



## **PUBLIC SECURITY IN KOSOVO: RELIGIOUS RADICALIZATION OF CITIZENS**

### **Introduction**

In the past months, citizens from more than 90 countries have decided to join the Islamic State (IS)<sup>1</sup> and other terrorist groups in order to fight with them in Iraq and Syria. The US National Counterterrorism Center counted 20,000 fighters so far - amongst those 20% coming from Western countries (CNN 2015).

After the US intervention in Iraq in summer 2014, IS intensified their social media campaign to attract more fighters. Given the unpredictable nature of social media and the fact that international counterterrorism did not lead to the desired results in the past decade, many reactions to this ongoing global trend are characterized by helplessness. The danger of foreign fighters returning to their home countries with the purpose of carrying out a terrorist attack has become reality in European countries in the past year. Right now, US officials' answer to the phenomenon consists mainly of domestic law enforcement that shall prevent citizens from going abroad in the first place (Rand/Vassalo 2014: 4 et seqq.).

European IS supporters enter the war regions through Turkey and Southeast Europe (ibid.: 5). The Balkans and especially Kosovo, however, are not only problematic because they are used for transit, but because their citizens also go to fight in Iraq and Syria. An OSCE report from March 2014 reports that between 100-200 foreign fighters come from Kosovo (Barrett 2014: 13), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs estimates that around 300 fighters went abroad (BalkanInsight 2015). Instrumentalization of Kosovo's

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Muslim population predominantly in rural areas has been observed already more than ten years ago. This chronicle will look closer into the background of political Islam in Kosovo, suggest main causes for radicalization of Kosovar citizens and recommend possible projects for further research on this topic.

### **Background of religious radicalization in Kosovo**

A study about political Islam undertaken in 2005 by KIPRED, a Kosovar policy research institute, highlights first signs of radicalization amongst Kosovo's rural Muslim communities. The paper holds the neglect of these communities by international post-war government bodies responsible for the increase of foreign Muslim organisations that attempt at spreading religious and social values that do not have a tradition in the Balkans. According to KIPRED, the main argument for the acceptance of foreign Muslim organisations and their beliefs is the failure of the international community to meet the local population's needs that range from education to housing and to basic human wants such as food. Those gaps reportedly are filled by foreign Muslim organisations that promote a radical Islam through welfare, e.g. by building or financing schools that are used for their purposes. The result, it is argued, is a community "linked to political forces that are not beholden to local interests [but] [...] that demand loyalties to be directed beyond the region" (KIPRED: 14). KIPRED compares this practice of foreign welfare in exchange for "hearts and minds" to a situation which has occurred in Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ibid.).

In his research on the rise of Salafism in Kosovo, Dimal Basha confirms the continuation of the spread of foreign Muslim values amongst Kosovo's population. He claims that foreign Muslim organisations - or transnational advocacy groups as he refers to them - have built a base of local representatives over the years that allows them to not be physically present anymore. Basha considers local Imams who have been educated in the organisations' countries of origin as biggest threat to Kosovo's democratic stability, since they managed to establish a movement of followers and to even become politically active by linking up with Kosovo's Muslim parties and by

creating fractions in the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Acts of physical intimidation against locally educated clerics as well as underprivileged groups such as women combined with the intent to challenge secular laws call for an active response by government and civil society (Basha 2013: 65 et seqq.).

### **Current situation in Kosovo**

In summer 2014, Kosovar police detained 40 persons that were linked to participation in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The arrests were justified with the Kosovo Penal Code to safeguard constitutional order and security. Official figures say that 16 Kosovars died in combat (The Huffington Post 2014). In March 2015, Kosovo's parliament adopted a draft law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory (cf. Republic of Kosovo 2015) as an reaction to the relatively high number of Kosovars going abroad. The law criminalizes any activities related to encouragement to join or participation in foreign conflicts. Unless the person concerned does not hold dual citizenship or is instructed to fight abroad as part of an internationally recognized operation, engagement in foreign conflicts can be punished with a prison sentence of 15 years (BalkanInsight 2015).

The laws in Kosovo so far react only to radicalization after it emerged but they do not regulate religion and freedom of religion in the first instance. Many religious organizations are registered as NGOs and hence lack proper supervision by the state.

