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CAUSES OF ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION AMONG ETHNIC ALBANIANS

by

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June 2019

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CAUSES OF ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION AMONG ETHNIC ALBANIANS

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, approximately 660 ethnic Albanians from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have joined Islamic jihadist groups, including ISIS. In 2014, these governments began conducting counterterrorism operations to disrupt recruitment networks. These efforts, however, devoted fewer resources to addressing the underlying social and religious aspects of the foreign fighter phenomena. This thesis studies the factors that have contributed to radicalization of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. It applies a radicalization model to study three groups of variables: socio-economic conditions, Islamic charities and non-governmental organizations, social connections, and online propaganda as potential sources of radicalization of Albanian foreign fighters. The thesis finds that no single overarching factor can fully account for the ideological and violent radicalization of ethnic Albanians in the region. The role of Persian Gulf State charities and foreign-trained Salafi clerics are two particularly strong variables that have led to the foreign fighter problem in the three countries studied. Given these findings, the thesis concludes by recommending a greater partnership between governments, official religious associations, and civil society by focusing counter-radicalization efforts at the community level and prioritizing communities that are at risk for radicalization and violent behavior.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BIK	Kosovo Muslim Community
CCVE	Center for Countering Violent Extremism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICCT	International Center for Counter-Terrorism
IDB	Islamic Developmental Bank
IIRO	International Islamic Relief Organization
INSTAT	Albanian Institute of Statistics
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IVZ	Islamic Community of North Macedonia
KCSS	Kosovar Center for Security Studies
KMSH	Albanian Muslim Community
MWL	Muslim World League
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
RD	Relative Deprivation
RDT	Relative Deprivation Theory
RFT	Religious Fundamentalism Theory
RIHS	Revival of Islamic Heritage Society
SHC	Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Hercegovina
SJRCKC	Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya
SHISH	State Intelligence Service of the Republic of Albania
SMT	Social Movement Theory
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WAMY	World Assembly of Muslim Youth

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this work are those of the author and do not represent the official view of the Albanian Armed Forces, Albanian Ministry of Defense, or the Albanian government.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, approximately 150 citizens from Albania, 358 from Kosovo, and 156 from North Macedonia have traveled to Syria and Iraq to participate in Islamic Jihad. Initially, these foreign fighters aligned with various anti-Assad regime groups. After the declaration of the caliphate in 2014, however, most of these fighters joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and have continued to fight on its behalf. Faced with relatively high numbers of citizens joining ISIS, and following external pressure from the international community, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have started to adopt, implement, and improve counterterrorism laws and security measures aimed at managing the “foreign fighter” problem in their countries.

More specifically, from 2014 to 2015, the respective governments of the three countries began conducting counterterrorism operations to foil radicalization and recruitment networks responsible for supplying foreign fighters to ISIS. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have used laws, the judicial system, and deterrence through criminal justice to prosecute those that participate in and support terrorist activities. Nonetheless, this option only treats the symptoms of radicalization. The core issue is how to address radical ideologies that “[create or form] belief systems which justify the use of violence to effect social change and come to actively support as well as employ violent means for political purposes.”¹ An effective analysis of the factors that encourage ethnic Albanians to embrace radical Islam ideology is a first and crucial step to understanding the phenomenon, and can ultimately facilitate the development and implementation of effective strategies and plans of action to prevent and counter violent extremism at the national and regional levels.

¹Asta Maskaliūnaitė, “Exploring the Theories of Radicalization,” *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 17, no. 1 (2015): 9. DOI10.1515/ipcj-2015-0002

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

This project explores the following question: What are the causal factors that have influenced ethnic Albanians to become radicalized, embrace militant Islamic ideologies, and join violent extremist organizations, such as ISIS? To answer this question, the thesis looks at political, economic, social, ethnic, and religious factors in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

C. METHODOLOGY

Understanding the causes of radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular requires a detailed analysis that covers both the breadth and depth of possible root causes. These root causes are often “complex, multifaceted and often intertwined.”² To investigate these complex factors, this thesis uses a controlled case study comparison to unravel the sources of radicalization. Political scientist Arend Lijphart, in “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method,” observes that “interpretive case studies are selected for analysis because of an interest in the case rather than an interest in formulation of general theory.... [However,] they make explicit use of established theoretical propositions.”³ With this in mind, this thesis also draws from existing theories to structure the analysis and comparison of the case studies.

Specifically, this thesis draws on three theories to construct an analytical framework: Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), Social Movement Theory (SMT), and Religious Fundamentalism Theory (RFT). These three theories provide the foundations for examining the causes of Islamic radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular among ethnic Albanians.

This thesis scopes the analysis into three interpretive, descriptive case studies of ethnic Albanians residing in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. In this context, to understand radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular, political,

²Ömer Taspınar, “Fighting Radicalism, not ‘Terrorism’: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined,” *SAIS Review*, vol. XXIX, no.2 (2009):76.

³Arend Lijphart, “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method,” *The American Political Science Review*, 65, no. 3 (1971): 691, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1955513>.

social, economic, and religious factors are explored and used to provide a comprehensive understanding of why some ethnic Albanians have radicalized and decided to join violent extremist groups, such as ISIS.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to consider the factors that have led to Islamic radicalization and how this radicalization has led to violent action in particular as a phenomenon that is visible among ethnic Albanians as a single group dispersed across three countries of residence: Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. This approach provides a better insight into the issue of Islamic radicalization broadly for this ethnic group and how the governments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia can better develop and implement national strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism. For country data and evidence, this project uses journal articles, government reports, databases, policy papers, research articles, and online information from various governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO).

D. FINDINGS

The thesis finds that Albanian foreign fighters from the three countries studied come from a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, genders, and areas within their countries, and many have ties to friends and family members that have already joined ISIS. Therefore, no single factor fully explains the path to violent radicalization and the decision of some ethnic Albanians to join ISIS.

Nevertheless, the investigation does point to some possible causal factors of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. First, the inability of governments to address socio-economic grievances, coupled with regional and local episodes of war and violence, including the violent outbreak in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, have provided opportunities for various Islamic charities and NGOs from Persian Gulf countries to gain a foothold in the Balkans, including in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Some of these charities, such as the Al-Haramain and Muwafaq foundations, under the guise of providing humanitarian assistance, have conducted terrorist activities, including money laundering, harboring jihadi militants from the Middle East, and planning terrorist attacks against critical targets

in the region. Aside from these nefarious NGOs, virtually all of the charities and NGOs from the Persian Gulf have introduced jihadi Salafism to the region alongside providing much necessary social and economic support to areas and communities in need. They have sponsored infrastructure building, education, and other social services within communities where governments have failed to effectively address socio-economic grievances. Critically, these charities have facilitated the proliferation of radical interpretations of Islam, especially Salafism.

Second, and more importantly, these charities have provided scholarships for young Albanians to attend theological universities in Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Upon return, most of these young clerics have continued to proliferate a foreign and radical interpretation of Islam, contrary to traditional Islamic values and practices of the Balkans. Some clerics have adopted jihadist Salafism and have played a key role in radicalizing and recruiting a significant portion of the 650 ethnic Albanian foreign fighters originating from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Third, personal relationships, such as family and friends, have also influenced individuals to join ISIS. Instances of families and friends traveling together as a group to join ISIS are evident across the three countries. Kosovo has had the largest number of foreign fighters traveling as a family, including siblings, women, and children.

Finally, the thesis identifies four broad ISIS propaganda narratives presented in the Albanian language: 1) the establishment of the caliphate and its implementation of full sharia law; 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah* (emigration), as well as the mandate to conduct jihad and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood. While more work needs to be done on the role that ISIS propaganda has played in recruiting Albanian foreign fighters, these generic terms provide an important foundation upon which local imams may have radicalized fellow congregants.

E. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ALBANIANS IN THE BALKANS

To better understand how ethnic Albanians came to be dispersed across several states in the Balkans, it is important to provide a brief historical overview of the region. While this discussion could easily require the length of a book, this section focuses rather on a few key events that created the modern-day states in the Balkans and some of the region's ethnic tensions.

The first important event that shaped the modern-day Balkans is what is known as the Great Eastern Crisis.⁴ This crisis, also referred to as the 1875–1878 Balkan crisis, involved a series of wars between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkan League—initially formed by Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania, and joined later by Russia in 1877. Ultimately, the Ottoman Empire lost this conflict, and the crisis ended with the short-lived treaty of San Stefano, which was signed on 3 March 1878.⁵ According to the treaty, Bulgaria gained extensive territories including today's Macedonia, regions of northern Greece (Thracia), and eastern territories of present-day Albania. Serbia gained independence and stretched into the northern areas of current day Kosovo, including Mitrovica and Pristina. Montenegro, similarly, gained independence and occupied majority ethnic Albanian regions in western Kosovo and north-western Albania.⁶ In response to the treaty, Albanian nationalists formed the League of Prizren on 10 June 1878 with the aim of uniting all Albanians, politically and militarily, in order to regain lost territory and prevent further partitioning of Albanian lands among its neighbors.⁷

At the same time, on 13 June 1878, Austro-Hungary, Germany, France, Britain, and Italy convened in Berlin to reverse the territorial changes implemented by the treaty of San Stefano because the great European Powers feared an increase in Russian

⁴Leslie Rogne Schumacher, "The Eastern Question as a Europe Question: Viewing the Ascent of 'Europe' through the Lens of Ottoman Decline," *Journal of European Studies* 44, no. 1 (2014):65–66, DOI: 10.1177/0047244113508363.

⁵Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 43.

⁶Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian*, 42–43.

⁷Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian*, 44.

influence in the Balkans, mainly through the enlargement of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro. On 13 July 1878, through the Treaty of Berlin, these powers compelled Russia to accept a new peace agreement and return most of the territories to the Ottoman Empire, especially land gained by Bulgaria and Serbia.⁸ The Ottomans, however, lost Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and Montenegro retained some of Albania's territories, despite efforts by the Albanian League to lobby the Berlin congress to recognize Albania's claims to autonomy. In the end, the main purpose of the Treaty of Berlin was to reduce Russian influence in Bulgaria, keep the Ottoman Empire in Europe by giving it full control of Albanian and Macedonian territories, and prevent Serbia from growing stronger.⁹

Albanians' aspirations for a unified nation that included all Albanian territory received a major blow in 1908, when the Young Turks came to power by overthrowing the Ottoman Sultan and establishing a constitutional government.¹⁰ Many Albanian elites hoped that, by supporting the Young Turks, they would achieve their national aspirations of a full autonomous Albanian state. However, the Young Turks did not deliver on promises of full autonomy and Albanian dreams of independence were eventually undermined by regional powers. In 1912, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria formed another Balkan League to completely drive the Ottomans from the Balkans in what became known as the First Balkan War. Albanians sided with the Ottomans to receive military aid and help in confronting the Serb and Montenegrin armies in the North, Bulgarian and Macedonian forces in the East, and Greek forces in the South. By the end of 1912, allied Greek and Serbian troops confronted Ottoman forces and defeated them. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy supported Albanian elites in their declaration of independence on 28 November 1912, at the Congress of Vlore.

The conference of ambassadors, convened in London in December 1912, recognized Albanian independence, but about half of the territories with ethnic Albanian

⁸Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian*, 44.

⁹Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian*, 45.

¹⁰*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Young Turks: Turkish Nationalist Movement," accessed 15 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Young-Turks-Turkish-nationalist-movement>.

populations were left outside the newly formed Albanian state, including Kosovo and western parts of Macedonia. These territories were annexed by Serbia. Greece received the southern Albanian region that Albanians called Çameria, and Montenegro maintained territories received from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and some territories in western Kosovo.¹¹

Kosovo remained part of Serbia, first under the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes that was formed in December 1918, and renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929,¹² later part of Communist Yugoslavia that was created in 1946, and finally part of Serbia after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) intervention in the Kosovo conflict in 1999 eventually opened the road for Kosovo's independence on 17 February 2008.¹³

During these various periods, the central Serb government brought Serbian settlers to Kosovo, attempted to assimilate ethnic Albanians by not allowing the Albanian language to be taught in Kosovo, and instituted forced migration that drove many Kosovar Albanians and ethnic Turks to Turkey, particularly between 1918 and 1941.¹⁴ Again, after Slobodan Milosevic came to power in 1987, the Serbian Government enacted repressive measures against Kosovo Albanians that culminated with the 1998–1999 atrocities that warranted NATO's intervention to prevent further ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians.¹⁵

¹¹Dick Zandee and Dick A. Leurdijk, *Kosovo: From Crisis to Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10–11.

¹²*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes: Historical Kingdom, Balkans [1918–1929]," accessed 15 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kingdom-of-Serbs-Croats-and-Slovenes>.

¹³Albert Rohan, "Kosovo's Path to Independence," European Council on Foreign Relations, last updated 2 February 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kosovos_path_to_independence.

¹⁴Zandee and Leurdijk, *Kosovo: From Crisis to Crisis*, 13–14.

¹⁵Zandee and Leurdijk, *Kosovo: From Crisis to Crisis*, 19–25.

At the end of World War II, Macedonia was declared the People's Republic of Macedonia and became part of the Yugoslav federation.¹⁶ Following this, in 1948, Macedonia was 68.5 % ethnic Macedonians, 17% ethnic Albanians, and around 8.3% ethnic Turks.¹⁷ On 8 September 1991, Macedonia declared independence from the Yugoslav Federation without violence, unlike neighboring Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which all went to war against Serbia between 1991 and 1995 in the Wars of Yugoslav Secession.¹⁸ Since then, however, the stability and integrity of Macedonia has been threatened in the domestic and regional arenas.¹⁹ At the regional level, Macedonia's neighbors, especially Greece and Bulgaria, did not accept a "Macedonian Nation" or "Macedonian State," a dispute that dates back to the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and World War II.²⁰ In 2019, after intense pressure from Greece, Macedonia officially changed its name to North Macedonia.²¹

Disputes over Macedonian statehood had considerable effects on the country's domestic politics and interethnic relations during the early years of independence. As of 1994, ethnic Macedonians constituted 66.5% of the population, whereas ethnic Albanians made up 22.9% of the population, Turks 4%, Roma 2.3%, Serbs 2%, Vlachs 0.04%, and other minorities comprised the remaining 2.26% of the population, including Bosnians, Croatians, and Bulgarians.²² Given the multiethnic nature of society in Macedonia, attempts to strengthen the Macedonian state and nation have proven challenging. The 1991 Constitution declared that "[...] Macedonia is established as a National state of the

¹⁶Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 28.

¹⁷Andrew Rossos, *Macedonia and Macedonians: A History* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2008), 256.

¹⁸Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict*, 142.

¹⁹Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict*, 12.

²⁰Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict*, 28.

²¹Stephanie Halasz et al., "Macedonia officially changes name to North Macedonia, drawing line under bitter dispute," CNN, last updated 13 February 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/13/europe/north-macedonia-name-change-intl/index.html>.

²²Rossos, *Macedonia and Macedonians*, 8.

Macedonian people, which guarantees the full civic equality and permanent coexistence of the Macedonian people with the Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Romas and other nationalities.”²³ Furthermore, the North Macedonian Constitution also created a strong central government and redrew municipal borders. Ethnic Albanians did not accept this constitutional arrangement that reduced political status of non-Macedonian nationalities to minorities and a reduction of political power at the national level.²⁴ These political grievances added to the pre-1991 socio-economic discrimination of minorities, including ethnic Albanians, and the inability of the political system to address the wide range of grievances led to the five-month-long ethnic Albanian uprising in 2001.²⁵

The United States and the European Union helped broker a ceasefire between ethnic Albanians and the Macedonian government through the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which was signed on 8 August 2001.²⁶ The agreement laid the groundwork for addressing the political demands of ethnic Albanians, and major changes were made to the 1991 Constitution, including decentralization of power to municipalities. Furthermore, laws were enacted to ensure equitable representation and greater ethnic minority rights in public administration, education, healthcare, and employment, particularly for ethnic Albanians.²⁷

Nonetheless, the 2001 conflict increased distrust between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in general. This distrust has shaped and aligned internal politics and social life along ethnic identities and has produced more divisive rather than inclusive state building efforts. Additionally, ethnic Macedonians view the Albanian state as having a role in influencing separatist demands of the more radical elements within the

²³Armend Reka, “The Ohrid Agreement: The Travails of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Macedonia,” *Human Rights Review* 9, no. 1 (2008):57, DOI 10.1007/s12142-007-0029-z.

²⁴Aisling Lyon, “Decentralization and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: A Case Study of the Republic of Macedonia” (PhD diss., University of Bradford, 2012), 52–53, <http://hdl.handle.net/10454/5693>.

²⁵Lyon, “Decentralization and the Management of Ethnic Conflict,” 55–56.

²⁶Rossos, *Macedonia and Macedonians*, 280; Lyon, “Decentralization and the Management of Ethnic Conflict,” 68–69.

²⁷Rossos, *Macedonia and Macedonians*, 280.

ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. These views emerged during World War II, when the Albanian puppet government attempted to align non-communist Albanian support for the Axis Powers in the Balkans, including those in Macedonia.²⁸ Yet, Albania, unlike Bulgaria and Greece, recognized Macedonia's independence with no reservations in 1991.²⁹ Furthermore, post-1991 internal political and social challenges prevented Albania from getting involved directly in Macedonia's domestic troubles.³⁰

The Albanian state itself has also faced considerable challenges in the 20th century. From 1944 to 1985 under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, Albania endured the most repressive communist regime in the region.³¹ Strictly enforcing a Stalinist ideology, Enver Hoxha broke ties with the Soviet Union in 1960, which had initiated a destalinization program under Nikita Khrushchev. The regime instead aligned with China until 1978, when Enver Hoxha severed ties with the Chinese over their economic reforms, which Hoxha considered to be capitalist in nature.³² With the Chinese gone, the regime lost its last source of foreign aid and turned toward self-reliance and autarky.³³

After the fall of communism in 1991, Albania entered “a rocky road” to “a pluralistic democracy and a market economy.”³⁴ The country inherited a devastated economic and social welfare system. Foreign aid that followed during the early years of pluralism helped the Albanian democratic government to improve Albania's economy and consolidate democratic institutions.³⁵ However, positive economic growth and socio-political order were disrupted by the 1997 breakdown of fraudulent “pyramid investment

²⁸Lyon, “Decentralization and the Management of Ethnic Conflict,” 72; Elez Biberaj, *Albania in Transition; The Rocky Road to Democracy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 19.

²⁹International Crisis Group, *Macedonia Report: The Politics of Ethnicity and Conflict*, (Skopje: ICG, 21 October 1997), 3, https://www1.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/world/europe/south_east_europe/macedonia/MacedoniaPoliticsOfEthnicityandConflict.pdf.

³⁰Lyon, “Decentralization and the Management of Ethnic Conflict,” 71.

³¹Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 22.

³²Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 24–26.

³³Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 26, 72.

³⁴Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 148.

³⁵Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 188–189.

schemes” that began in 1991.³⁶ A study on this issue estimates that, by 1996, these schemes accounted for total deposits equivalent to half of Albania’s gross domestic product (GDP) at that time.³⁷ With some of these companies offering as much as a 50% return on investment, many Albanians sold their houses and properties to benefit from the schemes. By the end of 1996, however, some of these companies could not make payments and declared bankruptcy. Aggrieved from having lost their lifetimes’ savings and investments, Albanian citizens took to the streets in various cities throughout the country, eventually leading to an armed revolt that lasted for almost five months.

The UN Security Council, under Resolution 1101, authorized an Italian-led multinational humanitarian mission that aided in the restoration of law and order.³⁸ By the summer of 1997 a new government was elected and seated. However, the 1997 civil war damaged Albania’s progress in economic development and democratization, in addition to weakening its position in the region. This was especially true of its ability to negotiate with its neighbors in regard to demanding more rights for Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.³⁹

The previous discussion does not provide a detailed historical, political, or socio-economic account of ethnic Albanians living in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Yet, this brief summary offers highlights of critical moments and context that will help facilitate an understanding of the political, social, and economic factors that may have contributed to the emergence of religious radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular.

F. OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter II begins with a literature review of the causes of social grievances broadly, and the conditions under which people adopt radical

³⁶Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 202.

³⁷James P. Korovilas, “The Albanian Economy in Transition: The Role of Remittances and Pyramid Investment Schemes,” *Post-Communist Economies* 11, no. 3 (1999):409, DOI: 10.1080/14631379995940.

³⁸Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 326.

³⁹Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 329–330.

ideologies. First, the chapter studies Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory, which provides the basis for understanding sources of grievances and their role in explaining the emergence of ideological and violent radicalization.⁴⁰ Then, the chapter outlines Social Movement Theory, which explains how social processes, political opportunities, and mobilizing structures transform grievances into collective actions that seek social and political change.⁴¹ Additionally, the chapter studies concepts from Religious Fundamentalism Theory literature, including factors that influence the rise of fundamentalist interpretations of religions, including Islamic fundamentalism, around the world.⁴² Moreover, the chapter considered factors that influence the emergence of radical interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, and justification for use of violence to protect one's faith.⁴³ Lastly, drawing concepts from these bodies of literature the chapter proposes a model that consists of the following sets of variables: 1) political and socio-economic conditions as sources of grievances, 2) foreign NGOs and charities as a source of proliferating a radical interpretation of Islam, and 3) social connections and online propaganda as facilitating radicalization and recruitment to ISIS.

Chapters III, IV, and V use the radicalization model to analyze the rise of ideological and violent radicalization among ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, respectively, to investigate the conditions under which individuals have joined ISIS. Each of the case studies begins by investigating socio-economic conditions to understand the sources of grievances among foreign fighters in particular. Then, each chapter considers the role of foreign charities and NGOs with ties to Persian Gulf countries as sources of proliferation of foreign and radical interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism. Additionally, each case looks at the role of Salafi-educated Albanian

⁴⁰Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), ix.

⁴¹Doug McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23, 141, 261.

⁴²Gabriel A. Almond, et.al, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 7–10.

⁴³Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 45, 85, 135, 167; Heather S. Gregg, *Path to Salvation: Religious Violence from the Crusades to Jihad* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 4–7, 32–31.

clerics, and family and friendship relations as sources of radicalization and recruitment of ethnic Albanians to join ISIS. Lastly, each case evaluates ISIS propaganda in the Albanian language and the potential role it might have played in radicalizing individuals, recruiting some of them on behalf of ISIS.

Chapter VI, the final chapter, provides a summary of the findings of the thesis and presents some suggestions to the governments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia to consider in their national strategies and plans of action for preventing and countering violent extremism.

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II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

A. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to develop an analytical framework to investigate the factors that influence radicalization of ethnic Albanians in the Balkan region and the conditions under which they embrace and act upon militant Islamic ideologies. The issue of radicalization and violence in general, and Islamic radicalization and violence in particular, requires a comprehensive approach that considers factors and variables at individual, group, societal, regional, and even international levels. Looking at these various levels of analysis provides a bigger picture of the phenomenon of radicalization, specifically radicalization that leads to violence, including Islamic jihadist terrorism.

This chapter draws on three theoretical frameworks to investigate the causal factors of radicalization of ethnic Albanians: Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), Social Movement Theory (SMT), and Religious Fundamentalism Theory (RFT). This chapter starts by providing a general definition of the term radicalization, the controversies related to this term, and a causal link between radicalization and violence. It then provides a detailed look at RDT, SMT, and RFT and identifies which casual factors are important in creating conditions for radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular. Finally, this chapter constructs an analytical framework that will be utilized to analyze radicalization among ethnic Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and their tendency to join radical Islamic groups outside their countries of residence.

B. WHAT IS RADICALIZATION?

Terrorism scholar Peter Neumann, in his article “The Trouble with Radicalization,” notes that debates over the term ‘radicalization’ have caused polarization in academia, to the point where various academics “claim that radicalization is a myth promoted by the media and security agencies for the purpose of [anchoring] news

agendas ... [and legitimizing] policy responses.”⁴⁴ Neumann provides a simple definition of the term: “[a]t the most basic level, radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists.”⁴⁵ Neumann further identifies that “contention and ambiguity” exist in regard to defining radicalization as thought or as action. The former he calls “cognitive radicalization,” meaning extremist ideology or belief, and the latter extremism he identifies as “behavior radicalization,” specifically terrorism or other violent actions.⁴⁶

Terrorism experts John Horgan and Randy Borum are strong proponents for separating extremist belief from extremist behavior, putting more focus on extremist behavior.⁴⁷ Specifically, Horgan in a 2011 symposium on terrorism argues that “[scholars] should have not allowed [cognitive] radicalization to take center stage ... [and that] preoccupation, if not obsession, with [cognitive] radicalization has come at the expense of increasing our knowledge and understanding of terrorist behavior.”⁴⁸ Horgan, also, stresses the fact that “radicalization [in general] remains very poorly conceptualized ... [and] that the relationship between [cognitive] radicalization and terrorism remains poorly understood ... to the point where radicalization is used synonymously with terrorism.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Borum states that “sometimes the concepts of radicalism and

⁴⁴“Until the early 2000s, hardly any references to radicalization could be found in academic literature. The rise to prominence of the term seems to be intimately linked with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.” See Peter R. Neumann, ‘Introduction,’ in Peter R. Neumann and Jacob Stoil, eds., *Perspectives on Radicalization and Political Violence* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2008), 3; see also: Peter R. Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873.

⁴⁵Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 874.

⁴⁶Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 875–877.

⁴⁷Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 879.

⁴⁸“National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism & Responses to Terrorism (START): Lessons Learned Since the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001,” C-SPAN, video, 01:30:09, accessed 5 December 2019, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?301326-1/lessons-learned-terrorist-attacks-september-11-2001>; see also: Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 878.

⁴⁹“START: Lessons Learned Since the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001,”

terrorism become conflated.”⁵⁰ Additionally, he argues that “the term radicalization is widely used, but remains poorly defined,” and “to focus narrowly on ideological radicalization [or cognitive radicalization] risks implying that radical beliefs are a proxy—or at least a necessary precursor—for terrorism, though we know this not to be true.”⁵¹ He also adds that,

Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists—even those who lay claim to a ‘cause’—are not deeply ideological and may not ‘radicalize’ in any traditional sense. Different pathways and mechanisms operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different context. Radicalizing by developing or adopting extremist beliefs that justify violence is one possible pathway into terrorism involvement, but is certainly not the only one.⁵²

At first, it seems that both Horgan and Borum underemphasize the role that radical beliefs, ideas, and ideology play into pushing individuals or groups towards radical behavior, such as political violence or terrorism. Their concern, however, is in regard to counterterrorism policies that concentrate on counter-radicalization or deradicalization efforts that undervalue other forms or “action pathways” of involvement in terrorism.⁵³

Neumann, however, criticizes both Horgan’s and Borum’s arguments by categorizing them as “straw man” argumentative approaches.⁵⁴ He argues that the different nuances in using political violence or peaceful activism to achieve political goals are very closely related to beliefs, ideas, and ideology.⁵⁵ In addition to this, he adds that it is “...precisely because of the inherently political nature of politically motivated

⁵⁰Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no.4 (2012), 9.

⁵¹Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” 7–8.

⁵²Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A review of Social Science Theories,” 8.

⁵³“START: Lessons Learned Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,” C-SPAN.; See also: Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” 9–11.

⁵⁴Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 880.

⁵⁵Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 881.

violence that terrorist groups and their members are defined with reference to their ideology.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, he proposes that to better understand why individuals, groups, or societies justify the use of violence and terrorist acts “a holistic understanding of both cognitive and behavioral processes” is necessary.⁵⁷

Despite many disagreements on defining radicalization, most scholarship agrees that radicalization is a process. For example, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko’s “pyramid model” identifies three different levels of analysis to describe the radicalization process—individual, group, and mass—composed of 12 different mechanisms that conceptualize “radicalization as a dimension of increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings and behaviors in support of intergroup conflict and violence.”⁵⁸ Fathali Moghadam’s “staircase to terrorism” provides a conceptual model for understanding the “social and psychological processes” that radicalize individuals and drive them toward engaging in violence and terrorist acts.⁵⁹ Horgan, in *Walking Away from Terrorism*, differentiates between cognitive and behavioral radicalization by providing two terms with their respective definitions; radicalization and *violent* radicalization.⁶⁰ For this thesis, Horgan’s violent radicalization definition will be used. First, he defines radicalization in general as “the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence, but is one of several risk factors.”⁶¹ Whereas he defines violent radicalization as

the social and psychological process of increased and focused radicalization through involvement with a violent non-state movement.

⁵⁶Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 881.

⁵⁷Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 885.

⁵⁸Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008):415–433, DOI: 10.1080/09546550802073367.

⁵⁹Fathali M. Moghadam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2, (2005):161, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161>.

⁶⁰John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 152.

⁶¹Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 152.

Violent radicalization encompasses the phases of a) becoming involved with a terrorist group and b) remaining involved and engaging in terrorist activity; it involves a process of pre-involvement searching for the opportunity to engage in violence and the exploration of competing alternatives; the individual must have both the opportunity for engagement as well as the capacity to make the decision about that engagement.⁶²

Thus, the main point that Horgan portrays in the two definitions to differentiate between non-violent cognitive radicalism and violent behavioral radicalism is becoming and remaining involved with a terrorist group. But, also, when referring to violent radicalism he acknowledges that a pre-involvement phase is necessary, which, according to him, is a phase between radicalization and violent radicalization.⁶³ For this phase Horgan refers to concepts such as opportunities, exploration, search for competing alternatives, and individual capacities to make the decision to engage in violent terrorist movements. All these entail different factors, internal and external, that influence individuals and groups to shift from non-violent radicalization to violent radicalization. But, at the same time, failure to consider factors that influence the development of non-violent radicalization will provide a shallow analysis of the issues surrounding violent radicalization.

C. CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION

Considering the previous discussions, in this third section of the chapter, to better portray a holistic approach for understanding the factors that influence cognitive and behavioral radicalization, three particular theories of social sciences are reviewed. These theories are: Relative Deprivation Theory, Social Movement Theory, and Religious Fundamentalism Theory.

1. Relative Deprivation Theory

Ted Gurr, in *Why Men Rebel*, develops the RDT framework for explaining causes of political violence. This framework consists of three causal stages: 1) “development of

⁶²Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 152.

⁶³Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 151.

discontent,” 2) “politization of discontent,” and 3)” actualization in violent action against political objects or actors.”⁶⁴ Gurr writes that “to understand grievances [or discontents], we must first examine where people stand in society and what goods and bads they experience from governments. It is not enough to point to big economic and social structures.... We need to understand how people interpret situations in which they find themselves.”⁶⁵ This is important because very often scholars of political violence have considered politico-social protests and rebellions as absolute indicators of political, social, and economic factors. Instead, Gurr presents a compelling proposition that postulates that the potential for men to resort to violence can be better explained through relative rather than absolute interpretations of political, social, and economic factors. Essential to this theory is the concept of Relative Deprivation (RD), which is defined as the “perceived discrepancy between men’s value expectations and their value capabilities.”⁶⁶ In general, Gurr posits that discontent will emerge if there is a difference between what individuals actually receive (value capabilities) and what they believe they deserve to receive (value expectations). Gurr believes that this is the basic condition that predisposes men to action and violence.⁶⁷

Gurr argues that there are two general conditions that create discrepancy between “what ought to be and what is”⁶⁸ that lead to increased RD: an increase in value expectations without a comparable increase in value capabilities, and a decrease in value capabilities with comparable effects.⁶⁹ Yet, he says that the level of action or violence, including the scope, intensity, and duration “is determined by men’s belief about the sources of deprivation and about the normative and utilitarian justifiability of violent action directed at the agents responsible for it.”⁷⁰ Therefore, the perception of deprivation

⁶⁴Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 12–13.

⁶⁵Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, xi.

⁶⁶Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 13.

⁶⁷Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 13.

⁶⁸Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 23.

⁶⁹Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 92.

⁷⁰Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 13, 29–30.

is a psycho-social calculation, a subjective and relative interpretation that first starts with the individual, but can manifest into a larger group phenomena based on various local contexts of political, social, or economic factors.⁷¹ Considering this, Gurr identifies the following variables (Table 1) that cause comparable increases in expectations or comparable decreases in capabilities, resulting in increased RD.

⁷¹Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 23, 155.

Table 1. Variables that effect RD divided into value expectations and value capabilities⁷²

Sources of Rising Expectations	A brief Explanation of the variables <u>Value Expectations:</u> “Goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled”
1. New Modes of Life	Exposure to Western ways of life, modernity, increasing literacy and quality of education, increased urbanization, migration from rural to urban areas etc., are some factors that influence increased expectations.
2. New Ideologies	“Ideologies are ‘frameworks of consciousness’ which provide men with an interpretation of the world for purpose of acting upon it.” In conditions where people’s old ideational systems do not provide a solution to their grievances, they become susceptible to new ideologies that offer a better alternative
3. Value Gains of Reference Groups	If another “comparative reference group” gains more, then the perception of RD increases for the group in question.
4. Value Disequilibria	Broadly, value disequilibria relates to social standing. For example, Gurr posits that the sharp discrepancy in the socio-economic standing between groups creates favorable conditions for political disorder. But this is not limited to economic or financial factors. Unequal distribution of social/political participation and other welfare values can be sources of rising expectations.
Determinants of Value Capabilities	<u>Value capabilities:</u> “goods and conditions that men think they are capable of getting and keeping”
1. Welfare Value Capabilities	This category includes well-being, wealth, employment skills, education opportunities, health and welfare benefits in general.
2. Interpersonal Value Capabilities	This category includes those benefits achieved from socialization with others, including family, community, etc. Broadly, it relates to psychological satisfaction, such as love, belongingness, self-esteem, respect, social status, friendship etc.
3. Power Value Capabilities	This category includes participation in collective action, political processes, and a sense of order and collective safety. It refers to the extent that an individual feels that actions he or she takes are not interfered with by others.

⁷²Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 24, 92–143, 194.

The aforementioned sources of RD provide a comprehensive understanding of the development of discontent and grievances—the first causal stage necessary for political violence to occur. On the other hand, Gurr’s explanation of the treatment of the second and third causal stages of RDT—politization of discontent and actualization of political violence—are less developed. He acknowledges that the “*Why Men Rebel* model looks at the extent and structures of group organization ... but does not provide a full account of the processes by which [these groups] become organized.”⁷³ In other words, by itself, RDT does not give a full account of the mechanisms and conditions that lead to political, social, ethnic, or religious violence. However, it provides a strong foundation for identifying sources of grievances. In order to better understand the processes and mechanisms that politicize grievances and cause collective action and violence, a detailed analysis of Social Movement Theory is important.

2. Social Movement Theory

Sociologists Doug McAdam and David Snow claim that the vast literature on social movements provides various definitions of the concept of social movement.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, these definitions cover similar elements such as, “some degree of organization, some degree of temporal continuity, change-oriented goals, and some use of extra-institutional forms of action to supplement more institutional forms of action.”⁷⁵ The authors define a social movement as a “loose collectivity acting with some degree of organization, temporal continuity, and reliance on noninstitutionalized forms of action to promote or resist change in the group, society, or world order of which it is part.”⁷⁶ Generally speaking, SMT concentrates on why and how aggrieved individuals mobilize and act collectively. By contrast, Klandermans et al. claim that most social movement literature considers grievances as a given and do not specifically formulate or theorize

⁷³Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, xi.

⁷⁴Doug McAdam and David A. Snow, introduction to *Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics, and Outcomes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 1.

⁷⁵McAdam and Snow, Introduction, 1.

⁷⁶McAdam and Snow, Introduction, 1.

“how such grievances are formed.”⁷⁷ Gurr’s RDT, described earlier, complements SMT in clarifying why and how grievances emerge.

To describe the mechanisms and processes that translate grievances into social movements, sociologists McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald identify three broad categories of factors: “political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes.”⁷⁸ Political opportunities relate to a broad range of governance variables that either restrict or facilitate mobilization and collective action. McAdam et al. group these variables into four dimensions:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system.
2. The stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity.
3. The presence of elite allies.
4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression.⁷⁹

These factors influence the socio-political interaction between a social movement and the state-political system. In other words, a social movement’s organizational structure, political aims and objectives, strategies, tactics, and level of mobilization will be significantly shaped by political opportunities, which are “unique to the national [local, or supranational] context in which [these social movements operate or] are embedded.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷Bert Klandermans, Marlene Roefs, and Johan Olivier, “Grievance Formation in a Country in Transition: South Africa, 1994–1998,” in *Readings on Social Movement: Origins, Dynamics, and Outcomes*, ed. Doug McAdam and David A. Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 397–398.

⁷⁸McAdam et al., introduction to *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. By Doug MacAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

⁷⁹McAdam et al., Introduction, 10.

⁸⁰McAdam et al., Introduction, 3.

Another key variable in social movements is mobilizing structures, which are “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.”⁸¹ Mobilizing structures, in broad terms, include material resources and social processes necessary for social movements to mobilize and achieve desired collective objectives. For example, informal or semi-formal institutions such as family, friendship, volunteer organizations, religious communities and so on can be thought of as facilitating mobilization. Among formal structures or institutions that significantly enhance material resources and mobilizing capacity of social movements are NGOs, charity organizations, interest groups, political parties, and external state actors.⁸² In current times, the internet, computers, cellular technology, mass media, and social media provide vast opportunities for social movements to increase membership or publicize their interests and political objectives.

The growth of information technology also closely relates to the third factor that creates social movements, framing processes. Technology and mass media are crucial to distributing framing narratives in today’s hyperconnected world. McAdam et al. emphasize sociologist David Snow’s definition of framing as “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.”⁸³ Social movements create “structural potential for [collective] action”⁸⁴ through political opportunities and mobilizing structures. Without framing, however, this potential for action could not be realized into collective action. Framing, therefore, is a “[mediator] between opportunity, organization, and action” for a social movement.⁸⁵ David Snow and Scott Byrd claim that the framing aspect of social movements “focuses attention on the process of framing

⁸¹McAdam et al., Introduction, 3.

⁸²Ulan Sadibekov, “Understanding the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan through Social Movement Theory, and Analyzing and Evaluating its Potential Threat to Kazakhstan” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2014), 15, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/44662>.

⁸³McAdam et al., Introduction 6.

⁸⁴McAdam et al., Introduction, 5.

⁸⁵McAdam et al., Introduction, 5.

in relation to the development of innovative amplifications and extensions of [...] existing ideologies or discourses, which, in turn, are conceptualized as collective action frames.”⁸⁶ In the same vein, McAdam et al. write that,

Culture, ideology, and strategic framing...are linked because they are the topics that deal with the content and processes by which meaning is attached to objects and actions. [...] culture is the shared beliefs and understandings, mediated by and constituted by symbols and language, of a group or society. Ideology is the set of beliefs that are used to justify or challenge a given social-political order and are used to interpret the political world. Frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representation, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action.⁸⁷

These strategic frames or narratives, influenced by ideology, culture, history, and the role of leadership, are constructed through three core framing tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing.⁸⁸

Diagnostic framing leverages grievances and focuses on “consensus mobilization” to create narratives and messages of collective grievance by answering the questions “what is or went wrong?” and “who or what is to blame?”⁸⁹ Prognostic framing focuses on “action mobilization” by describing objectives to be achieved, and prescribing the means, tactics, actions that need to be taken to achieve those objectives.⁹⁰ In other words, prognostic framing answers the questions of “what is to be done and how?” of collective action.⁹¹ Motivational framing, on the other hand, “involves the elaboration of a call to

⁸⁶David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” in *Readings on Social Movement: Origins, Dynamics, and Outcomes*, ed. Doug McAdam and David A. Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 323.

