

## **Religious radicalization and violent Islamist<sup>1</sup> extremism in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo <sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Terrorism and violent extremism (VE) have become perhaps the most widely used terms in recent times. When talking about VIE<sup>3</sup> (Violent Islamist Extremism) we are not dealing with a monolithic block. This brings about more complex responses.

The author contributes to the knowledge of radicalism and of the VIE phenomenon in the Albanian Balkans, a critical area for the interests of NATO and consequently the implications in terms of security.

This article aims to present an analysis of internal and external factors that have contributed to the development of the phenomenon: the economic, social and ideological aspects, and the areas most affected by this issue. Various factors that are encouraging the recruitment of Albanians by jihadist movements are different and intertwined with each other. Pointing the finger just to one factor would lead to a partial understanding of the reality, and consequently to an ineffective response.

In most areas, the State is almost inexistent: investments in education are seen only as a form of business, thus lowering the level of education; unemployment of young people, who comprise the majority of the population, is very high; corruption is part of the *modus vivendi*, and we face patriarchal societies emerging from isolation and totalitarianism, still in transition from an economic, political, and social point of view. This is the ground that hides the roots of the fundamentalist

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<sup>1</sup> Islamist - (Author's Note) While Islam is a religion, Islamism is a political ideology. The term is used only from Western scholars. It is not used by Islamic scholars, and no one accepts it. Islam is self-defining and does not accept formulation outside it. The author considers that the distinction is crucial in understanding the phenomenon of extremism. Islamism (within it there are the institutional Islamist and the Jihadist) is about religionized political order and not faith.

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movements, which are not necessarily violent (the distinction between these movements is very important in the search for answers to counter VIE).

Keywords: \*Radicalization\*, \*Violent Islamist Extremism\*, \*Jihadi-Salafi\*, \*Takfiri\*, \*social political alienation\*.

## **Introduction**

Since the attacks of September 2001, followed by those in Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2005, international terrorism has definitely become part of our daily lives. When talking about terrorism or radicalism we know it is not a new phenomenon. It is a rather ancient one, which has never ceased to evolve, thus making it of a very particular complex and detailed nature. We are not dealing with a monolithic block, with the same characteristics for all countries. This brings about even more complex responses.

Albanian speakers are the largest Muslim community in the Balkans today, with the language spoken widely in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. This article contributes to the knowledge of radicalism and of the violent Islamist extremism phenomenon in the Albanian Balkans.

The ideological indoctrination of the young and the not so young, what pushes them toward jihadism – recruitment finds a fertile ground because of: the existence of weak States politically, socially and economically creating alienated citizens, patriarchal and conservative societies still in transition from a post-communist era, or wars in crisis of values and social structure. A very low level of education, fragmentation, weakness and loss of credibility of the religious institutions of the Islamic community, secularization of a totalitarian character and nature that foments Islamophobia, despite the majority of the population being Muslim. There is a lack of a true intellectual and theological debate between the intellectuals and Islamic clerics that creates disorientation, weakness and lack of credibility in the Islamic Community Institutions.

Among the external factors, the geopolitical situation prevailing in the Middle East context and the growth of terrorist movements such as Al Qaeda and Isis definitely have to be mentioned.

The factors we have described are interwoven, do not exclude each other, and not necessarily all causes have to be present to become radicalized.

Islam is a religion and, in itself, it cannot explain indiscriminate violence. But Islamism, ideologizing religion, its use for political platforms, having as goal the triumph of politics rather than religion, it is helpful to understand why some of the radicalized people choose jihadism and terrorism, and not other forms of radicalization which are not lacking on the ground.

Islamism is certainly a complex process where we find political, religious, political and geopolitical aspects.

Radicalism, as well as terrorism, are widely used terms, yet academia has never managed to agree on a single definition. Given that governments, institutions, and the media in the countries that we observe use the same connotation for the words 'terrorism', 'fundamentalism', 'radicalism' and 'violent extremism', it is appropriate to clarify the differences.

In politics, radicalization consists in the refusal of any compromise with the existing power, thus looking for violent or non-violent means to undermine the status quo. It is the process through which the individual approaches extremist ideas, actions in support of a group in a conflict. In religion, radicalization has a completely different definition. Nowadays, there is a tendency to consider religious and political radicalization as one and the same phenomenon.

The puritans are generally conservatives who want to modify, adapt practices and individual behaviors according to religious values. The fundamentalist has the desire to return only to the foundational texts of the religion, by bypassing all the contributions of history, philosophy and heritage of men. Fundamentalism is not in itself a radical or politically revolutionary action. It connotes the idea of breaking with contemporary society. Radicalism is the rooting

of fundamentalism. When fundamentalism expresses itself politically as a comprehensive reform of society, then in this case the fundamentalism can be considered to be radicalism.<sup>4</sup>

According to Alex Schmid, radicalization is:

*an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarization, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favor of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes.*<sup>5</sup>

Radicalization is a natural phenomenon. Everything that goes beyond the norm, that crosses the border of the natural, the suitable, can be considered to be radical. In this sense, radicalization is not very common.<sup>6</sup> And only a few among thousands of radicals are involved in radical actions.

Violent Extremism, the terrorism, is an ideological language, an extremist ideology combined with a violent action. The degree of the extremism is different.

Radicalization is valid for anyone, and anyone can be radicalized. Every ideology radicalizes. We can be radicalized in the name of a religious or a non-religious ideology.

There are two types of radicalism in Islam:

1. As in other *Abrahamic* religions, Islam can serve as the ideological foundation of a theocracy. Theocracy itself is a set ideology. The Qur'an is not a State constitution but a civil one. Islam is not a religion for a specific territory where everyone speaks the same

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<sup>4</sup> Saoud el-Mawla, professor of sociology at The American University of Beirut. Interview with the author.

<sup>5</sup> Alex P. Schmid, Radicalization, "De radicalization, Counter radicalization: a conceptual discussion and literature review" (ICCT Research Paper, March 2013). Alex P. Schmid makes a list of the differences between (open-minded) radicals and (closed-minded) extremists, p.18.

<sup>6</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, Radicalisation, (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2014), p.11.

language and shares the same nationality. It is a civil code for relationships between citizens of a country or many countries; it is not a theocracy. Islam creates a horizontal Islamic civil society and not a vertical State. Adherence to a specific religion is an individual choice. Individuals join other adherents voluntarily, based on a shared faith. Faith (*iman*) and religion (*din*) are therefore individual and personal. Individuals united in the *din* and the *iman* produce *jamaat*<sup>7</sup>, which in turn produces a system of ethics, but no state, no army. An Islamic theocracy uses Islam, the religion, in a mistaken context, for the purpose of political, state power, and in doing so, thus creates radicalism. Therefore, Islamic States do not produce Islam, but radicalism.

2. Muslim identity is based in large part on what is forbidden. Many radical Muslims spend their time looking for fault in others, judging them based on what is prohibited. When Muslims accept this kind of scrutiny, this represents a voluntary devolution of individual freedom, which can create frustration for the individual and division within the group. Radicalization starts at the moment of division within the community, where the interests of specific groups who aim for this disruption get crystallized. The blaming and accusing of fellow Muslims as *kufar*<sup>8</sup>, which can go as far as *takfirist*<sup>9</sup> (excommunication, which is violent extremism), creates radicalism. The radicals want to impose a narrow, rigid form of Islam and they fight for this. This is what creates deviance.

