

Religious Radicalisation in the Albanian Diaspora



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Abstract

Since the emergence of the Islamic State (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ISIL, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ISIS) in early 2014, different countries have followed different paths in dealing with the problem of their citizens who have joined ISIS and have then tried to return to their home countries. Many countries established de-radicalisation programs while most also adopted laws declaring illegal the participation in such wars abroad and subsequently prosecuting, trying and jailing many of their own returning “foreign fighters.” Balkan states have been struggling with challenges similar to those confronting the rest of Europe. However, one aspect that was given little attention concerns the connections which Balkan foreign fighters and recruiters established with their Diaspora in Western Europe. Some media and analytical reports indicate that many of the second-generation young men and women of Balkan nationalities, living in the West, have become equally or even more radicalised and joined jihadist organisations in conflict areas in the Middle East. These reports reveal that a major role in the radicalisation and recruitment process belongs to networks established by key radical religious leaders in the Balkans, who are often back at home accused of links to terrorism or under increasing criticism for promoting a politicised version of Islamic practice. These leaders often appear as preachers in mosques in the Diaspora, opportunities they use to strengthen their networks and recruitment. This paper explores the connections between religious radicalisation and violent extremism in the ethnic Albanian-speaking Diaspora in Europe.

Introduction

It has been five years since the Islamic State and its de facto leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, declared the creation of an Islamic *caliphate* in the territories that the group occupied in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State attracted more than 40,000 foreign fighters from across the globe,^[1] 6,000 of whom were from Europe, including more than 1,000 citizens of various Balkan countries. Along with thousands of combat fighters, women and children were a significant part of the group's demographic. In the hope of creating a new utopian society operating under Sharia law, women and children were actively displayed as part of ISIS ideology and propaganda efforts that continue to inspire followers from across Europe and beyond. After the initial expansion, the power of ISIS and its hold on territory steadily weakened due to military and intelligence operations conducted by a US-led military coalition. The caliphate collapsed in 2018 and by late 2019 it remained in control of only few small pockets of territory in Syria. In Iraq and many other countries, however, ISIS went underground, blending back into the population but remaining active online. Experts observing developments in the Middle East feared that the latest Turkish military offensive against Kurdish forces in Northern Syria could provide ISIS with another opportunity to regroup and try to regain some of the territories it lost. There is still no clear assessment of the level of threat posed by ISIS in the long term, but its activity suggests that the group will remain a leading global security and terrorist threat for the foreseeable future.

The emergence of the group on the international stage forced governments, security agencies and academics to pay close attention to the push and pull factors that attract supporters of jihadist movements into violence and involvement in terrorism. Despite these efforts, researchers and experts continue to find it difficult to determine a general profile of individuals involved in violent extremism and terrorism. Research has found that terrorist organisations, including ISIS, have historically attracted diverse demographic compositions of men and women of

varying socio-economic status and cultural background. Earlier research increasingly suggested that low economic status and low levels of education play a crucial role in the decision-making process of individuals that are attracted to violent ideologies and their predisposition to support terrorist organisations. Although experts believe that there is a strong correlation between economic standing, level of education and involvement in terrorism, assessment of individual profiles of former terrorists in the past challenges this hypothesis among terrorism scholars. The debate continues to trigger controversy, but also opens avenues to new methods of analysis and schools of thought when looking at radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism research.

Years of research has turned the wheel in a different direction, forcing policy experts and security professionals to expand consideration of the psychological and sociological elements that give life to violent ideologies and recruitment into terrorism. The pool of thousands who joined ISIS from over 100 countries worldwide offers an important case study, but also underscores the complexities of the matter at hand.

It is increasingly important to recognise that a sense of belonging and quest for identity are significant factors that drive generations of supporters of jihadist movements and their embrace of ISIS goals. The pool of European nationals who joined ISIS offers some insight into the demographic composition of jihadist supporters. It is known, for instance, that second-generation European citizens from a migrant background are among the most susceptible to the influence of radical ideologies. This study finds that Balkan migrant communities, though to a lesser extent than their Middle Eastern counterparts, are also affected by violent ideologies that aim to promote jihadist causes among European societies. The ethnic Albanian Diaspora community in Europe is not immune to the outreach of politically-motivated Islamist ideologies and has in the past accounted for a number of recruits to terrorist organisations including al Qaeda and ISIS.

Initial observations reveal that the ethnic Albanian Diaspora in Europe is increasingly active through religious organisations that offer Diaspora members shared spaces for congregation, social support, opportunities for interaction and cultural activities for those who want to maintain strong ties with their countries of origin. This study finds that the ethnic Albanian Diaspora in Europe sees religious affiliation and traditional values as a form of continuity and a way to safeguard a sense of identity tied to their countries of origin. Ethnic Albanian Diaspora populations have not been impervious to radical religious influences aimed at promoting extremist ideologies and fomenting social divisions within religiously moderate ethnic Albanian communities in the West.

