² Information on the treaties which were signed by both sides between 1992 and 1996 can be found here: http://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/files/userfiles/Marrevshjet_Dypaleshe_me_te_gjitha_vendet.pdf, consulted on 10.04.2018.

Balkans were sent to theological schools in Turkey and the Middle East for religious education and training.

b) The outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995). The outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the organized influx of mujaheddin, who had fought in the war between Russia and Afghanistan, exacerbated the radicalization of the Muslim population in all the territories of former Yugoslavia. After the Soviet troops had withdrawn and the “Islamic State of Afghanistan” had been proclaimed in 1992, the missions of thousands of mujaheddin in Afghanistan were over. Therefore, these mujaheddin, who were financed by Arabian circles, started pouring into Bosnia in order to realize their jihadist ambitions there and to spread their religious ideology, which would enable certain Arabian states to expand their spheres of influence in the Balkans.

These mujaheddin operated in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the form of independent units. However, after their numbers had grown, they demanded that the Bosnian government incorporate them in the army. Thus, the mujaheddin unit “El Mujahid” became part of the 3rd corps of the Bosnian army under the command of General Enver Hadzihanovic while Alia Izetbegovic was appointed honorary commander.³ After that, the “El Mujahid” unit began to recruit Bosnians and Albanians as well. In this manner, they managed to pass on their radical and extremist Islamist ideology to the population for the first time. The mujaheddin units were notorious for their brutality and they tortured and murdered civilian people on a large scale. Even cutting off heads, which the Islamist State is notorious for nowadays with respect to both symbolic and strategic aspects, was quite a common practice with the fighters of the “El Mujahid” unit.⁴

After the war was over or they had been deported from Bosnia, some mujaheddin who had served in Bosnia rose up the ranks to leadership positions in different international terrorist organizations. One of them was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed who had conceived the terrorist attack on the USA in 2001 and another one was Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who was a member of the cell in Hamburg that had prepared the plan for the terrorist attack on the USA on September 11, 2001 etc. It is to be assumed that about 5.000 jihadists entered Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war. Some of them are still living in Bosnia, while others joined different jihadist movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East.⁵

During the war in Kosovo, the Islamist volunteers endeavored continually to be incorporated in the ranks of the KLA. But aside from some jihadists fighting for the KLA as members of different units, they were not incorporated or legitimized as special units of the KLA. In some cases, they were even expelled from areas under KLA control.

Without a doubt, the participation of such large numbers of jihadists in the war in Bosnia (from 1992-1995) also served as a test for the possibility to organize a global jihadist movement in order to start a new war for establishing the Islamist caliphate they had been dreaming of.

2. The activities of foreign Islamist organizations in Albania

While the democratic movement was coming under way in Albania in 1990 and people were being permitted to practice their religions, which had been forbidden since 1967, some members of Islamist NGOs from the Middle East traveled for the first time to Albania in order to reinforce a revival of Islam through providing different sorts of religious materials and aid. After the outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (which lasted from 1992-1995), the start of armed conflicts in Albania (in 1997) and the beginning of the war in Kosovo (which lasted from 1998-1999) respectively the outbreak of the war in Macedonia in 2001, all the preconditions had been created for the unchecked

³ Gordon Bardos, *The War on Terrorism in the Balkans: A Report Card on US Policy After 9/11*, in John Davis (editor), “The Global War on Terrorism: Assessing the American Response”, US: Nova Science, 2005, p. 117.

⁴ Cf.: Charles R. Shrader: *The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Bosnia: A Military History, 1992-1994*, Texas A&M University Press 2003, pp. 52-55, 128-129.

⁵ Context of 'August 23, 2001: 9/11 Hijackers Alhazmi and Almihdhar Are Finally Added to Terrorist Watch List; <http://www.historycommons.org/context.jsp?item=a082301watchlistadd#a082301watchlistadd>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

entries of dozens of extremist Islamist organizations from the Middle East and for their unchecked destructive activities in all regions in the Balkans populated by Muslims.