⁸⁷Mayer N. Zald, “Culture, ideology, and strategic framing,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. By Doug MacAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 262.

⁸⁸Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 323.

⁸⁹Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 323.

⁹⁰Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 326.

⁹¹Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 326.

arms or rationale for action that goes beyond the diagnosis and prognosis.”⁹² Motivational framing provides the motives for inactive supporters to become active participants. Additionally, motivational framing can also provide the justification for use of violence and other sensational terrorist acts, such as suicide terrorist acts, as actions designed to achieve desired political objectives. From this discussion, it is clear that history, culture, ideology, and leadership are crucial to the framing process.

More importantly, ideology is a critical element that “distinguishes revolution from routine contention of power.”⁹³ Various ideologies have been and are the basis of legitimacy for violence and terrorist acts around the world. Religious Fundamentalism Theory in general, and Islamic fundamentalism in particular, provide the basis for understanding how ideology in a religious context influences radicalization and the use of violence. Therefore, a detailed look at RFT will enhance both RDT and SMT in explaining how militant Islamic ideologies “create or form belief systems that justify violence and extremism for social and political change.”⁹⁴

3. Religious Fundamentalism Theory

Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, in *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*, define fundamentalism as “a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.”⁹⁵ The authors clarify various problems with using the word fundamentalism and provide caution for its understanding and use. For example, terms such as radicalism, terrorism, or violent extremism are used synonymously or interchangeably with fundamentalism. Classifying fundamentalism as synonymous with terrorism or violent extremism, however, is unhelpful because it does not help distinguish between radicals, who express their views non-violently, and

⁹²Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 327.

⁹³Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 322.

⁹⁴Maskaliūnaitė, “Exploring the Theories of Radicalization,” 9.

⁹⁵Almond et al., *Strong Religion*, 17.

terrorists who resort to violent extremism.⁹⁶ Perhaps the term radicalism is more useful than fundamentalism because it denotes extreme beliefs, but not necessarily violence. After all, not all radicalized individuals become terrorists; however, almost all violent religious groups hold radical belief systems and ideologies.⁹⁷

Another opposition to the word fundamentalism comes from mainstream religious believers, who claim that the extremists or radicals, who are a minority, represent a distorted, perverted, or incorrect account of the ‘fundamentals’ of their religion.⁹⁸ Furthermore, a good number of radical groups that do resort to violence fight internal threats to the religion more so than external threats, which is not captured in the term.⁹⁹ Despite the controversies in using the term, fundamentalism is about religion. Fundamentalism “equates ‘strong religion’ with ‘purity’ and purity, with uniformity of belief and practice.”¹⁰⁰

Almond et al., in their work, study various fundamentalist movements across major world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. From this study they provide the following ideological and organizational characteristics of these fundamentalist movements. These characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

⁹⁶Almond et al., *Strong Religion*, 14.

⁹⁷I write ‘almost all terrorists...hold radical beliefs’ so as not to include those terrorist acts that are a result of an external coercion or psychological dysfunction. Also in using the term radical here I used an etymological definition to identify similarities between fundamental and radical terms. Fundamental (from Latin *fundamentum* “foundation”) and radical (from Latin *radix/radicalis*, “root/going to the origin”) have similar connotations in a religious or political context. This is the main rationale for using radical, radicalism, radicalized as expressive of fundamentalist ideologies—in both religious and nonreligious contexts, (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/>, accessed 26 November 2018).

⁹⁸Almond et.al, *Strong Religion*, 15.

⁹⁹Ami Pedahzur and Leonard Weinsberg ed., *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), 60.

¹⁰⁰Almond et al., *Strong Religion*, 17.

Table 2. Characteristics of fundamentalist movements¹⁰¹

Ideological characteristics	Summary
1. Reactivity to the Marginalization of Religion	This is the key characteristic that “labels a movement as Fundamentalist.” It describes all religious fundamentalist movements as reactionary to perceived or actual threats. Modernity, globalization, Western culture, and secularism are some of the threats that most religious fundamentalist movements react against.
2. Selectivity	For the purpose of strengthening the movement, increasing membership, gaining political credit, etc. Key authoritarian leadership within these movements specifically select religious scripture and texts, and reshape meaning and interpretations of these scriptures to differentiate between fundamentalists and mainstream.
3. Moral Manicheanism	An ‘us versus them’ worldview. Divided all into good or evil, light or dark, righteous or unrighteous.
4. Absolutism and Inerrancy	Fundamentalists tend to interpret the scriptures in absolute terms, and do not accept interpretations based on human logic and critical rationality. They strive to “preserve the absolutist character of the sacred text or tradition.”
5. Millennialism and Messianism	Belief in the end of time, and the entry or return of “the Messiah, the Savior, the Hidden Imam. In the final day of judgement, suffering will end, evil will be vanquished, and believers will be victorious.”
Organizational Characteristics	
6. Elect, Chosen membership	Members of the fundamentalist movements believe that its members are purposefully selected by divinity, and are specifically chosen to defend the religious tradition.
7. Sharp boundaries	Dualistic worldviews of the fundamentalist movements also permeate into physical boundaries.
8. Authoritarian Organization	Charismatic, inerrant leadership with extraordinary qualities that sets the leader apart from anyone else.
9. Behavioral Requirements	“[T]he members’ time, space, and activity are a group source, not an individual one. Elaborate behavioral requirements create a powerful affective dimension, an imitative, conforming dimension.” There are clearly articulated rules in regard to dress, appearance, sexuality, speech, eating, drinking, etc.

¹⁰¹Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman, “The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 32 (2006):134; see also Almond et al., *Strong religion*, 93–104.

The first characteristic, the defense of religion, “is the *sine qua non* of fundamentalism; without it, a movement cannot be labeled fundamentalist.”¹⁰² Similarly, Heather S. Gregg in *Path to Salvation* writes that “fundamentalism is defined by its goal, to protect a group’s faith, which it perceives to be under threat.”¹⁰³ These threats range from colonialism to modernity to globalization, and secularism.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Gregg writes that fundamentalism, in reaction to these threats, can be manifested both violently and non-violently.¹⁰⁵ Gregg identifies two general factors that give rise to religious fundamentalism. These factors are:

- 1) A perceived or actual threat to religion as a whole. This implies that fundamentalism is not preemptive but is reactionary.
- 2) Certain social, political, economic conditions in which fundamentalist movements or groups emerge and operate provide context in understanding why some resort to violence and others do not ‘in preserving the group’s religious practices, identity, and the way of life.’¹⁰⁶

From this theoretical background on fundamentalism, Gregg proposes a four-variable theoretical framework that explains the causes of religious violence, shown in Table 3.

¹⁰²Almond et al., *Strong Religion*, 94.

¹⁰³Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 22.

¹⁰⁴Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 27.

¹⁰⁵Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 22.

¹⁰⁶Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 27.

Table 3. Causes of religiously motivated violence¹⁰⁷

Context	Leaders	Followers	Resources
What social and political contexts produce a religious reaction?	Who is interpreting the faith and by what authority?	Why do followers believe interpretations and answer the call to fight in defense of the faith?	Which resources matter for the persistence and spread of religious violence?

Gregg uses the causal relationships among the four factors, particularly, to understand how violence is justified and why it is used in a religious context. The same variables and their causal relationships can also be used to understand cognitive radicalization (radical belief) that potentially leads to radical behavior such as violent extremism.

In relation to Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic radical groups, Islamic radicalization expert Quintan Wiktorowicz, in *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, uses similar variables to answer the questions of why Muslims radicalize in Western societies and why they join radical groups that act violently to achieve their goals.¹⁰⁸ He groups these variables into three broad parallel processes: cognitive opening and religious seeking, constructing sacred authority, and culturing and commitment.¹⁰⁹ Wiktorowicz claims that cognitive openings are caused by moments of crisis. Factors that introduce crisis are numerous and vary across individuals. Wiktorowicz categorizes these factors into economic, social-cultural, political, and idiosyncratic experiences.¹¹⁰ Additionally, he adds that cognitive openings can also be encouraged by movements, groups, or leadership through outreach, networking, and socialization.¹¹¹ Once a cognitive opening is manifested, the individual is more likely to go through a “religious

¹⁰⁷Source: Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 31.

¹⁰⁸Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 20–30.

¹⁰⁹Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 20–30.

¹¹⁰Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 20.

¹¹¹Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 21.

seeking process ... in which an individual searches for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve discontent.”¹¹² In this process, the role of radical religious groups, with all of their religious resources, becomes even more important. Ultimately these groups “seek to prompt religious ideological conversion.”¹¹³ Being receptive to joining is not sufficient in explaining why some become participants and others do not, or why some follow non-violent Islamic activism and others join Islamic radical groups that resort to violence.

Therefore, constructing a “sacred authority” is essential for religious leaders.¹¹⁴ Wiktorowicz identifies two criteria that Muslims use to evaluate their religious leaders and scholars: religious knowledge and good character.¹¹⁵ Once authority is established, Muslim believers can trust and accept their interpretation of religious scripture, tradition, rituals, and practices. He notes, however, that determining religious knowledge is more subjective and is based, in part, on the number of followers.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, he also stresses that good character in a religious leader is valued in terms of independence from external pressures and, if a religious scholar is not influenced by other factors rather than religious and spiritual commitment, he is perceived to have a good religious character and worthy to be followed. Radical religious groups often attack moderate leaders who are influenced by “non-religious” factors as deviant, hypocritical, or corrupt, and who do not serve religion but their self-interest. Furthermore, literal interpretations of Islamic religious scriptures and prophetic traditions, namely Quranic verses and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammed) are tools that radical leaders and scholars selectively use to attack and discredit moderate religious scholars and leaders.¹¹⁷

¹¹²Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 21.

¹¹³Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 21.

¹¹⁴Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 26.

¹¹⁵Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 137.

¹¹⁶Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 139.

¹¹⁷Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 145.

Wiktorowicz states that authority is a critical concern for all social movements that strive for collective action. He quotes terrorism expert Martha Crenshaw who says that “Leaders and their organizations help shape people’s private preferences, through ideological indoctrination, organized group actions to impress and inspire, persuasive exhortations to change one’s beliefs, and charismatic appeals.”¹¹⁸ Wiktorowicz refers to this ideological indoctrination process as “culturing and commitment.”¹¹⁹ He also adds that “through a variety of micro-mobilization contexts, especially religious lessons, Islamic activists try to convince audiences and potential adherents that their primary concern should be salvation in the hereafter.”¹²⁰ Thus, the concept of “saving one’s soul on Judgement Day” becomes a spiritual individual goal that can be channeled toward achieving the greater good of the religious community, namely protection of the faith from perceived threats.¹²¹

Wiktorowicz further identifies that the concept of divine salvation is an element of all religious fundamentalist or radical movements, specifically Salafism. Nonetheless, the ways religious leaders construct strategies for believers, adherents, and activists to achieve salvation divides leaders into three general categories: those that protect and purify the faith through religious propagation only, those that engage in the political system, and those that see violence (jihad) as the only tool to protect the faith.¹²² These divisions within Salafism are further described in the following paragraphs.

4. Salafism as “Strong Religion”

The term Salafī, from its Arabic root *salaf*, means ‘pious forefathers’ and refers to the early ages of Islam as practiced by the companions of Prophet Muhammed and the generation after them. The central idea of Salafi doctrine is living the tenets of Islam the same way as it was during this “golden era” of the faith. This is the common identity for

¹¹⁸Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 27.

¹¹⁹Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 27.

¹²⁰Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 28.

¹²¹Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 28.

¹²²Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 29.

all Salafis, who are united by a common religious creed that entails very conservative adherence to the oneness of God (Tawhid), the Quran, and the Prophetic method, or Sunna.¹²³

Despite the fact that the religious creed of Salafism is similar across the movement, different accounts on how to respond to today's religious issues and problems have created divisions within the movement. Because of these different "contextual readings" Wiktorowicz divides Salafism into three major factions; purists, politicos, and jihadists.¹²⁴ Purists are concerned with preserving the fundamentals of religion through non-violent means such as religious propagation and education. They see involvement in politics as a threat to religious purity because of political corruption. Additionally, they condemn the use of violence to establish and apply Islamic Law (Sharia) among Muslim societies because violence will produce more evil than good for the religion. Political Salafists, on the other hand, advocate that involvement in politics is necessary to establish religion within the political system because only God has legislative power over humans. They refrain from using violence and are more focused on political processes to achieve their religious-political goals. Jihadist Salafists are stronger proponents of using violence and armed struggle as the principal means of change. Thus, in Wiktorowicz's words, "[the] splits are about contextual analysis, and not belief."¹²⁵

Understanding Salafism is important for investigating of the causes of Islamically motivated violence because the ideological foundations of this movement have inspired major global terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida and ISIS. Furthermore, in a local context, ethnic Albanians in the Balkans who have joined various terrorist organizations from the start of the Syrian Civil War, including ISIS, generally are influenced by Salafist doctrine.

¹²³Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207.

¹²⁴Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 208.

¹²⁵Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 208.

Selective interpretations of religious matters and which actions to take to purify, propagate, or protect the faith—either violently, non-violently, or strictly religiously, or through the democratic process—rest with the authority of religious leaders. But interpretation alone is not sufficient to explain why some radicalized ethnic Albanians join global jihadist groups and organizations such as ISIS. Thus, besides authority and identity of religious leadership, it is also important to investigate what local formal and informal religious resources facilitate radicalization of ethnic Albanians and pushes them to join jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS.

D. AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on this discussion, the following analytical framework is used to investigate the factors that influence Islamic radicalization among ethnic Albanians in the Balkans and their tendency to join violent extremist and jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS. Cognitive radicalization is a key risk factor that influences ethnic Albanians to join violent extremist groups such as ISIS. This factor alone, however, is not sufficient. Looking at religious mobilization processes and resources can provide an understanding of how radicalized ethnic Albanians come to join terrorist organizations far away from their country of residence. Yet, it is also equally important to understand why ethnic Albanians become ideologically or cognitively radicalized in the first place. Specifically, this framework proposes answering the following three questions to better understand the conditions under which ethnic Albanians in the Balkans radicalize and embrace radical and violent Islamic groups: 1) What are the social, political, and economic factors that create sentiments of discontent and grievances among ethnic Albanians? 2) What are the religious material, organizational resources, and processes that facilitate radicalization? And 3) Why do some radicalized ethnic Albanians join violent extremist and jihadist terrorist groups? These questions are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors of religious radicalization and violent extremism

Relative Deprivation as Sources of Grievances	Resources of Religious Mobilization	Violent Radicalization
What are the social, political, and economic factors that create discontent and grievances among ethnic Albanians?	What are the religious material, organizational resources, and processes that facilitate radicalization?	Why do some ethnic Albanians join violent extremist and jihadist terrorist groups, while others do not?

E. CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the key literatures on radicalization, fundamentalism, and Salafism to begin an investigation of the conditions under which ethnic Albanians have radicalized and embraced violent groups like ISIS. Furthermore, the chapter outlined three theories, RDT, SMT, and RFT, to develop a theoretical framework that will allow a comprehensive understanding of factors that influence ethnic Albanians to be radicalized and embrace violent extremist and jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS.

The next chapter uses this framework to investigate the factors that have influenced and continue to influence ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to support and join violent extremist groups such as ISIS.

III. KOSOVO

A. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011, between 334 and 358 Kosovo nationals have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State, and 40 children have been born in ISIS-held territories, bringing the total number of Kosovars in the region to 398.¹²⁶ The majority of these citizens—approximately 80%—are reported to have traveled to ISIS-held territories between 2013 and 2015.¹²⁷ Following this increase in foreign fighters, the Kosovo government conducted a countrywide counterterrorism operation and detained around 55 individuals suspected to have joined ISIS, to be involved in foreign fighter recruitment, and to have provided radical religious preaching or engaged in religious hate speech. Within this group, the government also arrested and detained about 15 imams, Islamic clerics, among them some official imams of the Kosovo Muslim Community (BIK, in Albanian).¹²⁸ This single event prompted media coverage to label Kosovo as “fertile ... ground for ISIS”¹²⁹ and “a hotbed for radical Islamists and a pipeline for jihadists.”¹³⁰

Most of the media reports point to radical imams and radicalized individuals influenced by Salafism as the causes of the high number of foreign fighters from Kosovo relative to its population. Additionally, they stress the role of foreign charities and NGOs

¹²⁶Vlado Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*. (London: The British Council, June 2018). 6, https://www.britishcouncil.me/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf.

¹²⁷Leonora Aliu, “Choosing between Your City and Islamic State,” *K 2.0*, 17 October 2017. <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/choosing-city-islamic-state/>.

¹²⁸“Ja kush jane 55 kosovaret e arrestuar per terrorizem” (Who are the 55 Kosovan arrested for terrorism?), *Telegrafi*, last updated 17 September 2014, <https://telegrafi.com/ja-kush-jane-55-kosovaret-e-arrestuar-per-terrorizem/>.

¹²⁹Carlotta Gall, “How Kosovo Was Turned into a Fertile Ground for ISIS,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>.

¹³⁰Rita Augestad Knudsen, “Radicalization and Foreign Fighters in the Kosovo Context,” *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)*, Nupi Working Paper 875, 2017, 6, https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2442205/NUPI_Working_Paper_875_Knudsen.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y.

from the Gulf States as having directly and indirectly driven some Kosovo nationals to become ideologically radicalized and join extremist groups like ISIS.¹³¹ On the other hand, social, economic, and political factors that create favorable conditions for ideological and violent radicalization to emerge, have been significantly less studied.

This chapter argues that to better understand the phenomenon of Kosovo's foreign fighters and Islamic radicalization, in addition to the mobilization of religious resources and entities, it is crucial to look at socio-economic and political factors within a local context. This approach can help identify the sources of individual and community grievances among Kosovo Albanians that might have created or continue to create the conditions for cognitive radicalization. This approach first explains why some ethnic Albanians in Kosovo radicalize, and others do not. Then, by looking at the mobilization of religious resources, such as the role of radical Islamic clerics, foreign charities and NGOs, recruiting networks, and ISIS online propaganda, this investigation can help inform why some cognitively radicalized ethnic Albanians in Kosovo have decided to join violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, while others have not.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first provides an overview of the demographic composition of Kosovo's foreign fighter contingent, noting factors like age and socio-economic status. Focusing on foreign fighters, the second part begins with a brief summary of the radicalization model proposed in Chapter II, and then uses the analytical framework to investigate the various factors that have created a conducive environment for the cognitive radicalization of Kosovo Albanians. Specifically, socio-economic conditions, including unemployment, education, and new fundamentalist Islamist ideologies, such as Salafism, are analyzed as factors that have influenced cognitive radicalization. This section also analyzes factors, including religious NGOs and charities, radical religious leaders, and ISIS propaganda, that have facilitated behavioral,

¹³¹Ari Shapiro, "After Kosovo Emerged From War, Foreign Extremists Radicalized Youth," NPR, 24 June 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/06/24/417192078/after-kosovo-emerged-from-warforeign-extremists-radicalized-youth>; "Minister: Extremism 'exported' to Kosovo from other regions," Fox News/Associated Press, last updated 26 September 2016, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/minister-extremism-exported-to-kosovo-from-other-regions>; Hiam Nawas, "Kosovo: The Collateral Damage of Saudi's Funding Extremist Ideology", *Huffington Post*, 31 May 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hiam-nawas-/kosovo-the-collateraldam_b_10156972.html.

violent radicalization among foreign fighters. Finally, the last part provides a short summary of the chapter.

B. DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF KOSOVO'S FOREIGN FIGHTERS

In absolute terms, the total number of foreign fighters originating from Kosovo is low when compared to Western European countries such as France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Germany. In per capita terms, however, Kosovo ranks first in Europe for foreign fighters within the 2011–2017 time period. With a population of approximately 1.8 million, which is 95% Muslim, Kosovo's foreign fighter recruitment rate is about 21 fighters per 100,000 Muslim citizens.¹³²

Some scholars argue that representing relative numbers based on total population numbers is a more correct approach. For example, Adrian Shtuni, an expert in terrorism studies, argues that a per capita representation is a more correct approach. He chooses this approach because, if Europe is considered in general, a good portion of foreign fighters who have joined ISIS have converted to Islam.¹³³ More precisely, a 2016 report from the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague writes that from 11 European Union Member States, 6% to 23 % of foreign fighters are converts.¹³⁴

On the other hand, other authors argue that calculations based on the Muslim population of countries of origin provide a more accurate picture of the problem.¹³⁵ Specifically, Shpend Kursani of Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), based in Prishtina, Kosovo, advocates for calculating and reporting numbers based on the total Muslim population, especially if Kosovo is compared to other European countries. This approach would rank Kosovo well behind some Western European countries. To put it in perspective, if the Muslim population is taken as the basis for representing the flow of

¹³²Azinovic. *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

¹³³Knudsen, "Radicalization and Foreign Fighter in the Kosovo Context," 7.

¹³⁴Berenice Boutin et al., ed. "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies," International Center for Counter-Terrorism, April 2016, 4, https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf.

¹³⁵Knudsen, "Radicalization and Foreign Fighter in the Kosovo Context," 6.

foreign fighters from the country of origin, Belgium, France, and the UK have 83, 30, and 26 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslims, respectively.¹³⁶ From this point of view, Kosovo's foreign fighter phenomenon would not be as alarming as represented in major regional and international media outlets. Indeed, the tendency for researchers, terrorism experts, and Kosovo officials to use the Muslim population as the basis of comparison is because of media hype that has represented Kosovo as a "fertile ... ground for ISIS" in Europe.¹³⁷

Instead of evaluating Kosovo's foreign fighter numbers in a comparative perspective against Balkan countries and even other Western European countries, it is more appropriate to understand the dynamics of the Kosovo foreign fighter phenomenon in a strictly Kosovan context. This approach can shed light on the possible underlying causes that have influenced Albanians from Kosovo to become initially radicalized and later influenced to join violent extremist organizations such as ISIS.

Furthermore, data from various sources on foreign fighter demographic composition and place of residence show that the phenomenon is widespread throughout Kosovo. Age group analysis shows that approximately 76% of the foreign fighters were between 15 and 34 years old when ISIS declared the caliphate in 2014 (see Figure 1). Men over the age of 15 constitute 267 foreign fighters, or 80% of the total number, whereas, women total 51 foreign fighters, or 15% of the total number.

¹³⁶Azinovic *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans* 6.

¹³⁷Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned into a Fertile Ground for ISIS."

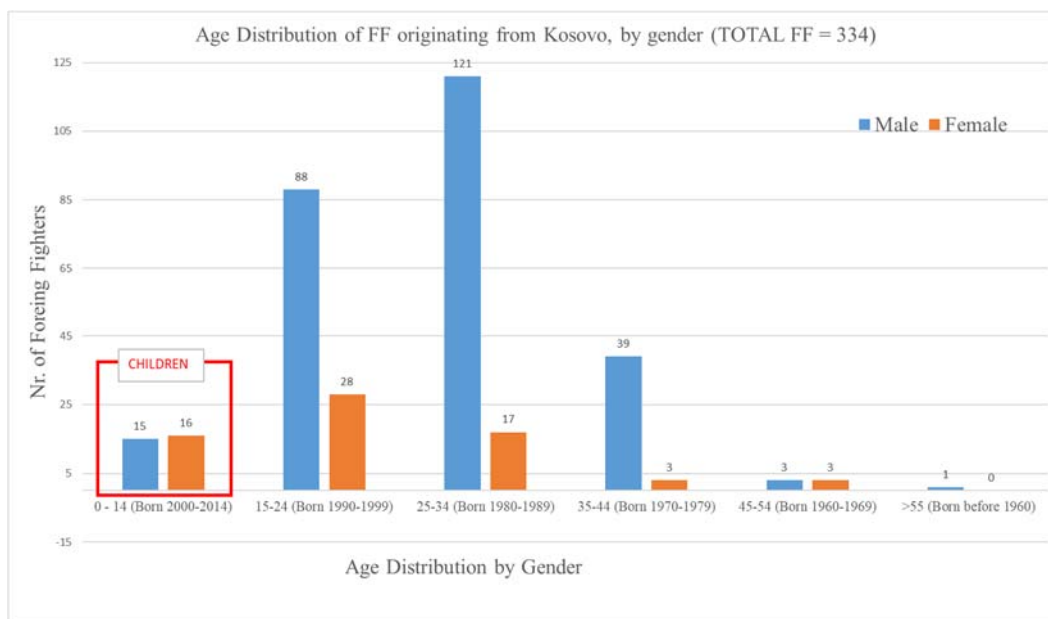


Figure 1. Kosovo foreign fighters by age group¹³⁸

Additionally, Figure 2 shows the distribution of 335 foreign fighters by place of residence of foreign fighter, including women and children who have left Kosovo and traveled to Syria and Iraq, initially joining opposition groups that fought against the Assad regime, such as the Al-Nusra Front, and later joined ISIS after the proclamation of the caliphate in June 2014.

¹³⁸Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 13; Behar Xharra and Nita Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo: Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and Their Families,” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), November 2017, 18, http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/understanding-push-and-pull-factors-in-kosovo--primary-interview.html.

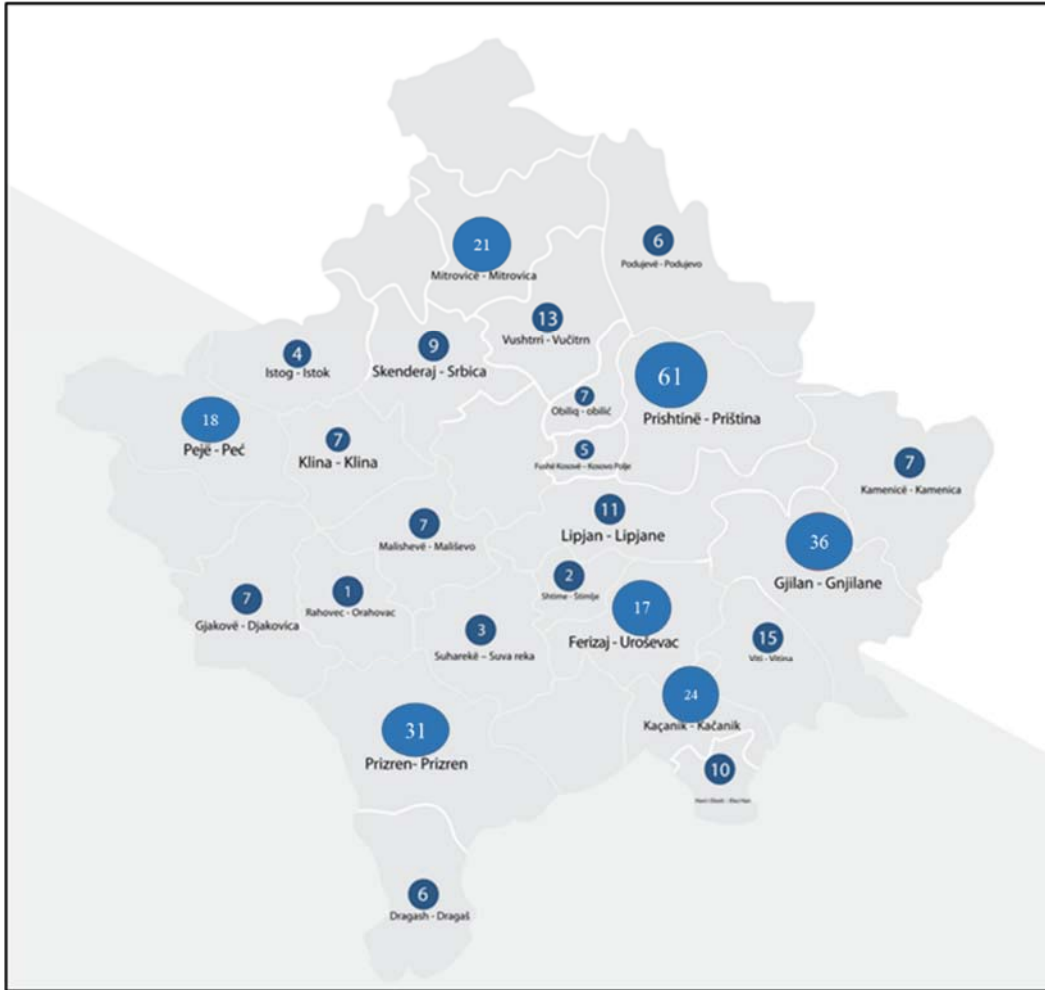


Figure 2. Kosovo foreign fighters by municipality.¹³⁹

The data reported in Figure 2, in absolute numbers, show that there is a high number of foreign fighters, including children, from the municipalities of Pristina, Gjiljan, Prizren, Kaçanik, Mitrovicë, Pejë, and Ferizaj: represented by 61, 36, 31, 24, 21, 18, and 17 foreign fighters, respectively. Per capita calculations on the municipality level, however, indicate that municipalities with small populations in the east-southeast region of Kosovo are more prone to radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. For example, for 10,000 Kosovo citizens, the municipalities of Hani i Elezit, Kacanik, Gjiljan, Viti, and Obiliq have 11, 6, 3, 2, and 2, respectively—as compared to fewer than 2 in

¹³⁹Source: Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 76.

Pristina (about 1.6 per 10,000 citizens), which ranks first in the country with 66 foreign fighters in absolute terms.¹⁴⁰

Nonetheless, considering the fact that the foreign fighter phenomenon is widespread across Kosovo, with some regions producing more than others, no overarching root cause can be stated as the main driver to radicalization and motivation for joining ISIS. Various factors have influenced Islamic radicalization in general and violent radicalization in the case of foreign fighters.

C. POTENTIAL CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION IN KOSOVO

The radicalization model, presented in Chapter II, provides a framework to investigate the role of various factors causing Kosovar Albanians to embrace radical Islamic ideologies and join violent extremist groups such as ISIS. Specifically, the framework, first, proposes to investigate the socio-economic and political factors that create favorable conditions for cognitive, ideological radicalization in general. Then, it proposes to look at the mobilization of various religious resources and processes—in a local and global context—that have facilitated cognitive radicalization and, later, behavioral or violent radicalization, such as the decision to join ISIS.

Utilizing the radicalization framework just discussed, this part of the chapter continues to analyze the various factors that have influenced the radicalization of Kosovo's foreign fighters, causing them to join ISIS. First, socio-economic conditions, including unemployment and education, are evaluated as risk factors that create conducive environments for radicalization among Kosovo citizens in general and among Kosovo foreign fighters in particular. Then, foreign NGOs, especially those with ties to Saudi Arabia, are evaluated as sources of the proliferation of fundamentalist Islamic ideology such as Salafism. Additionally, the role of radical religious leaders, recruitment networks, and ISIS propaganda are analyzed as factors of violent radicalization and recruitment to join ISIS.

¹⁴⁰Xharra and Gjonaj, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo," 19.

1. Grievances among Kosovo's Albanian Foreign Fighters

Since the end of the war, Kosovo has made significant progress toward the development and stability of the country. Despite this progress, however, Kosovo is the poorest country in the Balkans.¹⁴¹ In 2017, Kosovo's nominal per capita GDP was a little less than US\$4,000, putting it last in the region (see Figures 3 and 4).

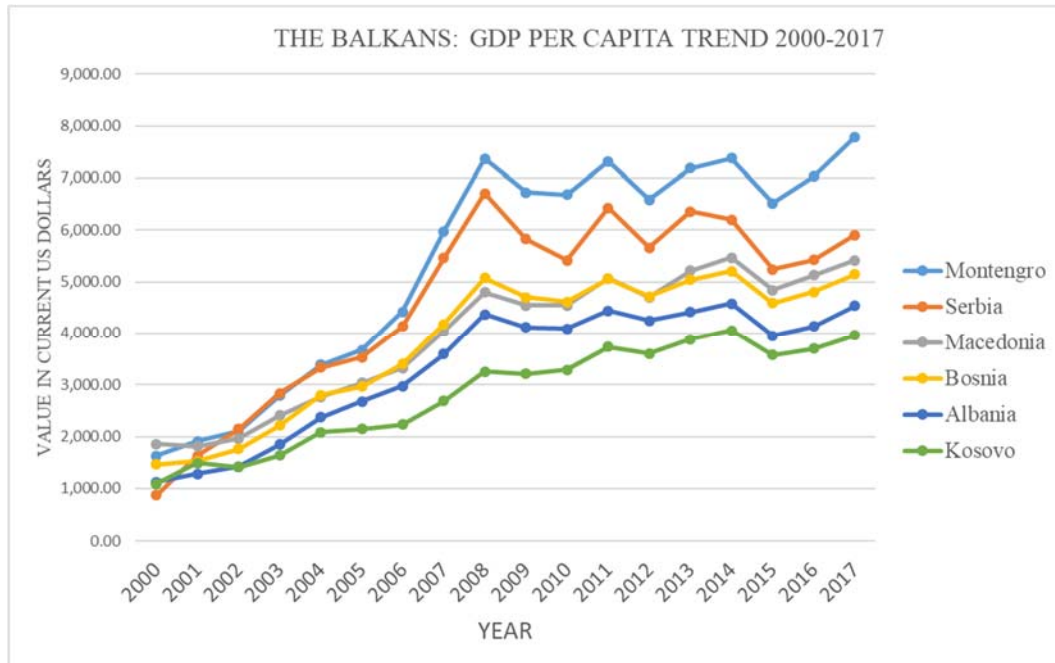


Figure 3. Balkan countries' GDP per capita trend, 2000–2017¹⁴²

¹⁴¹“List of European countries by GDP per capita,” Statistics Times, last updated 5 June 2018, <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/european-countries-by-gdp-per-capita.php>.

¹⁴²“GDP per capita (current US\$): Kosovo,” The World Bank, last accessed 4 February 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?contextual=region&end=2017&locations=XK&start=2017&view=bar>.

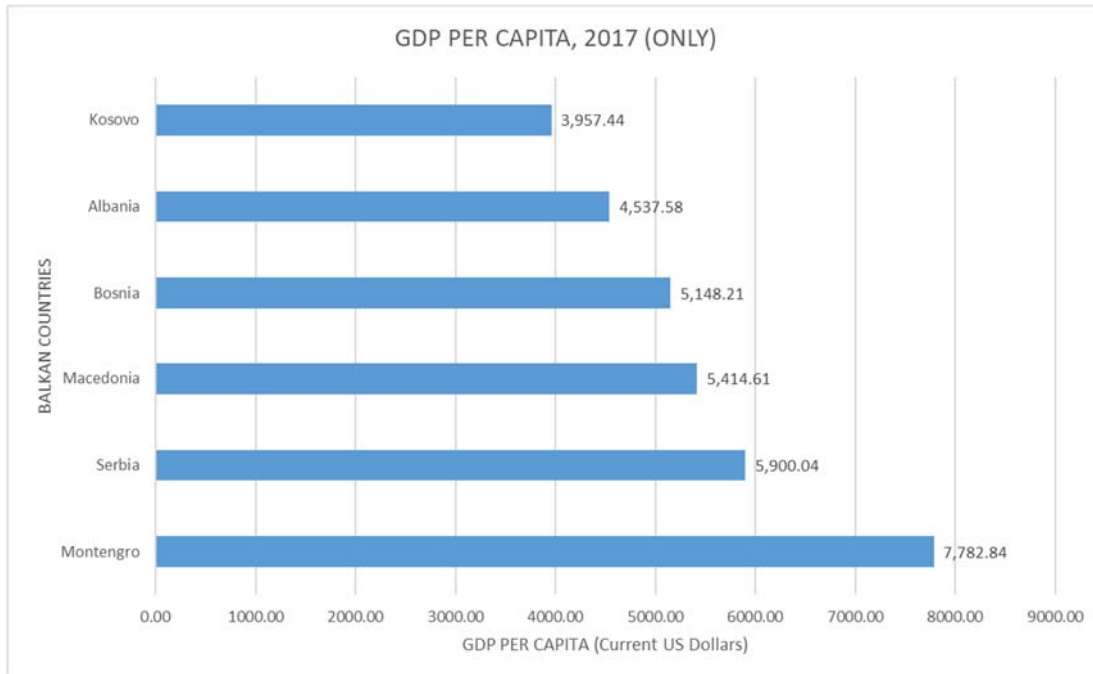


Figure 4. 2017 GDP per capita in the Balkans¹⁴³

Moreover, unemployment in Kosovo sits at an average of 30%, and the data show that 15–24 year-olds and young adults 25–34 years of age are the two groups most at risk of unemployment, with rates of 52.5% and 34.3 % respectively in 2016 (Figure 5).

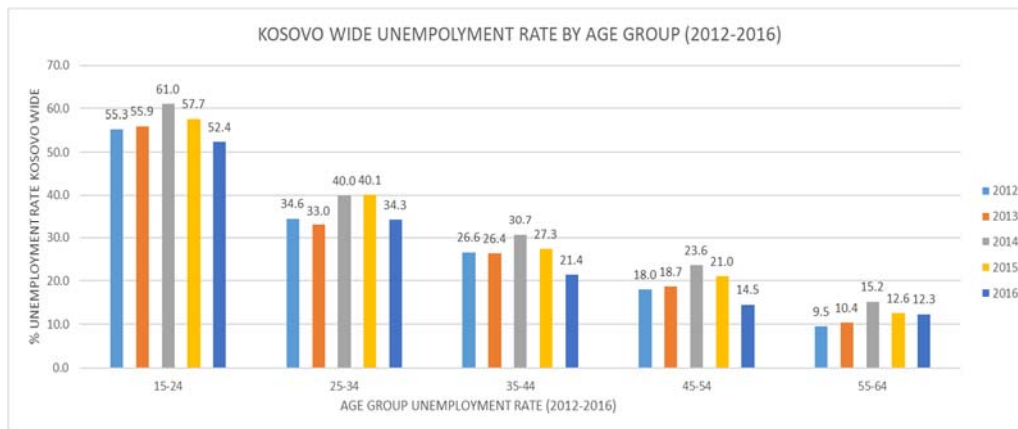


Figure 5. Kosovo unemployment rate by age group¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³“GDP per capita (current US\$): The Balkans,” The World Bank.

Furthermore, Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe. A little over 50% of the population is below the age of 29 and, within this group, approximately 20% are between 15 and 24 years of age.¹⁴⁵ Finally, data from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics show that, between 2012 and 2017, 56–71% of Kosovo citizens who have actively searched for a job responded that they could not find a full-time job (see Figure 6).

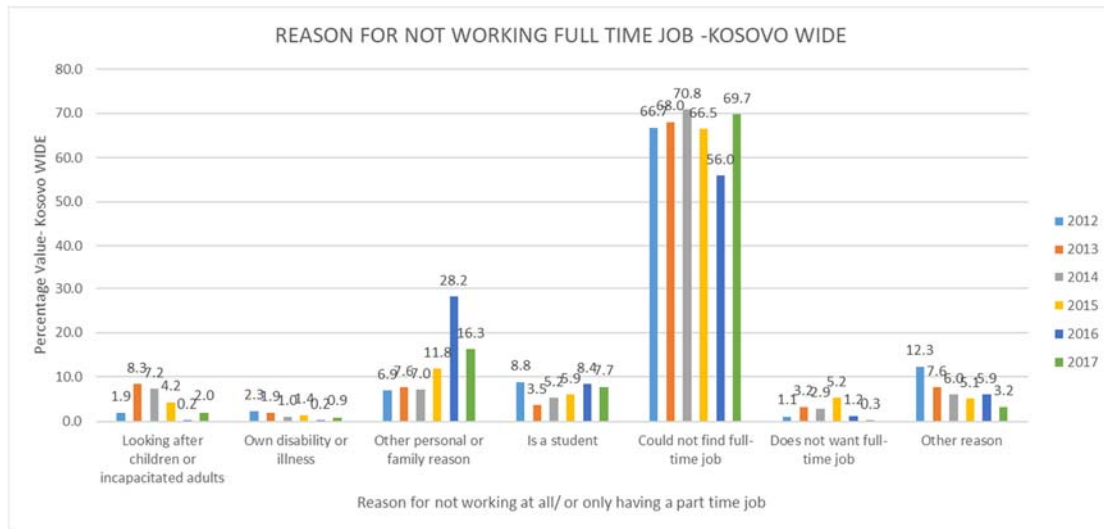


Figure 6. Reasons for not working at full-time job¹⁴⁶

The national data just provided indicate that high levels of unemployment, especially among those between 15 and 30 years of age, as well as a perception of a grim economic future could serve as sources of growing discontent and grievance among Kosovar nationals in general and the foreign fighters in particular. In other words, these

¹⁴⁴Kosovo Agency of Statistics, “Compilation of data retrieved from database,” accessed 4 February 2019, <http://askdata.rks-gov.net/PXWeb/pxweb/en/askdata/>.

