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Agnesa Dalipi

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**UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS, METHODS AND CONSEQUENCES OF
ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION IN KOSOVO**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Agnesa Dalipi

July 2016

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the root causes of the appeal of violent Islamic extremism that led to the surge of foreign fighters from Kosovo to Syria and Iraq. The subject of Islamic foreign fighter recruitment is a nascent area of research. From the analysis of the phenomenon in Kosovo, this thesis seeks to extrapolate insights that can be applied more broadly to the debate over whether the success in the Islamic State's recruitment is a result of religious or socioeconomic factors, or a combination of both. Understanding the causes will enable counterterrorist analysts and in both Kosovo and other countries to develop ultimate and sustainable solutions to stem the flow of foreign fighters that join violent Islamic groups. The thesis concludes with recommendations that the Kosovo government can consider implementing to begin to mitigate the radicalization of Kosovo.

Last line of abstract

KEYWORDS: Kosovo, Kosovar, foreign fighters, the Islamic State, Al – Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, Middle East

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Kerry M. Kartchner, PhD
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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I dedicate this thesis to my life coach, best friend, and uncle, Veton Rugova. Without you and all that you have done for me, I would not have been in a position to complete this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on Kosovo's bloody past and current socioeconomic developments that have led to the current Islamic radicalization of the country. Given that it is now one of the main contributors of foreign fighters to Islamic extremism, Kosovo is a perfect case study to analyze for a comprehensive understanding of how global violent Islamic extremism has gained such traction. Although many young Kosovars have joined violent Islamic extremist groups as fighters, there is a dearth of accurate data or information about why this phenomenon has arisen. As such, this research seeks to close the gap in literature by offering an analysis of Kosovo's past and current political and socioeconomic climate and examining how the country became a hotbed of Islamic extremist recruitment efforts. This analysis includes a critical inquiry into the appeal of Islamic extremism in an effort to understand why its recruitment efforts have attained such success.

In the last few years, Kosovo has become a fertile source for recruits by violent Islamic extremists in the Middle East. While such violent extremism has not yet left its mark on Kosovo's soil, the recruitment, radicalization, and repatriation of those who have joined groups such as the Islamic State could increasingly threaten the internal security of Kosovo, with spillover effects throughout the Balkan region and beyond.

One of the most pressing and serious threats facing Europe is the radicalization of European Muslims. Radicalized European Muslims travel to the Middle Eastern countries and the Islamic State's territories, where they become further indoctrinated in Islamic

extremism and receive training for terrorist activities for the purpose of launching attacks on European countries and beyond, and instilling fear across the continent.

Given the imminent threat of terrorism and the potential disintegration of political and socioeconomic stability, European and American leaders have made countering violent Islamic extremism a priority. Kosovo is at the forefront of this policy. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Kosovo at the end of 2015, where he spoke of the threat posed by violent Islamic extremism and called international leaders to action, “I have just come from a meeting in Brussels with NATO where we have talked fully about the ways we all need to step up to do more to be able to destroy Daesh, and we are committed to doing so in the days ahead.”¹

Furthermore, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) held a Ministerial Council in 2015 and discussed this very issue. The assembly of world leaders, including Secretary Kerry, collectively recognized “Ministerial Declaration on Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism” as the number one priority. In connection to this shared understanding, the Council produced the following statement: “Expressing particular concern that youth, including children, are being radicalized to terrorism and recruited as foreign terrorist fighters, and recognizing the importance of working with youth to prevent and counter radicalization of youth to terrorism.”²

¹ Office of the Prime Minister, Republic of Kosovo, December 2, 2015, <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/?page=2,9,5416>.

² OSCE Ministerial Council, “Ministerial Declaration on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism,” December 4, 2015, <http://www.osce.org/cio/208216?download=true>.

Within the reality of terrorism threatening the safety and stability of numerous countries all over the world, what makes the case study of Kosovo, a country of approximately 1.8 million people, important or relevant at all? Kosovo's importance in this counterterrorism discussion boils down to four major political factors: Kosovo is a seat of geopolitical significance in Europe; NATO fought its first war in a non-NATO state in Kosovo; Kosovo has been a continual point of political contention between the West and Russia; and lastly, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states of the Persian Gulf have directed their religion-motivated efforts to Islamize Kosovo, a country that has generally been a secular state.

In analyzing factors that contribute to Kosovo becoming a prime target of Islamic terrorist recruitment, this paper argues that the country's socioeconomic environment explains why young Kosovars are such willing targets for the Islamic State's ideology. This thesis argues that, while the Islamic State's rhetoric of promising "that (fighters) will be granted direct entry into heaven," which appeals to fundamentalist Islamic narratives, gives it religious legitimacy and motivation, it is the prospect of escaping social maladaptation and socioeconomic deprivation that constitute the foundation of the Islamic State's recruiting success in Kosovo.³

Since 2011, Kosovo has contributed approximately "125 foreign fighters for every one million citizens, making it the highest-ranking country among the 22 countries

³ Shadi Hamid, "The Roots of the Islamic State's Appeal," *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2014, accessed June 28, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-roots-of-the-islamic-states-appeal/382175/>

listed” in a study by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS).⁴ This study surveyed countries with significant Muslim populations, such as France, Belgium, Germany, U.S., and Russia. According to the study, “the majority, or 54 percent, of the foreign fighters from Kosovo joined the conflict in Syria in 2013,” coinciding with the time when the Islamic State significantly increased its recruitment efforts.⁵

Since 2014, the Kosovo government has arrested over 100 suspects affiliated with terrorist activities, including Imams. Approximately 50 of these suspects are currently awaiting trials.⁶ While these numbers may not appear significant when compared with other countries with similar Islamic foreign fighter issues, they actually represent an extremely high percentage of involvement given Kosovo’s population of only about 1.8 million.

The number of Kosovar Islamic foreign fighters leaving Kosovo is not the only reason for concern of terrorist influence in Kosovo. Abu Maqatil Al Kosovo, a Kosovar foreign fighter, who is considered to be in a leadership position within the Islamic State for Kosovar foreign fighters, released the following statement in 2015, calling for jihad in the Balkans: “I send a message to Taught of Kosovo, Macedonia, and all over the Balkans. Do not think that we have forgotten how you oppressed the Muslims. Dark days will come for you. You will be afraid to walk the streets. You will be afraid to work in

⁴ Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Kosovar Center for Security Studies*, April 2015, 7. <http://www.qkss.org/en/Occasional-Papers/Report-inquiring-into-the-causes-and-consequences-of-Kosovo-citizens-involvement-as-foreign-fighters-in-Syria-and-Iraq-408>

⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁶ Labinot Leposhtica, “Former Kosovar Jihadist Recounts Syrian Odyssey,” *Balkaninsight*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/former-kosovar-jihadist-recounts-his-syrian-odyssey-04-05-2016>.

offices. You will be terrorized even in your homes.”⁷ If this call is answered—and it may very well be—then Kosovo will see Kosovars terrorizing their own people on Kosovo’s soil. But who are the violent Islamic extremists appealing to? How has the Islamic State achieved such success defined as recruiting in Kosovo? These questions will be answered in the following chapters.

Indeed, what concerns Kosovo is not only that its young men are leaving the country to join in extremist groups, but also that these very same radicalized Kosovars would return to harm their homeland. The Government of Kosovo released its “Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020.” In this document was this statement, “The main risk Kosovo faces is the return of such fighters with radical beliefs and with an interest to harm Kosovo as a state with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society and with a secular government.”⁸

Since the late 1970s, global violent Islamic extremism has increased significantly and its rise can be felt in many corners of the world. This thesis analyzes the causes and the key actors of global Islamic extremism and how it has affected Kosovo. Analyzing Kosovo through these lenses provides useful and comprehensive insight as to how Islamic extremism has become one of the greatest threats to global stability. For this analysis, this thesis is broken down into five major chapters, each focusing on a different

⁷ Tim Ayres, “Islamic State Calls for Jihad in the Balkans,” *News from Islam Exposed*, June 10, 2015, <http://islamexposedblog.blogspot.com/2015/06/islamic-state-calls-for-jihad-in-balkans.html>.

⁸ Office of the Prime Minister, Republic of Kosovo, "Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020," Republic of Kosovo, September 2015, 5, Accessed October 1, 2015, http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf

component of the current violent Islamic extremism phenomenon, while using Kosovo as a case study for a broader understanding.

Chapter One provides an in-depth analysis of the global rise of violent Islamic extremism, including a discussion of the difference between radical Islamic extremism and violent Islamic extremism. This chapter focuses on the key actors and contributors throughout history that have led to the rise of violent Islamic extremism. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the role of the Islam religion in extremism, the different sects within Islam, as well as the modern interpretation of Islam by powerful Arab countries who eagerly spread their interpretation of Islam. The chapter concludes with an overview of the challenges faced by Western countries in confronting and defeating violent Islamic extremism.

Chapter Two discusses the emergence of Kosovo as a recruitment ground for Islamic extremism. This chapter begins with background information on Kosovo, including its origin, people, geography, relation to the West, religious makeup, and socioeconomic conditions. This presentation identifies factors that have driven Kosovars to become foreign fighters for violent Islamic extremists. This discussion also includes Kosovo's experience with Islamic extremism and events that have taken place within Kosovo that have contributed to the issue at hand. Finally, the chapter discusses why modern Kosovo has become a breeding ground for Islamic extremism.

Chapter Three discusses Kosovo's challenges in confronting violent Islamic extremism. After presenting the main challenges in Kosovo's counterterrorism efforts, the chapter proceeds to analyze how Kosovo's bloody past has contributed to the risk of radicalization. That analysis is followed by an evaluation of measures taken by the

government of Kosovo and of problematic areas in the government that may impede such efforts. Lastly, the chapter considers the international dimensions of Kosovo's challenge in counterterrorism, including a brief discussion of the key countries that contributed significantly to the rise of Islamic radicalization in Kosovo.

Chapter Four addresses the religious and socioeconomic components of Kosovo's response to violent Islamic extremism. This chapter seeks to delineate both religious and secular factors in this complex situation and how they challenge Kosovo's response to violent Islamic extremism. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a summary of thesis and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RISE OF VIOLENT ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

This chapter focuses on the emergence of global violent Islamic extremism and how it relates to Kosovo. In the following pages, the chapter traces the root causes of global violent Islamic extremism—to find a solution to any problem, it is best to first understand its origins. In order for this discussion to be fruitful, our understanding of the rise of Islamic extremism must encompass all the facets: its manifestation, root causes, key contributors, and religious and cultural influences. Violent Islamic extremism is a complex phenomenon and one deeply rooted in various factors. It is imperative to understand it in its entirety before any discussions about counter-terrorism—in Kosovo or elsewhere—can begin.

How the Global Rise of Violent Extremism Gained Significant Traction

The terminology used to describe the issue concerning this thesis varies from one continent to another and from one leader to another. Both “radical Islamic extremism” and “violent Islamic extremism” have been used to describe terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The general understanding is that when the term “violent” is used, it refers to violent actions, such as terrorist attacks. The term “radical” does not necessarily imply violence, but it is used to describe a form of extremism that could lead to violence.

Since the sole purpose of this thesis is to address the “violent” component of Islamic extremism, as it is the most dangerous aspect of this issue in Kosovo and

globally, “violent Islamic extremism” is used in this thesis to describe events in Kosovo and elsewhere that have been carried out in the name of Islam.

Violent extremism is not a new phenomenon; it has been present since the beginning of humankind. What distinguishes modern violent Islamic extremism from other forms of violence is an overwhelming hatred toward the entire Western world and all “non-Muslim believers.” This intense hatred leads to significant security threats that could crumble the stability of many nation states, making the present discussion of vital importance. More than just a political game, this type of extremism has instilled fear into every continent. In spite of extensive global efforts to weaken and destroy violent Islamic extremism in the last two decades, it is far from defeated. In fact, it could be characterized as the opposite of defeated.

Evidently, the global war on terror since the attacks of September 11 has not proven to be very effective. Fourteen years since the attacks, President Obama’s “*National Security Strategy 2015*” ranked violent extremism and the evolving terrorist threat as a top security challenge.⁹ The *2015 Strategy* also mentioned terrorist threats faced by other nations, which is very relevant to the Kosovo case study: “An array of terrorist threats has gained traction in areas of instability, limited opportunity, and broken governance.”¹⁰

While many countries have joined forces in fighting terrorism, other countries have seen an increase in their citizens' participation in terrorism. Since the 1980s, some of the countries less robust economically struggle with high unemployment and low

⁹ The White House, "National Security Strategy," The United States Government, February 2015, 1, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid, 9.

education rates and have become a recruitment target for violent Islamic extremism groups. Recruits from these countries are willing to not only commit atrocities by killing massive numbers of innocent civilians but also kill themselves in the name of the Islam religion.

The significant number of terrorist attacks in March 2016 alone—claiming hundreds of lives in Brussels, Istanbul, and elsewhere in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa—was a clear reminder of the strength and the threat of violent Islamic extremism. According to Middle East expert Fareed Zakaria, in 2014 alone about 30,000 people were killed in terror attacks worldwide.¹¹ Zakaria further points out a crucial fact that is often overlooked: “the vast majority of those perpetrating the violence were Muslim but—and this is important—so were the victims.”¹²

The Soufan Group recently released a report about Islamic foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight in the name of Islam. The report, focusing on the Islamic State rather than all Islamic terrorist groups, made two important observations: “Nearly eighteen months later, despite sustained international effort to contain the Islamic State and stem the flow of militants traveling to Syria, the number of foreign fighters has more than doubled” and that “The motivation for people to join violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq remains more personal than political.”^{13,14}

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, “Why They Hate Us,” *CNN.com*, May 24, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/08/opinions/why-they-hate-us-zakaria/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” December 2015, Accessed January 15, 2016, 4, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf,

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

Modern violent Islamic extremism, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, can be traced back to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁵ However, the Islamic State has only gained international traction since 2011 as a result of the Syrian Civil War. Middle Eastern expert Ian Fisher from the *New York Times* noted, “[The Islamic State] traces its origins both to the terrorist training grounds of Osama bin Laden’s Afghanistan and to America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, and it achieved its resurgence through two single-minded means: control of territory and, by design, unspeakable cruelty.”¹⁶ Notably, both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have ties in Kosovo, where both groups established their presence in the early 2000s.

One of the most notorious terrorists known to humankind, Osama bin Laden, is a product of the Mujahideen, a foreign fighter from Saudi Arabia. Mujahideen is an Arabic word, which means, “One who strives or struggles on behalf of Islam.”¹⁷ Studies indicate that it was during the Mujahideen era (invasion of Afghanistan in 1979) when both the rise of Islamic terrorism and the Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon began. The creation of the Mujahideen is a result of both Soviet and U.S. foreign policies. While the United States and the Soviet Union were after their own political agendas and interests, a seed of Islamic terrorism was planted in a country that to this day has been in turmoil:

Afghanistan. The Soviet agenda was to control Afghanistan, while the United States, with

¹⁵ For the purpose of this thesis when the term “violent Islamic groups” is used, it refer specifically to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda as they are the two main groups connected to Kosovo.

¹⁶ Ian Fisher, "In Rise of ISIS, No Single Missed Key but Many Strands of Blame," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2015, accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/middleeast/in-rise-of-isis-no-single-missed-key-but-many-strands-of-blame.html?_r=0.