These "religious" or "humanitarian" organizations, since the early days of their activity in Albania, through the donation of radical religious literature, the opening of courses and various religious schools, the sending of hundreds of young people to religious education in various Islamic centers of Arab world and the provision of conditional humanitarian aid, have promoted a new radical religious ideology, which had not been recognized until then in the Balkans. Some of these organizations are: The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), The Arab Albanian Islamic Bank, The Muwafaq Foundation, The Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), The Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage (RIHS).

3. The activities of Arabian Islamist organizations in Kosovo

Immediately after the war was over, large numbers of Islamist relief organizations and NGOs from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey, which had operated in Albania and Bosnia before, set up their branch offices in Kosovo. The International Islamic Relief Organization, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development and the Humanitarian Relief Organization were among these associations.

During the first few years after the war, the state organs which had been created anew, didn't function efficiently and the educational system wasn't consolidated in the slightest either. Levels of poverty and corruption were very high in Kosovo. Under such circumstances that were also characterized by different social conflicts, approx. 60 NGOs from Turkey and the Middle East started their unchecked operations and extended their indoctrination activities to all parts and classes of Kosovar society.⁶ Let's look at some of these organizations in detail: Al Waqf Al Islami, Kosova (Albanian for Kosovo) Aid and Development (KAD), Nektari-He, The Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya (SJRC) and "The Institute for Contemporary Culture and Studies".

Aside from the aforementioned organizations which were also identified as supporters of terrorism, some other associations that likewise promoted an extremist Islamist ideology, called for hatred of other faiths, caused a rift across the Muslim community and called on Muslim believers to engage in jihad in Syria and Iraq operated in Kosovo as well: "Gjurma", "Kalliri i Mirësisë", "Njeshmëria", "Sinqeriteti" and "Parimi" from Kaçanik, "Meszxhidi Studentor", "Rinia Istogase" from Istog, "Çelësi", "Argumenti", "Pema e Bamirësisë" from Peja (which is in touch with alleged terrorist Arfan Qadeer Bhatti from Pakistan), "Rinia Islame" from Kaçanik, whose "emir" is famous Kosovar terrorist Lavdrim Muhaxherri (the leaders of this organization are addressed with the Arabian title "emir") etc. It also bears mentioning that the majority of these organizations also collaborated in different ways with the 11 Al-Qaida terrorists that had been operating in Kosovo until 2008.⁷

A common feature of Arab Islamist associations and organizations that have acted or is acting in Kosovo is their inclination to cooperate with one another, the exchange of reliable personnel from one organization to another, the exchange of funds for the realization of joint Islamic projects and the establishment of a partnership for money laundering and financing of various extremist and terrorist activities in Kosovo and other countries.

4. The activities of the Shiite Islamist organizations in Kosovo

Even though there is no Shiite tradition or religious minority in Kosovo, some Shiite organizations have or had also been operating here in a halfway legal manner in order to promote their religion and to further the Iranian influence on the region. Discussions were held on different

⁶<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article164638965/Araber-predigen-und-finanzieren-Islamismus-im-Kosovo.html>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

⁷ <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/te-dhenat-shokuese-te-wikileaks-zbulohen-11-terroristet-e-al-kaides-qe-ishin-ne-kosove-dokumente-337765/?archive=1>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

diplomatic levels and in the area of international security on the issues of the direct or indirect Iranian connections to the Balkans, especially through the Hezbollah.⁸

Let's look at the most famous Shiite Islamist organizations operating in Kosovo: NISA, „Qur'an" Ehli Bejti, Ibn Sina.

This association was established as an "institute for the study of human sciences" in Prizren and declared as an independent study center that carries out activities in the field of education and scientific research as well as in the field of language, culture, Persian literature and Islamic civilization.⁹ "Nisa" and the organization "Bregu i Diellit" founded a common publishing house named "Dielli pas Reve" as well as the magazines "Vlera" and "Lumturia" as well as they have opened some electronic media like "Media e Lire" and "Press Lajme".

