

# THE THREAT OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS FOR THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Associate professor **Kolë KRASNIQI**<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

*The profound economic crisis and political tensions that have reigned in the territory of former Yugoslavia during the last two decades of the previous century (XX century), and especially the circumstances of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, have influenced the creation of perceptions of social insecurity among all segments of society. These circumstances, characterized by the improper functioning of the state apparatus, the high level of corruption, the degradation of the public health system and the destruction of the education system, have enabled the unhindered activity of foreign extremist organizations in some countries of the Western Balkans. During this time, all countries in the region were gripped by crises and similar social, economic and political conflicts. In these circumstances, it was enough for a foreign extremist organization to settle in Bosnia, Albania or North Macedonia, and through ethnic ties and the common Islamic tradition that prevails in this compact geographical region, be able to extend its destructive force to other parts of the Western Balkans. Thus a large number of Islamic humanitarian and non-governmental organizations from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, State of Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey, later identified as terrorist financing organizations, have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to build a strong propaganda infrastructure, with the aim of spreading a radical ideology and inciting hatred and various religious conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.*

**Keywords:** *islamic terrorism, Kosovo, terrorism, extremism, islamisation, radicalism, Islam.*

**JEL Classification:** K33, K34

## **1. Some characteristics of islamist extremism in Western Balkans**

In the recent decades, several groups of people in Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia have appeared under the name "Salafi". These religious activists, who practice completely different religious rules from the traditional ones of the Islamic religion, are distinguished from other believers by the characteristic way of praying (religious prayers), by their long beards, short mustaches and their characteristic clothes. These people do not claim to be "Wahhabis" but "Salafists" which means "ancestors". They even oppose their appointment by others as "Wahhabis", explaining that such a designation is made only by opponents of the Islamic religion, who want to cause division and discord among Muslim believers.<sup>2</sup>

These religious activists, organized in different groups and funded by various Islamic organizations operating in Kosovo, North Macedonia and other countries in the region, have so far organized thousands of different religious courses and lectures in all territories inhabited by Muslim population in the region and continuously have misused not only various mortuary meetings, circumcisions and family holidays, but also public schools and universities as places for the development of agitation and their extremist religious propaganda.<sup>3</sup>

The development of their destructive activities is done mainly tactically and according to a scenario that usually begins with the attack on traditional imams, accusing them of being uneducated or misguided. Then these activists proudly point to their "competence and mission" to spread a genuine Islam that is free of all Western influences. These religious extremists are proudly attacking their national identity according to their Islamist doctrine as if "for a Muslim it is not the national character that matters, but religion."<sup>4</sup>

The development of Islamist propaganda and agitation is accompanied by fierce attacks against secularism and the rule of law, especially in Western Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kolë Krasniqi - University of Peja, Kosovo, kole.krasniqi@unhz.eu.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.zeriislam.com/artikulli.php?id=1966>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Please review: <http://udhaebesimtareve.com/thirrja-per-ne-rruge-te-allahut/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>4</sup> For further information: <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/gerti-pashaj-nje-nga-muslimanet-ne-kerkim-per-terrorizem-nga-turqia-jam-i-pafajshem/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

According to these exponents, a just state can be built only if it is based on the religious rules of sharia. According to Islamist extremists, the cause of all problems in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania lies "in the leadership of the state by unbelievers" ..., "in the non-practice of religious rules in public life" ..., in allowing the construction of a Catholic cathedral in the Muslim land"..., "in the development of a pro-American and pro-European policy, which is generating harm and insults to all Muslim people".<sup>5</sup>

As a result, in all countries of the region, an intense anti-Western propaganda is being carried out, blaming the USA, the State of Israel and the EU member countries, for dividing the Muslim world in order to subdue, destroy it politically..., destroying its culture..., humiliation of Muslims as a people and as a religion. In this context, the Islamist radicals demand the unification of all Muslims in one state, according to the Qur'anic verses, that would affect the conquest and spread of the Islamic religion throughout the world.

Therefore, Islamist extremists through agitation and religious propaganda try to mislead young believers in every Muslim-populated countries in the Western Balkans that "the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate is envisaged in the Qur'an as the revival of the Islamic State" (which was established after the death of the Prophet Muhammad) ..., "that Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the true descendant of the Prophet Muhammad". As a result, in many Kosovar settings Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is worshiped as an immortal religious and military leader not only of the Islamic State but also leads all Muslims in the world. Some indoctrinated individuals even refer to al-Baghdadi as Amir al-Mu'minin, or the "Commander of the Muslims," whose mission is to continue the fight against the infidels. According to an alleged al-Qaeda strategy, the fight against infidels began with the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, it advanced worldwide, made headway with the proclamation of the Islamic State, and will end in 2020, with the complete victory of the "Islamic Army". Against the unbelievers (Christians and Jews), where the eternal rule of the world will be established by Islam.

Such an indoctrination also shows the worrying level of ideological degradation of parts of the Muslim youth, that has been achieved mainly through the systematic decline of the quality of education, high level of corruption, improper functioning of the state apparatus and the extremely negative impact of Islamic propaganda, which offers no rational idea or real concepts to solve various social, economic or political challenges, but only incites religious hatred and bigotry.