¹⁷ Amy Zalman, “Mujahideen,” *About.com*, accessed July 08, 2016, <http://terrorism.about.com/od/m/g/Mujahideen.htm>

the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, armed and funded the Mujahideen movement in an effort to defeat the Soviet invasion. Raphael Veit, the author of “Afghanistan: Can we Fix it,” said, this conflict “revived the concept of jihad as Muslims fought against an outside invader, armed and trained under the patronage of the CIA—skills which would later be turned against the West.”¹⁸

The Soviets were certainly defeated, but a new and perhaps more dangerous war began as the Middle Eastern countries welcomed ultra-conservative Saudi and other violent Islamic extremist ideologies. These ideologies became some of the root causes of today’s Islamic extremism. However, the political events that took place before, during, and after the invasion of Afghanistan only account for half of the problem of violent Islamic extremism. The other half is the Islamic component, which will be covered later in this paper.

But what were the interests that compelled the United States and the Soviet Union to want to control Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries then and now? How has the Middle East run into such a disastrous fate? Akbar Ganji, an expert of the Middle Eastern, offers an explanation: the most important causes of what have turned the Middle East into flames are the “dictatorial regimes of the region, the West’s support for many of them out of interests in the vast oil reserve of the region and other strategic considerations, the economic inequality between the elite and the poor, and the occupation of the Palestinians’ land by Israel.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Raphael Veit, “Afghanistan: Can We Fix It?” *Australian Quarterly*, Jan.–Feb., 2002, 17.

¹⁹ Akbar Ganji, "U.S.-Jihadist Relations (Part 1): Creating the Mujahedin in Afghanistan," *The Huffington Post*, July 2, 2014, accessed January 10, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/akbar-ganji/us-jihadist-relations_b_5542757.html.

To provide a better understanding, or perhaps a point of view, of how the creation of the Mujahedin has led to the rise of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the following in front of Congress:

We also have a history of kind of moving in and out of Pakistan. I mean, let's remember here: The people we are fighting today we funded 20 years ago. And we did it because we were locked in this struggle with the Soviet Union. They invaded Afghanistan, and we did not want to see them control central Asia, and we went to work, and it was President Reagan, in partnership with the Congress, led by Democrats, who said, "you know what? Sounds like a pretty good deal! Let's deal with the ISI and the Pakistani military, and let's go recruit these Mujahedin! That's great! Let's get some to come from Saudi Arabia and other places, importing their Wahhabi brand of Islam, so that we can beat the Soviet Union!" And guess what? They retreated, they lost billions of dollars, and it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So there's a very strong argument, which is: it wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union, but let's be careful what we sow, because we still harvest. So we then left Pakistan. We said, "OK, fine. You deal with the Stingers that we've left all over your country. You deal with the mines that are along the border. And by the way, we don't want to have anything to do with you. In fact, we're sanctioning you." So we stopped dealing with Pakistani military, and with ISI, and we now are making up for a lot of lost time.²⁰

Clinton's words offer only a partial summary of the United States involvement in the Middle East and its impact of poor foreign policy decisions since the late 1970s that are prevalent today. Undoubtedly, the United States has significant strategic interests in the Middle East, especially in Afghanistan, which must be achieved. However, a more effective and less damaging approach must be applied for successful results.

The Role of Foreign Fighters

There is certainly a profound connection between the creation of the Mujahedin and the global terrorism we are facing today. In fact, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of

²⁰ Ibid

the Islamic State, said the following in a video he released, addressing his supporters, “God gave your mujahedeen brothers victory after long years of jihad and patience...so they declared the caliphate and the caliph in charge.”²¹ Studies indicate that extremist groups use the history and achievements of the Mujahedeen movement as a marketing tool to recruit Muslim foreign fighters from all over the world to fight in the name of Islam.

Thomas Hegghammer, author of *The Rise of the Muslim Foreign Fighters*, wrote that “since 1980 between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflict from Bosnia in the west to the Philippines in the east.”²² Hegghammer emphasized that “foreign fighters are therefore key to understanding transitional Islamist militancy.”²³

According to a more recent report released by the Soufan Group, “between 27,000 and 31, 000 people have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups from at least 86 countries.”²⁴ The Soufan Group also reports that “Tunisians, Saudis, and Jordanians continue to outnumber other national contingents, although a reverse flow to North Africa may alter the balance within the Arab group.”²⁵

Based on these statistics, the current influx of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq indicate that the Islamic State’s strategies for recruiting foreign fighters are by far the

²¹ Hanna Strange, “Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Addresses Muslims in Mosul,” *The Telegraph*, Jul 05, 2014, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10948480/Islamic-State-leader-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdadi-addresses-Muslims-in-Mosul.html>

²² Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Winter 2010/11, 53, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/The_Rise_of_Muslim_Foreign_Fighters.pdf.

²³ Ibid, 53,

²⁴ The Soufan Group, 4.

²⁵ Ibid, 6.

most successful in Islamic terrorism history. Foreign fighters are flocking to the Islamic State at unprecedented rates, although the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon has been around for decades. Never before has a violent extremist group enjoyed such success in foreign recruits. Hegghammer also pointed out that a study of Muslim foreign fighters may have substantial value, because the number of Muslim war volunteers are significantly higher and “have affected many more conflicts than have foreign fighters of other ideological orientations.”²⁶

To date, many have proposed definitions of foreign fighters, but perhaps Hegghammer’s definition is one of the most fitting. He understands a foreign fighter as “an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organizations, and (4) is unpaid.”²⁷

In addition to these features in Hegghammer’s definition, a Soufan Group report makes an interesting observation about foreign fighters: “The motivation for people to join violent extremist groups on Syria and Iraq remains more personal than political.”²⁸ This seems especially relevant to the foreign fighters from Kosovo and the Balkans.

The foreign fighters themselves have also offered their own understanding of who a foreign fighter is, in a research conducted by Quantum Communications, “Understanding Jihadist.”²⁹ Based on televised interviews of 49 fighters in Syria and Iraq,

²⁶ Hegghammer, 56.

²⁷ Ibid, 58.

²⁸ The Soufan Group, 7.

²⁹ Quantum Communications, “Understanding Jihadist: in their Own Words,” *The White Papers*, March 2015, accessed March 10, 2016, p5, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/specialreports/565067-understanding-jihadists-in-their-own-words>

the Quantum study sought to understand the foreign fighters' experiences on the ground. Some of the fighters interviewed were active fighters, some were no longer active, and some of them were in confinement facilities. The access to fighters in confinement facilities was extremely useful as a comparison study against other fighters and against the Kosovo and the Balkans case study. The Quantum study will be referenced frequently in this thesis.

The Quantum report identified nine types of fighters, with definitions provided by the foreign fighters of the Islamic State:

- 1. Status Seekers:** See the world that does not understand or appreciate them as they perceive themselves. They want to improve their social standing; their main drives are money, employment, and a certain recognition by others around them.
- 2. Identity Seekers:** Need the structure, rules, and perspective that come from belonging to a group, because belonging defines them, their role, their friends, and their interaction with society. They often feel like outsiders in their initial unfamiliar/unintelligent environment and seek to identify with another group. In this context, the "Islamic Ummah" provides a pre-packaged transnational identity.
- 3. Revenge Seekers:** Consider themselves to be a part of an oppressed group, and thus want to inflict harm on their oppressors and anyone who might support them (oppressors).
- 4. Redemption Seekers:** Perceive their engagement in Jihad enterprise as a vindication from sinful ways of living.
- 5. Responsibility Seekers:** Values ties and want to preserve their family's well-being and prosperity by fulfilling the role of the provider/bread winner.
- 6. Thrill Seekers:** Are filled with energy and drive. They want to prove their potential/power by accomplishing an arduous task or surviving a harrowing adventure. They are mostly in it for the opportunity to engage in action while enjoying a certain level of impunity for their acts.
- 7. Ideology Seekers:** Are mainly in search of a certain world view that they can identify with and the "Islamic Ummah" provides a pre-packaged transnational ideology. Unlike the identity with seekers who wish to "belong" to a social

group, the ideology seekers aim at “imposing” their world view on to the other group.

8. Justice Seeker: Consider what is happening in the conflict areas as a major injustice and feel they have a certain inner calling to reverse this injustice. Unlike the revenge seekers, the justice seekers’ “raison d’etre” ceases to exist once the perceived injustice stops.

9. Death Seekers: Have most probably suffered from a significant trauma/loss in their lives and consider death as the only way out with a reputation of martyr instead of someone who has committed suicide.³⁰

Besides the psychological factors that motivate some of the Islamic foreign fighters, the ideology of jihad is another significant factor influencing many of those foreign fighters. Jihad is a term that is often used in relation to violent Islamic extremism. Jihad is an Arabic word, which refers to the religious obligation of Muslims and the act of “striving, applying oneself, struggling, persevering.”³¹

However, jihad is not always the primary mission for the foreign fighters. Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago and the founder of the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, says that “religious fervor is not a motive onto itself. Rather it serves as a tool for recruitment and a potent means of getting people to overcome their fear of death and natural aversion to killing innocents.”³² This observation is consistent with a significant number of researchers who have studied Islamic terrorism. More specifically, Lydia Wilson, a research fellow at the Center of the Resolution of

³⁰ Ibid, 5

³¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists,” (New York, NY: HarperSanfrancisco, 2005), 221

³² Joshua Holland, "Here's What a Man Who Studied Every Suicide Attack in the World Says About ISIS' Motives," The Nation, December 02, 2015, accessed January 01, 2016, <http://www.thenation.com/article/heres-what-a-man-who-studied-every-suicide-attack-in-the-world-says-about-isiss-motives/>.

Intractable Conflict at the University of Oxford, noted that “[the foreign fighters] are woefully ignorant about Islam and have difficulty answering questions about Sharia law, militant jihad and the caliphate.”³³ This analysis is also very relevant to the foreign fighters of Kosovo, which will be further explored in the next chapter.

In light of studies suggesting that Islamic foreign fighters, in general, lack basic understanding about the faith of Islam, where is the connection between Islam and violent Islamic extremism? An overwhelming amount of research has been conducted on this topic and generated various arguments, some supporting the notion that the Islam religion is to blame for the rise of violent Islamic extremism, others attributing blame to socioeconomic circumstances. The reality seems to be a mix somewhere in between, minimizing the religious component will not lead to successful defeat of violent Islamic extremism. Both religious and socioeconomic factors play a crucial role.

The Islamic Component

There is agreement that the Islamic foreign fighters who join groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are not generally strict practitioners of Islam. But there is certainly the religious component about the Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon that cannot be ignored or underestimated.

Whether it is adherence to the Quran or the misinterpretation of it, the Islamic component seems to be directly linked to terrorism, as the violent Islamic extremists cite the text in support of and justification for committing atrocities, including the September

³³Lydia Wilson, “What I Discovered From Interviewing Imprisoned ISIS Fighters,” *The Nation*, October 21, 2015, accessed January 01, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/what-i-discovered-from-interviewing-isis-prisoners/>

11 attacks. According to Charles Lister, author of *Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration*, “jihadists have also seized an interpretation of another hadith in which Prophet Muhammad predicted that three armies would emerge before the end of the world, from Greater Syria (or al-Sham), Yemen, and Iraq.”³⁴

It is evident that the Islamic State and other violent Islamic extremist groups use verses directly taken from the Quran to market, add legitimacy and justify their cause. The Quran provides ample support for anyone who is looking to use Islam as a reason to justify terrorist acts. Two of some of the most striking verses from the Quran are Q8-60, “to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies, and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know”³⁵ and Q9-29, “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya (tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”³⁶

Over the last two decades, the devastating atrocities inflicted across the world, including in Muslim societies, by Islamic terror groups such as al Qaeda are part of a bigger political goal, not only against the West. These terrorist activities have also been motivated by the Sunni–Shia rivalry within the Islamic states, which is believed to have contributed significantly to the current chaos in Muslim countries. Before this Sunni–Shia

³⁴ Charles Lister, "Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?" The Brookings Institution, August 13, 2015, accessed March 05, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/08/13-foreign-fighters-reintegration-lister>.

³⁵ Quran 8:60, accessed January 03, 2016, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-in-the-Quran-verse-8-60>

³⁶ Quran 9:29, accessed January 03, 2016, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=9&verse=29>.

rivalry emerged, however, an internal conflict within the Islamic countries has been plaguing them since “the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in the year 632.”³⁷

What has caused the word, *Islam*, to immediately resonate with terrorism or extremism? According to Fareed Zakaria, a Middle East Expert, “radical Islam is the product of the broken politics and stagnant economies of Muslim countries—they have found in radical religion an ideology that lets them rail against the modern world, an ideology that is now being exported to alienated young Muslims everywhere—in Europe, and even in some rare cases in the United States.”³⁸ This Islamic terrorism era has inflicted an enormous amount of fear globally, and this global threat is no longer just a prejudiced concept.

Wahhabism and the Sunni–Shia Component

According to The Sunni–Shia Divide, a report from the Council on Foreign Relations, the Syrian conflict is a direct result the power struggle between the Sunni and Shia countries. “Syrian civil war that threatens to transform the map of the Middle East, spurred violence that is fracturing Iraq, and widened fissures in a number of tense Gulf countries.”³⁹ However, violence and fracturing in Iraq was spurred by foreign invasion long before the Syrian conflict began. The report also points out to two specific countries, “two countries that compete for the leadership of Islam, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran

³⁷ “The Origins of the Shiite-Sunni Split,” *NPR.org*, February 12, 2007, accessed July 10, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2007/02/12/7332087/the-origins-of-the-shiite-sunni-split>

³⁸ Zakaria, “Why They Hate US.”

³⁹ “The Sunni-Shia Divide,” Council on Foreign Relations, n.d., accessed January 03, 2016, http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide.

have used the sectarian divide to further their ambitions.”⁴⁰ The Sunni-Shia divide is evident in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State is arguably a Sunni movement that “has placed anti-Shia sentiment at the center of its poisonous ideology” and indirectly supported by Sunni Arab powers.⁴¹

Historically, the Sunni and Shia Muslims lived peacefully alongside each other for centuries until the Sunni-Shia power struggles of the last few centuries erupted. More specifically, the Sunni-Shia Divide report concludes that it was during Iran’s Revolution in 1979, “the transformation of Iran into an overtly Shia power after the Islamic revolution induced Saudi Arabia to accelerate the propagation of Wahhabism, as both countries revived a centuries-old sectarian rivalry over the true interpretation of Islam.”⁴² Furthermore, Hegghammer says, “as late as 1950, Wahhabi clerics did not even consider non-Wahhabis as Muslims, much less as brothers in a united Muslim nation.”⁴³ This rivalry between Sunni and Shia Muslims exacerbated since the Arab Spring in 2011. The Sunni-Shia tensions surrounding the Syrian crises provides further analysis of overall Middle Eastern instabilities.

For example, Syrian President Bashar Assad, who belongs to the Shia sect, is fully supported by Iran, against a Sunni majority who oppose the president’s Shia Alawite sect, a minority branch of Shia.⁴⁴ Approximately 73% of Syrians are Sunni, 15%

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ian Black, “Sunni v Shia: Why the Conflict is More Political than Religious,” *The Guardian*, April 05, 2015, accessed, July 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/05/sunni-shia-why-conflict-more-political-than-religious-sectarian-middle-east>

⁴² Council on Foreign Relations, “The Sunni-Shia Divide.”

⁴³ Hegghammer, 78.