The rise of right-wing and anti-immigrant populist narratives throughout Europe has intensified these debates among Balkan migrant populations as well, resulting in growing cultural marginalisation or even alienation of ethnic or religious minorities living in Europe. This has left migrant populations grappling for political, cultural, religious representation and leadership. In the absence of credible institutions and the lack of capacity of Western Balkan governments to attract the attention of their Diaspora populations, other forces are filling an important social and political vacuum by introducing radical religious ideologies among existing Balkan Muslim populations that have led largely moderate and secular lives in Europe.

This ongoing struggle is partially manifested through the growing support for militant groups and extremist ideas among some members of Western Balkan Diaspora communities. This study finds that a significant number of ethnic Albanian fighters with groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS were also members of the ethnic Albanian Diaspora in a number of European countries. Ethnic Albanians from Diaspora communities who participated as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq were reportedly radicalised in their adopted countries, but the increasing influence of religious preachers from the Western Balkans is similarly significant. Radical preachers seem to have exploited social marginalisation and feelings of exclusion as part of their rhetoric to draw support among Diaspora members. It is also increasingly evident that in order to expand their support among Albanian Diaspora,

some religious preachers use nationalism and parts of religious ideology while promoting the unification of all territories dominated by ethnic Albanians in the Western Balkans in a *Greater Albania*. Even though political Islam in essence is of a globalist nature and seeks to eradicate national borders, nationalism adds value to religious ideologies among ethnic Albanian populations traditionally largely secular.

For the purpose of this study the author consulted available literature, media reports and relevant online audio and visual materials that show the outreach efforts of radical religious leaders and the narratives used when addressing Albanian Diaspora in Italy, Germany and Switzerland. In addition, for the purpose of this report, field interviews were conducted with community representatives, religious leaders and field experts in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Italy, Switzerland and Germany.

Background on the ethnic Albanian Diaspora

Scholars roughly define Diaspora as “groups of people who live in a foreign country but maintain a close relationship with their country of origin.”^[2] Albanians and ethnic Albanians in the Western Balkans have a long history of leaving for different parts of the world due to conflicts, poverty, social unrest and/or political changes at home, with the most recent exodus occurring during the final days of the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, which closed Albania’s borders for over 45 years. Since the fall of the communist regime in Albania and the dissolution of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, transnational labour migration of ethnic Albanians living across the Western Balkans has risen steadily.

According to the most recent migration profile from the International Organization for Migration, IOM, roughly 1.4–1.5 million migrants from Albania currently live abroad. This group can roughly be divided according to the period of their migration; the so-called “Old Diaspora” consists of those who emigrated before 1990, while the “New Diaspora” consists of those who emigrated later. The old Diaspora is mainly settled in the United States, Latin America, Australia, Turkey and some western European countries, while the new Diaspora is settled in Greece, Italy, the US and UK among others, with fewer in old Diaspora countries.^[3]

Over the years, the ethnic Albanian Diaspora has become a vibrant part of Europe’s political, social and economic life. However, the involvement of ethnic Albanian communities and citizens in organised criminal activities is increasingly a topic of European media coverage and discussion among policy-makers. Ongoing migration patterns and Albania’s role in addressing organised crime and corruption remain points of contention with European Union member states in the context of Albania’s EU membership ambitions. The negative image of ethnic Albanian communities living in Europe appears to have contributed to the intensification of debates

regarding Albania's place in Europe and the importance of religion in the composition of ethnic identity. These factors add to the cultural marginalisation of ethnic Albanians across Europe by opening the space for vulnerability and feelings of alienation among members of the Albanian Diaspora who may turn to religion and religious groups for comfort and networks of support.

Foreign Fighters and Diaspora

According to the estimates of authorities in the region, roughly 1,100 foreign fighters from the Balkan region joined the war in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016.^[4] The largest concentration is primarily from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but other areas in the Western Balkans are also represented in this group. Ethnic Albanians comprise nearly half of the Western Balkans contingent of fighters with an estimated 450-500 fighters.^[5] They are believed to originate primarily from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, but fighters from ethnic minority areas of Serbia as well as Montenegro are also recorded. An estimated 150 came from Albania, including a significant number of women and children. About 40 individuals were able to return home in the early years of the war. There are still more than 70 people, including family members of ISIS combatants, who remain in Syria, and are held in Kurdish-controlled camps awaiting repatriation. To date, Kosovo and BiH are the only countries in the region to have mounted large-scale operations to repatriate their citizens. In April 2019, Kosovo brought back some 110 family members of ISIS fighters and a smaller number of combatants. The combatants face being jailed, while a number of women await trial for their potential involvement in jihadist-related activities.^[6]

