

THE LATENT DANGERS OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN WESTERN BALKAN

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Abstract

The traditional model of harmony and interfaith tolerance that had existed in Kosovo and the countries of the region for centuries has come more and more under attack in recent times. Unfortunately, recently, the traditional model of religious harmony and tolerance that has been cultivated for centuries in Kosovo has begun to be attacked. After the war in Kosovo, started the uncontrolled arrival of some "humanitarian" organizations in the region and the departure of dozens of Kosovar youths for religious education began in some Islamic Middle East centers. Some people and association from the Near East, came as "missionaries" began their subversive activity in promoting Islamist extremism and spreading a radical ideology in all inhabited areas with Muslim populations in the Balkans. The risks of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists in Kosovo and the countries of the EU still seem to be limited. However, if the political and social crisis escalates in Kosovo and the conflict in the Middle East is exacerbated, which could also lead to a polarization of the public's attitudes toward Islam, the danger of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremist can't be ruled out any more in both to Kosovo and the EU countries.

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

JEL Classification: H83, K30

1. Introduction

All the radical Islamist movements aim likewise at discarding religious tolerance, which has been upheld in Kosovo for centuries. They are characterized through a high degree of aggression, ideological intolerance, hatred of other religious orientations as well as a willingness to use physical force and violence against "infidels" in the course of their extremist activities. They don't just treat members of other faiths but also moderate Muslims and members of other Islamic sects or orientations in Kosovo as "infidels". According to the extremist ideology, fighting "infidels" is the legitimate duty and obligation of Muslims. All the political organizations of the Islamists in Kosovo clearly express jealousy and envy of other creeds as well as hatred of the USA and other countries of the Western world in no ambiguous terms through their public demands and activities.

2. The boundaries of the distinction of radicalism from Islamist extremism in Western Balkans

Both from the scientific and the practical point of view, it is more than necessary to clarify the meaning and analysis of the reports that exist between the various forms of manifestation of radicalism and Islamist extremism in Kosovo, Bosnien, Serbian and the countries of the region.

As "Islamic radicalism" are considered all forms of actions that are manifested mainly through the discourse of the conservative doctrines of Islam's interpretation that exhibit a high degree of puritanism and religious intolerance, as opposed to the Hanafi tradition of Islam in Western Balkan. This means that Islamic radicalism is not manifested through violence, but it is a process in which different persons or groups of persons by spreading information or misinterpreting certain religious doctrine, influence the rise of religious fanaticism in order to achieve the desired ideological effects.

As such, Islamic radicalism is a dynamic process of embracing and manifesting extreme perceptions of a religious ideology, which may also affect the legitimacy of terrorist acts². As radical actions in Western Balkan can be considered the requirements for the "non-voting of non-Muslims by Muslim believers", "the non-attendance of non-Muslims in the leading countries", "the non-associating of Muslims with Christian persons", the requirements for "removal of Skanderbeg's bust,

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² *Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, The Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Tirana 2015, p. 9.

Theresa and other Catholics from the squares of Muslim cities", then the erroneous estimates that "who does not pray, does not fast, etc., is not a Muslim", "who drinks alcohol or consumes pork is not a Muslim", "who celebrates the new year is not a Muslim" etc.

Meanwhile, with the notion of "Islamic extremism" it is necessary to understand the actions against constitutionalism characterized by the active opposition of any other religious doctrine or ideology. According to Islamic extremists, only Islam should be a source of reference for all aspects of private, public, juridical, familiar and educational life. Islamic extremists propagate in an organized and intensive way their religious doctrine as a "true and authentic doctrine in the Qur'an" and oppose all other religious doctrines as counterfeits of true teachings of Islam. So, they seek the "forced return of every Muslim to true Islam" and regard as hostile all other forms of faith and interpretation of the rules of the Islamic religion.

In order to enforce their religious ideology and rules, Islamic extremists call for the political and religious union of all Muslims in a state (umma/panislamism), develop a fierce struggle for power within the Islamic community, cause disunity in the Muslims community, incite conflicts between ordinary believers and members of other Islamic sects, encourage interfaith hatreds, etc. They are also presented as saint warriors (jihadists) and oppose any mix or presence of foreign non-Islamic missions in Kosovo and other Muslim lands. Islamic extremists attack as a value against Muslims, the coexistence, interfaith tolerance, free religious belief, national unity and harmony, democratic order and basic human rights. In all cases where the realization of their ideological goals is at risk, Islamic extremists also practice the threat and exercise of physical violence in the name of the religion of Islam. In reality, Islamic extremists always harbor the threat of violence and legitimize physical violence as a mean of realizing their ideological interests³.

3. The return of jihadists

Contrary to claims made sometimes, the primary aim of all the radical Islamist groups in Kosovo does not concern itself with the protection of the Islamist past of Kosovo but with a coup d'état overthrowing the democratic constitutional order of Kosovo and establishing an Islamist state that would be organized and function according to the laws of the Sharia.

Islamist extremists also want to abolish traditional religious education and replace it with irrational and extremist religious doctrines in order to realize their cynical aim.

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

³ *Strategjia Kombëtare për Luftën kundër Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm*, miratuar me VKM No. 930, November 18, 2015. Fletore Zyrtare No. 203/2015. http://www.mb.gov.al/files/documentsfiles/StrategjiaKombëtarepërLuftënkundërEkstremizmittëdhunshëm_dhe_Planit_të_Veprimit.pdf (consulted on 1.10.2020).

institutions operating in Kosovo since it was deemed to be the “legitimate obligation and duty of Muslims”.