⁴⁴ "Syria: The Story of the Conflict," BBC News, March 11, 2016, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>.

are Shia.⁴⁵ It was not until 1970 that the Alawites in Syria, “an oppressed minority for the most of their history,” rose to power and “suddenly cemented their control in Syria in 1970 when Assad’s father, Hafez, staged a coup that sidelined the Sunnis.”⁴⁶ Assad’s father ruled Syria until his death in 2000. Immediately following his father’s death, Assad became Syria’s new president and has remained in power since. Assad’s presidency was guaranteed due to his father’s influence and dictatorship of the Syrian government, who “filled senior political and military posts with Alawites to reinforce his rule through sectarian loyalty.”⁴⁷ In spite of President Assad’s heinous war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons against the Sunni majority population, he is heavily supported by Iran although adamantly opposed by the West and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ After the use of chemical weapons in August of 2013 that left hundreds of people dead, which was strongly criticized by the West, “President Assad agreed to the complete removal and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal” to avoid U.S. intervention.⁴⁹

As Islamic terrorism captured the world’s attention by committing ruthless atrocities around the globe, the question of its fundamental cause arose. To suggest that the Islam religion is to take the full blame is entirely illogical, as it implies that all of the 1.6 billion Muslims are terrorists. So how is Islam as a religion related to terrorism? Commenting on the connection between Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic

⁴⁵ Ian Black, “Sunni v Shia: Why the Conflict is More Political than Religious.”

⁴⁶ "Syria's Alawites, a Secretive and Persecuted Sect," Reuters, January 31, 2012, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-alawites-sect-idUSTRE80U1HK20120131>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Syria: The Story of the Conflict," *BBC News*

⁴⁹ Ibid.

terrorism, Yousaf Butt, senior advisor to the British American Security Information Council and director at the Cultural Intelligence Institute, said:

The horrific attacks on the Charlie Hebdo weekly in Paris have led to speculation as to whether the killers—the brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi—were lone wolves or tied to masterminds of the Islamic State or its rival, Al-Qaeda. No matter which organizational connections (if any) ultimately prove to be real, one thing is clear: the fountainhead of Islamic extremism that promotes and legitimizes such violence lies with the fanatical “Wahhabi” stain of Islam centered in Saudi Arabia. And if the world wants to tamp down and eliminate such violent extremism, it must confront this primary host and facilitator.⁵⁰

While Mr. Butt’s words may appear harsh, they are certainly not too far from the truth. 14 years since the war on terror campaign began, Islamic terrorism remains a top security threat to world stability. It is very unlikely that terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State would still pose a significant threat without support from powerful Arab countries. According to Owen Jones, a columnist for *The Guardian* said, “ramped up rhetoric on security makes no sense so long as the West cosies up to dictatorships that support fundamentalism.”⁵¹

The next contributing factor to Islamic terrorism is Wahhabism, which originated during the eighteenth century, and it is strictly and forcefully practiced in Sunni Saudi Arabia, which is also where most of the Islamic foreign fighters have come from. “About

⁵⁰ Yousaf Butt, “How Saudi Wahhabism Is the Fountainhead of Islamist Terrorism,” *Huffington Post*, March 22, 2015, accessed January 23, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yousaf-butt-/saudi-wahhabism-islam-terrorism_b_6501916.html.

⁵¹ Owen Jones, “To Really Combat Terror, End Support for Saudi Arabia,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2014, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/31/combat-terror-end-support-saudi-arabia-dictatorships-fundamentalism>

2,500 Saudis” are believed to be in the Islamic State alone, and the number is significantly higher when considering other terrorist organizations.⁵²

The Wahhabi movement was founded by a Muslim scholar named Muhammad ibn Abd-al Wahhab, whose interpretation of Islam is slightly skewed according to many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. “He encouraged his followers to interpret the holy books for themselves and to act on their interpretation in light of their own understanding, regardless of whether they understand the fundamental principles or lack thereof.”⁵³

Saudi Arabia is well known for its ultra-conservative, forceful religious beliefs and practices as mandated by Sharia law, and its lack of basic human rights. For example, in 2014 Saudi Arabia sentenced liberal activist Raif Badawi to ten years in prison for creating a “liberal website that allegedly insulted Islam and religious authorities.”⁵⁴ Mr. Raif Badawi is a case in point. It is difficult to fathom that in the twenty-first century people are not allowed to exercise freedom of speech, or to practice a religion of personal choice. Furthermore, Mr. Badawi’s attorney, Abu al-Khair, was also sentenced to 15 years in prison, “in part for defending Raif Badawi.”⁵⁵ The legal basis to sentence Mr. Badawi to ten years and his attorney to 15 years in prison for “liberal views” appears to

⁵² Yousaf Butt, “How Saudi Wahhabism Is the Fountainhead of Islamist Terrorism.”

⁵³ “The Islamic Supreme Council of America,” n.d. accessed May 07, 2016

<http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org>

⁵⁴ Adam Coogle, “Dispatches: Saudi Arabia’s Unrelenting Assault on Free Expression,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 7, 2014, accessed May 10, 2016,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/07/dispatches-saudi-arabias-unrelenting-assault-free-expression>.

⁵⁵ Ian Black and Jessica Murphy, “Sister of Saudi Blogger Raif Badawi Briefly Detained in Same Prison,” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, accessed July 11, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/12/samar-badawi-sister-blogger-raif-badawi-arrested-saudi-arabia>

derive from laws put in place under Saudi King Abdullah.⁵⁶ A Human Rights Watch reports that “Saudi Arabia’s new terrorism law and a series of related royal decrees create a legal framework that appears to criminalize virtually all dissident thought or expression as terrorism.”⁵⁷

These examples portray the cultural environment with Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. These ultra-conservative laws are not necessarily important when addressing violent Islamic terrorism; however, it is a relevant concern due to Saudi Arabia’s profound influence within the Muslim world and beyond.

Saudi Arabia has produced some of the most dangerous terrorists known to humankind, beginning with Osama bin Laden, including the vast majority of terrorists of September 11. Presently, among those in the Islamic State fighting in Syria and Iraq, violent Islamic extremists from Saudi Arabia continue to outnumber fighters from most other countries.

Alastair Crooke, a former British military intelligence agent and author of *Resistance: The Essence of Islamic Revolution*, argues that Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, and the Islamic State are the same in their religious and power views.

Abd al, Wahhab demanded conformity – a conformity that was to be demonstrated in physical and tangible ways. He argues that all Muslims must individually pledge their allegiance to a single Muslim leader (a Caliph, if there were one). Those who would not conform to this view should be killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their possession confiscated, he wrote. The list of apostates meriting death included the Shiite, Sufis and other Muslim

⁵⁶ Daniel Costa-Roberts, "Saudi Court Sentences Man to 10 Years, 2,000 Lashes for Atheist Tweets," PBS, February 27, 2016, accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/saudi-court-sentences-man-to-10-years-2000-lashes-for-atheist-tweets/>

⁵⁷ “Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 20, 2014, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights>

denominations, whom Abd al-Wahhab did not consider to be Muslim at all. There is nothing here that separates Wahhabism from ISIS.⁵⁸

Crooke makes another distinct point about the Saudis–Wahabism connection to the Islamic State, who both practice the Sunni sect of the Islam religion. “It appears—even now—that Saudi Arabia’s ruling elite is divided. Some applaud that the Islamic State is fighting Shiite fire with the Sunni fire; that a new Sunni state is taking shape at the very heart of what they regard as a historical Sunni patrimony and they are drawn to Da’ish’s strict Salafist ideology.”⁵⁹

The purpose of focusing on the Islamic component, including Wahhabism and the Sunni-Shia divide, is to shed light on the root causes of the rise of global violent Islamic extremism. It is impossible to successfully combat violent Islamic extremism without understanding and addressing the Islamic component. It is highly unlikely that this phenomenon would be present to this extent if the Islamic religion were not a factor or used as a marketing tool. However, this does not imply that religion is the sole cause.

Challenges Faced by Western Countries in Confronting and Defeating Violent Islamic Extremism

The most significant challenge faced by Western countries in confronting this global phenomenon is the overwhelming increase of governance instability across the Middle East and in other parts of the world, such as Kosovo. One of the other challenges,

⁵⁸ Alastair Crooke, “You Can’t Understand ISIS If You Don’t Understand the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia,” *Huffington Post*, August 27, 2014, accessed November 30, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

as noted by Combating Terrorism Center, is the lack of knowledge and focus on all aspects and complexities “that drive and help to sustain terrorism has contributed to a narrow view of tools or strategies available to combat this phenomenon.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, the report makes another distinct point that “the United States has grossly under-resourced the non-military aspects” of its counterterrorism efforts.⁶¹

In addition, there has been a growing distrust fueled in the West against peaceful Muslims. These growing tensions within societies can potentially impede counterterrorism efforts as Muslims feel that they are not a welcomed part of western societies and less encouraged to report suspicious activities. This distrust hampers counterterrorism and widens the rift between peaceful Muslims and the rest of the society.⁶²

As it has been evident, countering violent Islamic terrorism is extremely challenging. One of the key challenges remains the radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. The foreign fighter phenomenon is truly global, with approximately 86 countries seeing at least one of their citizens or residents travel to Syria to fight in an extremist group there, primarily for the Islamic State.⁶³ Kosovo is a prime example of how violent Islamic extremism has been able to radicalize and recruit vulnerable men and women, which the next chapter will discuss in depth.

⁶⁰ Nelly Lahoud and Robert Person, “In Search of New Approaches,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, July 28, 2015, accessed January 11, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/in-search-of-new-approaches>.

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Arun Kundnani, “The West’s Islamophobia is Only Helping the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, Mar 26, 2016, accessed July 11, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/03/23/the-west-islamophobia-is-only-helping-the-islamic-state/>

⁶³ The Soufan Group, 4.

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the rise of global violent Islamic extremism, beginning with the history and the evolution of the Mujahideen movement during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s. It was during this period that the cancerous seed of Islamic terrorism was planted that later gave birth to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Furthermore, it was during the Afghanistan conflict when the Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon began, as Muslims from across the Muslim world flocked to fight in the name of Islam. This phenomenon has persisted to the present day and remains one of the greatest security concerns threatening global stability.

The next chapter turns to the emergence of foreign fighters from Kosovo who fight in the name of Islam. As an extension of this chapter's discussion on the rise of global violent Islamic extremism, Chapter Two helps to understand how Islamic terrorism reached the global stage by looking at its influence in Kosovo.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMERGENCE OF KOSOVO AS A RECRUITMENT GROUND FOR ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

As this thesis concerns the radicalization of Kosovo citizens by Islamic extremism, this chapter is the linchpin of the entire study as it explains and analyzes how recruitment by Islamic extremism originated in Kosovo. This analysis entails both an examination of major historical events in Kosovo and an investigation into how weak states are exploited by violent Islamic extremism. To this end, this chapter focuses on two main themes: an overview of Kosovo as a nation state, including its history, origin, geography, religion, and current socioeconomic conditions; and Kosovo's experience with Islamic extremism. The second part of the chapter includes a discussion of the key contributors, vulnerabilities, and timelines of the recruitment process. Lastly, the chapter considers the historically secular culture in Kosovo and the Balkans region, which makes Kosovo a unique case study among countries with similarly high numbers of Islamic foreign fighters.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the highly complex nature of violent Islamic extremism and consequently the need to investigate various factors, including non-religious ones, in order to fully understand its rising global influence. Kosovo is a perfect example of how political and socioeconomic factors can have a significant impact on cultural and religious dynamics, such as those resulting in participation in violent Islamic extremism.

About Kosovo

Kosovo is a landlocked country located in the western Balkans region in southeast Europe. Among its population of 1.823 million,⁶⁴ 92% are Kosovar, 4% are Kosovo Serbs, and 4% are of other minorities.⁶⁵ Kosovo is surrounded by the Shar Mountains, the Kopaonik, and North Albanian Alps.⁶⁶ The languages spoken are Albanian, Serbian, and Turkish. The three main religions are Islam 90%, Orthodox 7%, and Roman Catholic 3%.⁶⁷

Kosovo and the entire Balkans region have a very complex and bloody history. It would be an incomplete assessment of Kosovo's current events without briefly explaining the regional history and how that has contributed to the current influx of violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo and the entire region.

Kosovo was once part of Yugoslavia (also referred to as the Balkans⁶⁸), which consisted of six countries and two autonomous regions. The six countries were Slovenia, with a Slavic and Catholic population; Bosnia and Herzegovina, a multiethnic country with Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox followers; Macedonia, also a multiethnic country with an Orthodox majority; Serbia, with a Slavic and Orthodox population; and Montenegro, a mostly Slavic Orthodox country. The two autonomous regions, which fell under Serbia, were Kosovo, a multiethnic region with a Muslim majority, and Vojvodina,

⁶⁴ The World Bank, "Kosovo," 2014, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/kosovo>.

⁶⁵ "About Kosovo," United Nations Development Programme, n.d, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "Be In Kosovo.com," n.d., accessed May 20, 2016, <http://beinkosovo.com/en/kosovo-population>

⁶⁸ For brevity, the term "Balkans" will be used for the rest of this paper to refer only to the former Yugoslavian countries that are now dealing with radicalization of violent Islamic extremism, which are Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Albania.

a Slavic Orthodox region. Although all these countries were often identified by their religion, Yugoslavia was a communist country during Tito’s rule from 1945 to 1980, and therefore the people and the culture were overwhelmingly secular. Most of the Yugoslavian population derived their identity from their ethnicity. Notwithstanding, the religious history of the Balkans region is important to this discussion and will be further discussed later in this paper. The map of the Balkans is included below.



Figure 1: Map of the Balkans - Reproduced from “Huffington Post: Kosova ta eksportoj modelin ndërfetar” (lajm.net, 2015).

The oppression of Kosovars (also known as Albanians)⁶⁹ in Kosovo began in 1980, shortly after the death of the Yugoslav leader Tito, one of the most successful and effective leaders of his time. His ability to create unity and peace in a region where ethnic clashes had consistently plagued the population was remarkable. As John Stoessinger, an internationally recognized political analyst, explained Tito’s leadership, “his solution to

⁶⁹ This paper will use the term “Kosovar” when referring to the Albanian population of Kosovo, not to be confused with Albanians from Albania. Authors, international officials, and Kosovars from Kosovo often refer to the Kosovo population as Albanians.

his country's endless ethnic rivalries was simple: Loyalty to him was all that mattered.”⁷⁰ Following Tito's death, the dissolution of Yugoslavia began in the '80s. The system Tito had presided over since 1945 began to unravel.⁷¹ The clashes among ethnic groups in the Balkans became extremely problematic in the early '80s, leading to some of the bloodiest wars in Europe since World War II and eventually contributing to the conditions that would later give rise to a fertile ground for radicalization of violent Islamic extremism.

During the '90s, the Balkans region encountered two episodes of major ethnic cleansing, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) and in Kosovo (1998–1999), which led to a substantial death toll, expulsion of millions of people from their homes, and many other horrific acts of violence. It is important to note that among the Balkan states, Bosnia and Kosovo currently have the highest number of Islamic foreign fighters involved with the Islamic State, either by fighting in Syria and Iraq or involvement in local recruitment of foreign fighters.

The ethnic cleansing in Kosovo during the '90s was organized by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. Approximately 11,000 Kosovars were murdered and about 700,000 were expelled from their homes.⁷² By the end of the war in 1999, approximately 90% of Kosovars were displaced. Stoessinger wrote, “The ethnic cleansing campaign against the Albanians (Kosovars) in Kosovo, which Milosevic planned after his military defeats, made the earlier campaign in Bosnia look like a dress

⁷⁰ John Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010), 138.

⁷¹ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 57.

⁷² Neil Tweedie, “Kosovo War: Thousands Killed as Serb Forces Tried to Keep Control of Province,” *The Telegraph*, Mar 31, 2009, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/kosovo/5084374/Kosovo-War-Thousands-killed-as-Serb-forces-tried-to-keep-control-of-province.html>

rehearsal for the main event in barbarism. The only thing that Milosevic did not copy from Hitler were the gas chambers of Auschwitz.”⁷³

These atrocities eventually led to NATO’s first war, Operation Allied Force, which became a topic of animated controversy in 1999 mostly because of NATO's military operations in a non-NATO state, Kosovo. However, NATO leaders and some members felt it morally imperative to intervene and stop the massive ethnic cleansing. The 77-day Operation Allied Force against the Serbian forces ended at the end of May 1999. Immediately after the defeat of Serbian forces, the vast majority of Kosovo Albanians returned to Kosovo, although most of them had no homes to return to as they were burned down or otherwise destroyed during the conflict.