Religious motivated terrorists, who justify their violence through a specific interpretation of Islam, are hybrids of an exclusive, takfirist, radical version of Islam and Islamist political ideology. *Takfirs*<sup>10</sup> are members who evaluate the belief, the purity of belief, and the value of another Muslim's belief. In

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<sup>7</sup> *Jammat*: - Muslim community.

<sup>8</sup> *Kafir* (pl. *Kuffar*) - in Arabic, it means unbeliever. It is considered the major sin because one has left the basic creed behind.

<sup>9</sup> We will discuss *takfirism* later.

<sup>10</sup> *Takfir* - excommunication. The practice of declaring another Muslim a *kafir*, outside of the community of believers, is known as *takfir*.

religious terms, terrorism uses passages from the Qur'an selectively and out of context, ignoring historical analysis. In political terms, it uses the ideology as the foundation to morally justify the violence.

The ways in which radicals gain supporters are very diverse. Who is the contingent and why do they join the radical's cause have to do with sociology, specific individual conditions, and the environment.

Those who get radicalized often use religion to justify their use of violence as a means of compensating for their personal failures, weaknesses, and frustrations. In most cases, however, they have little knowledge of religion at all.

### **The socio-economic situation of the countries**

#### *Albania*

The three countries in question are characterized by socio-economic conditions identified as among the worst in the Balkan area. Because of this socio-economic situation, Germany faces a mass exodus from Albania and Kosovo, and both countries are under scrutiny for entry into Europe. This flow of economic migrants has created such a serious situation that the German Embassy in Tirana has launched a publicity campaign to convince Albanians not to leave.

A government official who declined to be quoted says that, in 2014, approximately 400,000 Albanians have applied for the "USA Green Card Lottery" and, in 2015, approximately 700,000 people - out of a population of 2.8 million.

"One of the poorest countries in Europe": this is the most widely accepted description of Albania in international relations. In its latest report on Albania, the German *Bertelsmann Stiftung* think tank provides this summary of socio-economic indicators identified by international associations:

The unemployment rate has increased in recent years, reaching 17%, while 14% of the population live on the verge of poverty in 2014. Some 75% of unemployment, moreover, is considered as long term. Also, there is a large gap in gender differences when it comes to

labor participation, public representation, education and property. Last, but not least, the share of youth unemployment is at 30%, twice the EU-27 average.<sup>11</sup>

Corruption has been identified as the central problem for all branches of public administration. The last report of the Transparency International Association ranks Albania in 88th place, while social surveys signal a shift away from local politics and a substantial lack of confidence in the State. Albanians have more confidence in international institutions such as NATO and Europe than in their own.<sup>12</sup> But, above all, they continue to refer to traditional support systems, such as family or territorial clan, rather than institutional ones. In crisis situations, they turn more to these structures than to a welfare system considered insufficient and unreliable.

With its 19% of people between 15 and 24 years, Albania is one of Europe's youngest countries. But young people are also the social category that suffers the most uncertainty and discomfort from these conditions. Less than 30% of young people complete high school and only 50% of them can access the world of work.

According to the last census of 2011, the Albanian population is essentially divided into three religions: Muslim (56.7%), Catholics (10%) and Orthodox (6.8%).

Traditionally, there has been substantial peaceful coexistence among these three communities. In recent times, however, they are manifesting increasing tensions, especially in terms of Islamophobia.

In her report on Albania for the think-tank SETA<sup>13</sup>, Prof. Juliana Ajdini writes:

“[...] problems exist that are linked to religion, and Islamophobia is one of these. Some results of Islamophobia are discrimination, exclusion and prejudice of people, all of which emanate from religious beliefs“. The field of sociology of work gives a concrete example: “According to a study

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<sup>11</sup> “Albania Country Report”, German Bertelsmann Stiftung (2016), p.16, at [http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI\\_2016\\_Albania.pdf](http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI_2016_Albania.pdf) (accessed the 6 November 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>13</sup> Juliana Ajdini, “European Islamophobia Report 2015”, Enes Bayrakli, Farid Hafez (ed), SETA (2016), p.13 at [http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR\\_2015.pdf](http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015.pdf) (accessed 7 December 2016).

(Kocani, 2015) conducted with 248 women who wear the hijab in Tirana, 18.8 % were employed in the private sector, 2.1 % in public institutions, 5% in NGOs and only 2.5 % were self-employed<sup>14</sup>.

### *Macedonia*

The population of Macedonia is about two million inhabitants. Orthodox Christians represent between 64-66%, Muslims 33-35%, and 1% are Catholics, Protestants and other denominations. The last census was done in 2002 and since then, Macedonian institutions have blocked every new census.

Ethnic tensions between the majority Serbian-Macedonians and minority Albanians date back to early last century and have never been dormant. Albanians in Macedonia are not included in the Constitution, they are continuously marginalized. The exclusion of Albanians from the Constitution was manifested even in 1989 when, exploiting Serbian nationalism, amendments that abolished a number of rights of Albanians were added to the existing constitution of 1974. This arrogance in relation to Albanians also appeared in the drafting and approval of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. For ten consecutive years, Macedonia became a typical model of a society of conflict that ended in 2001 with the war. Under international pressure, an agreement was reached between the two parties - the Ohrid Agreement.

It is more than evident that the Ohrid Agreement has failed in its implementation, pointing to the need for a new accord. And, despite the current Serbian-Albanian coalition in the government, discriminations against the Muslim minority are obvious:

Albanians remain overrepresented amongst the unemployed, still underrepresented in state employment, and those who live in areas where they do not constitute 20 per cent of the population face problems with language use in public administration and access to education in their mother tongue. Ethnic Albanians are often victims of hidden discrimination, including

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.15.



by public officials. As all groups in Macedonia, they face problems because the education system is segregated and heavily influenced by political parties.<sup>15</sup>

According to the latest report by Freedom House, the political and security situation has significantly decreased in 2015.<sup>16</sup> The causes: the scandal of illegal wiretapping ordered by the Government and a mysterious bloody incident in the village of Kumanovo, on the border with Kosovo, where they have killed fourteen ethnic Albanian militants and eight members of the police.

While the assessments on human rights are negative, the data on the social economic situation is not discouraging. Unemployment remains at 28%, but the low cost of food and energy maintain acceptable price levels.

The problems are mainly of a social nature. Transparency International puts Macedonia in the 66th place of their ranking, but it is observed that the new anti-corruption laws are not enforced. The media are under pressure and are divided by ethnic factions.

According to a survey of IRI Centre, 60% of the population has no confidence in State institutions. 81% of the population is afraid to express their opinions because of the climate of intimidation.

### *Kosovo*

Data on Kosovo's socio-economic situation is disastrous. Unemployment, especially of the youth, runs at very high levels, while 10% of the population lives below the poverty level. "The GDP per capita in 2013 was 2,935 euros, nearly twofold less than in the poorest country of the EU, Bulgaria, where according to Eurostat it was 5,600 euros, and nearly nine times below the EU average of

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<sup>15</sup> "Macedonia- Albanians", Minority Rights Group International, at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/albanians-3/> (accessed 30 October 2016)

<sup>16</sup> "Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure", Freedom House (2016), at [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH\\_FITW\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2016.pdf) (accessed 7 November 2016).