### **Root causes for radicalization**

The root causes that foster radicalization<sup>2</sup> differ from context to context and certainly depend on individual disposition as much as on societal structures and living conditions. A conference paper from the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) from 2014

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<sup>2</sup> It should be kept in mind that radicalization as it is presented in the form of foreign fighters in this text does not equal terrorism, or that terrorism is a logical consequence of radicalization - despite of radicalization and terrorism sharing similar root causes. Since definitions of radicalization (and especially terrorism) proved to be very vague, each case of radicalization should be analysed separately and with regard to context.

identified various target groups and motivational factors for Europeans to fight in foreign conflicts. RAN found that the current foreign fighter demography goes beyond the stereotypical young male. Teenagers, women and whole families with different characteristics - e.g. criminals, unemployed, students, converts, middle class, etc. - have been recorded as foreign fighters (Radicalization Awareness Network 2014: 3). In Kosovo the picture looks more homogeneous, since the only known foreign fighter cases have been exclusively those of males that were between 20 and 54 years old (The Huffington Post 2014). The motivational factors that RAN mentioned are mainly linked to religious identities and the duty that is derived from them: The duty to protect the community (Ummah) in a historic center of Islam (the medieval Bilad al-Sham) in a supposedly winnable war against enemies (e.g. the international community) is a textbook example for a motivational chain (Radicalization Awareness Network 2014: 3).

However, individual reasons for partaking in conflicts in Syria and Iraq will be more complex than this simplified example, since foreign fighters come from different countries all over the world. Kosovo's case is special, because the country is both pro-European and predominantly Muslim. Islam in Kosovo (KIPRED 2005: 2 et seqq.) has not attracted much attention in the past and due to Kosovo's historical development, Muslims even shared facilities and cultural habits with Christians. As described earlier in this text, radicalization in Kosovo has evolved in especially neglected areas. Structural grievances such as lack of welfare and education have to be also considered in the root cause analysis.

### **Efforts undertaken to fight radicalization**

The efforts undertaken by states to fight radicalization of their citizens have preventive, punitive and reintegrative components. Barrett claims that although those approaches are usually employed simultaneously, reintegration does not receive as much attention as prevention and punishment (Barrett 2014: 9, 27). One preventive and at the same time punitive mechanism is the creation of laws that criminalize participation in foreign conflicts. Some countries' laws even go as far as to forbid membership in organizations

such as ISIS. The latter, however, is not easy to enforce since it requires extensive data collection and cast iron proof. A problem that arises with stigmatizing laws is the effect that they can have on a foreign fighter's willingness to return home. There have been many cases of disenchantment amongst foreign fighters. The prospect of punishment upon returning will likely discourage fighters from going home rather than making it easier (Barrett 2014: 27). In the favour of reintegration, punishment should be weighed up against reintegration. Not all of the foreign fighters pose a security risk when they come back. The problem of job loss and rejection that many fighters face after their return is very problematic for reintegration. To separate the ones who reconsidered their participation in foreign conflicts from those who are still actively supporting the cause abroad, Barrett recommends to involve families of foreign fighters and the communities that they come from (Barrett 2014: 28).

In Kosovo, the biggest effort that has been undertaken so far is the creation of the law that prohibits citizens to fight abroad without authorization. A document that assess ISIS and its risk potential for Kosovo, furthermore acknowledges the importance to understand why citizens decide to fight in foreign conflicts and why they return<sup>3</sup>.

### **Recommendations for further research**

Radicalization is a trending public security issue in Kosovo. Research so far has primarily focussed on foreign Muslim organizations and on interviewing foreign fighters that came back to Kosovo<sup>4</sup>. With regard to the Human Security project, further studies of the vulnerabilities that cause radicalization amongst Kosovar citizens will be desirable. Since the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is a global one, comparative analyses with other regions can add value to understanding radicalization in Kosovo. Over the last years, terrorism and radicalization studies acquired a lot of knowledge that especially concerns individual developments (e.g. identity, etc.). Those findings can be used for analysing Kosovo's foreign fighters. Besides that, more context oriented research is necessary in order to work out solutions to prevent and to deal with

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<sup>3</sup> "ISIS, rreziku për Kosovën, August 2014: 24".

<sup>4</sup> The paper that is based on this research has not been published, yet.

radicalization. Context oriented research could include: a follow-up study on the status quo of foreign Muslim organizations in the whole area of Kosovo; interviews with families and communities of foreign fighters; or governmental activities concerning religious education and the freedom of religion in Kosovo.

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