In 1999, Kosovo was placed under the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244, which allows the international community to operate in Kosovo. The UNSCR was created to assist in charting out and rebuilding Kosovo’s future. State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian reported,

In April 2007, UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari submitted to the UN Security Council his Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (the "Ahtisaari Plan"). The Ahtisaari Plan includes the main text with 15 articles that set forth its general principles, as well as 12 annexes that elaborate upon them. The Ahtisaari Plan is primarily focused on protecting the rights, identity and culture of Kosovo's non-Albanian communities, including establishing a framework for their active participation in public life. Special Envoy Ahtisaari also proposed that Kosovo becomes independent, subject to a period of international supervision.

In February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence in accordance with the Ahtisaari Plan and the newest country in Europe was born. The events leading up to

⁷³ Stoessinger, 158.

Kosovo's independence explain the presence of the international community in the country since the late 1990s through the present. The international community has remained in Kosovo not only to provide security, but also to support the Kosovar government with substantial monetary and professional assistance as Kosovo transitions into a sustainable, prosperous, and democratic country.

However, wars that eventually gave birth to the Republic of Kosovo had left indelible marks on the country and its citizens. The repercussions of the ethnic conflicts are still felt today in Kosovo and have essentially led to the current surge of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism. The detrimental effects of Kosovo's war-torn history will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

Kosovo and the Origin of Its People

Albanians can be traced back to the Illyrians, an Indo-European tribe that inhabited the Balkans and other parts of the region during the first and second century AD. From the Illyrians was also derived the modern-day Albanian language. However, historical records of Albanians only date back to 1043, when “Albanian troops were reported as fighting alongside Greeks in the army of a rebel Byzantine general.”⁷⁴ The Albanian language is an Indo-European language, “but exists in a sub-section of its own.”⁷⁵

The vast majority of today's Albanians live in Albania and Kosovo, with a minority living in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. While all Albanians come from

⁷⁴ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 28.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

the same ethnic group, they have different dialects and slightly different cultures depending on the country they live in, partly because of the different histories they experienced in the last centuries. For instance, Albania was part of the Warsaw Pact from 1955 to 1961, whereas Kosovo was under the communist rule of Yugoslavia. Given the different geographical influences and historical experiences, the only thing in common between a Kosovar from Kosovo and an Albanian from Albania, both born in the 20th century, is the Albanian language and their ancestors.⁷⁶

Religion in Kosovo

From 1945 to the present, religion has been somewhat of a foreign concept for Kosovo and its Kosovar population. In fact, this was true for the vast majority in the Balkans as a result of the decades-long communist rule. The desire to fulfill some sort of Muslim duty, such as jihad, was nonexistent throughout the history of Kosovo, nor was the desire to gravitate toward Islamic countries or to lead a Wahhabi or Salafi lifestyle, until the beginning of 2000. "The secular legacy notwithstanding," writes Monika Gabriella Bartoszewicz, "certain symptoms of Islamic awakening in the region invite us to investigate the change in the nature of the terrorist threat in Kosovo from the indigenous nationalist-separatist to a religiously motivated international terrorism."⁷⁷

Kosovo's historical secularism and the rise of Islamic radicalization alert us to the complexity of the Kosovo case study. While many would categorize present-day Kosovo as a predominantly Muslim country, the vast majority of Kosovars would say that they

⁷⁶ "The Warsaw Pact is Formed," *History.com*, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-warsaw-pact-is-formed>

⁷⁷ Monika Gabriella Bartoszewicz, "Radicalization by Stealth: Kosovo Case Study," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 2013, no. 4, p88.

are Muslims but do not practice the religion and never have. In fact, the average Kosovar Muslim would have minimal, if any, knowledge about Islam. Mrs. Bartoszewicz's account of interviews in Kosovo corroborates this: "We are Muslims, but we do not practice."⁷⁸ It is common to encounter people in Kosovo who are completely indifferent about religion.

Tim Judah, Balkan Correspondent for the *Economist*, asks: "So, does religion matter? Whenever Albanians (Kosovars) address this issue it becomes a matter of pride, but also a cliché, to quote a line from a poem of Pashko Vasa, a 19th-century Catholic writer, who said that 'the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism.'"⁷⁹ Judah's question is an observation that Kosovars from Kosovo and elsewhere have always fought for a national—not religious—cause. Kosovars derive their identity from their place of origin. It was during the centuries of Ottoman Empire rule in the Balkans between 1389 - 1912 when people were forced to convert from Christianity to Islam, then 34 years later "the Communist Party came to power in Yugoslavia at the end of World War II."^{80 81}

A fitting example demonstrating Tim Judah's observation is the Kosovo War in 1999 and its most symbolic hero, Adem Jashari. Contrary to the common assumption that the war was religiously motivated, Adem Jashari and other Kosovars who fought against the Serbs did so for a national cause. Anna di Lellio and Stephanie Schwander-Sivers

⁷⁸ Ibid,99.

⁷⁹ Judah,9.

⁸⁰ "Timeline: The Ottomans and the Balkans," *BalkanInsight*, November 10, 2016 accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/the-ottomans-six-centuries-in-europe>

⁸¹ Aleksa Djilas, "Tito's Last Secret: How Did He Keep the Yugoslavs Together," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1995, accessed July 12, 2016 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/1995-07-01/titos-last-secret-how-did-he-keep-yugoslavs-together>

wrote about the legacy of Adem Jashari and his entire family, who were killed during the war, pointing out that Jasharis are called and remembered as “deshmore te kombit” (martyrs of the nation). This is certainly not the same characterization as "Shahid" (Islamic martyr of jihad).⁸²

The Government of Kosovo also declared itself to be secular. The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 8 (Secular State), reads: "The Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs."⁸³ The Government of Kosovo made this point very clear in 2011 when it banned Islamic headscarves (hijab) and religious instructions in public schools. On this legislation, Stephen Schwartz from the *Weekly Standard* reported,

The August 29 vote rejected two amendments to the Kosovo Constitution on pre-university education. Amendment 7 would have prohibited “discrimination against Muslims in school,” and was viewed as a measure favoring girls wearing the headscarf. It failed 43 to 39. Amendment 8 would have introduced religious education in the public schools, a proposition discussed in Kosovo since the end of the 1998-99 war. It was voted down 64 to 18.⁸⁴

In fact, *KCSS* report says: "government officials along with the average citizen of Kosovo are unable to make clear distinctions between religionization efforts by religious authorities (i.e. Imams) and violent extremism efforts (other imams and extremist

⁸² Anna di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, “The Legendary Commander: The Construction of An Albanian Master-Narrative in Post-War Kosovo,” *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2006, 518.

⁸³ Republic of Kosovo, "Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo," <http://www.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/Constitution1%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Kosovo.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Stephen Schwartz, “Kosovo Bans Islamic Headscarf and Religious Instruction in Public Schools,” *The Weekly Standard*, September 07, 2011, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/kosovo-bans-islamic-headscarf-and-religious-instruction-in-public-schools/article/592759>

activities).⁸⁵ Indeed, many Kosovars who joined the Islamic State had little knowledge of Islamic law and had never left Kosovo, according to a recent *Pristina Insight* article.⁸⁶

From these sources, it would appear that Kosovo is a predominantly secular state where people are not particularly enthusiastic about practicing one religion or another. But in this very same environment, there are now more long-bearded men and hijab-donning women than ever before. As will be made clear in this thesis, this drastic change in religious attitude stemmed from the influence of world politics on poor and weak post-conflict governance in Kosovo.

Socioeconomic Conditions

The average monthly wage in Kosovo is extremely low, “a measly \$330 (290 euros).”⁸⁷ However, the cost of living in Kosovo is substantially lower than most countries. Kosovo is an extremely poor country, especially for European standards, “with per capita GDP estimates of close to 3,000 euros.”⁸⁸ Kosovo also has an unemployment rate of 35%, with 60.2% unemployment rate among youth (aged 15 to 24 years), and a national poverty rate of 29.7%.⁸⁹ The high unemployment rate and the extremely weak economy are a result of both the conflicts of the 1990s and a weak government along

⁸⁵ Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” 7.

⁸⁶ Valerie Hopkins and Vincent Triest, “Exclusive: Kosovo’s ISIS Recruits,” *Pristina Insight*, March 14, 2016, accessed March 14, 2016. <http://prishtinainsight.com/exclusive-kosovos-isis-recruits/>.

⁸⁷ “Albania and Kosovo: A New Front for Jihadists,” *Yahoo News*, May 5, 2016, accessed May 05, 2016, <https://au.news.yahoo.com/world/a/31528112/albania-and-kosovo-a-new-front-for-jihadists/#page1>.

⁸⁸ “The World Bank Group in Kosovo,” *The World Bank*, April 2015, Accessed May 05, 2016, 6, <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/Kosovo-Snapshot.pdf>

⁸⁹ “About Kosovo,” United Nations Development Programme

with high corruption rates. Kosovo's economy has been heavily dependent on foreign aid and remittances from its Diaspora, the latter of which is believed to be Kosovo's strongest source of economic support.⁹⁰

Although Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, only 108 out of 193 UN members have recognized its independence. A recent UNDP report states that “Kosovo’s non-membership in the UN remains a key obstacle to political integration and socio-economic development.”⁹¹ Two key UN members blocking Kosovo’s full recognition are Russia and China, partly due to their political relationship to Serbia.

In an effort to gain international recognition, Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2015, which is part of the integration process into the European Union (EU). Although Kosovo is now a candidate for EU membership, it has not made promising progress thus far. Lack of visa freedom from the EU isolates Kosovo from the west and most other countries, with the exception of its neighboring countries, Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries.

Kosovo's struggle to strengthen its economy has other impediments. For example, the World Bank Group in Kosovo reported that Kosovo’s businesses and “companies are not compatible with their local, regional and international markets,” therefore “Kosovo's economic growth model is unsustainable over the long term.”⁹² The country's economic growth is also hindered by a lack of an effective rule of law. Moreover, Kosovo’s quality of education is lower compared to the international average, and access to good education is inequitable. As a result, young Kosovars do not get the necessary training to develop

⁹⁰ The World Bank Group in Kosovo, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid, 2.

⁹² Ibid, 5.

skills for a rapidly changing labor market and international economy.⁹³ There is also a lack of cultural and extracurricular engagements, especially for the youth of Kosovo, which stunts their development into otherwise competitive and competent workers. Kosovar government's apparent lack of attention to the education and development of the youth has left the younger generations underprepared for gainful employment and more tempted by "religious causes."⁹⁴

All of these factors have fostered a socioeconomic environment in which young Kosovars are increasingly turning to Islamic extremism for an escape from poverty. Visar Duriqi, a Kosovo-based religious expert, observed, "Kosovo was economically devastated by the war and its economic recovery is still slow, which is creating many social problems."⁹⁵ While the promise of wealth is not the main motivation that drove Islamic foreign fighters to travel from Kosovo to Iraq and Syria, it is certainly one of the motivations. For example a Kosovar police officer explained that a foreign fighter for the Islamic State earns "\$2,000 as a commander," which is significantly higher than the average monthly wage in Kosovo of \$300.⁹⁶ It is easy to understand how a person who is unable to find employment and who has a family to provide for would be drawn to becoming an Islamic foreign fighter in order to support his family.

The statistics and facts provided above demonstrate that the citizens of Kosovo are extremely vulnerable socioeconomically. Lack of opportunities, lack of a strong educational system, and lack of the rule of law combine into the perfect recipe for

⁹³ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁴ Shpend Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," 10.

⁹⁵ "Albania and Kosovo: A New Front for Jihadists," *Yahoo News*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

disasters. In Kosovo's case, it has contributed to the current surge of radicalization of violent Islamic extremism.

Kosovo's Experience with Islamic Terrorism

Carlota Gall, a reporter who covered Kosovo from 1999 to 2001, visited Kosovo 15 years later and observed, "I had long followed violent Islamist movements, from Afghanistan to former Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus and North Africa, but I was stunned to hear that Kosovo, which had long been a United Nations protectorate, had been infected, too."⁹⁷ Gall also wrote,

I wanted to answer the question in Kosovo: Who was behind this trend? Who was funding it, how, and Why? I went through hours of videos of radical preachers and ISIS propaganda, and read reams of U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks. Some detailed how rich donors in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries supported the spread of fundamentalist teachings, and even terrorism, through charitable foundations.⁹⁸

Violent Islamic extremism and Islamic foreign fighters from Kosovo traveling to Syria and Iraq were unheard of prior to the summer of 2014, when a handful of arrests were made in connection with terrorism. A little more than a year later, in November of 2015 the Kosovo government announced that an "estimated number of 300 Kosovars had traveled to either fight alongside jihadi groups or live in the Islamic State's controlled territory."⁹⁹ Shortly after the release of numbers of foreign fighters from Kosovo, the

⁹⁷ Carlotta Gall, "A Reporter Returns to Kosovo, 15 Years Later," *New York Times*, May 24, 2016, accessed May 24, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/insider/a-reporter-returns-to-kosovo-15-years-later.html?post_id=5317409_10103540457082474# = .

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Ervin Qafmolla, "Offer Kosovar Fighters 'Jihadi Rehab' to Combat Extremism," *BalkanInsight*, March 24, 2016, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/offer-kosovar-fighters-jihadi-rehab-to-combat-extremism--03-23-2016>.

Kosovo government officials declared “state of alert on the grounds that Kosovo faced real risks associated with terrorism.”¹⁰⁰ According to a report compiled by Anita Rice from the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, “regional security and intelligence experts have warned that despite crackdowns on radical Islamic extremists and other security measures, a significant number of young people from the Balkans continue to be radicalized online and the extent of extremism in the Balkans is likely much higher than originally thought.”¹⁰¹

It is unclear how many of those who traveled to the conflict areas of Syria and Iraq have actually returned to Kosovo. Out of the 300 known foreign fighters, 50 are now awaiting trials in Kosovo for criminal charges in connection with terrorism. Based on the numbers provided by the Kosovo government officials, the country is, on a per capita basis, the highest-ranking source country of foreign fighters from the Balkans and Europe.¹⁰²

The KCSS reported that “the majority, or 54 percent, of foreign fighters from Kosovo joined the conflicts in Syria during 2013, when the Islamic State was consolidated.”¹⁰³ During 2012, when Kosovo officials began to speak publicly against the mistreatment of Syrians by Assad’s regime, their vocal support of the opposition forces is believed to have encouraged some foreign fighters from Kosovo to join the Islamic

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Anita Rice, “Scale of Balkan Jihadist Extremism 'Underestimated,” *BalkanInsight*, March 30, 2016, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/scale-of-balkan-jihadist-extremism-underestimated--03-29-2016>

¹⁰² Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 17.

State.¹⁰⁴ In 2012, the first Kosovo foreign fighter, Naman Demolli, was killed in Syria while fighting alongside the opposition against the Assad regime.¹⁰⁵

In the summer of 2015, Kosovo police detained five supporters of the Islamic State who were suspected of planning to poison Pristina's main water supply.¹⁰⁶ It is believed that they began the plot after the Islamic State released a video calling on "sympathizers throughout the Balkans to mark the holy month of Ramadan by killing and poisoning unbelievers."¹⁰⁷

The Islamic State's influences have reached the women of Kosovo as well. A police report indicates that, to date, 36 women have traveled to Syria and Iraq.¹⁰⁸ Kosovar women's participation in Islamic extremism is a topic extensively written about by Arbana Xharra, a prominent Kosovo journalist. She recently interviewed a Kosovar man who is the father-in-law of a young Kosovar woman foreign fighter, Laura Hyseni. The man said, "In just a couple of months, the village imam and his wife brainwashed them."¹⁰⁹ He was referring to his son and daughter-in-law, who traveled together to the Middle East as foreign fighters.