Anecdotal evidence and analysis of the jihadist networks of Western Balkans supporters reveal that members of Diaspora communities across Europe were also part of the contingent of fighters that joined terrorist organisations in the Middle East. According to a 2018 report from the Pristina-based Kosovo Center for Security Studies, KCSS, about 20 per cent of the 403 foreign fighters from Kosovo, for instance, were born or grew up as second or third-generation immigrants in western European countries.^[7] The report states that during the establishment of the Islamic State, these individuals were among the “strongest ISIS supporters”. Even though many had little connection with their country of ethnic origin, their presence in Kosovo is believed to have increased in recent years due to family ties, but also as a

part of a wider plan to expand local networks by reaching out to supporters in Kosovo.^[8] Kujtim Bytyqi, a George Marshall Center scholar who focuses on issues of violent extremism and radicalisation in Kosovo, says that the Kosovo anti-terrorism unit was able to identify some 40 individuals with dual citizenship or residency in Western Europe who became foreign fighters in the Middle East. Due to their Kosovar citizenship and their family ties to Kosovo, they are treated by the Kosovo authorities as a part of the overall number of the contingent who traveled as foreign terrorist fighters.

The situation is similar for other Diaspora groups from Albania or North Macedonia. Although it is difficult to obtain precise data, security authorities consulted for the purpose of this study confirm that a significant number of Albanian citizens involved in violent extremism had a migrant background prior to being radicalised and traveling to the war theatre. Authorities in Albania say that about 10 of the contingent of foreign fighters from Albania were dual citizens or residents of another European country.

Bytyqi says that the networks of ISIS supporters authorities have observed from the diaspora are not as large compared to networks that have operated in the country, but they are nonetheless significant because jihadist supporters from abroad utilise family ties from their country of origin as a means to strengthen local relations with regional networks. Second-generation youths are particularly willing to strengthen these relations because they want to maintain strong connections with their identity back in Kosovo. *“Citizens from the Diaspora, whether individually or collectively, were radicalised in their host countries. Despite this, we have found some connections to their relatives and families here, but who were radicalised abroad,”* says Bytyqi.

Johannes Saal, a researcher from the University of Lucerne in Switzerland, observes that connections of ethnic Albanian jihadist supporters with networks and religious preachers from their countries of origin is a key component in their radicalisation. In his research, he challenges the long-standing assumption that radicalisation is a direct consequence of economic status and levels of integration. Rather, he believes it

is tied to questions of identity as crucial vulnerabilities that most young people of migrant background experience in a European environment which is increasingly hostile towards immigrants. *“Young immigrants become more religious after migration, which has to do more with identity, but also access to social networks,”* he says.

Saal observes that religious radicalisation is a rather recent phenomenon for ethnic Albanian communities living in Switzerland, compared to earlier Diaspora communities from the Western Balkans who maintained relations with jihadist networks in Europe. For instance, he says, there is a striking difference between Albanian-speaking and Bosnian Diaspora communities that adhere to jihadist teachings. The Bosnian Diaspora has stronger ties to jihadist preachers and ideologies due to the legacy of the Balkan wars that saw contingents of foreign fighters join the conflict in support of Bosnia’s Muslim population. This difference is manifested through the level of organisation and coordination between national and transnational supporters. When comparing the Albanian Diaspora’s involvement in this phenomenon, Saal observes that “radical Islam is a newer phenomenon” which appeared out of growing networks between preachers based in the Western Balkans and their followers abroad. Since the wars of the 1990s, Balkan Diaspora communities have invested much effort to represent a moderate version of Islam to European societies, but weak ties to governments in their countries of origin and high levels of corruption have opened doors to the growing influence of Salafi leaders, who penetrated some of the local religious communities and used their facilities and members to recruit new followers.

Religious preachers and clergy based in the Western Balkans play an important role in the radicalisation process and promotion of narratives among the ethnic Albanian Diaspora abroad. Traditionally, ethnic Albanian communities upheld a more moderate vision of Islam, without conflicting with the societal values of their host countries. *“Security agencies always overlooked Albanian migrants because they practiced Islam differently. Jihadi networks were almost nonexistent among Albanians,”* Saal says. However, he believes that Albanian preachers mainly coming from the Western Balkans played a crucial role in promoting salafism or concepts of jihadism

which were not as widely accepted or embraced by Albanian religious communities in the past. Over the years, media reports in Switzerland began picking up on these changes and were highly critical of Albanian mosques receiving preachers from Balkan countries who were facing criminal prosecutions for their alleged involvement in terrorism and violent extremism. According to several media reports, this influence created sectarian divisions between more moderate mosques and those that adopted conservative strains of religious practice among ethnic Albanian religious communities.