26,600 euros per capita in 2013<sup>17</sup>. “The unemployment rate increased to 35.3 % in 2014 from 30 % in 2013. Labor market conditions are especially difficult for women.”<sup>18</sup>

A young country, still living the trauma of the war, the new State of Kosovo presents additional problems related to its transition period. Organized crime is among the most violent, where, in 2015, there were still 10,814 missing people, in contrast to only 1,670 missing from the war.<sup>19</sup>

These data probably explain the exodus of Kosovars, particularly in the direction of the countries of Northern Europe and Germany, over the last two years. “Limited job opportunities, especially for young people (61 % youth unemployment), are also putting a strain on social cohesion and encouraging emigration.”<sup>20</sup> “Kosovars are the second largest group after Syrians to have migrated lately. It is estimated that 100,000 Kosovars left the country from August, 2014 to February, 2015.”<sup>21</sup> In the ranking of Transparency International on corruption, Kosovo trails Albania by more than 10 spots, ranking at 103rd place. Only 13% of the Kosovo population has a University/College Degree and the Ministry of Education and Science hopes to raise this level within the next year to "at least 35% of the school's population." The OSCE states that in Kosovo there are no reliable data on education but the situation is judged insufficient by all, especially in rural areas where religious institutions play an increasing role of substitution to public facilities.

Kosovo, just as Albania, despite being a country with a 95% majority Muslim population, figures in the European Islamophobia Report,<sup>22</sup> edited by the think tank SETA, where the debate that has

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<sup>17</sup> “Poverty spurs mass migration from Kosovo” (16 February 2015), Euractiv at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/poverty-spurs-mass-migration-from-kosovo/> (accessed 2 November 2016).

<sup>18</sup> “Commission Staff Working Document”, Kosovo 2015 Report (10 November 2015), European Commission Report at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2015/20151110\\_report\\_kosovo.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_kosovo.pdf) (accessed 3 November 2016).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> “Recent Migration from Kosovo” (23 December 2015), Global Public Policy Watch at <https://globalpublicpolicywatch.org/2015/12/23/recent-migration-from-kosovo/> (accessed 2 November 2016)

<sup>22</sup> Arber Fetiu, “European Islamophobia Report 2015”, E. Bayrakli and Farid Hafez (ed), p.299.

developed in Kosovo's media following the arrest of alleged jihadists exhibits strong anti-Islamic connotations.

### **The institutions and Muslim communities in 3 countries** <sup>23</sup>

After the fall of communism, Albania emerged as the only atheist country in the communist bloc. The clergy were almost nonexistent, and new generations had to be developed. After 23 years of interdiction of religion, the KMSH was formed (the Albanian Islamic Community/Komuniteti Myslyman Shqiptar) and, in subsequent years, hundreds of mosques were built and reconstructed. The Bektashi community has taken more time to regroup. After 1993, the Islamic Community was dissolved in the former Yugoslavia. The Islamic communities separated from each other and created in Kosovo the BIF (Islamic Association of Kosovo/Bashkesia Islame e Kosoves) and, in Macedonia, the BFI (Religious Islamic Association/Bashkesia Fetare Islame).

In Kosovo, the Faculty of Islamic Sciences was founded in 1992 and in Skopje in 1997. The University "Beder" of the Islamic community in Albania was created only in 2011.

Islam becomes much more visible, new mosques are built, the celebration of Muslim holidays becomes the norm, there are publications of books by various authors, an increase in number of Islamic magazines and publishing houses. The number of madrassas is also increasing, and religious teaching in schools was introduced in Macedonia, but not in Kosovo and Albania.

In these years of Islamic revival there was a flow of aid, funds and charitable organizations from many countries: Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar. Very soon such terms as 'Wahhabi', 'Salafi', 'bearded', 'radical', 'fundamentalist', 'terrorist' begin to circulate as if they are the same thing when, in reality, except for a few theologians, no one has any idea what the meaning

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<sup>23</sup>For a discussion of Islam in the Balkans in the post-communist period, see Nathalie Clayer and Xavier Bougarel, *Les Musulmans de l'Europe du Sud-Est* (IISMM – Karthala, 2013), pp.215-267.

and the differences between all these terms are. According to Nathalie Clayer,<sup>24</sup> probably the most suitable term would be neo-Salafis, or neo-fundamentalists according to Olivier Roy.<sup>25</sup>

Their presence is undeniable and it is manifested in different forms and modalities. There are different currents; 'the quietist', 'the jihadist', and also 'the *Takfirs*'. Organizations and different individuals approached each of the currents. First came the charitable organizations and funds from various countries for the construction of schools, mosques, scholarships for young students in the universities of the Arab world. Hundreds of boys, mostly from rural areas, left for their studies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, Libya, Lebanon and Syria. When they returned many of them brought with them clothes, habits and different interpretations.

I do not see anything negative in the fact that a good part of our imams graduated in Arab countries! This for the simple reason that Arabic is the language of Islam, the Qur'an, the Prophet's Muhammad's (peace be upon him) message, etc. Thus, it remains an essential detail in the literal meaning of religious sources. But I think that evil comes across this fact. In the transmission, from the earliest traces of our Islamic culture is said that: "There will come a time when there will be promiscuous readers and ignorant fans!" So, promiscuous readers and ignorant followers starting from the very initial goal of worshiping. This means that reading the wrong essence of religion by individuals (whether the imams or clerics) may introduce hybrid forms of manifestation of religious sentiment, as has happened throughout the world, in different times and different countries.<sup>26</sup>

The funds from the Gulf countries, from Turkey, from Iran, and from others arrive not only through NGOs but also in the form of State investments. While investments funds to the State are traceable and visible, the ones that come through the NGOs are completely unknown.

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<sup>24</sup> Nathalie Clayer and Xavier Bougarel, *Les Musulmans de l'Europe du Sud-Est* (IISMM – Karthala, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Olivier Roy, *L'Islam Mondialisé* (Points, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Muhamet Sytari, Mufti of Shkoder. Interview with the author December 2015.

A portion of that money was used often in the interest of groups close to Al Qaeda, with geopolitical objectives. For example, the non-governmental organization IIRO (International Islamic Relief Organization), and the foundations *Al-Haramain*, *Muwafaq*, and *Al-Waqf al-Islami*, were accused of supporting terrorist activities both in Albania and in Macedonia.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, an unknown form of Islam emerged: Salafism. Many journalists and researchers accuse this proselytizing, unknown to the traditional Hanafi Islam in the Balkans, as the real culprit of radicalism and violent extremism. This is not entirely wrong, but not quite right either; and it is much more complicated than that.