¹⁰⁴ Louis Charbonneau, "Kosovo Voices Strong Support for Syrian Opposition," *Reuters*, May 14, 2012, accessed March 1, 2016, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1EI20120514>.

¹⁰⁵ Studio Islame Prishtina (2012). "Kosovari Naman Demolli eshte vrare ne Siri" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopfl_s

¹⁰⁶ Una Hajdari and Sinisa Jakov-Marusic, "Kosovo Foils Terror Plot to Poison Water Supply," *BalkanInsight*, July 13, 2015, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/five-kosovars-detained-for-planning-terrorist-attack>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Arbana Xharra, "Few but Fanatical—The Kosovo Women Who Go Over to ISIS," *BalkanInsight*, January 26, 2016, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/few-but-fanatical-the-kosovo-women-who-go-over-to-isis-01-22-2016>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Most recently, a *Yahoo News* article reported that three years ago, Albert and Yassin left their homes in Kosovo and Albania to wage jihad in Syria. Now they're back, leading the jihadists in a region the Islamic State has called a "new front" in Europe.¹¹⁰ The return of Kosovar Islamic foreign fighters who intend on launching attacks on their homeland poses the most serious threat to Kosovo and the continent of Europe. As mentioned in Chapter One, a video released by the Islamic State in 2015 threatened the Balkan region with these words: "Black days are coming to you." These threats could easily become real attacks with the involvement of Kosovar fighters who have repatriated, especially given recent government estimates that approximately 120 Kosovar foreign fighters have returned from Syria and Iraq.

Another factor in the surge of radicalization of Kosovo is the country's changing relationship with the West. Kosovars generally had a favorable impression of the United States and the UK, since the United States led the NATO intervention in the Kosovo conflict. Some streets in Kosovo are named after former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. However, the younger generations, such as those under the age of 15, do not remember or did not experience the conflict of the 1990s, and they have less reason to support or trust the West. With recent corruption scandals affecting the European Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) as well as allegations of illicit dealings of former American Ambassador Christopher Dell, the perception of the West has declined among the younger Kosovars, especially among those who view the West as the puppeteer of the failing Kosovo government.^{111 112}

¹¹⁰ "Albania and Kosovo: A New Front for Jihadists,"

¹¹¹ Julian Borger, "EU's Biggest Foreign Mission in Turmoil over Corruption Row," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2014, accessed November 1, 2016,

A recent UNDP report indicates that close to 70% of Kosovars are dissatisfied with Kosovo's political orientation.¹¹³ As the younger generation grows up without jobs or opportunities, knowing only corruption and politicians who are directed by the United States, they are more increasingly likely to assign the blame to the West for Kosovo's failing institutions and policies.

Why Modern Kosovo is a Breeding Ground for Islamic Extremism

Although Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia eight years ago, there have been tremendous challenges for the citizens of Kosovo, including large youth population, high unemployment rate, high corruption, weak education system, strong ethnic divides, high levels of nationalism and strong ethnic ties. A 2016 UNDP report found that "more than three quarters of Kosovans (78%) think that the largest problems facing Kosovo today are related to the country's socioeconomic conditions. Indeed, respondents selected unemployment (57.1%), poverty (21.4%), and corruption (5.6%) as the three biggest issues, which impact their social well-being."¹¹⁴

All of these factors have contributed significantly to Islamic radicalization. For example, if young Kosovar men cannot find jobs—whether as a result of inadequate education, corruption or a weak rule of law—they will not be able to get married and start

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/05/eu-facing-questions-dismissal-prosecutor-alleged-corruption>

¹¹² Matthew Brunwasser, "Steamrolled: A Special Investigation Into the Diplomacy of Doing Business Abroad," *ForeignPolicy.com*, n.d., <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/30/steamrolled-investigation-bechtel-highway-business-kosovo/>

¹¹³ UNDP Kosovo, "Public Pulse XI," *UNDP*, May 30, 2016, 2, http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-11/.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

a family; as single, able-bodied young men, they become easy targets for Islamic radicalization. Traditional values such as marriage, children and family life are critical to identity of young people.

Furthermore, Kosovo citizens do not have freedom of movement. For some, the only way to improve their livelihood is to join violent Islamic extremist groups. Additionally, for those who are suffering in a society fraught with problems and suffering, the rhetoric of extremist groups about the world needing a paradigm shift or new regime is extremely appealing.

Summary

This chapter follows an overview of global violent Islamic extremism in Chapter One and discusses the complexity of violent Islamic extremism by examining its influence in Kosovo. This chapter began by describing Kosovo's historical and cultural background, including the ethnic conflicts in the 1990s that became the context for the surge of Islamic radicalization. This analysis helps identify the factors that have helped Islamic extremism gain traction and succeed in securing recruits from all over the world.

The next chapter turns to Kosovo's challenges in confronting violent Islamic extremism. Chapter Three will begin with a detailed explanation of how Kosovo's bloody past has contributed to Islamic radicalization. The chapter then considers the measures the Kosovo government has taken to counter terrorism, and evaluates the problems with those measures and the government itself. This analysis includes a discussion of the impact of international dimensions will be discussed in great length. By exploring the difficulties that Kosovo wrestles with in its fight against terrorism, Chapter Four presents

another dimension of radicalization in Kosovo in support of the overall narrative of this thesis

CHAPTER THREE

KOSOVO'S CHALLENGES IN CONFRONTING VIOLENT ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

Having presented an overview of Kosovo's past and present situations, as well as its involvement with global violent Islamic extremism, this chapter turns to the challenges Kosovo faces in its fight against Islamic extremism, including challenges in security policies, border security, and policy structure. This chapter also addresses a much more complex issue that has only received attention recently—the international dimensions of Kosovo's challenge in dealing with violent Islamic extremism.

Main Challenges in Kosovo's Response to Violent Islamic Extremism

Kosovo has more than just a few challenges in combating violent Islamic extremism—its status as the newest country in Europe brings a host of problems, from domestic instability to vulnerabilities to foreign threats, all adding to the complexity of its counterterrorism efforts. As detailed in Chapter Three, Kosovo's landscape was forever changed during the conflicts of the 1990s, especially in 1999 when Kosovars were either killed or expelled from Kosovo by Serbian military forces.

In May 1999, NATO's intervention ended the Kosovo conflict, by which time approximately 90% or more of the remaining Kosovar population was scattered around the globe. They began to return to Kosovo, but only to find their homes burned to the ground. Homeless, grieving the death of family members, and left without livelihoods as

many of their businesses were destroyed, Kosovars faced the seemingly insurmountable challenge of rebuilding their country.¹¹⁵

To describe Kosovo as a new country would be an understatement. Not only did Kosovo have to develop itself from the ground up in every aspect—from the economy, laws, and law enforcement, to education and security—it also had to accomplish this as people were grieving and as resources were desperately scarce. The country lacked in human and physical resources, expertise, and the knowledge to rebuild itself. All of these factors together formed an unstable, volatile, and harsh environment in which the radicalization of violent Islamic extremism could gain traction. Violent Islamic extremism is now considered to be the biggest security threat facing Kosovo, its region, NATO, and the UN mission in Kosovo. It certainly threatens the United States’ “goal to help Kosovo become a stable, democratic, and economically viable country within Europe.”¹¹⁶

Violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo threatens more than just Kosovo and its citizens; it is a threat to the international body. To strengthen Kosovo and enable it to stabilize and combat violent Islamic extremism, the international community—including the United States, EU, UN, NATO, OSCE, and other international entities—has invested years and millions of dollars in the development of Kosovo in the last 17 years. The United States alone has “contributed almost \$2 Billion to Kosovo’s development” since

¹¹⁵ Steven Lee Myers, “Crisis in the Balkans: The Overview; Serb Forces in Kosovo Under Attack as Weather Clears,” *The New York Times*, April 09, 1999, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/06/world/crisis-balkans-overview-serb-forces-kosovo-under-attack-weather-clears.html?pagewanted=all>

¹¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Assistance to Kosovo,” n.d., accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/kv/c26235.htm>

the conflict of 1999.¹¹⁷ This figure does not include more recent contributions. However, even with such international support, Kosovo still faces substantial challenges in confronting violent Islamic extremism.

How Kosovo’s Bloody Past in the 1990s Contributed to the Risk of Radicalization

One of the factors that motivated foreign fighters from Kosovo appears to be an emotional connection to those who were affected by the atrocities that took place in Syria around 2012. A United Nations Development Program report concerning Kosovo concluded that most of the Kosovar “Jihadis were deeply moved by the suffering of the Syrian people under the al-Assad regime, whose crimes echoed those committed in Kosovo in the 1990s.”¹¹⁸ A former Kosovar foreign fighter to Syria, Albert Berisha, who has been charged with terrorism-related crimes, said he took an “emotional decision” to leave for the Middle East “after seeing on TV and social media what was happening in Syria.”¹¹⁹ Berisha also said that “he traveled to Syria to help the moderate Syrian opposition but got trapped by the Islamic State fighters.”¹²⁰

Additionally, for someone who lives in Kosovo without freedom of movement, employment, or opportunities to improve the quality of life, joining violent Islamic groups is one of the only opportunities they have to escape poverty and find the meaning of life. While for most logical people this would not be an option, it may seem perfectly

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ “Comprehensive Assessment to Counter Violent Radicalization in Kosovo,” United Nations Development Programme 4. (unpublished central level working group paper)

¹¹⁹ “Albania and Kosovo: A ‘New Front’ for Jihadists,” *Yahoo News*.

¹²⁰ Labinot Leposhtica, “Former Kosovar Jihadist Recounts Syrian Odyssey,” *Balkan Insight*, April 05, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/former-kosovar-jihadist-recounts-his-syrian-odyssey-04-05-2016>

viable for those who struggle to make a living in Kosovo's struggling economy. Visar Duriqi, a Kosovo-based expert in religion said, "Kosovo was economically devastated during the war and its economic recovery is still slow, which is creating many social problems."¹²¹ The socioeconomic vulnerabilities in Kosovo have compelled some of its population toward Islamic terrorism groups or organizations for economic liberation.¹²² Unfortunately, these socioeconomic challenges are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, as the solutions to these challenges necessitate systemic reforms on the governmental and social level.

Measures Taken by the Government of Kosovo

The issue of violent Islamic extremism or Islamic foreign fighters from Kosovo was almost unheard of until 2012, when it was reported that Naman Demolli, a Kosovar, was killed in Syria while supporting the opposition party.¹²³ Even then, it was not clear what this meant for the Kosovo citizens or who Naman Demolli was fighting for. A KCSS report said, "citizens and the relevant institutions in Kosovo did not have a clear picture on how the opposition against Assad was organized."¹²⁴ At this time, combating terrorism was understandably not on the government's list of priorities.

However, Kosovo officials soon realized the threat of violent Islamic extremism to their country. Data indicates between 2012 and 2014, the Kosovo government began to

¹²¹ "Albania and Kosovo: A 'New Front' for Jihadists," Yahoo News.

¹²² UNDP, "Comprehensive Assessment to Counter Violent Radicalization in Kosovo,"⁴

¹²³ Studio Islame Prishtina, "Kosovari Naman Demolli eshte vrar ne Siri," November 13, 2012, accessed June 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopfl_s. This YouTube video is in Albanian and discusses the killing of the first know foreign fighter from Kosovo fighting in Syria.

¹²⁴ Shpend Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," 7.

notice and address the surge in the number of Islamic foreign fighters from Kosovo. As was previously discussed, the KCSS report indicated that the majority of the Kosovo foreign fighters joined the Islamic State and other terrorist groups during 2013.¹²⁵ During the same period of time, in 2012, when the Syrian conflict began to receive attention, Kosovo's Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj publicly voiced support for Syria's opposition party and claimed that the Kosovo's government "had already established diplomatic contacts with Syrians fighting to oust President Bashar al-Assad."¹²⁶ This public support of the opposition party might have prompted some Kosovars to join in the Syrian conflict. However, a KCSS report indicates that even before it was public knowledge in Kosovo that violent Islamic extremist groups were fighting in the Syrian conflict, "a number of citizens from Kosovo had already joined some opposition forces, including the then unknown Al Qaeda affiliated faction that emerged during 2012."¹²⁷ Regardless of the timeline, it is clear that the issue of Kosovar Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon is a fairly new topic for the Kosovo government. While the government has taken many measures to combat violent Islamic extremism, significant challenges remain.

A recent State Department Country Report on Terrorism indicated that although "Kosovo demonstrated political will to address threats related to terrorism, and the state possesses the legal framework to do so," the problem remains in its "national institutions—including investigative and prosecutorial elements have limited capacity,

¹²⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹²⁶ Louis Charbonneau, "Kosovo Voices Strong Support for Syria Opposition," Reuters, May 14, 2012, accessed March 01, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1EI20120514>

¹²⁷ Shpend Kursani, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," 17.

resources, and experience to handle terrorism cases effectively.”¹²⁸ These issues, which hinder Kosovo’s efforts in combating violent Islamic extremism, will be given an in-depth analysis later this chapter.

Despite the difficulties of countering terrorism, the Kosovo government has indeed demonstrated willingness to tackle the issue. The most significant measure it has taken in this regard was an antiterrorism operation in August 2014. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that “Kosovo launched a major operation against suspected domestic militants who have fought in Syria and Iraq, arresting at least 40 people and seizing weapons and explosives in dozens of locations.”¹²⁹ Additionally, only a month later, in September of 2014, the Kosovo government launched the second biggest operation, arresting 15 people suspected of links to terrorism.¹³⁰ Fatos Bytyqi of Reuters reported that at least nine imams were among the 15 people arrested, as the government attempts to stem the flow of young ethnic Albanians joining Islamist fighters in Iraq and Syria.¹³¹ A Kosovo police official involved in the second operation said, “the majority of those arrested are imams of different mosques belonging to the Islamic Community of Kosovo.”¹³²

By the beginning of 2015, more than 80 arrests were made in Kosovo related to terrorist charges. However, more than 60 percent of them were either released or placed

¹²⁸ U.S. State Department, “Country Report on Terrorism 2015,” June 2, 2016, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257516.htm>

¹²⁹ Laurence Norman, “Kosovo Arrests 40 Suspected Islamist Terrorism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2014, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/kosovo-arrest-40-suspected-islamist-militants-1407754434>.

¹³⁰ Fatos Bytyqi, “Kosovo Imams Arrested in Push to Stop Fighters Going to Syria, Iraq,” Reuters, September 17, 2014, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-kosovo-islamist-arrests-idUKKBN0HC0NJ20140917>

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

on house arrest.¹³³ As of the writing of this thesis, in June 2016, trials are still underway of individuals charged in as early as 2013 and 2014. The government made more arrests throughout 2015, opening 20 new cases related to terrorism.¹³⁴ One of the arrests apprehended five individuals who attempted to poison Lake Badovc, the main water supply of the capital Pristina.¹³⁵ It was later revealed that two of these five had returned to Kosovo from fighting in Syria alongside the Islamic State.¹³⁶

In 2016 the government continues to arrest terrorist suspects, and it apprehended two Islamic foreign fighters who are believed to have left Pristina in November 2013 to go to Istanbul, Turkey, then crossed over to Syria, where they were trained and armed by Islamic terrorist groups.¹³⁷ The most significant counterterrorism-related operation of 2016, which was highly publicized, was the trial of Zekerija Qazim, a “hard-line imam” from Kosovo. He was sentenced to ten years in prison, the most severe sentence issued to date on terrorism charges in Kosovo. In total, the Kosovo government has sentenced seven individuals to a total of forty-two years of imprisonment.¹³⁸ Imam Zekerija Qazimi was found guilty of recruiting individuals from Kosovo to travel to Syria and fight alongside the Islamic State. “He was also accused of making jihad the main subject in

¹³³ Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” 7.