The spread of the influence of Shiite organizations in Kosovo has been hampered, especially after the threatening and warlike statements of some Shiite activists, such as Zehra Huddut, Igballe Huduti-Berisha's daughter, given to Iranian television "Nasr TV" during a visit to Tehran, where she said: "I'm here to fight Israel and America".¹⁰

The work of all the said Shiite organizations was interdicted by the authorities of Kosovo after their commission of several serious crimes against the international legal order and the constitution of Kosovo.¹¹

5. The activities of the Turkish Islamist organizations in Kosovo

Aside from Arabian humanitarian organizations which spread the SelaFi ideology in Kosovo and pro-Iranian groups which promote the Shiite faith and the revolutionary Iranian orientation within the region, there are also Turkish NGOs or relief organizations in Kosovo wanting to fuel Islamist radicalism and seeking to revive pro-Ottoman sentiments in Kosovo: Asociacioni për Kulturë, Edukim dhe Arsimim / Association for Culture and Education (AKEA), the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), "the Sylejmania Society".

6. The aims and dangers of Islamist extremism in Kosovo and the countries of the region

The inception and the activities of radical and extremist Islamist structures in Kosovo as well as their being aided and abetted by some intelligence agencies and foreign organizations operating in Kosovo do constitute a latent risk for national security. The extent of such dangers is also impacted by the geopolitical developments in the Middle East. In fact, the outbreak of the civil wars in Iraq and Syria was used as a pretext for fueling religious fanaticism in Kosovo as well as envy, jealousy and hatred of the USA and other countries of the Western world and for assaulting "infidels". After the "Islamic State (IS)" was founded, Islamist organizations started to recruit hundreds of volunteers from Kosovo for fighting at different front-lines in Syria and in Iraq. This was aided and abetted by some religious circles and Turkish institutions operating in Kosovo since it was deemed to be the "legitimate obligation and duty of Muslims".

Thus, "recruitment centers" were founded and according to estimates of official sources, approx. 1.000 volunteers were recruited for several front-lines in Syria and Iraq solely in the Western Balkans 314 volunteers solely from Kosovo went to war as members of different terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State, the Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham etc. Some researchers even estimate that solely from Kosovo, approx. 1.000 volunteers have been fighting at different front-lines in Iraq and Syria.¹² But be that as it may, the mere fact that quintuple numbers of volunteers for

⁸ Benjamin Weinthal, *Iran Threats in the Balkans*, Jerusalem Post, April 12, 2013, in <http://www.jpost.com/International/Report-warns-of-Hezbollah-Iran-threats-in-Balkans-309596> (15/05/2013).

⁹ Kosovo Police Raid NGOs Linked to Iran; <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-raid-ngos-with-ties-to-iran>; <http://www.weeklystandard.com/iranian-propagandists-kosovo/article/890381>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹⁰ Kosovo vs. Iranians and ISIS: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/kosovo-vs.-iranians-and-isis/article/981448>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹¹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-raid-ngos-with-ties-to-iran>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹² <http://zeri.info/aktuale/68551/huffingtonpost-islamizmi-ne-kosove/>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

the wars in Syria and Iraq stem from Kosovo compared to other European countries (and proportionately to the population numbers) shows at any rate that Kosovo belongs to those countries from where the most volunteers for the jihad hail on a global scale.¹³

After the international coalition against terrorism had been founded in September 2014, the situation at the front-lines in Iraq and Syria changed and Kosovar fighters began to desert and to return home on a massive scale. According to official data, it is estimated that at least 120 “holy warriors” returned solely to Kosovo.¹⁴

The return of such large numbers of jihadists with fighting experience constitutes a high risk not just for the national security of Kosovo but also for the safety of the region and of Europe in general as well. Those fighters had been radicalized to a large extent during their long-term stays in Syria and Iraq and they are in touch with radical circles from different countries on an ethnic, religious and terrorist basis. Above all, they have been using counterfeit Arabian passports in order to claim that they are “wounded soldiers” or “refugees” and thus, to seep into different EU countries.¹⁵