Albania became a member of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) with a decision of the President of the Republic, Sali Berisha, in 1992 - precisely to attract funds and financial aid.<sup>28</sup>

“Albania became a transit point for weapons to be sent to Bosnian Muslims ... Some Islamic fighters also passed through Albania on their way to Bosnia at the time, hoping to make it a European base.”<sup>29</sup> These were the years in which *takfirism* and jihadism of Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda penetrated into Albania. “The cell of Tirana was regarded as one of the most important committees of Jihad. They took part in some of the well-known exponents of the organization, who were disguised as Muslim missionaries, and charity coming from the Arab world”<sup>30</sup> The first extraditions to Egypt began in 1998, but the roots of *takfirism* remained.

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<sup>27</sup> Nathalie Clayer and Xavier Bougarel (2013), p.260.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Abrahams, “Nga Shqipëria në Bosnjë: Vëllezërit kanë nevojë për armë” (1 June 2015), BalkanInsight at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/al/article/nga-shqip%C3%ABria-n%C3%AB-bosnj%C3%AB-v%C3%ABllez%C3%ABritkan%C3%AB-nevoj%C3%AB-p%C3%ABr-arm%C3%AB/1431/64> (accessed 7 November 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Artan Hoxha, “Si u kapen 2 drejtuesit e xhihadit ne Shqiperi” (21 September 2001), Forum Virtual at <http://www.forumivirtual.com/lajme-nga-shqipria-54/artan-hoxha-u-kapn-dy-drejtuesit-e-xhihadit-n-shqipri-16570/#post183498> (accessed 7 November 2016).

The first radical movements in Macedonia begin to come in the years 1988-1989. *Tabligh*<sup>31</sup> are the first missionaries and, after that, the beginning of the neo-Salafi movement in the early nineties. Here, too, the arrival is accompanied by the activities of charitable organizations, publications, scholarships for students to Arab countries. The first *mujaheddin*<sup>32</sup> appeared during the armed conflict in 2001. *Takfirism* appeared in 2005-2006 and it successfully penetrated in poor rural areas. Everything in Kosovo began in 1992. We have the first imams returning from studies in Egypt. Until 1998, we only have small groupings. In contrast to Bosnia, in the Kosovo War, there are no *mujaheddin*.

In 2001, the first neo-Salafist NGO also entered Kosovo. It is during the first year that *takfirism* appears that, according to interviewed sources in 2007-2008, it completes its organizational structuring.

It is in this context that, over the years, Islamic institutions have lost credibility with the community of believers. In their eyes, they have become corrupt, incapable of dealing with religious matters, because they are too absorbed by power dynamics, weak, and institutionally indifferent to preventing the rise of the radical wing.

The word 'islamophobia' means fear (phobia) of Islam. But "Islamophobia isn't simply about 'fear of Islam,' this fear of Muslims' religion plays an important role in engendering prejudice and fueling discrimination."<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxical for countries with a predominantly Muslim population, this phenomenon is growing both in Albania and in Kosovo. We cannot say the same with regard to Macedonia. There, the problem is

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<sup>31</sup> *Tabligh - Tablighi Jammāt*, a Sunni Islamic proselytizing and revivalist movement that focuses on urging Muslims to return to primary Sunni Islam, and particularly in matters of ritual, dress, and personal behavior. They encourage people to follow Islamic principles and the life of the prophet Muhammad. It was founded in the late 1920s by a Deobandi cleric.

<sup>32</sup> *Mujaheddin - Mujaheddin* (pl. *Mujahiddeen*) is a Muslim fighter in religious war, especially those who are fighting against non-Muslim forces.

<sup>33</sup> "Islamophobia: The Right Word for a Real Problem" (26 April 2016), Bridge Initiative Team at <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/islamophobia-the-right-word-for-a-real-problem/> (accessed 8 November 2016)

basically ethnic and national. Both Albania and Kosovo are secular States. Islamophobia in these countries is mainly fueled by an intellectual elite that is atheist, secular, and Eurocentric.

Since the beginning of the first years after the fall of the communist regime, Ismail Kadare suggested that the mosques should not be opened. An idea that continues to accompany the thought that “the opening of and increase in the number of mosques leads to radicalism and extremism”. In his pamphlet, “The European Identity for Albanians”,<sup>34</sup> Kadare makes clear that Islam for Albania is a fatal historical accident and a major obstacle to the return of Albania into the “European family”. This position was articulated by former head of State, President Alfred Mojsiu, in a speech delivered in England in 2005, where he said that basically all Albanians are Christian and that Islam is a religion of “nested”, not historical, Albanians.

According to many, Islam is an inferior religion; one that does not share Western values, unable to advance because of its archaic and barbaric nature, a religion that supports violence and terrorism. The attack against Islam in these two countries aims to cede the autochthony of a majority of the population. *Islamophobia* in these two countries is combined with a strong feeling of *Ottomanophobia* (fear of Ottoman history, particularly Ottoman culture and legacy).

In recent years, when new forms and currents of Islam came to be part of the lives of believers, talk of ‘moderate Islam’ kept fomenting more confusion and division among the Muslim faithful. According to this principle, moderate Islam would be an invisible Islam: without a veil for women, no beard, no pants above the ankle, praying in enclosed spaces and invisible to the ‘naked eye’. Once you leave this frame, it is very easy to be laughed at or labeled, thus making parts of the community feel isolated and marginalized.

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<sup>34</sup> Ismail Kadare, *Identiteti Evropian i Shqiptareve* (Onufri, 2006).

## **Wahhabism and Salafism**

Ideology seems to be one of the main factors in pushing radicalization, which is true, but that should not be isolated from all those factors we have outlined above.

“Wahhabism” is the term used for the doctrine of Muhammad ‘Abd al- Wahhab (1703-1792) and his followers.<sup>35</sup> Wahhabism emerged as a revivalist movement directed to the purification of the doctrine and later it rejected all western models. The very core of his teaching was made up of a concept of *tawhid*<sup>36</sup> and its opposite *shirk*<sup>37,38</sup>

Wahhabism was born as a political alliance of the emir Muhammad ibn al-Saud of the tribal clan of Saud with the religious reformer Saoud Al-Wahhab in 1744. The descendant of Abd’al-Wahhab created a religious dynasty, the al-Shaykh, with power over the religious establishment independent from the Al-Saud dynasty, who provided the political elite of the State.

Abd al Wahhab’s followers would rigorously propagate Islam and support the idea of *jihad*<sup>39</sup> as a struggle for the true religion, expelling (*takfir*) the Muslims who resist it.<sup>40</sup> The Wahhabis describe themselves as *Muwahiddun* (unitarist), but “...the *takfiri* ideology ...for which the Wahhabis became noted historically was not present in the foundational writings of the reform movement, suggesting that State formation and jihadist expansionism were not the central vision of the movement’s founder.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Peskes E. – Ende W., "Wahhabiyya", in Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. XI, 2002 (Brill, 1986), p.39.

<sup>36</sup> *Tawhid*- is the indivisible oneness concept of monotheism in Islam. The God is One and Single.

<sup>37</sup> *Shirk*- In Islam is the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism.

<sup>38</sup> Peskes E. – Ende W., "Wahhabiyya", in Encyclopedia of Islam, p.40.

<sup>39</sup> *Jihad*- struggle, or religious war.

<sup>40</sup> Serge Laffite, Chiites et Sunnites, (Plon, 2007), p.15.

<sup>41</sup> John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin, The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics (Oxford University Press, 2013), p.412.