## **2. The threat from Islamist extremism to national and regional**

The establishment of radical and extreme Islamist structures in Northern Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania as well as their support by some foreign intelligence services and organizations operating in the region, pose a latent and asymmetric threat to national, regional and international security. The increase in this risk is being influenced, among other things, by geopolitical developments in the Middle East.

After the establishment of the "Islamic State" began the recruitment of hundreds of volunteers from the Western Balkan countries to participate in various war fronts in Syria and Iraq. These indoctrinated persons have also been stimulated by some Turkish and Arab religious structures operating mainly in some countries of the Western Balkans, to perform "a legitimate and obligatory action for all Muslims". Thus, in many countries in the region, several "centers" were established for the recruitment of jihadists. According to some estimates, about 1,000 volunteers have been recruited from the Western Balkans alone to take part in the various war fronts in Syria and Iraq. These estimates are consistent with official data from countries in the region. In this regard, the Kosovo authorities have so far identified over 400 Kosovar citizens, who have fought in the ranks of various (sometimes confronted terrorist) organizations such as the Islamic State, Front of al-Nusra; Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>6</sup> However, there are data that speak of the participation of about 1000

<sup>5</sup>Please view and compare: <https://www.shqiperia.com/shqip/opinionart/aID/307/Perse-vendet-arabe-nuk-e-njohin-pavaresine-e-Kosoves>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dw.com/sq/përballja-e-kosovës-me-të-kthyerit-nga-is-në-siri/a-50661661>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

volunteers from Kosovo in various war fronts in Syria and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> However Kosovo as a nation, in terms of its population size, among the first countries in the world (in relation to its population) that has generated one of the largest numbers of jihadists in Syria and Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

After the formation of the international coalition against terrorism, in September 2014 and the change of the balance of forces in Iraq and Syria, the return of Kosovar fighters from various war fronts in Syria and Iraq had begun. According to official data, until recently, about 150 jihadists have returned to Kosovo.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the number of fighters returned to other countries of the Western Balkans is over 300.<sup>10</sup> The return of such a large number of "jihadist" volunteers, with combat experience and radicalized in the most extreme way during their long stay in Syria and Iraq, as well as their contacts with the established extremist structures of the countries in that region, based on ethnic, religious or common jihadist backgrounds, and in particular their tendency to infiltrate while disguised as "wounded soldiers" or as "refugees" in various European Union countries, pose a high degree of risk to the regional and European security in general.<sup>11</sup>

Such a risk assessment is also argued by the fact that some Islamic State fighters, immediately after their return to Kosovo and other countries in the region, began to engage in various criminal activities, which resulted in the imprisonment of over 40 of them during July and August 2014. A year later, on July 11, 2015, some former Islamic State fighters attempted to carry out an asymmetric attack, by poisoning water resources in Lake Badovc, which could have inflicted catastrophic consequences for thousands of residents of Kosovo.

Two months after the failure of this terrorist attack, the Islamic State through a communiqué published in Albanian language, had announced to the Muslim public about the beginning of terrorist attacks in the Balkans, which will be carried out by dozens of jihadists trained in the use of weapons, explosives and masks during their covert operation in the region. Some "other fighters", immediately after their return to Kosovo, began their cooperation with some well-known terrorist structures in the region, with the aim of carrying out joint terrorist attacks against American institutions and interests in Kosovo, Europe, and even in the US. Such an attack was planned to take place on July 4, 2015, in Prishtina, during a concert organized in honor of the Independence Day of the United States of America. Then, in September 2015, a Kosovar hacker, identified as a member of the "Islamic State Hackers Division", carried out a cyber attack on a US military base, extracting the personal data of about 1,000 military officers, employees, other members of the US government, which were sent to the leading information structures of ISIS. Islamist extremists from Kosovo, in cooperation with several terrorist structures in the region, had planned to carry out a terrorist attack on a global scale during the Albania-Israel football match, that was scheduled to be held on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Shkodra.<sup>12</sup> During the joint operation of several police units in the region, supported by the Israeli and Western intelligence agencies, 18 jihadists from Kosovo, 3 from Macedonia and 4 from Albania were arrested, and sophisticated weapons, various ammunitions as well as explosive devices were confiscated, that were intended only to carry out these terrorist attacks.

Out of religious jealousy and hatred towards the Western world, even in December 2015, a group of four Kosovar immigrants, in cooperation with certain terrorist groups in Syria, had planned to carry out an assassination attempt of Pope Francis. In March 2017, another group of Islamic extremists from Kosovo, including a participant in the war in Syria, planned to mine the Rialto Bridge in Venice. Here should also be mentioned the case of two Kosovar brothers, who had

<sup>7</sup> <http://zeri.info/aktuale/68551/huffingtonpost-islamizmi-ne-kosove/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>8</sup> For more information: Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment of the Floë of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (The Soufan Group, December 2015), [http://soufangroup.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_Foreign\\_FightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/TSG_Foreign_FightersUpdate3.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dw.com/sq/përballja-e-kosovës-me-të-kthyerit-nga-is-në-siri/a-50661661>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>10</sup> Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees, The Soufan Center, October 2017; <http://thesoufancenter.org/ëp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>11</sup> Me pasaporta të tilla kanë qenë të pajisur edhe dy pjesëmarrës në sulmin terrorist në Paris. For more information: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article150152713/Die-Gefahr-der-echten-falschen-Paesse-und-die-Rolle-des-IS.html>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

<sup>12</sup> <https://zeri.info/sport/114315/s-ka-ndryshime-shqiperi-ndash-izrael-luhet-ne-shkoder/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.

prepared a terrorist attack during the Christmas holiday of 2016, in the shopping center in Oberhausen, Germany and the prevention of a terrorist attack in Vienna, by a Muslim individual of Kosovo origin.