In his studies, Saal observes that Jihadi networks in Switzerland and across the German speaking areas in Europe were mainly dominated by North African or Iraqi supporters, but the number of Swiss foreign fighters of Balkan origin has not gone unnoticed by Swiss authorities.[\[9\]](#) Saal attributes this shift to the influence of radical preachers originating from the Western Balkans.

Swiss media have frequently criticised ethnic Albanian religious communities based in Switzerland for hosting Salafi preachers. In 2014, Kosovo authorities led a series of police operations against a number of imams suspected of instigating interfaith and interethnic hatred and aiding terrorist organisations such as Al-Nusra and ISIS in recruitment and propaganda efforts.[\[10\]](#) Shefqet Krasniqi, Ulvi Fejzullahu, Mazllam Mazllami, Idriz Bilibani were all eventually cleared of the charges, but their popularity among the ethnic Albanian Diaspora in Switzerland remains a concern for Swiss authorities.

The role of identity in radicalisation

Most research argues that low levels of education and weak socio-economic conditions often make people more vulnerable to radicalisation and indoctrination. In the Western Balkans, experts who have examined the socio-economic conditions of areas affected by the wave of foreign fighters travelling to the Middle East find that poverty, weak state welfare support structures and high levels of unemployment create the necessary conditions for “facilitating and enabling” radicalisation.[\[11\]](#) Based on this initial assumption, states across the Western Balkans have shaped policies and national strategies to respond to the phenomenon by adopting soft-power approaches that aim to reach out to communities through communication strategies as well as employment opportunities aimed at reducing economic anxiety and building trust at the local level.[\[12\]](#) Like others in the region, the Albanian government adopted the National Strategy to Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in 2015, a key element of which is the provision of economic opportunities in designated ‘hot spots.’[\[13\]](#) However, additional research challenges this assumption by arguing that individuals are susceptible to radicalisation due a complex number of factors beyond financial stability, including feelings of social exclusion and appeals to the brotherhood or sisterhood sense of belonging.[\[14\]](#)

Increasing feelings of social exclusion and the need for belonging are manifested in the support levels many salafi and wahabbi preachers have received among ethnic Albanian Diaspora youth in recent years, threatening to change the landscape of religious communities across the Diaspora and introducing often violent and politically charged ideologies that stir distrust and alienate Diaspora members from the social and public life of their host countries. According to Rejhan Neziri, an ethnic Albanian preacher from North Macedonia who leads the New Moon Mosque (Xhamia Hena e Re) located in the small town of Kreuzlingen near the Swiss-German border, there are several underlying issues that explain the shift in views and religious

rhetoric among some Swiss-Albanian youth in Switzerland. He points out that many religious preachers originating from the Western Balkans have had a negative role in shaping the minds and the hearts of Swiss-Albanian youth. *“The main narrative they present is that it’s us, Muslims, against the kuffar^[15] world. That we are in a perpetual war against this world. This is a difficult narrative to counter,”* he says.



New Moon Mosque (Xhamia Hena e Re, Kreuzlingen, Switzerland)

Neziri has led The New Mosque in Kreuzlingen for over fifteen years. During an interview with BIRN, he notes the long-standing relationship his mosque has with over 350 Albanian families that are members of his congregation. He is proud of their achievements and the level of integration that Swiss-Albanian youth of his community have been able to accomplish as vibrant parts of Swiss society.

“Compared to other states in Europe, we as Muslims are more favoured when we look at Paris ghettos or other countries around,” he says. “The education system and internal social policies are more favorable compared to many other countries in Europe. Unemployment levels are only at 2.7% at the national level and the education system has played an important role in reducing unemployment, especially among youth.” But despite a strong support system for diaspora communities living in Switzerland, Neziri recalls that even members of his community were not impervious to divisive narratives. *“There were youth who were influenced by religious leaders and salafi preachers who were primarily from Kosovo. Some were also my students, but were soon influenced by them. They began praying differently, which to us did not cause any issues because Islam embraces diversity, but the problem began when they started imposing the same rituals on other members of the jammah [congregation].”* It was at that moment, he says, that his mosque had to take measures and face the new challenges.

Neziri says that questions of identity and sense of belonging are important vulnerabilities that preachers from the Western Balkans prey on in order to gain trust and admiration. In this struggle, right-wing political narratives take advantage of the influence Islamist preachers have among youth in order to fuel anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives affecting Europe today. *“Even before September 11, Albanians and Bosnians were seen as problematic. They were called Yugo Balkans, echoing former Yugoslavia, especially younger generations that weren’t able to integrate as quickly and lacked language skills. Stereotypes, marginalisation became almost automatic. Since September 11th, there is an additional layer of discrimination, that they are Muslims. Right-wing parties have played negatively with numbers, creating fear in the local population towards diasporas. We are the largest Muslim population in Switzerland, especially coming from Kosovo,”* he says.