Salafism is a neo-orthodox brand of Islamic reformism.<sup>42</sup> It derives from the term the pious forefathers (*al-salaf al-salih*), the first three generations of Muslims who had first-hand experience of the rise of Islam. Salafism preaches the return of the study of the basic sources of Islam: The Qur'an and the Sunna<sup>43</sup>, rejects the following of the four *madhahab* (the four canonic law schools) and accepts *ijtihad*.<sup>44</sup>

The term Salafism refers initially to a deep and sincere religious reformist movement that fought for the recovery of Islam and has almost nothing to do with what we now identify as Salafism. The authors were the Persian Jamal al Din Al Afghani (1839-97), the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and the Syrian Rashid Rida (1865-1935).

The movement is only later radicalized, with the weakening Ottoman Empire, the arrival of colonialism, and after the secular elite of the Arab countries attained power in the newborn States.

Wahhabism differs in content from the Salafi reforms led by the first thinkers. While they were *scripturalists*, they were not *literalist* (differently from Wahhabism), trying to find all answers to life in the *Hadhit*,<sup>45</sup> as al-Wahhab had done.<sup>46</sup> In terms of their respective formation, Wahhabism and Salafism were quite distinct. Wahhabism rejected the modern influences, while Salafism sought to reconcile Islam with modernism. What they had in common is that both rejected traditional teachings on Islam in favor of direct, 'fundamentalist' reinterpretation.

While Saudi Arabia is usually characterized as exporting Wahhabism, it has in fact imported pan-Islamic Salafism, a conservative Islam from the doctrinal point of view.<sup>47</sup> "From the early 1960s the

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<sup>42</sup> Shenar P and Ende W., "Salafiyya" in Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. VIII (Brill, 1995), p.900.

<sup>43</sup> *Sunna* - the perfect habits and ways (words and acts) of the Prophet, transmitted from him in the ahadith.

<sup>44</sup> *Ijtihad* - individual interpretation of the two sources (Qur'an and hadiths) opposed to the following of one of the canonical schools of jurisprudence.

<sup>45</sup> *Hadith* - (pl.ahadhit), tradition or saying of the Prophet Muhammad. The hadith make up the Sunna.

<sup>46</sup> Roel Meijer, "Introduction", in Global Salafism (Roel Meijer ed, Oxford University Press,2013), p.7.

<sup>47</sup> Olivier Roy, Islam Mondialisé, p.148.

Muslim World league and affiliated organizations began to spread Wahhabi ideology worldwide<sup>48</sup>, distributing books and cassettes by Al-Banna, Qutb and other foreign Salafi luminaries, courted academics at Al-Azhar University, and inviting radical Salafis to teach at its own Universities.<sup>49</sup> Saudi Arabia founded transnational organizations and headquartered them in the kingdom, but many of the guiding figures in these bodies were foreign Salafis. To the Wahhabi *ulama*<sup>50</sup> were given all the financial means and institutional basis by which they might spread their ideology abroad.

Salafism is certainly not a unified movement and assumes the most diverse, contradictory, fragmented and ambivalent forms.<sup>51</sup> Salafis are considered puritans in their practice of Islam. The word “Salafism” itself tells us very little in terms of policy choices.

Jihadi Salafism found its original inspiration in Sayd Qutb, but is much more highly politicized.<sup>52</sup> Salafism’s political dimension adopts three forms: quietist and discrete, covert (professing quietism, but acting politically) and openly activist.<sup>53</sup>

The political actors labeled as Salafi “...constitute a politically very heterogeneous group. It includes actors who between themselves have diametrically opposing views on crucial political issues. Alleged Salafis include bitter enemies of the Saudi regime [...] on the other hand apologists like the official Saudi ‘*ulama*...’<sup>54</sup> The problem then with the term Salafism is that it is a theological, not a political category. It is difficult to analyze all the actors labeled as Salafist as part of one single Salafi movement.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Guido Steinberg, “Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi’is: Remarks about the intellectual” in *Global Salafism*, pp.115-116.

<sup>49</sup> Trevor Stanley, “Undersanding the origins of Wahhabism and Salafism, *Terrorism Monitor*” 14 (15 July 2005), Volume 3, Issue at <https://jamestown.org/program/understanding-the-origins-of-wahhabism-and-salafism/#.VwA0fBKxXMI> (accessed 30 October 2016).

<sup>50</sup> *Ulama* - religious scholars

<sup>51</sup> Olivier Roy, *Islam Mondialisé*, p.148.

<sup>52</sup> Roel Meijer, “Introduction”, in *Global Salafism*, (Roel Meijer), p.25.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On the Religion and Politics in the study of militant Islamism, in *Global Salafism* (Roeil Meijer), p. 249.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, pp.250-251.

Jihadi-Salafism includes three branches: the first originated in Egypt from the radical faction of the Muslim Brotherhood; the second originated from the neo-Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, and the third derives from Palestine. The latter consists of the trio of Abdallah Azzam, Umar Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the spiritual father of the fusion between the Wahhabi *tawhid*<sup>56</sup> and the violent *takfiri* jihad.<sup>57</sup>

The principle of *takfir* by excommunicating not only infidels, but every Muslim who does not follow the Jihadi-Salafi doctrine, comes from here. The concept of social justice of Sayyid Qutb is replaced by that of the violent jihad. This jihadi thought has no connection either with the initial Salafi reformist thinking, even with the Salafi Puritans today. Within the same al Qaeda there are two schools of thought: the first school of Al Maqdisi and Al Tartusi is opposed to the second school of violent jihad (the one of the Saudi Jihadi-Salafi scholars), which is called the "Zarqawi doctrine" - indiscriminate violence against everyone who does not support Jihadi-Salafism.<sup>58</sup>

The followers of radical jihadism have no interest in calling themselves Salafi. For their part, Saudi jihadists to which most of the responsibility is given, represent post-national non-state actors, reflecting the unresolved tension and troubled relationship between religion and politics in Saudi Arabia.<sup>59</sup> The current Saudi State, founded in 1932, remains contested by the Saudi Salafi Jihadist. Its creation is attributed to an illegitimate relationship with Britain and as a corruption.<sup>60</sup>

### **Kharijites e Takfir**

*Takfirism* in the modern political context of excommunication is essentially a theological or ideological manoeuvre to ostracise other Muslims. They invoke the Kharijites doctrine. "Assured of their own religious purity, the Kharijites judged other Muslims - those outside the Kharijite fold - as

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<sup>56</sup> *Tawhid* - unity of God

<sup>57</sup> Reuven Paz, "Debates within the Family", in *Global Salafism* (Roel Meijer ed), p.269.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.278.