This estimation is also buttressed by the fact that some returnees from the IS were involved in criminal activities immediately, which resulted in the arrest of 40 returned jihadists solely during July and August 2014. Some former IS fighters attempted to commit an **asymmetrical terrorist attack** by poisoning the water of the lakes of Badovc one year later on July 11, 2015, which could have had disastrous consequences for thousands of inhabitants of Kosovo. Two months after this terrorist attack had failed, the IS informed Muslim public opinion through a communiqué in Albanian that they were going to have dozens of jihadists who were well-versed in the use of weapons and explosives and who would be wearing masks during their secret activities commit terrorist attacks in the Balkans.

Some other „holy warriors“ started to cooperate with well-known terrorist circles in the region immediately after their returns in order to commit terrorist attacks against American institutions or interests in Kosovo, Europe and even in the USA. Such a terrorist attack was planned for July 04, 2015 in Prishtina during the concert scheduled in honor of Independence Day. After that, a Kosovar hacker who self-identified as a member of the “hacker division of the Islamic State” committed a cyber-attack on an American military basis during which he spied out and forwarded to the leading structures of the IS the personal data of approx. 1.000 officers, soldiers and Government employees.¹⁶

Together with other terrorist circles from the region, Islamist extremists from Kosovo also planned the commission of a huge terrorist attack during the football game between Albania and Israel which was scheduled on November 12, 2016 in Shkodra. The police departments of the countries in the region, which were also assisted by Israeli and Western intelligence agencies, arrested during their joint operations 18 jihadists from Kosovo, 3 terrorists from Macedonia and 4 jihadists from Albania and seized sophisticated weapons as well as different types of ammunition and explosives that were solely destined for the commission of terrorist attacks.

Collaboration between different radical and extremist Islamist groups within the region is common practice and facilitated since such people the same ideology and motivation and have the same ethnic and religious affiliations in common. Thus, it is easy for them to contact young Muslims from the diaspora and initiate cooperation.

¹³ For further information, see: http://soufangroup.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/TSG_Foreign_FightersUpdate3.pdf, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹⁴ Cf.: <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹⁵ Two participants in the terrorist attack in Paris also used such passports. For more information, see: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article150152713/Die-Gefahr-der-echten-falschen-Paesse-und-die-Rolle-des-IS.html>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹⁶ Some years ago Islamist extremists had used ethnic and religious structures of the Kosovar diaspora for indoctrinating and recruiting persons for terrorist attacks on American interests or institutions in Europe and the USA. Such a terrorist attack was planned for May 2007 against the American military basis Fort Dix in New Jersey. After that, a citizen was sentenced in July 2009 to a term of 45 years in prison by a court in North Carolina for attempting to commit terrorist attacks on American institutions in Kosovo, Jordan and Palestine. A Kosovar Albanian who was living in Germany killed two US soldiers and injured two other GIs in 2011 due to his hatred of the USA and of Western values. In the same year, a radicalized Albanian prepared a terrorist attack in Brooklyn, New York for the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The American authorities also managed to prevent the commission of two terrorist attacks planned by Islamist extremists from Kosovo in 2012 as well etc.

Islamist extremists from Kosovo fueled religious fanaticism and hatred of the Western world and thereby, they furthered activities that were aimed at the commission of terrorist attacks in the countries of Western Europe as well. In September 2009 the Hungarian police seized 7 kilos of explosive plastic materials that were destined for the commission of a terrorist attack in Germany while checking a bus that was on its way from Kosovo to **Germany**. In May 2010 the police of Stockholm arrested a man of Kosovar origin who had set on fire the house of a Swede who had taken part in a TV debate on the Mohammed caricatures. Four months later a Swedish court sentenced two Swedish citizens who hailed from Kosovo to terms in prison since they had committed a terrorist attack against the designer of the Mohammed caricatures that had unleashed so many protests all over the Muslim world.