Neziri says this has laid the ground for radical ideologies to flourish and for ethnic Albanian youths to feel most marginalised. *“This fear is reflected at the workplace; finding a job is not as easy anymore. If you’re a woman who wears a headscarf it is not as*

easy to find a job or teach in public schools. Finding a flat to rent is not as easy either. This is where young people are the most affected. Fulfilling their potential, finding a profession and a place to live. When young people discuss these matters with each other they tend to generalise or personalise these matters, thus creating the perfect ground for an 'us vs. them' narrative”.

This, he believes, created the opportunity for radical preachers to channel personal and communal grievances into a political narrative that fosters distrust and division between communities. Most religious preachers are also active on social media, a medium which enables them to deliver teachings and sermons across national borders. Despite their influence and considerable popularity among young people, Neziri believes that their messages risk reducing complex issues into simplified dogmatic explanations that amplify victimhood. “We allowed some of these preachers into our mosque before they were prosecuted and accused of terrorism in Kosovo. We were criticised nonetheless. But they had their supporters here and we could not shy away from that. We wanted to keep our youth within our space so they didn't slip from our hands,” says Neziri.

Mixing nationalism and religious ideology

This study finds that nationalism is another of the narratives used by several religious preachers that have visited mosques throughout the ethnic Albanian Diaspora in Europe. In the past, preachers from the Western Balkans often utilised notions of nationalism and political ideas that promote the unification of Albanian-populated territories in the Western Balkans in a *Greater Albania* as means to promote a jihadist ideology. In their lectures and appearances in different events with Diaspora religious communities, ethnic Albanian preachers argue that Islamic forces will safeguard the integrity of the Albanian population in the Western Balkans against Slavic Christian foes that seek to undermine and violate the rights of ethnic Albanians in the region. In an appearance in 2011, for instance, Shefqet Krasniqi, a leading figure of the Kosovo Islamic Union[\[16\]](#), attended an annual conference held in Biel (Switzerland) where he was introduced as the keynote speaker to a cheering crowd that chanted “Takbir! Allahu Akbar!”[\[17\]](#) During his speech, he promoted the idea that state-building is intrinsically tied to religious identity, leading up to his main argument that Islam has historically been a “guardian for Albania and Albanians” against foreign enemies and on the world stage.[\[18\]](#)

This has raised eyebrows among those who study the complexities of the Albanians’ role in the Western Balkans and the interethnic struggles with other populations in the region. Compared to other nations across the region, Albanians have historically identified themselves via language and national identity, not religion. Despite Albania’s history of ties to Islam due to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Albania has a similarly long history of interfaith relations between Christians, Muslims and other ethnic groups who have supported and contributed to the formation of the state of Albania during different periods in history. As a result, most Albanians regard their religious identity as neither their primary nor exclusive identity. Over

the years, however, the importance of religious identity has been growing and is widely used by Islamist preachers across Albanian-speaking regions, often causing friction and sectarian division within Muslim communities that still adhere to secular practices and moderate teachings in Islam.

Scholars in Albania and Kosovo view the link between nationalism and religious identity with concern.^[19] Though the emergence of religious radicalisation is attributed to external influences and funding that religious institutions have received from foundations based in the Middle East and Gulf countries since the fall of Communism in Albania and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, scholars in the region have voiced concern that certain geopolitical forces are seeking to intensify the image of Albanian Islamist groups in order to portray inter-ethnic grievances alongside religious divides as a perpetual struggle between *Christian Orthodox Slavs* and *Muslim Albanians*.^[20] If this rhetoric intensifies, nationalist agendas may end up becoming hijacked by religious extremist ideologies or recast as bigger struggles between Muslims and Christians, instead of localised ethnic grievances.