¹⁴⁵United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Kosovo Human Development Report 2016,” 22, accessed 4 February 2019, <http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/poverty/kosovo-human-development-report-2016.html>.

¹⁴⁶Kosovo Agency of Statistics, “Compilation of data retrieved from database,” accessed 4 February 2019, <http://askdata.rks-gov.net/PXWeb/pxweb/en/askdata/>.

factors may create favorable environments for radical ideas and behavior to manifest, such as crime, political violence, and the adoption of radical religious ideologies.

A 2018 report by the British Council, based on interviews and first-hand data, points out that socio-economic conditions have a “mixed role” in explaining radicalization in general and recruitment for ISIS in particular.¹⁴⁷ Specifically, its author compiled socio-economic data for 54 foreign fighters, and after comparing the results Kosovo-wide, he determined that “the [average] socio-economic conditions of a foreign fighter from Kosovo seem to be leaning towards below the average value” for the country, meaning that these individuals tended to come from below average economic conditions.¹⁴⁸ Figure 7, taken from the report, presents the details that support this conclusion.

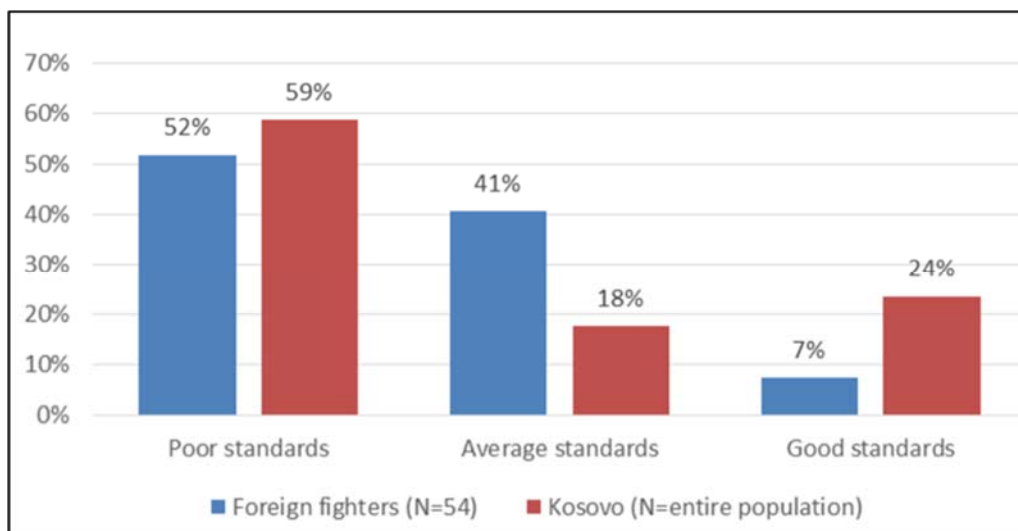


Figure 7. Comparison of socio-economic conditions of foreign fighters vs. Kosovo-wide average¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Shpend Kursani, *Extremism Research Forum: Kosovo Report*. (London: The British Council, April 2018), 22, https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf.

¹⁴⁸Kursani, *Extremism Research Forum: Kosovo Report*, 25.

¹⁴⁹Source: Kursani, *Extremism Research Forum: Kosovo Report*, 25.

It is true that, based on a size sample of 54 foreign fighters, there are more foreign fighters —52%— originating from poor socio-economic standards when compared to the foreign fighters' percentage from average and good socio-economic standards. It seems, however, that foreign fighters originating from average socio-economic status are disproportionate when compared to Kosovo wide population from the same socio-economic status. In other words, individuals with average socio-economic background present a higher tendency to join ISIS when compared to those coming from poor and good socio-economic status. Thus being poor does not fully explain why some have joined ISIS and others have not.

B. Xharra and N. Gojani, authors of a 2017 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on factors of radicalization among Kosovo foreign fighters, state that “[the research] did not [show] a clear connection between economic status and radicalization.”¹⁵⁰ Their statement, however, is based on information from 13 interviews, including six foreign fighters who were serving sentences for terrorism charges, three who were being processed on bail, one who was not charged at all, and family members of three other returned foreign fighters. The authors, nonetheless, recognize the fact that only 13 interviewees do not constitute a strongly representative sample of the whole Kosovo foreign fighter contingent.¹⁵¹ Yet, they quote one of the interviewees who “report [ed] feelings of a sense of hopelessness and disappointment from not finding work in their field of study, and identified it as one of the reasons why they have traveled to Syria.”¹⁵² They described another interviewee who stated that he decided to travel to Syria because of his inability to find a steady job in Kosovo to support his severely ill parents. Moreover, the authors state that about half of the interviewees had traveled to EU countries sometime before deciding to travel to Syria and Iraq in search of better economic and life opportunities.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 26.

¹⁵¹Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 26.

¹⁵²Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 27.

¹⁵³Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 27.

Additionally, data on the unemployment level among the foreign fighter contingent, but also at national level, show a strong indication that socio-economic conditions and lack of job opportunities —combined together— over time have created feelings of frustration and loss of optimism in these individuals for their own and their families' future. Specifically, 76% of individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 years who represent about 76–80% of the total foreign fighters, reported being unemployed at the time of travel to Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁴ The unemployment average for the same age group in Kosovo is approximately 46.5% (see Figure 3). This data suggest that the foreign fighters' unemployment rate is almost twice the rate of the national average for this age group, which comprises the bulk of Kosovo's foreign fighters. This discussion shows that individuals with average socio-economic status when faced with unemployment have a higher tendency to join ISIS.

Education level is another factor considered by both reports as a risk factor that causes radicalization; however, both reports conclude that education levels are not a strong indicator of radicalization. Specifically, they compare the average education level of foreign fighters to the national average. Both reports estimate that 83–84% of foreign fighters have a secondary level of education (from 5th to 12th grade) whereas the national average is about 72%. Additionally, 9% of them have a college education, which is the same as the national level. Both reports, however, acknowledge that the quality of education that foreign fighters received in particular might explain the tendency for less educated individuals to become more prone to radicalization and to accept extremist worldviews and ideology.¹⁵⁵ A 2018 EU Commission report on Kosovo states that, even though the country has increased its education budget, only a minimal portion of it goes for qualitative improvements.¹⁵⁶ The report further adds that:

¹⁵⁴Kursani, *Extremism Research Forum: Kosovo Report*, 25.

¹⁵⁵Kursani, *Extremism Research Forum: Kosovo Report*, 21; Xharra and Gjonaj, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo," 27.

¹⁵⁶"Kosovo 2018 Report," The European Commission, 17 April 2018, 63, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-kosovo-report.pdf>.

[t]he implementation of the curricula reform, [as per 2017–2021 Kosovo Education Strategic Plan and its Action Plan], is undermined by a lack of qualified teaching staff, teaching material and supplies and an underdeveloped student assessment system [and states further that] ... [t]he quality of the education continues to be a challenge at all levels.¹⁵⁷

Additionally, the 2017 UNDP report states that a returned foreign fighter interviewee, during the interview, “spoke about how a Kosovo Albanian high-ranking member of ISIS had specifically asked recruiters in Kosovo not to send educated people to ISIS.”¹⁵⁸ This shows that recruiters within Kosovo have targeted specific groups that are more vulnerable to accepting radical ideologies, but also less adept intellectually and rationally to reject more extreme views within the larger pool of Salafists, such as Salafi jihadists who believe that protection of the Muslim faith and Muslims comes through violence.

2. Mobilization of Religious Resources

The population in Kosovo is 95% Muslim, 2.2% Roman Catholic, and about 1.5% Eastern Orthodox, with the rest of the population identifying as Protestant, Jewish, or non-religious.¹⁵⁹ Ethnic Albanians are predominantly Sunni Muslim, from the Hanafi school of law, with a small percentage of ethnic Albanians practicing Roman Catholicism.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, approximately 15% of Muslims belong to mystical Sufi orders, including the Bektashi Sufi order, which is represented by the majority of ethnic Albanians in the Balkans, but also in Kosovo.¹⁶¹ Despite the different religious

¹⁵⁷The European Commission, “Kosovo 2018 Report,” 63.

¹⁵⁸Xharra and Gjonaj, “Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo,” 29.

¹⁵⁹Jeton Mehmeti, “Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country,” (In *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*, edited by A. Elbasani et al., 62–80. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.), 69, doi:10.1057/9781137517845_4

¹⁶⁰Xhabir Hamiti, “Islam in Kosovo-The Current State of Affairs and the Way Ahead,” *Euxenious* 23 (2017): 38–42, https://gce.unisg.ch//media/dateien/instituteundcenters/gce/euxeinos/hamiti_euxeinos_23_2017.pdf?la=en&hash=8CA6841215F9373666287637EFE03D267F944A6E.

¹⁶¹Agon Demjaha and Lulezim Peci, “What Happened to Kosovo Albanians: The Impact of Religion on the Ethnic Identity in the State-building Period,” Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), Policy Paper No. 1/16, (2016), 34, http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf.

affiliations, ethnic Albanians have traditionally used their Albanian national identity as a unifying force and have always promoted religious tolerance.

After the 1999 Kosovo war, however, conservative and militant interpretations of Islam started to proliferate, particularly Salafism.¹⁶² Most of the research on Kosovo's foreign fighters attributes the increase of radical ideology, such as Salafism, and their tendency to join extremist groups like ISIS to the proliferation of foreign charities and religious associations from Persian Gulf countries, especially from Saudi Arabia, and from Egypt.¹⁶³ Their increased presence in the region, however, is closely linked to the financial support these countries have provided after the negative socio-economic effects of the 1998–1999 Kosovo conflict. A 2005 study on the proliferation of foreign and conservative interpretations of Islam in Kosovo indicates that various Saudi-funded charity organizations have mostly operated in Kosovo under the umbrella of the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya (SJRCCK).¹⁶⁴ Additionally, a 2010 U.S. Congressional testimony claims that:

[T]he Saudi royal family adopted a similar approach [as in Bosnia] when confronted with the parallel crisis in 1999 ... in the tiny province of Kosovo. Under the chairmanship of Saudi Interior Minister Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, the Kingdom formed the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya [SJRCCK] in order to better coordinate Saudi charitable work abroad. A key function of the Saudi Joint Committee was to coordinate the efforts of other Wahhabi-style missionary groups with loose ties to the Saudi government, including the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, al-Haramain al-Masjid al-Aqsa Charity Foundation, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), the

¹⁶²Demjaha and Peci, "What Happened to Kosovo Albanians," 35–39.

¹⁶³Shpend Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, (Pristina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, April 2015) 35–37, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf.

¹⁶⁴Isa Blumi, "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans," Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), 2005, 1, http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Islami_Politik_Nd%C3%ABr_Shqiptar%C3%ABt-_A_Po_Vijn%C3%AB_Taliban%C3%ABt_n%C3%AB_Ballkan_487343.pdf.

Muslim World League (MWL), al-Waqf al Islami, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY).¹⁶⁵

Moreover, the 2005 study identifies that most Western secular NGOs and the Kosovo government's developmental programs failed to appropriately focus on rural areas of Kosovo, leaving them open to Saudi-funded NGOs to fill the void.¹⁶⁶ Islamic NGOs engage in a range of development projects, including mosques, education, healthcare, and basic life needs, essentially controlling all the services that should be the duty of the central government.¹⁶⁷ The author of the study, Isa Blumi, also adds that "the efficiency of the SJRCKC shows a sophisticated and global agenda, similar to an international corporation working to dominate the market [with its own brand]."¹⁶⁸ Additionally, one organization, *al-Waqf al Islami*, developed an estimated 30 *madrassas*, or Islamic schools, for children over three years of age throughout Kosovo, and more than 98 schools for elementary and secondary education; overall, these schools are in better shape and have more resources than the government-run ones, including free room and board.¹⁶⁹ Critically, these schools teach the Salafi understanding of Islam, in addition to offering classes in English and computer science.

In November 2015, the Kosovo government closed between 14 and 16 NGOs suspected of facilitating radicalization, recruitment, and financing of terrorist organizations such as ISIS. Among these NGOs was the *al-Waqf al Islami* along with several local charities and associations run by Kosovo clerics. At the same time, the

¹⁶⁵Evan F. Kohlmann, "The Role of Saudi Arabian State-Sponsored Charitable Fronts in Providing Material Support to Foreign Paramilitary and Terrorist Organizations," Washington, D.C., 111th U.S. Congress, Senate, 2nd Sess., Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs, 14 July 2010, 8, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/07-14-10%20Kohlmann%20Testimony.pdf>; See also: U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs, *Evaluating the Justice against Sponsors of Terrorism Act*, S. 2930, (Washington D.C.: 111th Cong., 2nd sess., 14 July 2010), 18, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg64296/pdf/CHRG-111shrg64296.pdf>

¹⁶⁶ Blumi "Political Islam among the Albanians," 10.

¹⁶⁷ Blumi "Political Islam among the Albanians," 15.

¹⁶⁸ Blumi, "Political Islam among the Albanians," 10.

¹⁶⁹ Blumi, "Political Islam among the Albanians," 16; Frud Bezhan, "Kosovar Imam, Radicalized at Home, Vanishes abroad to Join Islamist Fight," Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, last updated 23 July 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovar-imam-radicalized-at-home-vanishes-abroad/27875249.html>.

Kosovo government arrested several imams.¹⁷⁰ For example, the imam Zekeria Qazimi was arrested and sentenced to ten years for radicalizing and facilitating recruitment of foreign fighters to ISIS.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Qazimi is credited with influencing both Lavderim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi, who were the two most prominent leaders of ethnic Albanians in ISIS (currently reported to have been killed in Iraq and Syria).¹⁷² Moreover, from court proceedings and foreign fighters' statements, both Muhaxheri and Haqifi, once with ISIS, were in continuous contact with imam Qazimi to facilitate travel of foreign fighters from Kosovo to Syria and Iraq.¹⁷³ Thus, under the guise of providing social assistance or religious teachings, these Islamic NGOs have been used for indoctrination, radicalization, and for building networks and relationships that have facilitated recruitment of Kosovo Albanians to join ISIS.

Within these networks of radicalism, another dimension that is visible among the Kosovo foreign fighters is the role that family ties have played in radicalization. In one instance, a family of ten individuals comprised of three brothers, with wives and children, traveled to Syria and Iraq in September 2014.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Ridvan Haqifi's two younger brothers joined ISIS; the youngest was 19 at the time of travel in 2013. All three brothers are reported to have died in Iraq.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰Bleta Gashi, "Keto jane organizatat e dyshimta islamike qe mbylli shteti" (These are the Islamic charities that were shut down by the state authorities), *Gazeta Express*, last updated 25 November 2015, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-keto-jane-organizatat-e-dyshimta-islamike-qe-i-mbylli-shteti-147267/?archive=1>.

¹⁷¹Fatos Bytyci, "Kosovo group jailed for 42 years for aiding Islamic State," Reuters, last updated 20 May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kosovo-idUSKCN0YB1YM>.

¹⁷²Xharra and Gjonaj, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo," 34.

¹⁷³Xharra and Gjonaj, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo," 34.

¹⁷⁴"Familja dhjete anetareshe ne ISIS" (10 member family in ISIS), Zëri, last updated 29 January 2015, <https://zeri.info/aktuale/17468/familja-dhjetanetareshe-ne-isis/>.

¹⁷⁵"Prinderit e 'Shehideve' shqiptare te ISIS ne pikellim dhe te braktisur" (Family of Albanian ISIS 'martyrs', in sorrow and forgotten), Koha, accessed on 10 February 2019, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/69290/prinderit-e-shehideve-shqiptare-te-isis-ne-pikellim-dhe-te-braktisur/>.

3. Global Jihad and ISIS Propaganda

Foreign fighters from Kosovo in particular, but also ethnic Albanians throughout the Balkans, cannot be fully explained without investigating the role of ISIS propaganda, specifically propaganda that builds strong narratives on the idea of the caliphate, and the concept of martyrdom. The majority of Kosovo foreign fighters, especially families of foreign fighters that traveled to Syria and Iraq during the 2014–2015 time frame, are believed to have traveled after the proclamation of the caliphate and because of ISIS's effective propaganda campaigns encouraging Muslims around the world to join the caliphate.

In June 2014 after Friday prayers, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, addressed all Muslims of the world and called for them to recognize him as the *khalif*—leader—of the newly proclaimed *Khilafah*, a unified polity of all Muslims around the world under Islamic law.¹⁷⁶ In his 20-minute speech, the new *Khalif* outlined key messages to all Muslims and his vision for his new Islamic State:

O Muslims everywhere ... Raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and Khilafah.... It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilāfah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi (North African), American, French, German, and Australian.... Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal.... The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory.... This is my advice to you. If you hold to it, you will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶Hannah Strange, "Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Addresses Muslims in Mosul," *The Telegraph*, July 5, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10948480/Islamic-State-leader-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdadi-addresses-Muslims-in-Mosul.html>.

¹⁷⁷SITE Intelligence Group, "Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action.," Siteintelgroup, last updated 1 July 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>.

Calling for all Muslims around the world to migrate to fulfill a religious duty and the ultimate ambition to “conquer Rome and own the world” reflects the global vision and goals of ISIS. His speech set the stage for the major propaganda themes that ISIS has successfully used in its online and local recruitment efforts. Four messages have strongly appealed to the foreign fighters from Kosovo in particular, but also the rest of ethnic Albanian foreign fighters from the Balkans region: 1) the establishment of the caliphate under full sharia law; 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah*, conduct *jihad*, and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood.¹⁷⁸

Charlie Winter, a researcher on terrorism and insurgency with expertise in strategic communication, has focused his research on ISIS’s online and offline propaganda. In particular, he collected and categorized data on ISIS propaganda for a 30-day period from different outlets and platforms, as shown in Figure 8. Within this 30-day propaganda campaign, the four propaganda themes mentioned in the previous paragraph are clearly visible.