¹³⁴ U.S. State Department, “Country Report on Terrorism 2015.”

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Fox News, “Prosecutor in Kosovo Charges 2 with Syria Terror Offenses,” *Fox News*, May 6, 2016, accessed May 7, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/05/06/prosecutor-in-kosovo-charges-2-with-syria-terror-offenses.html>

¹³⁸ Labinot Leposhtica, “Kosovo Jails Hard-line Imam for 10 Years,” *BalkanInsight*, May 20, 2016, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-hard-line-imam-sentenced-to-10-years-in-prison-05-20-2016>.

many of his sermons.”¹³⁹ In fact, in 2013 Imam Qazimi was featured in a YouTube video in which he declared, “the blood of infidels is the best drink for us.”¹⁴⁰

Six other individuals who were sentenced on the same day as Imam Qazimi, five of whom were found guilty on charges related to joining the Islamic State in Syria.¹⁴¹ The seventh individual was found guilty and imprisoned on charges of recruiting Islamic foreign fighters.¹⁴² Kosovo passed a law in April 2015 that expressly prohibits its citizens from joining any foreign conflicts, with a penalty of up to fifteen years of imprisonment.¹⁴³ It is unclear whether it was under this law that these six individuals were sentenced.

In addition to the 2015 law, the Kosovo government also passed an anti-terror funding and money laundering law.¹⁴⁴ Kosovo also signed an extradition treaty with the United States in March 2016. The United States Ambassador to Kosovo, Greg Delawie, indicated that “the ability to extradite criminals between our two countries will be an important tool in the struggle against terrorism and against transnational crime.”¹⁴⁵ According to *BalkanInsight*, the extradition treaty followed an incident in 2010 involving a Kosovar in the United States who was suspected to have been “providing material and

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ Fatos Bytyqi, “Kosovo Group Jailed for 42 Years for Aiding Islamic State,” *The Foreign Desk*, May 20, 2016, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-hard-line-imam-sentenced-to-10-years-in-prison-05-20-2016>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ U.S. State Department, “Country Report on Terrorism 2015.”

¹⁴⁴ Associated Press, “Kosovo Passes Anti-Terror Funding Law,” Fox News, April 20, 2016, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/04/20/kosovo-passes-anti-terror-funding-law.html>

¹⁴⁵ Embassy of the United States in Pristina, Kosovo, “Ambassador Delawie’s Remarks at the Signing of the Extradition Treaty,” U.S. Department of State, March 29, 2016, accessed May 5, 2016, http://pristina.usembassy.gov/extradition_treaty.html.

support to terrorism.”¹⁴⁶

While there is ample evidence of the Kosovo government’s active efforts in combating terrorism, such efforts are hampered by Kosovo’s operational experience, capabilities, and overall law enforcement structure. The State Department report indicated that Kosovo “authorities were inexperienced in dealing with terrorism cases, and communications and information sharing across agencies remained a challenge.”¹⁴⁷ The report continues to note that “Kosovo’s legislative framework is sufficient, but prosecutors lack experience in trying [terrorism-related] cases.”¹⁴⁸

Kosovo officials’ inexperience with combating violent Islamic extremism has been a known issue. For example, a recent *BalkanInsight* article reported that two Kosovars were convicted on terrorism-related charges, but the terrorist group “Harausham” that they were accused of joining “may only exist in the prosecution’s indictment and other related court documents.”¹⁴⁹ Each of the accused individuals received about three and a half years in prison, but the “documents compiled by Chief Special Prosecutor Reshat Millaku (who oversaw this particular case) contains no evidence of ‘Harausham’s’ existence,” nor does it indicate that it has ties to any other terrorist group.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Erjone Popova, “Kosovo, US Hail ‘Historic’ Extradition Agreement,” *BalkanInsight*, Mar 29, 2016, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-us-sign-extradition-deal-03-29-2016>.

¹⁴⁷ U.S. State Department, “Country Report on Terrorism 2015.”

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Ervin Qafmolla and Labinot Leposhtica, “Mysterious Terrorist Organisation Haunts Kosovo Judiciary,” *BalkanInsight*, May 7, 2016, accessed May 7, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/mysterious-terrorist-organisation-haunts-kosovo-judiciary-05-06-2016>.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Kosovo government's inexperience with counterterrorism affects not only its prosecution of terrorist suspects, but also in implementing other necessary policies. The government approved a national Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy in September 2015 and established an inter-ministerial CVE working group.¹⁵¹ The CVE strategy provides a five-year comprehensive guideline on preventing and decreasing the threat of violent Islamic terrorism in Kosovo. These measures, while well-intended, are unlikely to be effective in the short-run, because the implementation of the strategy requires resources and funding that Kosovo simply does not have at this time.

Although Kosovo may seem to be in a precarious position in its fight against violent Islamic terrorism, the Kosovo government is not without support. A robust network of international bodies has been providing various forms of support to Kosovo, including funding, training of law enforcement, border control, and judicial authorities, as well as other programs to assist Kosovo in its efforts. Some of the most significant contributors to Kosovo's counterterrorism initiatives are the United States (through its Justice Department, State Department, Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC), International Criminal Investigative Training Program (ICITAP), Export Control and Related Border Security (EXBS)), the OSCE, and the UN Office of Antiterrorism.¹⁵²

While the Kosovo government's counterterrorist measures thus far may not seem effective, it is undeniable that Kosovo has, in cooperation with the international community, strengthened and advanced its legislative, law enforcement, and border control structures in response to violent Islamic terrorism. The international community continues to support Kosovo as its government endeavors to combat terrorism. An

¹⁵¹ Fatos Bytyci, "Kosovo Imams Arrested in Push to Stop Fighters Going to Syria, Iraq."

¹⁵² U.S. State Department, "Country Report on Terrorism 2015."

example of such international support is the invitation extended to Kosovo officials to the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in New York in February 2015. Kosovo has also been selected to become a part of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), which will provide Kosovo monetary funds to combat violent Islamic Extremism.¹⁵³

Problematic Areas in the Kosovo Government

As mentioned above, the Kosovo government has made significant efforts to counter violent Islamic extremism both within and outside of Kosovo. However, many problems exist in the Kosovo government that impede its efforts in combating Islamic terrorism. While all countries have challenges in combating terrorism, Kosovo, as a new sovereign country, must deal with challenges in counterterrorism that are compounded by existing issues with rebuilding the country from the aftermaths of the 1990s conflicts. Of the utmost importance among these challenges are law enforcement, border control, and other tools that would normally be of assistance in preventing or minimizing violent Islamic terrorism.

In addition, Kosovo's unfamiliarity with various terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq has been a challenge for the judiciary authorities of Kosovo, which could lead to legal issues such as having to release terrorist for lack of evidence. Two reporters from *BalkanInsight* covered the trials of Kosovar Islamic foreign fighters and reported that the presiding Kosovo judges were unable to distinguish between various terrorist groups

¹⁵³ Ibid.

operating in the conflict areas of Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁴ Such a flawed justice system naturally would result in significant difficulties in properly prosecuting terrorist suspects. KCSS report says, “policy and decision makers as well as the general public do not make clear distinctions between religionization efforts by religious authorities (i.e. Imams) and violent extremist efforts (other imams and extremist activities).”¹⁵⁵ In addition to legal issues, the inability to distinguish between citizens practicing their religion of choice and violent extremists could further cripple counterterrorism efforts by creating hatred and discontent within Kosovo.

Another problem area in Kosovo’s counterterrorism initiatives is the regional cooperation among Islamic extremists in the Balkans region. A recent UNDP assessment reported, “the complete rupture in police cooperation between Kosovo and neighboring states that do not recognize it—Serbia and Bosnia—hampers counter-terrorism.”¹⁵⁶ There are countries in the Balkans that have high violent Islamic extremist numbers than Kosovo, i.e., Bosnia, Macedonia, and Albania. In fact, there is ample evidence indicating that the violent Islamic extremist groups within the Balkans are all interconnected and likely operate under the same leadership of the Islamic State.

The conversion of a small minority in the Balkans who embrace the new violent Islamic ideology referred to as “takfir,” which is motivated by the Islamic State, is a result of the activities by imams from Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, who were educated in the Middle East. In fact, KCSS reported that “this ideology has found its

¹⁵⁴ Ervin Qafmolla and Labinot Leposhtica, “Mysterious Terrorist Organization Haunts Kosovo Judiciary.”

¹⁵⁵ Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” 7.

¹⁵⁶ UNDP, “Comprehensive Assessment to Counter Violent Radicalization in Kosovo,” 28

place in Kosovo through a number of Skopje (Macedonia) based Imams who have visited and studied in the Middle East, becoming prey to Takfir circles in its most prominent ideological base-Egypt.”¹⁵⁷

The Soufan Group recently estimated that “least 875 fighters have traveled to Syria from the Balkans, with fighters coming from at least seven different countries in the region. Almost 800 of these fighters come from just four countries—Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia—all located in the western Balkans.”¹⁵⁸ Additionally, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) estimates that approximately 500 ethnic Albanians from the Western Balkans have traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012.¹⁵⁹ In the summer of 2015, all Western Balkan countries increased their security levels in an effort to prevent terrorist attacks by the Islamic State. The threat became escalated when the Islamic State’s black flag was reported to be spotted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, not far from Kosovo.¹⁶⁰

As the violent Islamic extremists in the Balkans are interconnected, it is of vital importance that Kosovo is a part of regional cooperation with other Balkan countries, implementing measures such as intelligence sharing and other joint efforts to combat the violent Islamic phenomenon. In light of a recent Soufan Group report indicating that “it

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵⁸ The Soufan Group, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Adrian Shtuni, “Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, April 30, 2015, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>.

¹⁶⁰ Occasionally this paper will compare Kosovo and Bosnia as they share many similarities in terms of Islamic foreign fighter phenomenon, the involvement of Islamic terrorism in the region, and Middle Eastern charities that spread extremist views within these two countries.

would appear that the number of fighters from the Balkans has at least doubled, if not tripled, since June 2014,¹⁶¹ regional cooperation is more important now than ever.

International Dimensions of Kosovo's Challenges in Dealing with Violent Islamic Extremism

As the above analysis made clear, Kosovo faces numerous internal challenges that have led and contributed to the current issue of violent Islamic extremism. However, neither Kosovo nor the rest of the Balkans would be facing such substantial security threat without the influence of certain Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. These countries advocate and teach a version of Islam that has led to the violent Islamic extremism as we know it today, and they began to heavily influence the Balkans after the fall of communism during their investment ventures in the region.

In the aftermath of the conflict of the 1990s, Kosovars were left with a tremendous scarcity of various types of resources, and in the face of extreme socioeconomic challenges, they might have gravitated to any number of illegal activities in hopes of a better future. However, were it not for these Arab countries and their Islamic ideologies, it is highly unlikely that Kosovo and the rest of the region would have been dealing with their citizens participating in violent Islamic extremism.

This part of the paper explains how this form of Islam was introduced in the Balkans by those few Arab states, and how this influence has had a profound impact on

¹⁶¹ The Soufan Group, 17.

The international dimension of the Kosovo challenge will include other Balkan countries as well, as the issue of radicalization has also affected them. Kosovo's and Bosnia's experiences with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are almost identical. Including Bosnia in this part of the thesis provides better understanding of the issue at hand.

the terrorism issues that are the topic of discussion in this thesis. While the people of the Balkans historically fought for a national cause that united the people, the spread of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism has shifted the motivation for Kosovar fighters and caused a wide divide in Kosovo.

Furthermore, what has occurred in Kosovo after these countries established their presence in the region is also very telling when analyzing the global rise of violent Islamic extremism. This significantly problematic component of this issue goes beyond Kosovo and deserves much more attention. Kosovo is a very small country and with the proper measures in place, violent Islamic can be overcome.

Chapter One of this paper discussed Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi ideology and the role it played in the rise of global violent Islamic extremism. As such, the history and nature of the ideology will not be reiterated. Suffice it to say that it was precisely this ideology that was emphasized during lectures on Islam offered in Kosovo mosques by Saudi-educated clerics. The lectures, advocating Wahhabism, preached the same religious hatred propagated at home in Saudi Arabia.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012 Annual Report, Saudi school books of the 2010–2011 school year, a list of which was posted on the Saudi Ministry of Education's website, "continue to teach hatred toward other religions and, in some cases, promote violence."¹⁶² More specifically, those textbooks "justified violence against apostates and homosexuals and labeled Jews and

¹⁶² U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2012," March 2012, 167, accessed March 9, 2016.
[http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)

Christians enemies of the believers.”¹⁶³ This is not any different from what is seen in the Islamic State’s ideology.

The religious landscape in Kosovo began to shift when countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey began to invest in Kosovo as part of their humanitarian relief efforts after the war in 1999. As these states overreached for the Balkans Muslims, their investment or relief activities in Kosovo became an avenue for the propagation of extremist Islamic views in a region that has largely been secular.

Kosovo is a perfect case study to understand the relentless efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and several other Islamic and Arab countries to impose their religious views, principles, and political goals on socioeconomically weak and vulnerable countries such as Kosovo. David Garner from the *Columnist* wrote, “Since the end of the cold war and after the wars of the Yugoslav succession, the western Balkans—in particular Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia and even bits of Bulgaria—have been carpeted with Saudi-financed Wahhabi mosques and madrassas.”¹⁶⁴ Madrassa refers to Muslim schools that are associated with mosques. Carol Chosky and Jamsheed Choksy also report that “Saudi Arabia is not the only source of resources for Jihadism-public and private entities in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and more recently Turkey have also been linked to collection and transfer of funds supporting terror groups.”¹⁶⁵

In 2012, before the issue of violent Islamic fighters from Kosovo was in the

¹⁶³ Ibid, 167.

¹⁶⁴ David Garner, “Saudis Have Lost the Right to Take Sunni Leadership,” *Financial Times*, August 7, 2014, accessed February 10, 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/ab1b61c4-1cb6-11e4-b4c7-00144feabdc0>

¹⁶⁵ Carol E. B. Chosky and Jamsheed K. Choksy, “The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad,” *World Affairs*, May/June 2015, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad>.

public consciousness, the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* (BIRN) published an article addressing the rise of a new form of Islam in Kosovo, “stricter forms of the faith had taken root after the war, following the influx of Islamic aid agencies and schooling of local clerics in Arab countries.”¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, the article said, “Kosovo officials said they believed as many as 50,000 people in the territory had begun following more conservative form of Islam.”¹⁶⁷

After the establishment of Islamic aid agencies and schools for clerics came the excessive number of mosques that were erected in Kosovo. In 2012, BIRN reported that the Islamic Community of Kosovo has been involved in reconstructing and building a very large number of mosques. Approximately 113 mosques were reconstructed and about 155 new ones were built “through various funding channels.”¹⁶⁸

More mosques have been built than schools in Kosovo since 1999. Where did the funding for such constructions come from? It is highly unlikely that the funding for Islamic Community of Kosovo construction projects came from the Kosovo government. In fact, David Phillips from the *Huffington Post* wrote, “the Muslim Society of Kosovo is well-financed by Turkey and the Gulf States, with an annual budget of 6 million euros. Imams pay stipends to parents, targeting single mothers, so their children adhere to

¹⁶⁶ Arbana Xharra, “Fissures in the Faith: Rise of Conservative Islamists Alarms Kosovans,” *BalkanInsight*, December 12, 2012, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/fissures-in-the-faith-rise-of-conservative-islamists-alarms-kosovans>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Besianna Xharra, “Kosovo Turns Blind Eye to Illegal Mosques,” *Balkan Insight*, January 12, 2012, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-turns-blind-eye-to-illegal-mosques>.