Irfan Peci, a former member of jihadist organisations in Germany and now an advocate and coach for de-radicalisation programs for vulnerable youth in Germany, believes there is some truth to this. Over a period of time, Peci has observed that Salafist teachings are being embraced by ethnic Albanian communities across Germany. He maintains, however, that the ethnic Albanian Diaspora remains largely secular and more nationalistic, even though there are increasing fears of the two elements overlapping. “I know and met some Albanian Salafists and jihadists in the past but in my opinion among the Albanians the problem is the smallest compared to other Muslim Balkan nationals, like Bosnian, Sandzak and so on... because Albanians are more nationalistic and that’s why they are more skeptical,” he says. But the narratives of engagement are similar to those used in other communities, exploiting grievances and reviving historical disputes between ethnicities in the Western Balkans: “‘You are a Muslim, look at the situation today, the non-believers attack us...’ Sometimes they mention the civil war and say ‘look what the Serbian non-believers’ did to us Muslims in Bosnia and in Kosovo. They hate us because we

are Muslims and they will always attack us. That's why we need to be steadfast in holding onto Islam and be prepared,'” Peci says, characterising the messages being relayed. According to Peci, jihadist organisations rely on fostering local alliances by exploiting unresolved ethnic disputes among Muslim populations across the Balkans as a strategy to achieve the ultimate goal of global political unity among fighters and recruits across the spectrum.

Some of these elements are apparent in Islamic cultural centres and mosques holding prayers for Albanian communities in towns and cities across Europe. One example is the Albanian Islamic Centre, IAZ, in a Turkish warehouse in the outskirts of the Bavarian city of Neu-Ulm. On a Friday afternoon, most of those attending are young men who have recently migrated to Germany for work, and others who were either born or raised in Germany. At the entrance to the Centre there is a large map of appears to be Albanian territories under the Ottoman Empire, taking in Albania, Kosovo and parts of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece.

“I am from Tetovo [North Macedonia], look at the map,” remarks one recent arrival in Germany. Other young men attending the Friday prayers are well-integrated in the economic and social life of their adopted country, but there is a strong sense of nostalgia and they say that every summer they cannot wait to return to Kosovo for vacation: “That's where our heart is,” says a 23 year-old man who is studying information technology and is a follower of the Albanian Islamic Centre in Stuttgart. During prayer, the imam speaks about challenges facing the Muslim community worldwide, including divisions, separation, setbacks in jihad. But Muslims should not be discouraged, he says. “This was also the case during the Prophet's time, but Muslims nonetheless should always be aware of *munafiqs*^[21] and despite these differences, they should be united in fighting against those who try to divide them and undermine their faith,” says the imam, who is originally from Tetovo.

Western Balkans governments fail to reach out to their Diasporas, leaving a political vacuum now exploited by religious ideology

Imams from Albania and many other Albanian-speaking areas across the region actively engage with diaspora communities on a number of issues, including on gender roles in Islam, promoting a strict code of conduct with regards family values and interpersonal relationships.[\[22\]](#) In addition to inspiring and promoting a ‘takfiri’ version of Islam, which essentially aims to alienate and delegitimise indigenous religious practices that have evolved over time in relation to local customs and traditions in Albania and across the region, these imams play an important role in guiding and advising their followers in their everyday lives and personal matters. They are often regarded as teachers to their followers by dictating the do’s and don’ts on many intimate areas of daily life, while abandoning the promotion of jihadist or violent narratives that draw attention from authorities. In Kosovo, a significant number of preachers were initially arrested and investigated on suspicion of ties to ‘terrorism’ but many were subsequently released due to a lack of evidence.

In the absence of meaningful outreach efforts towards Diaspora communities, ethnic Albanians abroad have relied on individual efforts in order to maintain their cultural and national ties to their countries of origin. The Union of Albanian Muslims (*Unione Degli Muslimani Albanesi*), originally founded in 2007 in Italy, is an example. “UAMI was born out of the need to safeguard our cultural identity. We created this union with a group of students primarily from Albania. We felt the need to keep our cultural and religious identity,” says Briken Bakalli, one of the co-founders of UAMI and resident of Florence for over 20 years. “Albanians living in Italy are among the most

integrated migrant communities here. We number more than 500,000. The Italian government, even though it's not experiencing its best days in relation to migration, does not take anything from us. Our rights are safeguarded and respected. What's missing for us Albanians here is our link to Albania. The Albanian government is almost non-existent. We're almost 600,000 Albanians and the Albanian government is nonexistent in helping us maintain our own identity," says Bakalli.

The expanding network of religious influences is also seen in language schools where religious institutions prepare curricula, school environments and trained teachers for Albanian families that aim to maintain their cultural ties to their country of origin. The governments of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have fallen behind in providing similar services and investing in the continuation of cultural centres and languages classes that were once offered to children and families living abroad. For local experts, this is a worrying phenomenon, because other forces have replaced the role that the state should play in mobilising Diaspora communities. "There is an increasing number of Albanian children who attend Albanian language classes offered in mosques and religious centres", says Gani Mehmeti, a journalist and writer based in Kosovo and a vocal critic of religious influences in diaspora communities in the West. In an interview with BIRN, he recalled several instances when Islamist organisations and individuals from Pakistan and countries in the Gulf approached the Albanian language newspaper he worked for in Zurich, Switzerland, in order to publish articles and other written pieces that would promote Islamist ideas among a primarily Albanian audience. "Back in 1997, when I was still living in Switzerland and I was leading the *Rilindja* (*Renaissance*) newspaper in Zurich, Albanian children were attending regular language classes in schools and there weren't many religious institutions". Arsim Sinani, a Tetovo-based professor at the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Prishtina in Kosovo, says that it is difficult to trace the funding behind foundations and organisations that provide Albanian language classes in religious institutions in Europe, but he believes that Russian and Turkish geopolitical ambitions lie behind long-term efforts to influence Albanian populations for wider geopolitical and strategic goals via historical revisionism.[\[23\]](#) In interviews with religious leaders and Islamic cultural centre officials in Italy and