Following this successful prevention, on November 2nd, 2020, an Islamist terrorist of Albanian nationality (with the origin from North Macedonia) carried out a multiple terrorist attack in Vienna, killing four people and injuring about 20 others. Three days later, two young men in the ages 17-18 were arrested in Belgium, together with one Chechen and another Albanian from Kosovo, for similar reasons had planned a terrorist attack against Belgian police building in the Eupen Region, which borders with Germany.

According to these reliable sources we can conclude that the risk of Islamic extremism in some countries of the Western Balkans is unpredictable. In this respect, one can only ascertain the fact that Islamic extremists in Kosovo, North Macedonia and other countries in the region, thanks to their extreme religious indoctrination and experiences garnered in Iraq and Syria as well as their cooperation with some extremist Islamist structures operating in the Middle East, have the necessary potential to carry out terrorist attacks in Kosovo, Albania and other countries in the Balkans as well as in some European Union countries where they are abusing the democracy values of these countries, and have created their own radical and extremist infrastructures.

### **3. Conclusion**

Islamist extremism in the Western Balkan, in all its forms, poses a serious threat to national and regional security. The degree of this danger is rising by the increasingly visible cooperation between various radical and extremist Islamic groups in the region, which is made possible by the purpose, ideological fulcrum, the same religious ideology and the common "jihadist" past.

In case of a political and social crisis in the region and deepening international and geostrategic conflicts in the Middle East (Israel-Palestine conflict, Azerbaijan-Armenia, etc.), or ideological conflict between Turkey and France, respectively the Western world, which consequently causes polarization of different attitudes about Islam, then the possibility can not be ruled out that Islamist extremists from In some countries of the Western Balkans may carry out terrorist attacks against Western targets in their own countries or in any of the EU countries.

The threat of carrying out these terrorist attacks has been shaped with the return of hundreds of jihadists from the war zones in Syria and Iraq and the operations, intelligence sources of some foreign intelligence services (mainly Serbian-Russian and Turkish) in the Western Balkans. For these reasons, the governments of the countries of the region, together with the international security institutions, especially those of the EU and the US, in the interest of protecting their constitutional order, should consider the fight against Islamic extremism as one of the principal duties.

In the interest of preventive strategy, an effective program must be implemented to eradicate the radicalism of indoctrinated persons, especially those who are considered "lone wolves". These potential terrorists usually have no direct links to the leaders of ISIS or any other terrorist group but are inspired by their ideology and act according to their strategic interests. As such they should be considered not only as the persons returned from the war fronts but also as radicalized individuals who, despite their avid efforts, did not join the various jihadist groups.

These indoctrinated and highly emotional persons who usually have a relative in the war, killed or persecuted by the "enemy of Islam" and personally did not participate in any "major" activity, their passivity very easily could create the feeling of worthlessness and conviction of the possibility of improving their image only by committing any acts of terrorism. On the other hand, the established religious beliefs consisting that the death of a martyr is rewarded by going directly to paradise, and especially the glorification of martyrs and their families, along with repeated prayers in many mosques "oh Allah destroy non-Muslims", may affect all sensible people in making the decision to easily carry out terrorist attacks against any Western values and targets.

**Bibliography**

1. <http://www.zeriislam.com/artikulli.php?id=1966>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
2. <http://udhaebesimtareve.com/thirrja-per-ne-rruge-te-allahut/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
3. <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/gerti-pashaj-nje-nga-muslimanet-ne-kerkim-per-terrorizem-nga-turqia-jam-i-pa-fajshem/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
4. <https://www.shqiperia.com/shqip/opinionart/aID/307/Perse-vendet-arabe-nuk-e-njohin-pavaresine-e-Kosoves>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
5. <https://www.dw.com/sq/përballja-e-kosovës-me-të-kthyerit-nga-is-në-siri/a-50661661>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
6. <http://zeri.info/aktuale/68551/huffingtonpost-islamizmi-ne-kosove/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
7. <https://www.dw.com/sq/përballja-e-kosovës-me-të-kthyerit-nga-is-në-siri/a-50661661>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
8. <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article150152713/Die-Gefahr-der-echten-falschen-Paesse-und-die-Rolle-des-IS.html>, consulted on 1.02.2021.
9. <https://zeri.info/sport/114315/s-ka-ndryshime-shqiperi-ndash-izrael-luhet-ne-shkoder/>, consulted on 1.02.2021.