¹⁷⁸Daveed Gartenstein-Ross et al., “The Islamic State’s Global Propaganda Strategy,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 1 (2016), 5–6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2016.1.01>

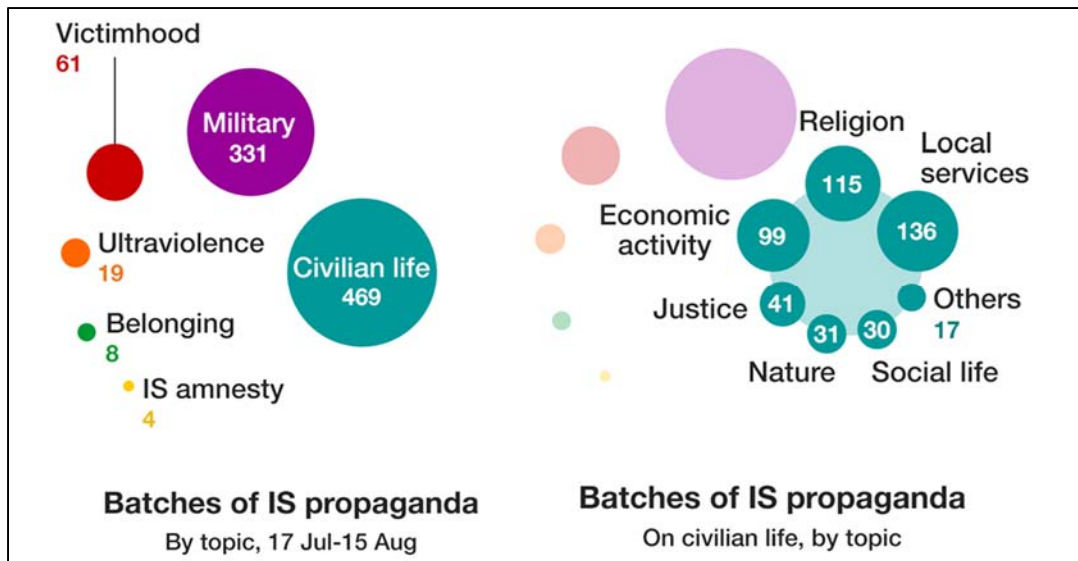


Figure 8. 30-day media content by topic, 17 July to 15 August 2015.¹⁷⁹

The first message, the establishment of the caliphate under sharia law, has strong appeal to Kosovar foreign fighters who traveled with their family or were joined by their families at a later stage. The pictures in Figure 9 are snapshots of ISIS propaganda depicting various social activities.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹Charlie Winter, “Fishing and Ultraviolence,” BBC, last updated 6 October 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idx-88492697-b674-4c69-8426-3edd17b7daed>.

¹⁸⁰Tom Porter, “Iraq Crisis: Isis Tweets Bouncy Castles in Charm Offensive for Hearts and Minds,” *International Business Times*, 14 August 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-crisis-isis-tweets-bouncy-castles-charm-offensive-hearts-minds-1461118>.



Figure 9. Photos from daily life in ISIS-held territories¹⁸¹

The propaganda effort portrays that the caliphate in ISIS-held territories gives a better alternative for foreign fighters and their families than their current living conditions under non-Islamic or Western-influenced governments. Further, ISIS's use of pictures and videos that depict social, economic, governance, and daily life events inside ISIS-held territories portrays the caliphate as a legitimate state.

The second and third messages—about emigration (*hijrah*) as a religious obligation and protecting Muslims against the West—strongly appeal to the believers who are strictly indoctrinated into extremist ideology, specifically jihadi Salafism. In a 20-minute video published in June 2015 by ISIS' Al-Hayat Official English News Media, ISIS fighters representing Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo call on their Muslim countrymen to conduct *hijrah* to join the *Khilafah* and fight Western invaders (see snapshot in Figure 10).

¹⁸¹Porter, "Iraq Crisis: Isis Tweets Bouncy Castles in Charm Offensive for Hearts and Minds."

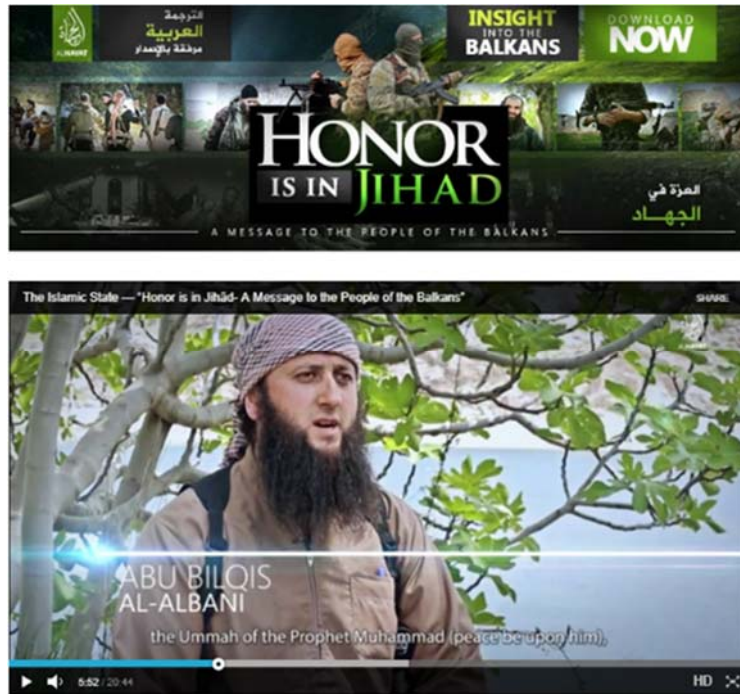


Figure 10. Snapshot of a propaganda video targeting Balkan Muslims.¹⁸²

Additionally, the call to conduct *hijrah* and protect the caliphate from the West specifically appeals to Kosovo ethnic Albanians, but also the rest of ethnic Albanians in the Balkans. These narratives build on the suffering from the Kosovo conflict, communism, and the treatment of ethnic Albanians during the Balkan wars, World War I, and World War II.

The fourth message—the appeal of jihad and the camaraderie it brings—appeals to the fulfillment of the desire to belong as part of a tight and strong brotherhood. Winter argues that this message is especially attractive to the younger generation of foreign fighters, the majority of whom tend to be less indoctrinated and not very knowledgeable about religion. This demographic also tends to suffer from identity crises and the desire to be part of something bigger, particularly with non-married, childless groups of

¹⁸²“al-Ḥayāt Media Center Presents a New Video Message from The Islamic State: ‘Honor is in Jihād: A Message to the People of the Balkans,’” Jihadology, 4 June 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/>.

radicalized Muslim youth. Winter concludes that the depiction of the caliphate as a place of brotherhood and close community is a very strong recruitment method for the sidelined and radicalized younger generations.¹⁸³

D. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to identify the factors that have influenced ethnic Albanians from Kosovo to be radicalized in general and to join violent extremist organizations such as ISIS more specifically. The analysis showed that several factors have caused a contingent of about 400 Kosovar Albanians, including women and children, to travel to Syria and Iraq and join ISIS.

First, several socio-economic conditions have helped the radicalization process. The 1999 Kosovo war's negative consequences on the socio-economic conditions of Kosovo Albanians, coupled with the continuous inability of the Kosovo government to address individual and community grievances, especially in the rural areas of the country, are a source of grievances for many young Kosovars. In particular, the 15–34 age group in Kosovo is at high risk of employment, making them susceptible to radicalization and violent behavior. More importantly, the data on the foreign fighter contingent showed that individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 years, who represent about 76–80% of the total foreign fighters, were unemployed at the time of travel to Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁴ This, however, does not indicate that all the individuals within this age group traveled to ISIS because of poor economic conditions. Nonetheless, poor economic conditions and lack of employment opportunities are risk factors for radicalization and violent behavior.

Second, these socio-economic challenges in Kosovo have provided opportunities for foreign religious charities from Gulf States—particularly Saudi Arabia—to proselytize a fundamentalist and conservative version of Islam, thus beginning the cognitive radicalization of thousands of Kosovars. More critically, these charities have

¹⁸³Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *Quilliam*, 27–28, accessed 22 February 2018, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>.

¹⁸⁴Kursani, "Extremism Research Forum," 25.

provided religious scholarships for educating young Kosovo Albanians as imams in Arab countries. Upon return they have continued to proselytize a radical interpretation of Islam, such as Salafism. Among these radical imams, some have preached Salafi jihadism, which justifies violence for protection of the faith. Additionally, some charities, under the guise of providing human relief assistance to areas in need, have served as nodes of radicalization, financing, and recruitment for violent extremist organizations such as ISIS.

Third, effective ISIS propaganda has appealed to ideological, social, and moral settings of the various target groups and has served as a catalyst for their decision to travel to ISIS, to protect and live in the caliphate. There is no sufficient evidence to conclude that ISIS propaganda has directly influenced Albanian foreign fighters from Kosovo. ISIS propaganda, however, most likely has strengthened local radical imams' preaching and recruiting narratives and as a consequence have helped inspire the decision of many ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to join ISIS. Four broad propaganda themes were identified: 1) the establishment of the caliphate under full sharia law; 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah*, conduct *jihad*, and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood.¹⁸⁵

The next chapter looks at radicalization trends in Albania, using the radicalization model proposed in Chapter II to analyze the case.

¹⁸⁵Gartenstien-Ross et al., "The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy," 5–6.

IV. ALBANIA

A. INTRODUCTION

Official Albanian sources report that, since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011, approximately 114 individuals from Albania have traveled to Syria and Iraq, initially joining the Al-Qaeda affiliate, Al-Nusra, and later ISIS.¹⁸⁶ Media reports and research that focus on the issue of foreign fighters originating from Albania, however, bring this number to approximately 140–150 individuals.¹⁸⁷ Within this group, 13–24 individuals are believed to be adult women and 31–35 of them were children at the time of travel.¹⁸⁸ Enri Hide, a researcher and expert on extremism and terrorism based in Albania, claims that the majority of the Albania’s foreign fighters traveled to ISIS-held territories between 2013 and 2014. Moreover, among the 48 individuals who have returned to Albania, some of them have traveled more than once to ISIS-held territories in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, Hide finds that, after 2015, no Albanian citizens are believed to have traveled to ISIS-held territories.¹⁸⁹ He attributes the decline of Albania’s foreign fighter travel to various factors, but most importantly to the Albanian government’s 2014 counterterrorism efforts that focused on preventing the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS. As part of this effort, the government apprehended, prosecuted,

¹⁸⁶Enri Hide, *Assessment of Risks on National Security/The Capacity of State and Society to React: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, (Tirana, Albania: Albanian Institute for International Studies. 2015), 4, <http://www.aiisalbania.org/sites/default/files/Violent%20Extremism%20and%20%20Religious%20Radicalization%20in%20Albania.pdf>.

¹⁸⁷Gjergji Vurmo and Enis Sulstarova, “Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats,” Institute for Democracy and Mediation, October 2018, 14, https://www.academia.edu/37691885/Study_Violent-Extremism-in-Albania-2018-_web.pdf; Azinovic, “Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans 3,” https://www.britishcouncil.me/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf.

¹⁸⁸Filip Ejodus and Predrag Jurekovic, ed., “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans,” *Report on 31st Workshop of Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe*, 27–29 September 2015, Belgrade, Serbia, 73–76, https://www.academia.edu/32410053/Violent_Extremism_in_the_Western_Balkans; Enri Hide, *Emerging Security Issues: Countering Violent Extremism*, (Belgrade: The Balkan Trust for Democracy, January 2017), 22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313221974_Emerging_Security_Issues_Countering_Violent_Extremism.

¹⁸⁹Hide, *Emerging Security Issue*, 22.

and sentenced seven to nine members of a foreign fighter recruitment ring that facilitated the travel of at least 70 foreign fighters from Albania to ISIS territories.¹⁹⁰ Among those arrested were Bujar Hysa and Genci Balla, two radical “self-declared” imams not recognized by the official Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH).¹⁹¹

From a legal perspective, since 2015, the Albanian government has improved and updated the legal framework for prosecuting Albanian citizens who participate, facilitate participation, or call others to participate in foreign conflicts, such as the Syrian war.¹⁹² As importantly, in 2015 the government also adopted the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and the Plan of Action to prevent radicalization and violent extremism in Albania.¹⁹³ Additionally, in January 2018, the government created the Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CCVE) for “coordinating, creating and monitoring projects, activities, policies, and procedures to prevent radicalization, de-radicalize, and re-integrate Albanian citizens.”¹⁹⁴ A positive aspect of this strategy and plan of action is that it provides a framework for a whole of government and society approach to address radicalization in general and violent extremism in particular. Within the measures proposed in the CCVE Plan of Action, the Albanian government plans to address various socio-economic factors, including education and employment, countering extremist propaganda, and focusing all CVE efforts and engagements at the local community level.

¹⁹⁰Ejdus and Jurekovic, ed., “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans” 70.

¹⁹¹“Rekrutoni xhihadiste per ne Siri, zbulohet ne Tirane celula terroriste” (They recruited jihadists for Syria, terrorist cell in Tirana is discovered), Oranews, last updated 11 March 2014, <http://www.oranews.tv/article/rekrutoniin-shqiptare-per-ne-siri-7-te-arrestuar-mes-tyre-dhe-dy-imame-jamrat>.

¹⁹²U.S. Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014* (Washington, DC: United States Department of State, June 2015), 83–84, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/239631.pdf>.

¹⁹³The Albanian Government, “VKM Nr. 930, date 18.11.2015,” Qendra e Botimeve zyrtare (Center for Official Publications), accessed 2 March 2019, http://botimezyrtare.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf.

¹⁹⁴The Albanian Government, “VKM Nr. 737, date 13.12.2017,” Qendra e Botimeve zyrtare (Center for Official Publications), accessed 2 March 2019, <http://www.qbz.gov.al/Botime/Akteindividuale/Janar%202017/Fletore%20225/VKM%20nr.%20737,%20date%2013.12.2017.pdf>.

This chapter proceeds as follows: The first section explores the demographic composition of the Albanian foreign fighter group, focusing on elements such as age, residence, and socio-economic status. The second section recaps the analytical framework proposed in Chapter II and then uses this framework to identify the various factors that have created favorable conditions for ideological or cognitive radicalization of Albanian citizens. Particularly, it explores socio-economic factors such as unemployment and education as variables that may create favorable environments for cognitive radicalization. Then the third section looks at the role of foreign Islamic charities and NGOs, radical Islamic clerics and leaders, recruitment networks, and ISIS online propaganda as factors that have enabled violent radicalization of Albanian foreign fighters. The final section provides a summary of the chapter.

B. DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF ALBANIA'S FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Unlike Kosovo, Albanian official and non-official research of foreign fighters does not provide detailed statistics on this group. This gap in information prevents the creation of an accurate and detailed picture of Albania's foreign fighter contingent based on age group, place of residence, and socio-economic status at time of travel to ISIS. Nonetheless, various recent research and reports on the phenomenon of Albania's foreign fighters provide some useful general demographic facts to facilitate the analysis of the phenomenon for the rest of the chapter.

Data on the ages of Albania's foreign fighters at the time of travel to ISIS-held territories, in contrast to Kosovo, are not available at the individual level. However, various sources identify that children under the age of 15 years old totaled between 31 and 35 individuals, whereas adult women over 15 years old numbered between 13 and 24 individuals. The rest of the foreign fighter contingent consists of adult males over 15 years of age, approximately 90 individuals, or 60 % of the foreign fighter contingent. Hide's 2017 study identifies that 48 foreign fighters have returned to Albania, mainly adult men. Furthermore, the report states that, in addition to at least 23 foreign fighters who are reported to have been killed, 78 individuals still remain in Syria and Iraq. Among these, 20 individuals are involved in combat, whereas the remaining 58 are

women and children.¹⁹⁵ These numbers suggest that all the women and children who left Albania still remain with ISIS and imply that none of the families that traveled to ISIS territories have returned to Albania.

According to a 2011 census, Albania has a population of approximately 2.9 million, of which about 59% are Muslim, including Sufi orders such as the Bektashi sect. Albania's foreign fighter recruitment rate is about nine foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslims (see Table 5). This figure is much lower when compared to Kosovo's and the Republic of North Macedonia's foreign fighter recruitment rate of 21 and 23 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslim citizens, respectively.¹⁹⁶

Table 5. Albania's foreign fighter recruitment rates.¹⁹⁷

Albania's Foreign Fighter recruitment, including women and children (max 150 foreign fighters taken as basis of calculation)	
Albania Total population (in million)*	2.907368
Albania Muslim Population (in million)*	1.715347
Per 100,000 Muslims	9
Per 10,000 Muslims**	0.9
Per 100,000 General population	5
Per 10,000 General population**	0.5
Notes: *based on 2011 census, **reduced the unit to 10,000 to facilitate comparison of areas with population lower than 100,000	

Furthermore, the recruitment of foreign fighters is not confined to just one part of Albania. There are certain areas, however, that seem to be more vulnerable and have provided a relatively higher proportion of foreign fighters per capita. Figure 11 provides an overview of the different municipalities in Albania.

¹⁹⁵Hide, *Emerging Security Issues*, 22.

¹⁹⁶Azinovic. *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

¹⁹⁷Albanian Institute of Statistics, "2011 Census: Population by religion and total population" INSTAT, accessed 5 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START__Census2011/Census1114/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=be2ad0ea-0c0b-4e93-8ddf-b5d0ddb25e05.



Figure 11. Geographic distribution of Albania’s foreign fighters by district.¹⁹⁸

Specifically, the majority of foreign fighters originated from rural areas of Kukes, Dibra, Elbasan, Librazhd, and Pogradec municipalities, but also from suburban areas of larger municipalities, including Tirana, Durres, or Vlora.¹⁹⁹ Exact numbers for each of these regions are not available; however, most of the research points to three adjacent villages of Leshnice, Gurras, and Remenj in the district of Pogradec as having a large proportion of foreign fighters when compared to the national average. Foreign fighters

¹⁹⁸Enri Hide, *Assessment of Risks on National Security*, 6–8; Ejodus and Jurekovic, ed., “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans,” 102–103; Wikipedia, s.v., “Albania location map.svg,” last updated 20 June 2011, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Albania_location_map.svg

¹⁹⁹Enri Hide, *Assessment of Risks on National Security*, 6–8.; Ejodus and Jurekovic, ed., “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans,” 102–103

from these three villages total 24 individuals, including women and children.²⁰⁰ Exact data for these three villages are not available; however, all three villages are part of a larger administrative unit, Bucimas, which includes several other villages around the larger city of Pogradec. The population of Bucimas is approximately 15,687. Whereas the Muslim population is approximately 76.80%, or 12,048 total.²⁰¹ The recruitment rate of foreign fighters within this area is at least 20 times higher than the national average recruitment rate per 10,000 Muslim Albanians. See Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 6. Foreign fighter recruitment rate from Bucimas, Pogradec.²⁰²

Bucimas Administrative unit (Leshnice, Gurras, Remenj, and other villages)	
Population total	15,687
Muslim Population (76.80%)	12,048
Total Foreign Fighters (from the three villages)	24
Recruitment rate for 10,000 general population	15
Recruitment rate for 10,000 Muslim population	20

Thus, despite the fact that accurate data on foreign fighters from Albania are not currently accessible at an individual level, the general data still show that the foreign fighter phenomenon is widespread throughout the country, and the relatively high rate of foreign fighters is observed specifically in rural areas and underdeveloped suburban areas of major cities. Based on the previous discussions, the following sections of the chapter

²⁰⁰Vurmo and Sulstarova, “Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats,” 38; Jola Alimemaj, “Fshatrat e Xhihadit: Si u rekrutuan te rinjte per te luftuar ne Siri” (Villages of Jihad : How were the young recruited to fight in Syria?), *Gazeta Shekulli*, last updated 7 April 2016, <http://shekulli.com.al/fshatrat-e-xhihadit-si-u-rekrutuan-te-rinjte-per-te-luftuar-ne-siri/>.

²⁰¹Gjergji Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” Institute for Democracy and Mediation, (2015), 138, accessed 20 February 2019, https://www.academia.edu/14484714/Religious_Radicalism_and_Violent_Extremism_in_Albania.

²⁰²Albanian Institute of Statistics, “2011 Census: Population by religion and total population” INSTAT, accessed 5 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START__Census2011/Census1114/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=be2ad0ea-0c0b-4e93-8ddf-b5d0ddb25e05; Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 138.

investigate several factors as potential causes of ideological radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular among Albania's foreign fighters.