<sup>59</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, "The local and the Global in Saudi Salafi Discourse", in *Global Salafism* (Roel Meijer ed), p.307.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.309.

unworthy of the name of Muslim and set about creating, through violence, an ideal community of the saved".<sup>61</sup>

The Kharijites refer to "those that seceded". After the murder of Caliph Uthman, a relative of Uthman, the Umayyad Moawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, then governor of Syria, accused Ali and his supporters of killing Uthman. After Ali agreed to be the Caliph, the aristocracy of Mecca instigated a series of revolts against him. The most violent was the one organized by Moawiya, which refused to recognize Ali as the fourth Caliph. The arbitration of the conflict favored the Mowaiya party, a decision that caused the first split between the followers of Ali: 12,000 broke away from the faction loyal to Ali, accusing him of weakness, and began to fight him by creating the movement that was called the *Kharijites*, the first political radical group within Islam. The Caliph Ali died in Kufa, a stronghold of his party, due to the wound of a poisoned sword, during an ambush organized by a group of *Kharijites*.<sup>62</sup> "...[B]y pronouncing Ali and the Umayyad Caliphs unbelievers (*takfir*), the *Kharijites* introduced this notion into the discourse on social life of early Islam."<sup>63</sup>

The *Kharijites* Doctrine was always present in history and it remains always latent in history, especially in the memory of the Egyptians and the Islamic scholars<sup>64</sup>, and it is used only in such moments of political conflict.

The word *takfir* or *kharajit* is actually used by the majority of Muslims who do not share their ideology and has a pejorative connotation within the same community. Many testimonies tell us "*takfirs* justify robbery and theft (e.g., I stole from that person as he did not pray). *Takfirs* do not refer to the ancient scholars, but the new ones"<sup>65</sup> - a clear testimony of the disdain that the community has for the *Takfirs*.

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<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijities and the politics of extremism in Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2006) p.4.

<sup>62</sup> Gerta Zaimi, *Hezbollah: Partito politico libanese e milizia iraniana* (Aracne 2014), pp.30-31.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijities and the politics of extremism in Egypt*, p.3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews by the author with members of the Islamic community in the three countries that are the subject of this chapter.

## **Process of radicalization and the path to extremism**

Based on what we have described, radicalization is the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs. Radicalization is marked by the articulation between a radical ideological vision and relentless will to carry it out.<sup>66</sup> So we can clearly make a distinction between extremist ideology and extremist action.

While all the interviewees<sup>67</sup> refer to radicalization as an individual process that is long and dynamic, violent extremism appears to be a short process, individual, and in the majority of cases difficult to understand.

In the Albanian reality, the individual keeps finding himself facing a dichotomous state media: white and black. This leads to frustration. Adding the marginalization within the metropolis, a certain lack of social standing, lack of employment opportunities, Islamophobic propaganda, lack of education, and we have people who feel humiliated and victimized.

The initial changes of the person who is radicalized are imperceptible. He begins to change his way of thinking, his friendships; starts researching the internet, reading religious literature that most attracts him. In his private life, he gets isolated and becomes more aware of social differences. He changes his congregation and approaches everything by self-isolation. He holds contrasting positions with those of his previous group where he could not integrate, or his own family members. He fails to understand himself and to understand others. His knowledge of religion is very limited. He takes everything as excuses for his personal frustrations, feelings and grievances.

His new Islamic identity gives him self-respect that he feels society has taken away from him. The individual seems to take control of his life and to become decisive. In reality, he has a sense of

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<sup>66</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation*, p.21.

<sup>67</sup> The author relies on a large number of interviews with members of the Islamic community of the three countries and Muslim intellectuals, as well as to some people back from the war camps in Syria and Iraq.

inferiority toward society and the rebellion is against a world that denies you, and you have not access to a life worthy of being lived.

Entering into religion is easy, the problem is to leave it behind because it becomes a personal problem. Starting from what you read, self-approach, the imam. The influence of the friends you choose to round with plays a big role. We read together only in Albanian. For us, Islam is one religion. What is important is meeting the preacher. The internet has something, but the preacher has more. Religion makes you stronger, makes you feel powerful. The very fact that you consider each other brothers empowers you in a special and euphoric way.<sup>68</sup>

In radicalization, the effect of being part of a community is extremely important. The trends are based on clandestinity and group dynamics. The principle is the inclination to find an environment free of competition. One goes looking for peers, and those who think like him, because only in that way does he feel protected and equal. The violent action mode may become more attractive because the group loses a sense of reality in isolation. In religious practice, extremism develops within a strong, closed circle of a powerful religious group which acts on the basis of an overarching ideology. Clearly not all sectarian groups become violent and not all its members are radicalized. But if all of radicalization's ingredients are there, the fact they are confined together can favor the transition to violence.<sup>69</sup>

Religion is easier for them: I am right, you are wrong! Everything prescribed: halal/haram (permitted/forbidden)! Not being able to think more deeply, they turn to extremism. Islamization is seen as a form of protection, amounting to a distortion of religion.

“Radicalization is a constant process that develops over time, while the decision to leave is almost instantaneous. Basically, I like war, everything before the departure is a particular emotion. From the

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<sup>68</sup>Author's interview with a foreign fighter.

<sup>69</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation*, pp.23-24.

moment you decide, everything is fast. You decide to leave for the values of this world and the one beyond...”<sup>70</sup>

Travel to Syria and Iraq is linked to the concepts of *hijrah*<sup>71</sup>, jihad and *shahid*<sup>72</sup>. Here you have the element of religious conscience, and religious clergy play a key role here. The radicalized choose the Imam who, in turn, influences the selection and interpretation of his readings. From the interviews, it seems that the scholars most often referred to by the imams for their interpretation of Jihad are Ibn Taymiyyah and the Pakistani Abul Ala Mawdudi. The imam is the central figure to give them the conviction of being on the right path of Islam, and that what they do is the best choice. Videos, YouTube, the internet all reinforce this path. Jihad becomes the sixth pillar<sup>73</sup> for them, an individual obligation. If this religion does not permit suicide, then they commit suicide by legitimizing the *shahid*. Their sacrifice is seen as a mission for the Islamic cause. Jihad and martyrdom have a semantic continuity with the past, but actually take on new meanings in modern times. Jihad and sacrifice give a meaning to his life and so even to his death. Death in that way is not a simple suicide, but a suicide that has a special meaning to him. Therefore, the external factor becomes important in maintaining legitimacy. They need to be seen as defenders of the cause, and so they act. It does not matter how negative; he sells himself as a hero falling in battle. The caliphate is like a promised land for them, the life for an imaginary, egalitarian and absolute society. They have the illusion that ISIS is providing them with more opportunities for life.

### **Foreign Fighters (FFs) from the 3 countries**

There are three stages of development of the situation in which persons from the three States move toward jihadism.

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<sup>70</sup> Author's interview with a foreign fighter turned back from Iraq.

<sup>71</sup> *Hijrah* - the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution a.d. 622

<sup>72</sup> *Shahid* - martyr, who dies in *Jihad*.

<sup>73</sup> There are actually only five pillars of Islam: *Shahada* – Faith; *Salat* – Prayer; *Zakāt* – Charity; *Sawm* – Fasting; *Hajj* - Pilgrimage to Mecca.