Muslim traditions—hadith.”¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Phillips said, “capitalizing on Kosovo’s weak education system, religious charities from Arabic countries have established a strong presence in Kosovo, offering English and computer lessons—along with instruction in the Qur’an.”¹⁷⁰ Ida Orzechowska from *Global Research* echoed, “It’s becoming common practice to pay people in their initial phase of religiosity for regular visit to the mosque, wearing a hijab or a beard.”¹⁷¹

A significant contributing factor of the violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo is the influence, either directly or otherwise, of the Islamic Community of Kosovo and its imams, who were funded and educated in various Islamic and Gulf countries. As mentioned previously in this chapter, many Kosovo imams have been charged with terrorism-related activities, such as spreading hatred and encouraging and recruiting Kosovar citizens to fight alongside the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq.¹⁷²

Indeed, the Islamic Community of Kosovo has been accused of being the key “middle-man” for spreading and supporting Wahhabism. According to Avni Islami, a Muslim scholar, the wider Kosovo Islamic community is not doing its job to “duly

¹⁶⁹ David Phillips, “Islamism in Kosovo,” *The World Post*, December 21, 2015, accessed February 10, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/islamism-in-kosovo_b_8855128.html.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ida Orzechowska, “Kosovo: The Hidden Growth of Islamic Extremism,” *Global Research*, August 24, 2014, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-hidden-growth-of-islamic-extremism-in-kosovo/5397371>.

¹⁷² Fatos Bytyci, “Kosovo Imams Arrested in Push to Stop Fighters Going to Syria and Iraq,” Reuters, September 17, 2014, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-islamist-arrests-idUSKBN0HC1B420140917>

manage” mosques, because 99 percent of the Kosovar participants in the Syrian conflict—both the recruiters and the recruited—came out of these mosques.¹⁷³

Areas especially vulnerable to these extremist influences are the largely ignored rural areas of Kosovo, where there is hardly any presence of the Kosovo government or the international community. These areas are overwhelmingly poor, with even lower educational standards, which provide easier access for the Islamic and Gulf countries to penetrate and spread their ideologies in those communities in the guise of charities or investment ventures.¹⁷⁴ The KCSS report stated, “poorly educated men and women in rural communities, consequently, accepted some of the conditions of Saudi charity organizations to attend their lectures that introduced them to more conservative and rigid thoughts of Islam.”¹⁷⁵

The Gulf countries certainly wanted to give an impression that their presence in Kosovo was strictly for humanitarian efforts. In addition to providing a significant amount of funds for the Islamic Community of Kosovo and other Islamic institutions, the Gulf countries also provided funding for hospitals and other humanitarian projects. However, these countries’ true motives were revealed when the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya (SJRC) was reported to have links to al-Qaeda. Most of Saudi funds flowing into Kosovo were operated through this organization. The

¹⁷³ Ervin Qafmolla, “Kosovo Islamic Body Accused of Tolerating Extremists,” *Balkan Insight*, October 29, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-islamic-body-accused-of-tolerating-extremists-10-28-2015>.

¹⁷⁴ Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development “Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans?” Policy Research Series, June 2005, accessed January 10, 2016, http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians-Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans_137060.pdf

¹⁷⁵ Shpend Kursani, “Kosovar Center for Security Studies,” 59.

BBC reported, “the relief committee works as an umbrella body for several Saudi NGOs, including the Saudi Red Crescent and has a multi million-dollar budget partly financed by the Saudi government.”¹⁷⁶ This fact provides some explanation for the link between Saudi Arabia and the terrorist groups operating within Kosovo and the Balkans region.

Other facts later surfaced that made it clear that Saudi Arabia’s involvement in terrorist activities, in the Balkans and beyond, is anything but coincidental. Immediately following the crowning of the new King of Saudi Arabia, King Salman, in January 2015, reports began circulating about his illicit dealings and support to the Mujahedeen, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations. According to a UN-sponsored investigation, in the 1990s “Salman transferred more than \$120 million from commission accounts under his control, as well as from his own personal accounts, to the Third World Relief Agency, another al-Qaeda front and the main pipeline for illegal weapons shipments to al-Qaida fighters in the Balkans.”¹⁷⁷

Furthermore, the illegal operations of the Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SHC), founded in 1992 and overseen by King Salman, were exposed for ongoing in elicited illegality. According to David Weinberg, an expert on Saudi Arabia wrote, “In 2011, NATO forces raided the SHC’s Sarajevo offices and discovered a treasure trove of terrorist materials: before and after photographs of al-Qaeda attacks, instructions for how to fake U.S. State Department badges, and maps marked to highlight

¹⁷⁶ Nick Wood, “US Fears Terrorist Attack in Kosovo,” *BBC News*, April 3, 2000, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/700435.stm>.

¹⁷⁷ Washington’s Blog, “New Saudi King Tied to Al Qaeda, Bin Laden and Islamic Terrorism,” *Global Research*, February 4, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/new-saudi-king-tied-to-al-qaeda-bin-laden-and-islamic-terrorism/5429307>.

government buildings across Washington, D.C.,” among other items.¹⁷⁸ There is no lack of evidence supporting King Salman’s ties to terrorist organizations.

What does Saudi Arabia want? More broadly, what is the goal of countries and groups subscribing to Wahhabism, such as the Islamic State? According to Tim Lister, a Middle East expert, the Islamic State wants to achieve a global caliphate, remain and expand its hold over Iraq and Syria, smash borders, purify Islam, and enslave the disbelievers.¹⁷⁹ In the summer of 2015, the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, released a video calling on all his supporters to wage jihad, whether by traveling to Syria and Iraq or fight in their respective lands. He urged, “Do not think that the war we are waging is the Islamic State’s war alone. Rather, it is the Muslim’s war altogether. It is the duty of every Muslim in every place, and the Islamic State is merely the spearhead in this war. It is but war of the people of faith against the people of disbelief.”¹⁸⁰

These four goals of the Islamic State are in line with Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism or political goal, or perhaps both. King Salman, before being crowned the sovereign, has been associated with at least three organizations that have been under international investigations: “the International Islamic Relief Organization, al-Haramain Foundation,

¹⁷⁸ David Andrew Weinberg, “King Salman’s Shady History,” *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/27/king-salmans-shady-history-saudi-arabia-jihadi-ties/>.

¹⁷⁹ Tim Lister, “What Does ISIS Really Want?” CNN.com, December 11, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/11/middleeast/isis-syria-iraq-caliphate/>.

¹⁸⁰ Heather Saul, “ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Resurfaces in Audio Urging Supporters to Join Terror Group,” *Independent*, May 15, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-resurfaces-in-audio-urging-supporters-to-join-terror-group-10251955.html>.

and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth.”¹⁸¹ The involvement of Saudi Arabia in global terrorism cannot be underestimated, and it is crucial that Kosovo officials know who the players are behind the force of terrorism that is now a threat to Kosovo’s national security.

Islamic State’s Recruitment Efforts

The Islamic State has had substantial success in its recruitment efforts. One of its strongest tools has been the internet, which had never been used to this extent by another terrorist organization. Brendan I. Koerner, an editor for *Wired* says, “the Islamic State recognized the power of digital media early on, when its brutish progenitor, Jordanian Jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, discovered the utility of uploading grainy videos of his atrocities to the internet.”¹⁸²

With the internet, the Islamic State’s propaganda has reached almost every part of the world, including people in vulnerable socioeconomic positions. Kosovo’s lack of resources, poverty and high unemployment rates have not prevented Kosovars from having internet access. In fact, Kosovo’s “internet penetration rate and the number of internet users are among the highest in the region, and are comparable to many EU member states.”¹⁸³ Even the vast majority of residents in rural Kosovo have internet access. The propaganda proved particularly effective in rural areas of Kosovo, where most of the Kosovar foreign fighters come from.

¹⁸¹ David Andrew Weinberg, “King Salman’s Shady History.”

¹⁸² Brendan I. Koerner, “Why ISIS Is Winning the Media War,” *Wired*, April 2016, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>.

¹⁸³ Shpend Kursani, “Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens Involved as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” 81.

Two significant factors made internet access an efficient channel for the Islamic State’s propaganda videos in rural Kosovo. First, the lack of foreign language skills limits the Kosovar youth to only Albanian language content.¹⁸⁴ This means the youth in rural Kosovo may be more likely to be exposed to Kosovo imams’ teachings than other internet resources available in Albanian. Second, much of the web content available in Albanian concerns Islamic teachings, with countless lectures delivered by Kosovar imams, who discuss and offer “some very basic questions on existential issues.”¹⁸⁵ The two factors combined resulted in the rural youth of Kosovo being exposed to more Islamic teaching than other content on the internet.

According to “Documenting the Virtual Caliphate,” an October 2015 report by the Quilliam Foundation, the Islamic State “releases on average thirty-eight new items per day—twenty-minute videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays, audio clips, and pamphlets, in languages ranging from Russian to Bengali.”¹⁸⁶ However, as part of Islamic State’s online propaganda “are portrayals of public works projects, economic development, and military triumphs, frequently aimed at specific Muslim enclaves throughout the world.”¹⁸⁷ In so doing, the Islamic State has achieved massive success through its online propaganda.

A recent report from the Council on Foreign Relations says that the Islamic State is more a “boots on the ground” than a “bytes on the net” problem, refuting claims that

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 82.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 82.

¹⁸⁶ Brendan I. Koerner, “Why ISIS Is Winning the Media War.”

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

the group's online propaganda has strategic value.¹⁸⁸ However, this report is inaccurate, as it underestimates the significant role the online propaganda has played in the group's global recruitment success, including in Kosovo and the Balkans. As noted Middle East expert Hisham Melhem said, "the technologies of globalization offer contemporary radical extremist opportunities to reach mass audiences to an extent their predecessors could never have imagined, and the Islamic State has exploited these technologies more successfully than any of its contemporaries in the Islamist world."¹⁸⁹

In Summary, this chapter discussed Kosovo's challenge in confronting violent Islamic extremism by highlighting the effect of the war of the 1990s and the interconnectedness of fighters in other Balkan states. The chapter also presented the actions that the government of Kosovo has taken to address violent Islamic extremism, as well as the factors that hamper its efforts. The analysis then turned to a survey of the international dimensions of violent Islamic extremism, such as the presence and influence of certain Islamic and Arab countries that contributed significantly to the surge of Islamic foreign fighters from Kosovo, as well as the Islamic State's use of the internet, which transcends country borders and penetrates even to the remotest areas of Kosovo.

Chapter Four will turn to an analysis of the religious and socioeconomic components of Kosovo's response to violent Islamic extremism. It will then conclude with recommendations, summary, and conclusions.

¹⁸⁸ David Fidler, "Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/cybersecurity/countering-islamic-state-exploitation-internet/p36644>.

¹⁸⁹ Hisham Melhem, "Keeping Up with the Caliphate: An Islamic State for the Internet Age," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015, accessed January 5, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/keeping-caliphate>.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIOECONOMIC COMPONENTS OF KOSOVO'S RESPONSE TO RADICAL ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

This final chapter focuses on two significant components—religious and socioeconomic—Kosovo must consider in its response to radical Islamic extremism. Addressing one without the other will likely lead to ineffective counterterrorism efforts. This chapter will demonstrate that while Kosovo's socioeconomic situation in the aftermath of the 1990s conflicts has left its citizens with few opportunities for advancement, and therefore many turn to radical Islamic groups to escape poverty, the fundamental shifts in Kosovo's cultural and religious landscape in the last few decades have also contributed to the appeal of radical extremism to young Kosovars. As such, Kosovo must develop solutions to both the socioeconomic and the religious problems in order to successfully stem the waves of fighters from leaving its borders to join extremist groups. While both socioeconomic and religious problems are significant, it is more likely that the Kosovo government will be able to more effectively address the latter in the near future.

Religious Components of the Kosovo Challenge

As discussed in previous chapters, prior to 1999 Islam was not a critical or even a relevant part of Kosovars' life, and this remains true to the present day for the vast majority of the population. Although the majority of the Kosovar population has a Muslim background, which was introduced in the Balkans during the Ottoman reign between 1389-1912. Kosovo then became part of Yugoslavia, which was not necessarily

a communist regime until 1945, it was more nationalistic with roots in communist ideology. Then, during the communist rule between 1945-1990s most stopped practicing religion, including Islam. The fall of communism created ideological confusion throughout the Balkans region, including Kosovo, which was exacerbated by the ethnic clashes that ensued in the following years.

In the early 2000s, a noticeable shift in ideology began—not only toward religion, but also radical Islamic extremism, among a small minority of the population. The beginning of this shift coincided with the time when a significant number of charities, funded by certain Islamic and Arab states, began to establish their presence in Kosovo as they brought in much-needed financial assistance for the redevelopment of Kosovo. Much of these charities' focus was on building mosques, awarding scholarships for Kosovar imams to study in the Middle East, and developing other religious projects, especially the Islamic Community of Kosovo.

The Islamic Community of Kosovo is a very well-funded entity by those Islamic charities mentioned above, especially Saudi-based charities. The presence of these Islamic charities and the Islamic Community of Kosovo is not the ultimate cause of the religious challenge in Kosovo's counterterrorism efforts—it is the infiltration of radical Islamic extremist ideologies into the Kosovo society through these entities. A previously secular society, Kosovo was now exposed to a significant amount of Wahhabism, an ultraconservative form of Islam, which is forcefully enforced in Saudi Arabia and practiced by the vast majority of violent Islamic extremists.

The association between the threat of violent Islamic extremism to Kosovo and the influence of these Islamic entities is not speculative. As discussed in previous

chapters, a majority of those Kosovars charged with terrorism-related offenses were part of the same mosques that fall under the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Through the Islamic Community of Kosovo and other similar organizations, Wahhabi Islam penetrated the vulnerable population of Kosovo, including those in dire socioeconomic conditions in the rural areas.

Rural Kosovo has been largely neglected by the Kosovo government and the international community, which are spread thin as they try to rebuild the country after the 1990s conflicts left it in ruins. The vacuum left by the Kosovo government and other organizations was filled by the Islamic Community of Kosovo, which reached out to those areas with various forms of assistance, including spiritual guidance for those struggling with profound existential and socioeconomic difficulties. Its presence naturally made a favorable impression on the people in the rural areas, who are mostly young, uneducated, with no opportunities. They saw Islam as their ticket to a brighter future, financially and spiritually. Given the foregoing, it is clear that the religious appeal of radical Islam is a crucial consideration in how Kosovo should respond to its threat. Resolving this issue will require tremendous effort and collaboration with international organizations.

Another aspect of the religious component in the Kosovo's counterterrorism challenges is the frequent confusion between extremists and peaceful Muslims. As previously mentioned, Kosovars are predominantly secular and among the religious there are many different faiths. Thus, although some Kosovars have joined extremist Islamic groups, the average secular Kosovar is unable to distinguish between a conservative Muslim and a radical Islamic extremist. This confusion between the two types of Islam

followers has created tension between nonreligious and religious citizens of Kosovo, even among the peaceful Muslims.