Due to the same reason, a group consisting of four Kosovar migrants who collaborated with certain terrorist organizations planned to assassinate Pope Francis in December 2015.¹⁷ In March 2017, another group comprised of Islamist extremists from Kosovo, among them one returnee from the war in Syria, planned to blow up the Rialto bridge in Venice. The case of two brothers from Kosovo who planned a terrorist attack in a mall in Oberhausen, Germany for Christmas 2016 also needs to be mentioned here as well as the prevention of a similar terrorist attack in Vienna, which had also been planned by a Muslim from Kosovo.

7. Conclusions

The dangers present due to Islamist extremism in Kosovo are still unpredictable, to be sure but nonetheless, they have the potential to become a serious threat not just to national security in Kosovo but to the security of the citizens of the countries within the region and of the European Union in general as well.

The risks of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists in Kosovo and the countries of the EU still seem to be limited. However, if the political and social crisis escalates in Kosovo and the conflict in the Middle East is exacerbated, which could also lead to a polarization of the public's attitudes toward Islam, the danger of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremist can't be ruled out any more in both to Kosovo and the EU countries.

In order to stop the terrorist activities of Islamist extremists in Kosovo, a comprehensive program for the **deradicalization** of radicalized persons must be implemented first and foremost. In this context, those referred to as „lonesome wolves” need to be brought especially into the center of attention.¹⁸ However, such a program must not be conceived of, understood and treated as a “program against the religious affiliations of pious Muslims”, as some radical circles in Kosovo claim for purposes of propaganda, but it most definitely must not give preferential treatment to extremists with respect to the provision of jobs or apartments “free of charge” by the State either (which has actually been demanded by some Muslim ideologists in Kosovo).¹⁹ A deradicalization program needs to aim at detecting and doing away with the influences that have been impacting the radicalization of a large number of people in Kosovo. Solely if Kosovar society takes the required measures in order to stop such influences caused by different criminogenic factors which are mainly of an exogenic nature, any deradicalization of young Kosovars and renunciation of extremist beliefs can be achieved.

The sources of reliable intelligence agencies from the region also need to be consulted in order to shed light on and stop terrorist activities. The fact that Islamist extremists from Kosovo don't differ from other parts of the population by means of any characteristic features requires this approach, too. Therefore, cooperation and support of the police forces and the intelligence services of the countries

¹⁷ See Steve Robson: “Jihadist plot to kill Pope Francis’ thwarted as police arrest four Kosovans with links to Italy”, *The Mirror* (UK), 3 December 2015; <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/jihadist-plot-kill-pope-francis-694797>, consulted on 10.04.2018.

¹⁸ People who are not directly in touch with the leadership circle of the IS or a terrorist group in the region but who are influenced by their ideology and act on behalf of their strategic interests can be referred to as “lonesome wolves”. Persons who have left terrorist units and who are suffering from complexes with respect to their values belong to this group, too.

¹⁹ Such a program would solely create destructive incentives in a criminogenic manner for thousands of young Kosovars who would visibly become radicalized in order to have their social problems resolved quickly.

in the region are required. Besides, the work of researchers from which credible information on Islamist extremism in Kosovo and the region can be gathered must not be ignored either.

8. Closing remarks

Islamist extremism surfaced in Kosovo and the countries of the region after Albania had become a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and civil war had erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The subversive activities of certain people and groups that came especially from the Middle East and that emerged as “voluntary fighters” or “religious missionaries” and that fueled hatred and religious fanaticism and that spread in diverse manners a radical religious ideology across the regions on the Balkan Peninsula populated by Muslims can be traced back to that time.

Under such circumstances which were also characterized by the destruction of the educational system and deep social, economic and political crises, Islamist extremism emerged in Kosovo.

According to plenty of information, Islamist extremism in Kosovo constitutes a serious threat to the national security of Kosovo and to Europe as a whole. Therefore, combating Islamist extremism needs to be given the highest priority by Kosovar and international institutions in Kosovo as well as by EU security authorities in order to protect the safety and security of the citizens, human rights and the democratic order.

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