1. The first phase, or the beginning (2011 – most of 2012) is when the war in Syria is seen as a war for democracy and freedom from the dictatorship. A wide range of people become involved initially as mercenaries, persons associated with those who had fought with the KLA in Kosovo or who had been in Bosnia. Here, the role of the media is very important and has a big impact. The media emphasize the solidarity of the Albanian and Kosovan governments with the Syrian people in their revolution against the dictator Assad, often making comparisons with the dictatorial period in Albania with Milosevic, leading to Kosovo's war. The gory images of Syrian government shelling, the use of chemical weapons in Ghoutta against innocent civilians reinforce the idea of Sunni persecution. At this stage, we are still in the moment where jihad is perceived as a struggle for freedom and democracy. Religious and humanitarian feelings are intermingled in those who leave to fight in Syria. Those who leave in this period are mainly from Kosovo and Macedonia.
2. The second phase is the period from the end of 2012 to the beginning of 2013. At this stage, poverty plays a crucial role, i.e. "we have nothing to lose". Jihad is not yet the main motivation. The imams themselves started to tell Albanians not to go to Syria to fight because it is not a religious obligation to go to a foreign land for war. Nearly 40 people have returned disappointed. Initially they went to fight for the Free Syrian Army, then for Al Nusra which was cooperating from the beginning with ISIS. Clusters created division and infighting and frustration among those who came.
3. The third phase, 2013/2014, involves religiously radicalized people directly influenced by radical *Takfirism*. The *Takfir* imams in this phase has direct influence and they are almost leading this stage. ISIS propaganda, the Internet, and its achievements in the field at this stage have a very big impact on the recruitment of the jihadist. At this stage, we are dealing with "total jihad".



The ones who go have no tradition of Islam, but religious preparation for about two years. They are convinced that the true Islam is what they are being taught and they have taken their path towards paradise. The imam is the main figure of recruitment. The internet is used, but is an associative element of the imam's preaching. The imam's influence is even greater among uneducated poor youngsters, with a criminal record, who have problems in their families and internal frustrations. There is also a contingent of those who leave with their entire family. In these cases, religious belief is absolute. They are applying the *hijrah*.

### *Albania*

The figures given are 83 FFs and, in addition, 32 members of their families (elderly, wives and children) - a total of 115 people, including 30 who are currently active in combat, 13 who have died, and 40 who have returned home. The age range of those who go to battle is between 20 and 45 years. Nearly 45% of the fighters had a criminal record before leaving. In November 2016, in Shkoder, four people were arrested on suspicion of collaboration and recruitment of persons to go to Syria in support of ISIS.<sup>74</sup>

### *Kosovo*

According to official sources, there are 340 individuals who went mainly to Syria but also to Iraq, of which almost 52 have died and 130 are back. The numbers change slightly from month to month. The age range of those who go to battle is between 20 and 35. Here the official sources do not give an exact figure on the proportion who had a criminal record before leaving. After a long period of silence, in September 2016, a television channel (not an official source) reported that there are seventeen new departures and, in October 2016, seven people were arrested and accused of

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<sup>74</sup> "Rekrutoniin luftetare per te ISIS, kater te arrestuar ne Shkoder" (5 November 2016), Shqiptarja at <http://shqiptarja.com/m/aktualitet/rekrutoniin-luft-tar--p-r-isis-kat-r-t--arrestuar-n--shkod-r-383904.html> (accessed 8 November 2016).

organizing a terrorist attack in Kosovo on order of Lavdrim Muhaxheri, one of ISIS's leaders of Kosovar origin.<sup>75</sup>

### *Macedonia*

It is said that there are 100 FFs who left for Syria and Iraq, 18-20 dead, and 10 returnees. 70% of them have a criminal record. The age of the fighters who have left is between 19 and 50 years. Most of the returnees are UN prisoners.

The law in the penal code on persons who go to wars in foreign countries exists in Albania and Macedonia since 2014 and in Kosovo since 2015.

As for gender, from Albania and Macedonia, women basically follow their husbands. There are four women who went from Macedonia, 32 from Kosovo, and more or less 30 from Albania. Single women have left Kosovo to join ISIS and its *Shari'a* police (the Brigade Al Khansaa) that monitors women's morality. Women are often used to make propaganda for recruitment through social networks.

Foreign fighters generally travel by land from Greece to Turkey, or via Macedonia or Bulgaria. For most European citizens it is easy to enter these countries because there is no need for visas. The alternative is to fly directly from one of the three airports (Tirana, Pristina, Skopje) to Turkey.

Those who leave to join ISIS or Al Nusra always have a contact that connects them from within the organization and an imam in the country of origin who recruited them and acts as a guarantor, providing the money needed for the journey. The family has no role in recruiting and has nothing to do with the dynamics that characterize the recruiting organizations. The path to jihadist radicalization is completely individual and, in some cases, a radicalized individual can then try and recruit his brother or father as well. The money is mostly passed from hand to hand, through simple couriers

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<sup>75</sup> Ekskluzive: 7 të dyshuarit për terrorizëm kishin marrë udhëzime nga Lavdrim Muhaxheri për të sulmuar institucionet e Kosovës dhe rajonit (5 November 2016), Lajmi at <http://lajmi.net/ekskluzive-7-te-dyshuarit-per-terrorizem-kishin-marre-udhezime-nga-lavdrim-muhaxheri-per-te-sulmuar-institucionet-e-kosoves-dhe-rajonit/> (accessed 8 November 2016).

or businessmen, but they are very faithful and loyal people. The guarantee is given only by the imams, who are the link with the ISIS organization. Without it, you cannot enter Syria.

The *Takfiri* imams who recruit for ISIS or Al Nusra are actually few in number. According to Institutional sources in the three countries, they are as follows:

#### *Albania*

Genci Abdurahman Balla (imam of the mosque "Unaza e re" in Tirana), along with another eight imams who were convicted of recruiting and financing terrorist activities. Genci Balla first studied in Jordan and later went to Damascus, from where he was expelled. Then he went to the University of Medina, where he wanted to complete a Master's, but was also expelled from Saudi Arabia because of suspected *takfirism*. Before he went to Egypt, Bujar Hysa (imam at the mosque Yzberisht in Tirana) had begun his studies in Jordan, but did not conclude them. Other imams are Gerti Pashja and Kreshnik Cili in Cerrik. Almir Daci, who is now in Syria, has recruited many fighters in the Leshnica Mosque in Pogradec.

#### *Kosovo*

Zeqirja Qazimi of Gjilan (now in prison) and Ridvan Haqifi, imam of a mosque in Gjilan, who is now in Syria as emir for Albanians. Both recruiters have a religious education. Recruitment in Kosovo was done through the associations Nektari H.E, Rinia Islame in Kacanik and Rinia Islame in Gjilan.

#### *Macedonia*

Rexhep Memishi of the "Tutunsez" mosque went to study Arabic, but he did not study theology because he was expelled. He is currently in prison.) at the "Tutunsez" mosque (actually in Prison). This imam is one of the first to start creating a takfirist network across Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. Imam Omer Bajrami (with education in theology) of the Abdul Kader Albani mosque in Skopje and Abdyl Fuga (he did not study theology) of the Vizbeg mosque are suspected to have arranged departures to Al Nusra Front.

In Albania, the most sensitive areas in terms of FFs are: Tirana, Kavaje, Cerrik, Elbasan, Pogradec, Librazhd, Bulqize, Peshkopi and lately Shkoder.

In Kosovo, the epicenter of the jihadism is in Mitrovica and surroundings, in the Gjilan El-Kuddus mosque with the villages in the surrounding area, Hani Elezit, Kaçaniku and Vushtrina.