The lack of understanding of the differences between the two groups has resulted in a general disapproval of the entire Islamic community among most Kosovars, including Kosovo's policy-makers. As the rift deepens among the Kosovo population, Muslims who feel unaccepted—or, worse, threatened or disrespected—by their neighbors become more likely to carry out attacks on their own homeland. People that formerly united for a national cause is beginning to be divided by this new form of religion. A fragmented society, as Kosovo could become if the distrust and misunderstanding of Muslims is not corrected, would encounter significant troubles in becoming a free, democratic, and prosperous country.

Socioeconomic Components of the Kosovo Challenge, Visa Restrictions and Lack of Proper Education

In addition to the religious components in Kosovo's counterterrorism challenges, there are socioeconomic factors that also contribute to the picture. The lack of a strong education, visa restrictions, and lack of opportunities in Kosovo will remain the core of most problems. It has been eight years since Kosovo declared its independence, which has been recognized by more than 100 countries, but Kosovo remains one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Kosovo citizens are rather isolated, as they are prohibited from traveling to most countries. The only countries they can travel to are the problematic Islamic ones that have been discussed throughout this thesis. Certainly, given the opportunity, Kosovo citizens

would much rather travel to the U.S. than Saudi Arabia, Germany than Egypt, but unfortunately, that is not a reality for the average Kosovo citizen.

It is not financially feasible for the vast majority of Kosovo students to attend one of the only public universities, which is located in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. Besides limited access to postsecondary education, the general educational system in Kosovo is below the standards of any European country. Graduating from the University of Pristina does not guarantee the average student a brighter future. In fact, with the high unemployment rate, a university diploma doesn't offer most people any sort of future. Besides, the universities do not have the ability to properly prepare students for today's workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The socioeconomic challenges impeding Kosovo's successful response to violent Islamic extremism include extremely high unemployment rate, weak educational system, high corruption, lack of the rule of law, lack of opportunities, and visa restrictions that limit Kosovo citizens to obtain employment in only a few Eastern countries. The socioeconomic conditions in Kosovo are deeply problematic and have contributed significantly to the issue at hand. However, this thesis recognizes that these socioeconomic conditions are unlikely to change in the near future and therefore the recommendations will focus on more realistic approaches.

Given the urgency and severity of the national security threats, Kosovo must take assertive steps to counter violent Islamic extremism, while being tactful and considerate to avoid creating a hateful and biased perception of Islam among the Kosovo population. In Kosovo's counterterrorism efforts, it is critical to preserve the human rights and religious freedom of all people involved, in accordance with international law. Deprivation of religious freedom will only lead to further tension between the Islamic Community of Kosovo and the Kosovo citizens.

The first and most critical component of countering the global phenomenon of Islamic extremism is the close cooperation between all institutions operating within Kosovo, including sharing of information across the board among citizens, all government entities, and the Islamic Community of Kosovo. The information sharing will also allow the government and international agencies in Kosovo to better understand and address the gaps in social services that have been exploited by extremists. Terrorist

organizations are successful because they offer services that the government fails to provide for the citizens, including social services, security, healthcare, etc. The Kosovo government, NGOs, and other organizations in Kosovo need to step in and fill these gaps. Realistically, the political, socioeconomic, and security environment in Kosovo is unlikely to change drastically in the near future; therefore collective efforts are required. An important part of this collaboration is the appropriate allocation of funds to counter violent extremism.

All efforts, including those of various international agencies, must be organized by one central agency that oversees all operations. Without effective coordination and centralized oversight by an official agency, whose primary goal is to combat violent Islamic extremism, many good initiatives would be carried out in vain.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, one of most significant threats within Kosovo's borders is the illicit operations of the Islamic and Arab states fronted by charity activities. Recognizing that Kosovo is one of the poorest countries in the world and is in dire need of monetary assistance, this thesis recommends that government authorities not only monitor all foreign aid, but also ultimately determine its allocation.

Further, again recognizing the sensitivity of the issue, this thesis recommends that government officials carefully consider which foreign aid activities are actually necessary for the development of Kosovo. Building hundreds of mosques and Islamic schools, rather than regular schools, should not be considered a priority because it does not contribute to the overall development of Kosovo. In fact, as prior analysis demonstrated, radicalization and violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo can be partially attributed to the extremely well-funded Islamic Community of Kosovo. The best way to prevent foreign

investments from being used for terrorism activities and financing is close monitoring and partnering with these countries to ensure complete transparency of funds allocated.

The strategies to counter global violent Islamic extremism have already been well established by some of the most brilliant minds and the most powerful countries in the world. These are not one-size-fits-all suggestions, however. For example, violent Islamic extremism threatens the United States, the UK, and France in very different ways from how it threatens Kosovo or the Balkans. To successfully apply them in Kosovo, the government should tailor the strategies according to its unique situations. However, the key in applying those strategies and tools requires that they are tailored to each individual country and region.

Developing counterterrorism strategies specific to Kosovo may be easier than it sounds. Although Kosovo does not have the training, expertise, or the financial capability to counter violent Islamic extremism on the same level as the U.S. can, Kosovo does have an enormous advantage with the significant international support and presence within its borders. This is an advantage that most countries similar to Kosovo simply do not have, so it must be leveraged to its full extent.

In collaboration with the international community, it is critical that the Kosovo government has the lead in all efforts related to violent Islamic extremism within its borders. This entails the Kosovo government having complete oversight of all operations within and outside of Kosovo related to Kosovo's counterterrorism initiatives. No other entity should have jurisdictional authority for matters related to Kosovo's national security, unless it is fully transparent and authorized by Kosovo government officials.

Providing higher domestic security in Kosovo can be achieved by establishing an

antiterrorism force of well-trained and equipped personnel to conduct counterterrorism operations in all vulnerable areas, such as airports, borders, and mosques. Additionally, such force can provide more close monitoring of vulnerable municipalities such as Gjilan, Ferizaj, Kacanik, and Mitrovica. The Kosovo government can evaluate this recommendation against the available funds and resources for its law enforcement and weigh how to allocate its resources.

While recognizing the delicacy of this issue, this thesis submits that national security must hold priority. This thesis recommends that the special antiterrorism force be authorized to conduct security checks of all mosques within Kosovo.

Kosovo must aggressively seek closer regional cooperation with all its neighboring countries. Disengagement is not an option, as the extremists in the Balkans are interconnected and work in concert to threaten the stability and security of the entire region. A robust communication and tracking system must be put in place to allow sharing of available information among all authorities across the board, including local and regional agencies, academic institutions, private organizations, NGOs, etc.

The threat posed by violent Islamic extremism in Kosovo should not be underestimated. The reality of the danger was made evident in the summer of 2015 when a few individuals attempted to poison the main water supply of Pristina. Those individuals were Islamic foreign fighters returning home from Syria and Iraq. Although there have not been any terrorist attacks in Kosovo, videos have been released by the Islamic State and Kosovar foreign fighters, warning Kosovo and the Balkans of their upcoming plans of attacks. Furthermore, the Kosovar foreign fighter returnees pose a significant threat, especially the ones who have traveled freely to Syria and back through

Turkey. They are extremely difficult to track but are very dangerous; therefore, travelers from and to Turkey should be closely monitored.

Community outreach and community policing would be an extremely useful tool. This program should be aimed at every municipality and region of Kosovo, especially the problematic areas where a larger number of Islamic foreign fighters come from. Not only would this strategy bring awareness to the average citizen who is not aware of the dangers posed in Kosovo by radicalization and violent Islamic extremism, it would also encourage national involvement for a great cause. This would especially be extremely effective in rural areas. This would be a low-cost project with substantial benefits, especially if it is volunteer-based and encouraged by local schools to participate in return for extra credit or some other academic benefit.

Another possibility is implementing a similar campaign as the one designed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security: “If You See Something, Say Something.”¹⁹⁰ A similar campaign in Kosovo would likely bring enormous success by cultivating awareness and encouraging citizens to report suspicious activities. Communities have always played a powerful role in every society.

Kosovo’s educational system must place emphasis on its youth by providing better quality education, better access to education, and extracurricular activities for all school-aged children. These efforts would counter those of mosques that have been spreading radical and violent views.

The government can educate and communicate to the citizens of Kosovo about counterterrorism on TV channels, radio stations, internet, local communities, and at

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “If You See Something, Say Something,” n.d., <https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something>.

schools. Kosovo's high rate of internet accessibility has been exploited by the extremists for propagating dangerous messages, but the government can tap into this resource for counter messaging. Counter messaging programs would likely have positive outcomes.

According to Charles Lister, "discerning exactly who has left the country will determine the extent to which domestic border control should be capable of detecting their return and assessing the threat posed."¹⁹¹ This would be an easy task for the government of Kosovo to achieve if the family members are empowered to report either early signs or any other activity about their Islamic foreign fighter family. Empowering women is an extremely useful to achieve this goal as well, according to Lister.

In order to successfully combat global terrorism, all aspects and links should be researched and studied extensively. Saudi Arabia's direct involvement in Kosovo and the Balkans is only a part of the problem, but a significant one that is worth exploring. Moreover, it may be fruitful to analyze Saudi Arabia's and other Islamic countries' tactics and deceptive agendas for infiltrating radical Islam into countries such as Kosovo where there is a significant international presence.

¹⁹¹ Charles Lister, "Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?" *Brookings*, August 13, 2015, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/08/13-foreign-fighters-reintegration-lister>.

SUMMARY

Today, terrorist attacks by violent Islamic extremist are extremely frequent globally and have become part of everyday life. As national security has become a critical concern for many countries in the world, this thesis is written at a timely juncture to provide further insight into the successful recruitment of violent Islamic groups by identifying some of the root causes. The thesis approached this analysis by focusing on Kosovo as a case study. The selection of Kosovo as the target case study is important and relevant. While Kosovo is a relatively small country in comparison to many other countries, it has disproportionately contributed Islamic foreign fighters—the highest number per capita of foreign fighters—to the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations. In a small and historically secular country, violent Islamic extremists have gained tremendous success in Islamizing and radicalizing a segment of Kosovo's population. As such, understanding the radicalization of Kosovo will offer insight into how Islamic terrorism has gained such traction globally. The thesis sought to delineate the strategies that were used by powerful Arab states in the last two decades that led to the current surge of Islamic fighters leaving Kosovo for the Middle East.

As emphasized in previous chapters, before one can begin to find a solution to any problem, it is important to first examine and understand the origin of the problem, which is precisely the aim of this thesis. As such, before examining the rhetoric of present-day Islamic State or offering recommendations for countering its recruitment efforts, the thesis first provided a thorough analysis of the rise of global violent Islamic extremism, examining both the Islam religion itself and the background and current

conditions of those who became Islamic foreign fighters. Within this discussion, it was inevitable to trace the impact of Wahhabism and the Sunni–Shia power struggles historically and presently, mainly between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This paper made evident that the Sunni–Shia component of this issue is one of the main causes of the global rise of Islamic extremism. The overwhelming instabilities across the Middle East can be attributed to the political power struggles between powerful Islamic countries that adhere to different strands of Islam. More specifically, the conflict in Syria, which has motivated many of the Kosovar fighters, is a result of the Sunni–Shia divide.

In Syria, the Sunni majority have been opposing its Shia leadership, i.e., President Assad. The Islamic State, arguably a Sunni movement and likely funded by Saudi Arabia, is fighting Syria’s Shia government, which is a reflection of Saudi Arabia’s domestic and foreign policy. Additionally, this thesis recognizes the negative impact of some of the United States’ involvement in Middle East. Overthrowing various governments and occupying land in order to protect U.S. strategic interests has not proven to be a successful foreign policy; in fact, these policies have certainly contributed to the rise of global Islamic extremism.

The next important component that this thesis examined was the emergence of Kosovo as a recruitment ground for Islamic extremism. By presenting a picture of Kosovo’s past and present, including descriptions of the Kosovo people’s origin and religious affiliations historically, the backdrop of the thesis was developed, without which any discussion of today’s Islamic radicalization would be erroneous and incomplete at best. Importantly in this presentation is Kosovo’s bloody past and the challenges Kosovo has faced since the 1990s that left the country completely devastated.

These events resulted in a weak economy in which young Kosovars have few options for finding gainful employment besides become willing fighters for the Islamic State and other terrorist groups. Although Kosovo, with the help of Western countries, declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, it has not yet recovered from the conflicts of the 1990s. While it has been recognized by over 100 countries, Kosovo is strongly opposed by Russia and China due to their political relationship with Serbia. Opposition by Russia and China blocks Kosovo's UN membership and limits further international funding and support for counterterrorism and internal development. Kosovo remains one of the poorest countries in Europe and almost completely isolated because of visa restrictions imposed by the vast majority of countries, including the ones who recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state.

Having the historical and socioeconomic background of Kosovo in mind, it becomes clear how the Islamic State has exploited Kosovo's weak governance, lack of rule of law, high corruption, low education, and high unemployment rates. The Islamic State's recruitment strategies of foreign fighters have been recognized to be the most successful of its kind. What makes Kosovo unique in the Islamic State's successful recruitment is that prior to 1999, Kosovo was not associated with any Islamic organizations. It was not until Arab countries established their presence in the Balkans in the 1990s that the conservative religious shift began among a small minority of Kosovars. Prior to this time, throughout history Kosovo had been mainly a secular state, though with a Muslim background, during and after the communist era. While the Kosovo government established itself as a secular state, some of its citizens embraced the religious freedom and turned to Islam following the influx of Arab charity organizations.

One factor that has motivated Kosovars to join Islam is that exceptionally high corruption rates within the Kosovo government led the people to have less trust in governmental institutions than in the Islamic Community of Kosovo. The Islamic Community, which is heavily funded and supported by Arab states, has certainly made efforts to attract publicity in providing humanitarian aid, especially in the rural areas of Kosovo where poverty is rampant.

Kosovo has increased its efforts to combat violent Islamic extremism in the last few years and has seen some successful results. Among its counterterrorist initiatives, Kosovo has developed a national strategy and new anti-terrorism laws, and have made numerous arrests related to terrorist activities, including imams who recruited and preached violent extremism. This thesis pointed out that in Kosovo's fight against terrorism, it must address limitations and challenges associated with both terrorism and overall development of the country.

Conclusion

On the issue of violent Islamic extremism on the global scale, Kosovo is a unique and complex case study in both the form of extremism it faces and the responses that are required to combat the radicalization of the country. This thesis makes clear that Kosovo has an extremely challenging task ahead to rid the country of the threat of violent Islamic extremism, which promises to crumble the stability of Kosovo and its neighboring countries.

This thesis has presented the historical events in Kosovo that led up to its present-day socioeconomic and religious landscape and analyzed various factors that contributed

to the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo. The thesis also sought to identify the main causes—both religious and otherwise—of Kosovo’s becoming a fertile source for recruits by the Islamic State. Finally, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, several recommendations are offered for the government of Kosovo’s counterterrorism efforts. These recommendations address the socioeconomic issues that have made Islamic extremism appealing to young Kosovars, as well as the religious components of the phenomenon that must be dealt with to stem the flow of foreign fighters from leaving Kosovo for the Middle East.

The threat of violent Islamic extremism is not in Kosovo alone. The phenomenon is a recognized global issue, and if such terrorism is not taken seriously and dealt with properly in Kosovo, it could lead to catastrophic consequences in Kosovo and beyond. It would threaten the democracy, human rights, security, and stability of Europe and the entire world. Specific to Kosovo, however, such terrorism could reverse the international and national efforts that went into the restoration of the country’s economy, political structure, and social stability.

However, identifying the causes and the key players in the terrorist threat can help Kosovo and other countries in the region develop effective strategies to combat the threat. This thesis has identified some of these causes and key players. With this information in its arsenal, now Kosovo must make it a top priority to address radical Islamic extremism and work in concert with the international agencies already within its borders to implement comprehensive and realistic measures against terrorism.

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