Thus, “recruitment centers” were founded and according to estimations from official sources, approx. 1.000 volunteers were recruited for several front-lines in Syria and Iraq solely in the Western Balkans. 314 volunteers solely from Kosovo went to war as members of different terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State, the Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham etc. Some researchers even estimate that solely from Kosovo, approx. 1.000 volunteers fought or have been fighting at different frontlines in Iraq and Syria⁴. But be that as it may, the mere fact that quintuple numbers of volunteers for the wars in Syria and Iraq stem from Kosovo compared to other European countries (and proportionately to population numbers) demonstrates at any rate that Kosovo belongs to those countries from where the most volunteers for the jihad hail on a global scale⁵.

After the international coalition against terrorism had been founded in September 2014, the situation at the frontlines in Iraq and Syria changed and Kosovar fighters began to desert and to return home on a massive scale. According to official data, it is estimated that at least 120 “holy warriors” returned solely to Kosovo⁶.

The return of such large numbers of jihadists with fighting experience constitutes a high risk not just for the national security of Kosovo but also for the safety of the region and of Europe in general as well. Those fighters had been radicalized to a large extent during their long-term stays in Syria and Iraq and they have been in touch with radical circles from different countries on an ethnic, religious and terrorist basis. Above all, they have been using counterfeit Arabian passports in order to claim that they are “wounded soldiers” or “refugees” and thus, to seep into different EU countries⁷.

4. Terrorist activities of Islamist extremists from Kosovo and the countries of the region

Islamist extremists from Kosovo and the countries of the region have attempted to commit a huge number of terrorist attacks on Kosovo, the countries of the EU and the USA so far. Terrorist activities of Islamist extremists from Kosovo and the countries of the region Islamist extremists from Kosovo and the countries of the region have attempted to commit a huge number of terrorist attacks on Kosovo, the countries of the EU and the USA so far.

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

Some other „holy warriors” started to cooperate with well-known terrorist circles in the region immediately after their returns in order to commit terrorist attacks against American institutions or interests in Kosovo, Europe and even in the USA. Such a terrorist attack was planned for July 04, 2015 in Prishtina during the concert scheduled in honor of Independence Day. After that, a Kosovar hacker who self-identified as a member of the “hacker division of the Islamic State” committed a cyber-attack on an American military basis during which he spied out and forwarded to the leading structures of the IS the personal data of approx. 1.000 officers, soldiers and Government employees⁸.

⁴ Huffingtonpost: Islamizmi në Kosovë: <http://zeri.info/aktuale/68551/huffingtonpost-islamizmi-ne-kosove/> (consulted on 1.10.2020).

⁵ *Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (The Soufan Group, December 2015), http://soufangroup.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/TSG_Foreign_FightersUpdate3.pdf (consulted on 1.10.2020).

⁶ *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, *The Soufan Center*, October 2017; <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf> (consulted on 1.10.2020).

⁷ Two participants in the terrorist attack in Paris also used such passports: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article/150152713/Die-Gefahr-der-echten-falschen-Paesse-und-die-Rolle-des-IS.html> (consulted on 1.10.2020).

⁸ ISIS përgatit sulme terroriste në Kosovë: <http://www.gazetatribuna.com/lajme/isis-pergatit-sulme-terroriste-ne-kosove/> (consulted on 1.10.2020).

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

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

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

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

Due to the same reason, a group consisting of four Kosovar migrants who collaborated with certain terrorist organizations planned to assassinate Pope Francis in December 2015⁹. In March 2017, another group comprised of Islamist extremists from Kosovo, among them one returnee from the war in Syria, planned to blow up the Rialto bridge in Venice. The case of two brothers from Kosovo who planned a terrorist attack in a mall in Oberhausen, Germany for Christmas 2016 also needs to be mentioned here as well as the prevention of a similar terrorist attack in Vienna, which had also been planned by a Muslim from Kosovo.

5. Conclusions

In order to stop the terrorist activities of Islamist extremists in Kosovo, a comprehensive program for the **deradicalization** of radicalized persons must be implemented first and foremost. In this context, those referred to as „lonesome wolves” need to be brought especially into the center of attention¹⁰.

However, such a program must not be conceived of, understood and treated as a “program against the religious affiliations of pious Muslims”, as some radical circles in Kosovo claim for

⁹ See Steve Robson: *Jihadist plot to kill Pope Francis' thwarted as police arrest four Kosovans with links to Italy*, The Mirror (UK), 3 December 2015; <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/jihadist-plot-kill-pope-francis-694797> (consulted on 1.10.2020).

¹⁰ People who are not directly in touch with the leadership circle of the IS or a terrorist group in the region but who are influenced by their ideology and act on behalf of their strategic interests can be referred to as “lonesome wolves”. Persons who have left terrorist units and who are suffering from complexes with respect to their values belong to this group, too.

purposes of propaganda, but it most definitely must not give preferential treatment to extremists with respect to the provision of jobs or apartments “free of charge” by the State either (which has actually been demanded by some Muslim ideologists in Kosovo)¹¹. A deradicalization program needs to aim at detecting and doing away with the influences that have been impacting the radicalization of a large number of people in Kosovo. Solely if Kosovar society takes the required measures in order to stop such influences caused by different criminogenic factors which are mainly of an exogenic nature, any deradicalization of young Kosovars and renunciation of extremist beliefs can be achieved.

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6. *Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, The Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Tirana 2015.

¹¹ Such a program would solely create destructive incentives in a criminogenic manner for thousands of young Kosovars who would visibly become radicalized in order to have their social problems resolved quickly.