Switzerland, all acknowledged that community members contribute a periodic fee to the upkeep of their organisations.



Albanian Islamic Centre (IAZ), Neu-Ulm, Germany



Albanian Islamic Centre (IAZ), Neu-Ulm, Germany

Conclusion

Despite ongoing patterns of migration that continue to grow among Albanian populations in the Balkans, relations between local governments and their respective ethnic Diaspora remain weak and vague, leaving a political and spiritual gap for Diaspora populations that cling to their identity while living abroad. Governments in both Albania and Kosovo have recently created Ministries of Diaspora, but progress in encouraging these communities to become more active in the political and social lives of their countries of origin remains a challenge. For governments in the Western Balkans, the Diaspora is mostly seen as a financial resource for thousands of members of their families who live back home and often rely on remittances.

But Diaspora groups interviewed for the purpose of this study believe that this relationship is unsustainable and that more must be done to attract human capital back to countries of origin. Liza Gashi, the founder of GERMIN, a non-governmental organisation that advocates for the rights of the ethnic Albanian Diaspora abroad, maintains that diaspora communities are still low on the list of priorities for governments in Albania and Kosovo. In February, the Albanian government organised a large scale summit to attract leaders, entrepreneurs and representatives from Diaspora communities to invest in their homelands. The event drew criticism over the size of its budget and the resulting lack of policy decisions.^[24] *“Albania does not have an approved budget for Diaspora, but the Diaspora Summit’s budget was about 600,000 Euros, only dealing with event logistics in Tirana,” says Gashi.*

Representatives from the Albanian Ministry of Diaspora consulted for the purpose of this study, however, maintain that the summit was the first occasion when most organisations and leaders from abroad met and were able to communicate ideas for further engagement.

According to Gashi, the wide network of religious communities in the Diaspora should not be viewed with skepticism and concern, but should be seen as as-yet untapped potential. *“Some of these mosques are not necessarily connected to radicalisation. They are a precious opportunity to network and socialise. If other options are lacking, Albanians find other means to meet between each other,” she says.*

For Albanians living abroad, community networks serve as a safety net to preserve their identity amid cultural changes and fast-moving societal shifts. Religious communities are important in mobilising support for Albanian migrants living abroad, including language classes for children, networking to find employment or cultural associations where they can gather. All these elements lack substantial support from the governments of Albania or Kosovo and the capacity to sustain such support for the Diaspora is not sufficient to meet their needs. *“We have an identity crisis among second or third generation migrants, especially those living in Germany or Switzerland. What is their future connection to their country? Beyond visits every summer to their parents’ homelands, they feel neither completely Swiss nor Albanian. Structural and institutional support is needed to address this aspect and avoid the further cultural marginalisation of this youth,” says Gashi.*

Cases of ethnic Albanian foreign terrorist fighters and supporters of jihadist organisations coming from the West are not hard to find. Recently, such cases gained media attention and demonstrated how the issue of foreign fighters and radicalisation goes beyond national borders in Albania and across the Western Balkans. The most prominent case was the story of Alvin Berisha, a young boy of Albanian origin who was born and raised in Italy until the age of six. Media reports claim that his family moved to Italy from Albania in 2000.[\[25\]](#) In 2014, Alvin went missing when his mother, Valbona Berisha, took him to Syria without her husband’s knowledge. Authorities in Italy suggest that Valbona was radicalised through frequent online communication with ISIS supporters from Kosovo and North Macedonia who convinced her to join the group and take her son with her.[\[26\]](#) Most recently, Hasan B., a German citizen of Kosovar origin, was prosecuted on charges of

terrorism financing and supporting a terrorist organisation due to his activities in “transferring funds to IS fighters”.[\[27\]](#) Similar cases are not hard to find.