C. POTENTIAL CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION IN ALBANIA

The radicalization model, proposed in Chapter II, provides a useful lens to investigate the various factors that have caused Albanian citizens to become ideologically radicalized; accept fundamentalist Islamic ideologies, such as Salafism; and decide to join violent extremist organizations, such as ISIS. More precisely, the model suggests, initially, studying the socio-economic and political factors that create settings for radicalization of Albanian citizens in general. Then it drive the investigation of various religious mobilization resources that have influenced and continue to influence cognitive Islamic radicalization initially, and at a later stage, violent radicalization, including participation in violent extremist organizations such as ISIS.

Building off of this three-part model, the rest of this section is organized in three subsections. The first investigates socio-economic factors, including unemployment and education, as sources of grievances among Albanian citizens, creating favorable conditions for radicalization in general. Then, in the second subsection, religious resources, such as foreign Islamic NGOs and charities with ties to Persian Gulf countries, are evaluated as sources of proselytizing a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, such as Salafism, in Albania. Additionally, this subsection evaluates religious factors such as radical Islamic leaders and clerics, recruitment networks, and family and friendship relationships as sources of violent radicalization. Lastly, the third subsection discusses the role that online propaganda from ISIS has had in violent radicalization and recruitment of Albania's foreign fighters.

1. Grievances among Albania's Foreign Fighters

In the beginning of the 1990s, Albania began a political and economic transition phase from communism to liberal democracy. It emerged as the poorest country in Europe at that time and continues to be one of the four poorest countries in Europe in per

capita GDP, only ahead of Kosovo, Ukraine, and Moldova.²⁰³ A 1999 study of the economic performance of Albania finds that, for the first five years of the democratic transition (1991–1996), Albania had the highest yearly increase of GDP in Europe.²⁰⁴ This progress in the economy, however, was severely disrupted by the breakdown of the “pyramidal investment schemes” in January and February of 1997.²⁰⁵ Albanian-owned private companies as early as 1991, claiming they operated corporate holdings, began running fraudulent investment schemes.²⁰⁶ Some of the larger companies did invest in the private sector; however, smaller ones did not do so.²⁰⁷ In simple terms, these corrupt schemes relied on new client deposits to pay off returns from high investment rates for older clients. Within this logic, the increasing demand for paying old depositor’s earnings requires new clients to deposit more money.²⁰⁸ With some of these companies offering as much as a 50% return on investment, many Albanians sold their houses and properties to benefit from the schemes.²⁰⁹ However, by the end of 1996, some of these companies could not make payments and declared bankruptcy.²¹⁰ This last condition occurred in Albania during the first months of 1997, spurring a wave of protests and violent responses by the government that eventually led to the 1997 Albanian Armed Revolt.²¹¹ Besides the negative economic effects from these corrupt investment schemes, sudden social and political unrest in the country caused the death of at least 2,000 citizens, destruction of private and government infrastructure, and the looting of weapons and

²⁰³James P. Korovilas, “The Albanian Economy in Transition: The Role of Remittances and Pyramid Investment Schemes,” *Post-Communist Economies* 11, no. 3 (1999): 399–415, 400, DOI: 10.1080/14631379995940.

²⁰⁴“GDP per Capita Europe,” Trading Economics, accessed 5 March 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14631379995940>.

²⁰⁵Korovilas “The Albanian Economy in Transition,” 400.

²⁰⁶Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 202.

²⁰⁷Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 202.

²⁰⁸Korovilas, “The Albanian Economy in Transition,” 408.

²⁰⁹Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 317.

²¹⁰Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 319.

²¹¹Christopher Jarvis, “The Rise and Fall of Albania’s Pyramid Schemes,” *Finance & Development* 37, no. 1 (March 2000), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2000/03/jarvis.htm>.

ammunition from military and police installations. In April 1997, the UN Security Council authorized “Operation Alba,” composed of 7,000 military troops from 11 countries, with the aim of restoring order in the three months that followed until a new government was elected and constituted.²¹²

Following the 1997 crisis, the political and economic situation in Albania began to stabilize. Positive economic trends resulted in a reduction of the national unemployment rate from 1991 to 2018. In 2018 the national average unemployment was approximately 13.4%. See Figure 12.²¹³

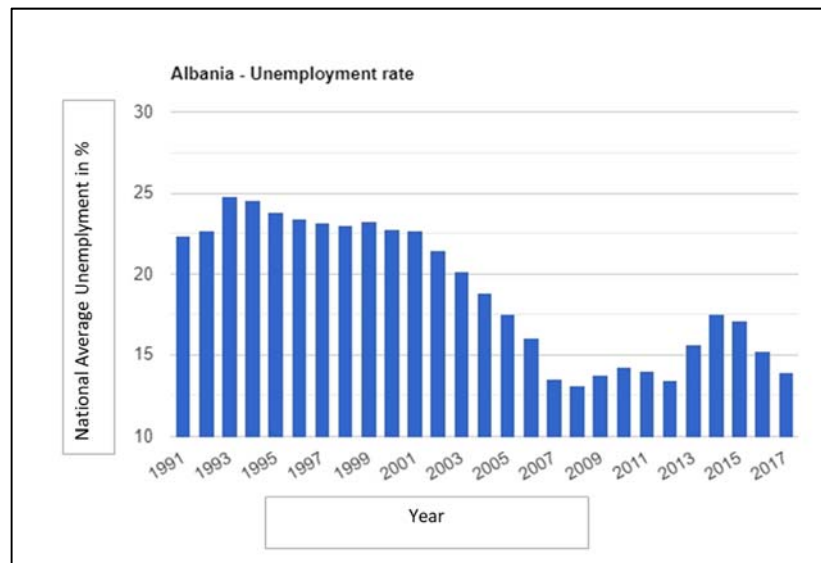


Figure 12. National unemployment rate, 1991–2017.²¹⁴

This relatively low level of unemployment as compared to the rest of the Balkans, however, can be attributed in part to the reclassification of farmers who own land as

²¹²Global Security, “Albanian Civil War (1997),” accessed 11 March 2019, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/albania.htm>.

²¹³“Albania Unemployment Rate,” *Trading Economics*, accessed 11 March 2019, <https://tradingeconomics.com/albania/unemployment-rate>.

²¹⁴Global Economy, “Albania: Unemployment Rate,” accessed 11 March 2019, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Albania/Unemployment_rate/.

“self-employed.” A study suggests that following the post-communist land reform, centralized cooperative land was distributed to farmers, whom the government then did not include in unemployment statistics.²¹⁵

Nonetheless, if national unemployment is analyzed by age group, it is possible to identify the categories that are the most at risk of unemployment. The data from Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) show that, in 2017, the 15–24 age group and 25–29 age group are the most at risk for unemployment with 31.9% and 20.55 % unemployment rates, respectively. See Figure 13.

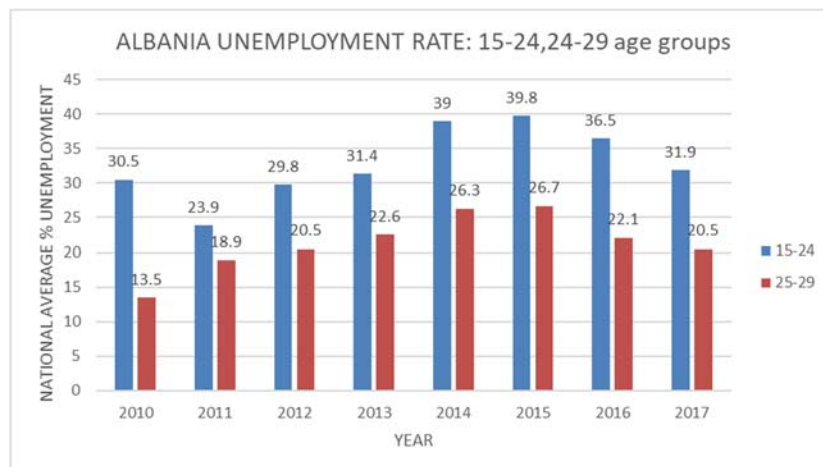


Figure 13. Youth and young adults (15–29 years old) percent unemployment in Albania.²¹⁶

More importantly, within these two age groups, the share of unemployment for a period of more than 12 months is 47.1% for the 15–24 age group and 62.3% for 24–29

²¹⁵Carlo Azzarri et al., “Migration and Labour Choice in Albania,” World Bank, accessed 11 March 2019, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ALBANIAEXTN/Resources/CAzzarri_Migration_Labour_Choice_Albania.pdf.

²¹⁶Albanian Institute of Statistics, “Data compiled from Unemployment database,” INSTAT, accessed 5 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START_TP_LFS_LFSV/NewLFSY0013/?rxid=be2ad0ea-0c0b-4e93-8ddf-b5d0ddb25e05.

age group.²¹⁷ Additionally, if educational attainment and unemployment are considered for these age groups together, the analysis shows that unemployment is relatively the same, no matter the level of education. For example, in 2017, for the 15–29 age group, 29% of those unemployed have only eight-to-nine years of education total, 30.5 % of those unemployed have only a high school education (12 years), and 29.8% of those unemployed have at least a college degree. See Figure 14.²¹⁸

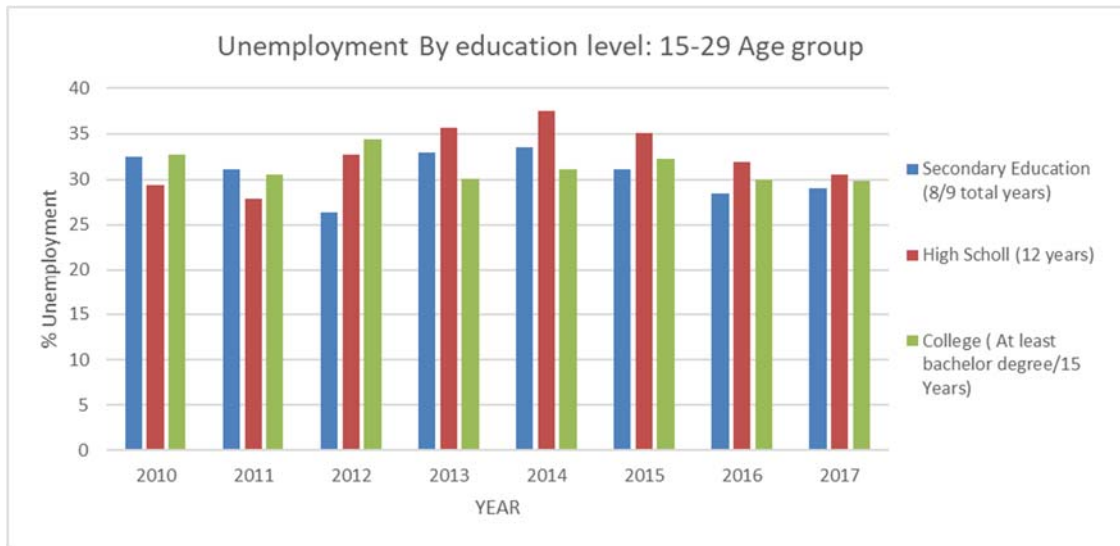


Figure 14. Unemployment by education level for 15–29 age group, 2010–2017.²¹⁹

Thus, for those between 15 and 29 years old, high levels of unemployment, no matter the level of education, could be a source of grievance and discontent. Furthermore, this same age group also experiences high inequality in socio-economic status within and between rural, suburban, and urban areas throughout the country, which could serve as a

²¹⁷Albanian Institute of Statistics, “Youth Not at School and Unemployed,” INSTAT, accessed 5 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START_TP_LFS_LFSV/NewLFSY004/?rxid=be2ad0ea-0c0b-4e93-8ddf-b5d0ddb25e05.

²¹⁸Albanian Institute of Statistics, “Youth Unemployed Based on Educational Attainment,” INSTAT, accessed 5 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START_TP_LFS_LFSV/NewLFSY0013/?rxid=be2ad0ea-0c0b-4e93-8ddf-b5d0ddb25e05.

²¹⁹Albanian Institute of Statistics, “Youth Unemployed Based on Educational Attainment.”

source of discontent among Albanian citizens in general, but also among the foreign fighters in particular. Increasing grievances and discontent throughout Albania creates the potential for radicalization and violence to manifest in different forms such as crime, political radicalization, and violence, as well as religious ideological radicalization, such as Islamic fundamentalism, and violent radicalization, and may include joining Salafi jihadist groups like ISIS.

Detailed data on the socio-economic conditions, such as unemployment and level of education of the foreign fighter contingent are currently not accessible. As a result, no definite conclusions can be made regarding the specific sources of grievances among the foreign fighters. Nonetheless, a 2015 study from the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, based in Albania, provides the most comprehensive approach in investigating the factors of religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania. The key aspect of the study is that it uses surveys and interviews with target groups among the general population from areas throughout Albania that have been affected more by the foreign fighter phenomenon.²²⁰ Specifically, the authors of the study focused their research on eight different zones, including the administrative unit of Bucimas, which is one of the areas with the highest foreign fighter recruitment rate per capita. See Figure 11 and Figure 15.²²¹

²²⁰Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 10.

²²¹Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 17.



Figure 15. Target areas of the 2017 study on religious radicalization and violent extremism in Albania.²²²

Bucimas is a rural area with a total population of 15,687, with 76.80% of residents identifying as Muslim, 2% as Christian Orthodox, 0.6% as Christian Catholic, and 0.2% from the Bektashi Muslim Sufi Order.²²³ Data on education show that 4.7% have a maximum of four years of education, 58.53% have a maximum of eight-to-nine years of education, 30.83% are high school graduates or have 12 years of education, and only 5.94% have a college education.²²⁴ The average unemployment rate in Bucimas is

²²²Source: Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 128.

²²³Vurmo et al., “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 138.

²²⁴Vurmo, et.al, “Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania,” 132.

54.70%. Moreover, 78.80% of youth and young adults between the ages of 15 and 30 are unemployed.²²⁵

In recent years, another factor that has contributed to this high level of unemployment is the return of economic migrants following the 2008 global economic crisis, particularly from Greece and Italy, two top destinations of Albanian migrant workers.²²⁶ The exact number of migrants that returned to Bucimas is difficult to determine; however, there are two cases of foreign fighters who had worked in Greece and Italy before joining ISIS. Both foreign fighters were 25 years old when they traveled to ISIS-held territories in 2013. In a news report, the father of one of the foreign fighters claims that radicalization of his son occurred at least three years before his departure and blames his son's radicalization on the village imam, Almir Daci, a cleric who himself traveled to ISIS and became a key ISIS commander for foreign fighters from Albania until he was declared dead in 2017.²²⁷

Thus, lack of employment opportunities and perceptions of a grim economic future may have been among some of the various sources of discontent and frustration among the general population, including especially those between the ages of 15 and 29. This frustration can be manifested in various forms, including accepting fundamentalist interpretations of Islam in general and deciding to join ISIS in particular, as is suggested by the 24 individuals from three villages in Bucimas. As mentioned previously, though, exact socio-economic data on the entire foreign fighter contingent are not accessible. Thus a causal relationship between poor socio-economic conditions and radicalization cannot be established with certainty. Still, the general socio-economic inequalities and differences between rural, suburban, and urban areas in the country provide a plausible explanation for creating favorable conditions for other factors and players that have caused ideological radicalization, and later, violent radicalization. Socio-economic

²²⁵Vurmo, et.al, "Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania," 133.

²²⁶Kosta Barjaba and Jonida Barjaba, "Embracing Emigration: The Migration-Development Nexus in Albania," Migration Policy Institute, last updated 10 September 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/embracing-emigration-migration-development-nexus-albania>.

²²⁷Alimemaj, "Fshatrat e Xhihadit: Si u rekrutuan te rinjte per te luftuar ne Siri" (Villages of Jihad : How were the young recruited to fight in Syria?)

factors alone do not explain the path to radicalization, however. It is also necessary to consider religious resources that have contributed to the radicalization process. First, however, it is important to understand how fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, established roots and continue to proliferate in Albania, which traditionally has practiced and continues to predominantly practice the moderate Hanafi interpretation of Islam.²²⁸

2. Mobilization of Religious Resources

According to the 2011 census, 58.79% of Albanians identify themselves as Muslim (including 2.09% Sufi from the Bektashi Order), 10.03% Roman Catholic, 6.75% Christian Orthodox, 0.2% other Christian denominations, and about 13.8% undeclared.²²⁹ Despite this mix of religious identities, Hide argues that Albanians have always promoted religious tolerance and harmony, placing ethnic identity as the most important element of national identity.²³⁰ Yet, after the fall of communism and the establishment of the first liberal democratic government, Salafism started to emerge and proliferate as a new religious orientation among Albanian citizens. In Albania, this fundamentalist interpretation of Islam is attributed mainly to two broad factors: 1) political opportunities in Albania and the Balkans at large, and 2) the need for financial capital or foreign direct investment to improve Albania's economic infrastructure inherited from the communist era.²³¹

First, the change in political opportunities in Albania is important for understanding the rise of more radical understandings of Islam. More specifically, in 1992 the new government enlisted Albania as a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference for the purpose of getting access to the financial capital from the oil-

²²⁸Ejdus and Jurekovic, ed., "Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," 62–63.

²²⁹Albanian Institute of Statistics, "Percent Population according to Religion," accessed 12 March 2019, http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START__Census2011/Census1114/?rxid=5f91397b-63a5-4ceb-a949-62e0b9c278e5.

²³⁰Hide, *Emerging Security Issues*, 16.

²³¹Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007), 28.

rich Islamic countries of the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The financial aid that followed from these Islamic countries, however, came with political agendas that introduced ideologically based cognitive radicalization, including Salafism in general, but also violent radicalization. For example, in 1992, the Albanian government gave Kuwait permission to build mosques in exchange for providing developmental aid.²³² Similarly, the Islamic Developmental Bank (IDB) provided much needed financial investment in various sectors of the Albanian economy, but also created infrastructure for Arabic language education and provided religious scholarships in Muslim countries for young Albanians.²³³ As mosques and religious institutions started to proliferate, demand for imams, religious teachers, and clergy increased also. The Albanian-Islamic Bank, founded in 1994, provided even more scholarships for Albanian citizens to study in Islamic countries in the Persian Gulf to become imams. Additionally, this bank and other Islamic charities and NGOs continuously financed the travel of many Albanian Muslims for pilgrimages to Mecca, but also provided donations to poor families under the condition that women wear *hijab*.²³⁴

Perhaps more importantly, the violent break-up of the Yugoslav Republic, including the Bosnian civil war from 1992 to 1995 and the Kosovo conflict in 1999, provided the political opportunity for Islamic jihadists to move into the Balkans under the guise of NGOs and charities providing humanitarian and developmental assistance, and to protect the Muslim faith in the Balkans. Christopher Deliso, an author with expertise in South East Europe, argues that the network of these so-called charities conducted activities such as money laundering, weapons trafficking, and providing refuge for jihadists and terrorists under the cover of legal workers for these charities and NGOs.²³⁵

²³²Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 29–30.

²³³Damian Gjikhuri, “Albania’s Counter-terrorism Policy Options: Finding a Strategy of Common Sense” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2004), 12.

²³⁴Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 31.

²³⁵Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 32

After the 9/11 attacks, the Albanian authorities, with assistance from the U.S. Government, closed down various NGOs and seized financial assets and key individuals within these organizations. For example, one of these charities, Muwafaq Foundation, which is headed by the Saudi businessman Yassin Al Qadi, is currently on the United States' and UN's terrorist list for financing terrorism.²³⁶ Another charity, International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), provided cover also for the brother of Ayman al Zawahiri, Mohammed al-Zawahiri, to be the head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad in Albania. The Albanian government detained and extradited members of this group to Egypt to be tried for terrorist activities in what was generally known as the process of "returnees from Albania."²³⁷

Other Islamic NGOs and charities not tied to terrorism, however, continued the agenda of proselytizing Salafism through infrastructure building, education, and other social services for communities in need throughout Albania. Furthermore, the new imams and clerics who finished their education in Middle Eastern countries returned to Albania with the mission of propagating Salafism in contrast to the traditional Hanafi interpretation of Islam, which was the only interpretation accepted by the KMSH.²³⁸

Leonie Vrugtman, a researcher who focuses on various security issues including radicalism and violent extremism, quoting an Albanian official, writes that as of 2015 approximately 200 mosques throughout Albania, out of a total of 727, did not fulfill regulations required by KMSH. More importantly, in 2015, Albania's State Intelligence Services (SHISH) reported to a parliamentary committee that at least 89 mosques were outside KMSH control.²³⁹ Within these groups of mosques some have served as violent

²³⁶Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 32; see also Richard C. Morais and Denet C. Tezel, "The Al Qadi Affair," *Forbes*, last updated 24 January 2008, https://www.forbes.com/2008/01/24/turkey-yasin-al-qadi-biz-cz_rm_0124alqadi.html#61a4f0a0666a.