In Macedonia, the departure areas of the jihadists have mainly focused on Skopje, in the neighborhoods of Gazi Babe, Seraj and Cair.

The level of education of people from all three countries varies. In most cases, it is very low and in many case, we are dealing with functional illiteracy. The recruits come from poor and abandoned areas where the state basically does not exist.

In different percentages, from 45% in Albania to 70% in Macedonia, they have criminal records. Albanians are more jihadist rather than suicide bombers. For them, the concept of martyrdom seems to be more related to the hero fallen in the battlefield rather than as a suicide bomber. The only Albanian suicide bombers among ISIS are three from Kosovo and four from Macedonia. According to our respondents in the communities we studied, those who go to fight for Al Nusra observe *shari'a* more than those who go to fight for ISIS.

The reasons why some come back from Syria and Iraq are:

- disappointment with the way they were treated by ISIS;
- war fatigue;
- a perception that they would never have an opportunity to join the battlefield because they were kept on the sidelines at training grounds;
- ethnic and racial discrimination between fighters of different origins;
- being wounded and returning home to be cared for within families;
- other family reasons.

The categories of those who returned are divided into three groups:

- Those who renounce the ideology (repentant, deradicalized);

- those who regret having gone to war (disengagement) but still believe in the cause (they are still radicalized and often punish themselves for the weakness shown by returning);
- those who remain radicalized and have returned with assigned tasks (carrying on the fight at home).

## **Conclusions**

Manipulation and indoctrination certainly have a role in radicalization and violent extremism, but they are not the only factors and it is important to understand the process. Otherwise, the risk is to impugn an entire community for their ideas and choice of religious practices, creating enemies and pushing them into a clandestine network. As Olivier Roy states: "I simply say that this fundamentalism is not enough to produce violence".<sup>76</sup>

The factors driving this move towards violence are numerous and multifaceted. Economic, sociological, and psychological functioning are interrelated. If they are analyzed separately, the results of the analysis will be artificial.

We are faced with weak States in transition that are unable to build a real State system. Corruption, crime, low level of education, a dysfunctional and corrupt health system and judicial system, stigmatization, hatred and ethnic marginalization are all on the agenda. Radicalization, the need to radicalize religion and the motivation of violent reactions stem from a combination of personal weaknesses, frustrations, prohibition, a legitimized propaganda of Islamophobia, feelings of inferiority, failures in one's personal life, marginalization.

The Salafists, or what are called Wahhabis, represent the various currents of the new neo-fundamentalism or neo-Salafism that still represent a minority. They do not want to be labeled as "Salafis", "Wahhabis", "Takfiris" etc. and they are divided among themselves. The ideological doctrines they claim are different. It is a broad movement, complex and very unstable.

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<sup>76</sup> Olivier Roy, *Le Djihad et la mort (Debats)* (Kindle edition, 2016) loc. 171.

The new fundamentalism wants to make a clean sweep, rejecting Sufism, the division between the major schools of law; it does not recognize Shiites as Muslims, and rejects any form of integration.

This neo-fundamentalism, de-territorialized and de-cultural by definition, adapts very well to globalization, which explains its success.<sup>77</sup> “Salafism is the negation of cultural Islam that is the Islam of their parents and of their roots. Instead of providing them with roots, Salafism glorifies their own deculturation and makes them feel better ‘Muslims’ than their parents. Salafism is the religion by definition of a disenfranchised youngster”.<sup>78</sup>

The construction of new and different styles of mosques, new practices in the daily lives of believers, the spread of this neo-Salafism should not be considered as the antechamber of the transition to violent extremism. But the spread of neo-Salafism cannot be totally exonerated. The rigid and violent language, the close-mindedness, the hatred of Shiites and Sufism, the arrogance, the ultra-conservatism, the violence against thinking differently, the stuffy and violent vision against women, all features in common with the Jihadi-Salafist school of thought, create what are essentially social problems. However, they also constitute the ideological environment, since individuals who in their quest for identity and fulfillment choose the path of jihad and violent extremism feel at ease with this religious backdrop, this particular vision of Islam.

Such a challenge can trigger debates among different currents within the Muslim community. While political radicalization is a collective responsibility and task of societal institutions, of civil society, elites and intellectuals, radicalization in religion can only be fought and resolved by the Islamic community, the Muslims themselves. The debate is an internal debate and any outsider would not have the credibility to do it.

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<sup>77</sup> Olivier Roy, *Le Croissant et le Chaos* (Hachette Littératures, 2006), p.73.

<sup>78</sup> Kenan Malik, “Olivier Roy on European Jihadists” (11 November 2015), Pandaemonium at <https://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2015/12/10/olivier-roy-on-european-jihadis/> (accessed 10 September 2016).

The definition of islamophobia by the institutions themselves is of a crucial importance. Fighting islamophobia is not merely a human rights issue, but also a strategic choice to built safer societies.

For the security forces, arrests are necessary, but only at a final stage, and where the rule of law prevails in providing evidence of crimes as defined in the Penal Code. Mass arrests and closures of associations or non-governmental organizations in Kosovo without clear evidence have shown that they are only counterproductive in the fight against violent Islamist extremism.

Having said that, however, we must remember that Islam cannot be more progressive than the society in which it exists and the average education of the clergy is not greater than that of the society. They go hand in hand. All these three States are secular, despite the flow of different Islamic or Christian currents. Laicism of the State is never questioned. The societies are conservative, but secularism is non-negotiable.

The radicalization trend will likely increase over time, unlike the jihadist trend that now seems to be contained. Conferences against radicalization that have been organized in the Balkan countries have not yet led to any decrease in the phenomenon. They are not credible in the face of an Islamic audience attracted by fundamentalism.

Albania, along with Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, are NATO members; Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia aspire to become such, while Montenegro is in the process of joining the organization. NATO's post-Cold War evolution has been strongly influenced by events in the Balkans. For the Alliance, the area - especially the Western Balkans - remains a region of special concern<sup>79</sup>. Terrorism and violent Islamist extremism pose a threat to the security and stability of the people and the countries. The threat of terrorism can come from "lone wolves", who may act alone or as directed by ISIS cells, as well as from networks that act according to specific orders from ISIS in Iraq or Syria. Nevertheless, among the most important implications is the recruitment for the cause of jihad, not

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<sup>79</sup> NATO Warsaw Summit Communiqué, July 2016, 107.

only in the Balkans but in other European countries as well. Also of concern is the possible close ties with organized crime organizations, which facilitate the weapons trade. Weapons from the '90s wars continue to circulate, and Serbia is still one of the biggest manufacturers. Several weapons that were used by the jihadists in the terrorist attacks of November 2015 in Paris, were produced in the factory of Kragujevac, Serbia.

Bearing in mind that the different countries in the region live in unstable political situations, under weak Governments and security institutions, and are stretched thin by economic crisis, war, political infighting and corruption, one of the greatest dangers is the potential use of these radicalized people (with or without war experience) to create political or ethnic instability as a means of furthering hidden national and international agendas. This the main reason why an understanding of the phenomenon by governments, and consequently the choice of appropriate measures, remains a strategic need for the Balkan area.

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