The issue of radicalisation and violent extremism, in terms of Islamist radicalisation, has been widely discussed in recent years, but the debate does not seem to be over. The question continues to garner emotional responses in the context of a tense political climate that is already heightened in the face of stronger right-wing sentiments displayed openly among European leaders and the increasingly dim hopes of Balkan states advancing further towards membership of the European Union. The bloc is often criticised in the region as a ‘Christians-only club’. As the prospect of EU accession recedes, questions of identity are easily exploited by external actors who aim to gain political capital for division and distrust not only in the region but among migrant communities who live and work in major European cities but feel increasingly estranged and distant from the fellow European citizens who took them in.

FOOTNOTES

[1] United Nations, *Greater Cooperation Needed to Tackle Danger Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters*, Head of Counter Terrorism Office Tells Security Council, November 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm>

[2] Waldamn, Peter, *Radicalization in the Diaspora: Why Muslims in the West Attack Their Host Countries*, Elcano Royal Institute, 2010.

[3] Ibid

[4] Adrian Shtuni, *Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications*, CTC Sentinel, August 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/western-balkans-foreign-fighters-homegrown-jihadis-trends-implications/>

[5] Adrian Shtuni, *Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, CTC Sentinel, April 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria/>

[6] *Islamic State Returnees in Kosovo guided back into society*, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/islamic-state-returnees-in-kosovo-guided-back-into-society/a-50668479>

[7] Skender Perteshi, *Beyond the Triggers: New Threats of Violent Extremism in Kosovo*, Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), Prishtina, Kosovo, 2018 (Available at: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violent-extremism-eng_611603.pdf)

[8] Ibid.

[9] Daniel Glaus & Lorenzo Vidino, *Swiss Foreign Fighters Active in Syria*, CTC Sentinel, July 2014, <https://ctc.usma.edu/swiss-foreign-fighters-active-in-syria/>

[10] Johannes Saal, *Jihadi Mobilization Within Diasporas: Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Switzerland*, September 2017, <https://germanjihad.wordpress.com/2017/09/06/615/>

[11] Enri Hide, *Assessment of risks on national security, state capacities and society to react: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, Albanian Institute for International Studies, 2015, <http://www.aiis-albania.org/sites/default/files/Violent%20Extremism%20and%20%20Religious%20Radicalization%20in%20Albania.pdf>

[12] *Strategjia Kombetare Kunder Ekstremizmit te Dhunshem dhe Plani i Veprimit, Adopted in 2015* https://mb.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/strategjia_kombetare_per_luften_kunder_ekstrmizmit.pdf

[13] Hot spot areas where there is known to have been a larger concentration of foreign fighters originating.

[14]

https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_I_SIS_Phenomenon.pdf

[15] The term refers to a person who rejects or disbelieves in God (Arabic: الله/Allāh) or the tenets of Islam, denying the dominion and authority of God, and is thus often translated as "infidel".

[16] Tried under accusations of inciting religious and interethnic hatred, aiding terrorist organizations and tax evasion was found innocent by a Prishtina court of all charges in March 2018.

[17] The Takbīr (تَكْبِير) Arabic pronunciation: [tæk 'bi:r]^(a) is the Arabic phrase Allāhu akbar (الله أكبر), usually translated as "God is [the] greatest". It is a common Islamic Arabic expression, used in various contexts by Muslims; in formal prayer, in the call for prayer (adhān), as an informal expression of faith, in times of distress or joy, or to express resolute determination or defiance. Kongresi Vjetor ne Biel, Fjalim i imamit Shefqet Krasniqi. Biel, Switzzterland, 2011 (Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiOPEjWIXI8&t=7s>)

[18] Ibid.

[19] Familjaret e femijeve dhe grave te Sirise ne A2, A2 CNN, November 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdLcbDU2oI>

[20] Ibid

[21] In Islam, the munafiqun or false Muslim were a group decried in the Quran as outward Muslims who were inwardly concealing disbelief and actively sought to undermine the Muslim community.

[22] Ahmed Kalaja, Roli i Femres ne Propagandimin e Fese, Albanian Islamic Center, Ulm, Germany, 2013
(Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nknko16HxQ&t=16s>)

[23] Individual interview, Arsim Sinani, April 29, 2019.

[24] Esmeralda Keta, *Kostot e larta shfryjne entuziazmin per Samitin e Diaspores*, Reporter.al, February 2019, <https://www.reporter.al/kostot-e-larta-shfryjne-entuziazmin-per-samitin-e-diaspores/>

[25] *Kush eshte nena e Alvni Berishes qe ka trazuar Italine e Shqiperine*, Balkanweb, November 2019
<https://www.balkanweb.com/kush-eshte-nena-e-alvin-berishes-qe-ka-trazuar-italine-e-shqiperine-si-e-mori-djalin-e-vetem-per-siri/>

[26] Ibid

[27] *The Federal Prosecutor's Office*, December 2019
<https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/de/showpress.php?themenid=21&newsid=863>