²³⁷"Re-arrest of Zawahiri's brother for investigation in the case of 'Albania Returnees,'" *Egypt Independent*, last updated 21 March 2011, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/re-arrest-zawahiris-brother-investigation-case-albania-returnees/he>.

²³⁸Leonie Vrugtman, "Albania's CVE for 'Hearts and Minds' Is Not over," *Global Risk Insights*, last updated 4 June 2018, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2018/06/cve-albania-battle-hearts-minds-not/>.

²³⁹Vrugtman, "Albania's CVE for 'Hearts and Minds' Is Not over,"

radicalization and recruitment sites for the Albanian foreign fighters. More specifically, Vrugtman notes that two mosques in the suburbs of Tirana were under the control of two imams arrested by the Albanian government for involvement in a foreign fighter recruitment ring in Tirana.²⁴⁰ Radical cleric Bujar Hysa, the imam of one of the two mosques, was sentenced in 2016 to 18 years in prison on terrorism charges, specifically for radicalizing, facilitating recruitment, and preaching statements that promoted violence. In a national media interview from prison, Hysa outlined some important contributions that foreign charities have played in radicalization in general. He confirms that a donation from a Kuwaiti charity, under the umbrella of the larger Kuwaiti based Revival of Islamic heritage Society (RIHS), made possible the construction of the mosque in 2004.²⁴¹ In 2008 U.S Department of the Treasury named this charity a terrorist financing organization. Since then, the U.S. Department of Treasury finds that activities of the branches of this charity in Albania and the rest of the Balkans have continued by changing the names of organizations and channeling finances to other less suspected charities.²⁴²

Hysa has denied being a terrorist, and he denies having any financial or monetary connections in facilitating radicalized Albanian foreign fighters to travel to ISIS-held territories. On the other hand, he claims that he has regularly preached in his mosque for those devout Muslims who have the means to support the effort in any fashion, including physical jihad for protecting Muslims and the Muslim faith.²⁴³

Similarly, the role of radical cleric Almir Daci, the imam of the only mosque in one of the three villages in South-East Albania, is believed to have been crucial in

²⁴⁰Vrugtman, “Albania’s CVE for ‘Hearts and Minds’ Is Not over,”

²⁴¹“Percmim per grate dhe besnikeri ndaj ISIS-it, ja kush eshte imami-xhihadist,” (Loyalty to ISIS, who is the jihadist imam?), *Panorama*, last updated 19 May 2016, <http://www.panorama.com.al/percmim-per-grate-dhe-besnikeri-isis-it-ja-kush-eshte-imami-xhihadist/>.

²⁴²U.S. Department of Treasury, “Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaida Network,” *Press Center*, last updated 13 June 2008, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/hp1023.aspx>.

²⁴³*Panorama*, “Percmim per grate dhe besnikeri ndaj ISIS-it, ja kush eshte imami-xhihadist,” (Loyalty to ISIS, who is the jihadist imam?).

facilitating violent radicalization and recruitment of Albanians to join ISIS; this area has one of the highest foreign fighter rates in the country. In April 2016, the Albanian government declared Daci killed in combat; despite this, the Albanian government sentenced him, in absentia and post mortem, for terrorism charges. During court proceedings, communication between Daci and the two radical imams, Hysa and Balla, was presented as proof of their involvement in facilitating and encouraging the travel of Albanian citizens to ISIS.²⁴⁴

The roles of kinship, friendship, and family also are equally important in explaining a high concentration of Albania's foreign fighters, especially in small communities like the three villages in Bucimas. For example, the case of the two 25-year-olds mentioned previously, who joined ISIS, were close friends prior to becoming economic migrants and returning to the village of Leshnica where Daci preached. The decision to travel together was likely influenced by this close association. Additionally, no single women from Albania traveled to ISIS alone; this suggests that the women and children who traveled to ISIS did so mainly because of their husbands' and fathers' decision to join ISIS.²⁴⁵

3. Global Jihad and ISIS Propaganda

A high proportion of Albania's foreign fighters traveled during the 2013 to 2014 time frame. This period coincides with ISIS consolidating its power and declaring the caliphate in June 2014.²⁴⁶ The propaganda campaign that followed may be one of the causes in catalyzing the decision of ideologically radicalized Salafist Muslims around the world, including Albania, to join the caliphate. As described in Chapter III, the propaganda themes and messages that have influenced ideologically radicalized Albanian Muslims are the same as ethnic Albanian foreign fighters from Kosovo. The four propaganda themes: 1) the establishment of the caliphate under full sharia law; 2)

²⁴⁴"Kush ishte Almir Daci," (Who was Almir Daci?), Lajm Press, last updated 3 April 2016, <https://lajmpress.com/kush-ishte-almir-daci/>.

²⁴⁵Ejdus and Jurekovic, ed., "Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," 73–76.

²⁴⁶Strange, "Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Addresses Muslims in Mosul."

religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah*, conduct *jihad*, and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood.²⁴⁷

Similar to the Kosovo case, the first theme appeals to those who have traveled with their families to live under the caliphate as the legitimate state that should govern all Muslims under sharia law. The messages that Islam and Muslims are under attack and that they need to wage jihad to protect the faith and the faithful, the second and third messages, most likely appeal to Salafi jihadists who justify violence for protection of the faith. Lastly, the fourth message may have appeal for the younger generation of foreign fighters, who are less knowledgeable about the religion, but are motivated by other factors such as adventurism, belonging, or the desire to be part of something important to them.

Yet, in order to make a definite causal relationship between ISIS propaganda and the increase of foreign fighters from Albania in the 2013–2014 period, a more detailed analysis of foreign fighters’ online access is necessary. A study like this would show if indeed ISIS online propaganda has directly influenced and encouraged a large portion of ideologically radicalized Albanian citizens to join ISIS. This line of research is, however, a much more challenging endeavor than collecting or obtaining detailed individual data about socio-economic conditions, which also currently are not readily accessible. Nonetheless, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that ISIS propaganda might have strengthened the recruiting narrative of radical imams and recruiters to influence their followers to either join ISIS or support ISIS’ cause with other means.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter investigated the factors that have influenced Albanian citizens to become radicalized in general, including their violent radicalization in particular, and their decision to join a violent extremist organization such as ISIS. The inquiry demonstrates that several factors have influenced approximately 150 Albanian citizens,

²⁴⁷Gartenstein-Ross et al., “The Islamic State’s Global Propaganda Strategy,” 5–6.

including women and children, to join ISIS. First, various political and socio-economic factors may have facilitated radicalization in general. A weak and volatile political life in the first years of post-communist Albania, in addition to the new liberal democratic government's inability to address grievances such as poverty and unemployment, may have made certain communities in Albania vulnerable to radicalization and violent behavior, including crime, political violence, and Islamic radicalization.

Second, these weak political and economic factors may have provided favorable circumstances for an increase in foreign assistance in Albania, including from Persian Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Lack of effective developmental policies, especially in rural and suburban areas of the country, coupled with episodes of conflict and political violence, such as the 1997 crisis and the outbreak of violence in Yugoslavia, provided favorable opportunities for various Islamic charities and NGOs to proliferate in Albania.

Third, in exchange for providing financial aid, various foreign Islamic charities and NGOs built mosques and madrassas, donated cash to poor families, and provided religious scholarships in Muslim countries for hundreds of young Albanians. This new generation of clerics and imams, after being indoctrinated in fundamentalist ideologies such as Salafism, returned to Albania and have continued to proselytize these extreme understandings of Islam. As a consequence, they have radicalized many Albanian citizens and have established networks that have recruited foreign fighters.

Finally, ISIS propaganda campaigns may have served as a catalyst for radicalized Albanian Muslims to join ISIS. Among the different propaganda themes and narratives, the following may have appealed to Albania's foreign fighters in particular: the caliphate under sharia law representing the only arrangement for all Muslims; emigrating (*hijrah*) to the caliphate as an obligation; conducting jihad to protect the faith and the Muslim lands from the West; and the caliphate providing a place of belonging and brotherhood, giving individuals the opportunity to be part of something bigger.

The following chapter utilizes the radicalization model proposed in Chapter II to investigate the factors of radicalization among ethnic Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia.

V. REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

A. INTRODUCTION

Research that focuses on foreign fighters originating from the Republic of North Macedonia estimates that between 110 and 156 citizens traveled to Syria and Iraq since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.²⁴⁸ Within this group, approximately 14 are reported to be women. No cases of children have been reported so far, despite the fact that three families have returned to North Macedonia from Syria and Iraq.²⁴⁹ In a 2018 study, Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski—researchers based in Northern Macedonia—estimate that, as of the end of 2017, 41 individuals, including four women, remain with ISIS. The same report identifies that 33 individuals have been killed and that 80–86 individuals have returned to North Macedonia, including three women and three other families.²⁵⁰ Moreover, Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski identify in another study that foreign fighters originating from North Macedonia had stopped traveling to ISIS held territories by 2017. Both authors attribute this decline to the government’s newly updated counterterrorism policies but also to ISIS’s territorial losses²⁵¹ that had started by the end of 2015.²⁵² Additionally, Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski argue that the “disintegration” of ISIS removes the “foreign outlet” for violent extremists to channel their actions, thus

²⁴⁸Florian Qehaja and Skender Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Macedonia*. (Prishtina: Kosovar Center for Security Studies. March 2018), 8, https://www.academia.edu/36149918/The_unexplored_nexus_Issues_of_radicalisation_and_violent_extremism_in_Macedonia; Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, (London and Skopje: Berghof Foundation and Democracy Lab, November 2018), 4, https://www.academia.edu/37603107/Community_Perspectives_on_the_Prevention_of_Violent_Extremism_in_Macedonia

²⁴⁹Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 16.

²⁵⁰Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, (London: The British Council, April 2018). 11–12; Qehaja and Perteshi *The Unexplored Nexus*, 16–17. https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/erf_macedonia_report_2018.pdf.

²⁵¹Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 5.

²⁵²“ISIS Fast Facts,” CNN, last updated on March 25, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/index.html>.

leaving the domestic arena within North Macedonia as a new potential target; either for violent attacks or for violent radicalization of others.²⁵³

As early as 2015, the government of North Macedonia has conducted three major counterterrorism operations, code named “Cell,” that resulted in the sentencing of 11 individuals on charges of radicalizing, recruiting foreign fighters, and participating in ISIS.²⁵⁴ Among those sentenced is a radical imam, Rexhep Memishi, who was identified as a key figure in facilitating radicalization and recruiting many foreign fighters to ISIS from North Macedonia.²⁵⁵ Moreover, in 2018, the North Macedonia government adopted a four-year plan for “Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism” (P/CVE) in Macedonia. This strategy came later than those of Macedonia’s neighbors.²⁵⁶ Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski argue that, at the political level, key national leaders have determined that a broad ‘whole of society’ approach is necessary to address ideological radicalization and violent radicalization; however, pragmatically this is not visible within the P/CVE strategy. Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski assess that “[...] the strategy itself is insufficiently comprehensive, lacking in expertise, and predominantly focuses on the security and law enforcement aspects of P/CVE—it does little to acknowledge that extremism [radicalization] and violent extremism [violent radicalization] are not just a security issue, but a social one as well.”²⁵⁷

Thus, this chapter investigates various factors that have influenced ideologically-based cognitive radicalization of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia and their tendency to join violent extremist groups such as ISIS. It is structured as follows. The first section provides a general analysis of foreign fighters, focusing on characteristics such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, gender, and place of residence in North Macedonia.

²⁵³Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 5.

²⁵⁴Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, 12–13.

²⁵⁵Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, 13.

²⁵⁶Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 5.

²⁵⁷Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 5.

The second section restates the radicalization framework proposed in Chapter II and, utilizing this framework, continues to explore the various factors that initially created favorable conditions for cognitive radicalization and, at a later stage, violent behavioral radicalization of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia. More specifically, this second section of the chapter studies socio-economic factors such as unemployment, education, and ethnic minority rights under the lens of ethnic relations as factors that have created conducive environments for ideologically-based cognitive radicalization to emerge. Secondly, in the same section, the paper investigates the role of foreign Islamic charities and NGOs, radical leaders and imams, physical and online recruitment networks, and ISIS propaganda as factors that have influenced violent radicalization of some citizens of North Macedonia. The third and final section of the chapter concludes with a summary.

B. DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Similar to the case of Albania from the previous chapter, detailed information about individual foreign fighters from North Macedonia is not accessible. This lack of evidence hinders the development of an accurate analysis of the foreign fighters. Nonetheless, various research that focuses on the phenomenon of foreign fighters originating from North Macedonia provides some general facts to help inform the analysis that follows.

The last country-wide census in North Macedonia was conducted in 2002. According to it, the country has a population of a little over two million citizens. By ethnicity, 64.17% of North Macedonia's citizens identify as Macedonian, 25.17% as Albanian, 3.85% Turks, 2.66% Roma, 1.77% Serbs, 0.84% Bosnian, and 1.04% as other ethnicities.²⁵⁸ By religious affiliation, 64.6% of North Macedonia's citizens identify themselves as Christian (Eastern Orthodox), 33.3% as Muslim, and 2% as other religious

²⁵⁸Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "Total population according to ethnic affiliation, Census 2002," *MAKStat*, accessed 10 April 2019, http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat__Popisi__PopisNaNaselenie__PopisOpstini/03Popis_op_02_VkNasPoNacPr_ang.px/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef.

sects.²⁵⁹ Among Muslims the majority, approximately 80–85%, are represented by ethnic Albanians, whereas the rest of the Muslim population is represented by ethnic Turks, Bosnians, Roma, and other minorities.²⁶⁰ If the foreign fighter recruitment rate in North Macedonia is calculated based on the Muslim population, then the results are 23 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslims. This figure is higher than Kosovo and Albania with 21 and nine foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslim citizens, respectively (see Table 7).²⁶¹

Table 7. Occurrence of foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslim citizens²⁶²

	Albania	Kosovo*	North Macedonia
Total population (in millions)	2.907368	1.8	2.022547
Muslim population (in millions)	1.715347	1.710000	0.674182
Total No. of foreign fighters	150	358	156
Foreign Fighters in 100,000 Muslim citizens	9	21	23
*Note: For Kosovo the calculation of the foreign fighter rate does not include 40 children who were born in ISIS. Women and minors under age of 15 at the time of travel to ISIS are included in the calculation for all three countries.			

In their 2018 study, Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski found that most of the foreign fighters originated from communities that represent a minority ethnic Albanian population.²⁶³ There are also foreign fighters originating from areas where ethnic Albanians form the majority ethnic group; however, the phenomenon is less concentrated when compared to where they are an ethnic minority group.²⁶⁴ Figure 16 shows a general distribution of foreign fighters by place of origin in North Macedonia.

²⁵⁹Qehaja and Perteshi *The Unexplored Nexus*, 14.

²⁶⁰Qehaja and Perteshi *The Unexplored Nexus*, 14.

²⁶¹Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

²⁶²Source: Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

²⁶³Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, 20–21.

²⁶⁴Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, 20–21.



The blue circles are not to scale. They only show the main regions reported as places of origin of the majority of foreign fighters.

Figure 16. General distribution of foreign fighters in North Macedonia according to regions (communes).²⁶⁵

Specific numbers of foreign fighters for each region are not available; however, Skopje, the country's capital city, and Kumanovo are two areas that have contributed a considerable number of foreign fighters.²⁶⁶ Skopje city and Kumanovo have an ethnic Albanian minority of 20.5% and 25.9%, respectively, whereas the regions of Tetovo, Gostivar, and Struga, which also have had foreign fighters, are ethnic Albanian majority regions with 70%, 67%, and 59% ethnic Albanians, respectively.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵Source: Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, "Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report, 12; Vasko Sutarov, "The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and Western Balkans," (In *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, edited by Vlado Azinovic. Sarajevo: The Atlantic Initiative, 2017), 111, http://www.atlantskainicijativa.org/bos/images/BETWEEN_SALVATION_AND_TERROR/BetweenSalvationAndTerror.pdf.; Maps of World, "Political Map of Macedonia," last updated 4 September 2012, <https://www.mapsofworld.com/macedonia/macedonia-political-map.html>

²⁶⁶Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 29.

²⁶⁷Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "Total population according to ethnic affiliation, Census 2002."

Skopje city—with its ten municipalities—accounts for approximately 500,000 citizens, or 25% of the total population of North Macedonia.²⁶⁸ Additionally, Skopje, in absolute numbers, accounts for the highest concentration of ethnic Albanians in the country.²⁶⁹ Nonetheless, in relation to ethnic Macedonians they form a minority group, albeit the largest minority group when compared to other minorities. Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski note that within Skopje, the municipalities of Cair, Saraj, and Gazi Baba, which have high ethnic Albanian populations, have contributed a large proportion of foreign fighters and are also at high risk of radicalization and violent extremism.²⁷⁰

In regard to foreign fighters, specific demographic information such as age or socio-economic status is not available. A 2016 study, however, provides some specific details about 11 individuals arrested during counterterrorism operations conducted between 2015 and 2016.²⁷¹ The individuals arrested and sentenced for facilitating and/or participating in foreign terrorist groups were between the ages of 22 and 38 at the time of their arrest and sentencing. Among them were three individuals who were employed at time of travel to ISIS, including a government employee.²⁷²

The study also identifies five cases of women who either joined or attempted to join ISIS. The youngest of the women, from Kumanovo region, was 18 years old at time of travel. Additionally, according to statements from her father, this girl was in continuous contact with another girl from Kosovo who had joined ISIS. She also had videos from Iraq and Syria, and other propaganda videos were found on her personal

²⁶⁸Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, “Total population according to ethnic affiliation, Census 2002.”

²⁶⁹Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, “Total population according the ethnic affiliation, Census 2002.”

²⁷⁰Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Extremism Research Forum: Macedonia Report*, 18.

²⁷¹Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism: View from Civil Society,” *Analytica*, 21, accessed 14 April 2019, https://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf.

²⁷²Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism.” 24.

computer. Three other young girls, from rural areas of Skopje region, were stopped by their families before reaching ISIS-held territories.²⁷³

In addition to these cases, there were two reported cases of ethnic Macedonians who had converted to Islam and joined ISIS, one male and one female.²⁷⁴ The ethnic Macedonian male, Stefan Stefanovski, was among those arrested during the “Cell” counterterrorism operation in August 2015 and subsequently sentenced to two years in prison.²⁷⁵ Stefanovski, a 32-year-old from Skopje, was a doctor from a well-established family and traveled to ISIS to provide medical help.²⁷⁶ The ethnic Macedonian female was radicalized in an unspecified Western European country. Before joining ISIS, however, she traveled back to her place of residence in Struga region.²⁷⁷ Apart from these two cases, most of the research identifies that the rest of the foreign fighters are from ethnic Albanian origins.²⁷⁸

The details just presented show that multiple pathways to radicalization and violent extremism exist in North Macedonia. Additionally, the radicalization of two ethnic Macedonians shows that individuals or groups from different backgrounds, socio-economic status, age, ethnicity, and so on are vulnerable to ideological and violent radicalization. Nonetheless, the rest of the paper focuses on ethnic Albanians specifically. The previous discussion shows that there is no overarching factor that has contributed to the ideological radicalization and violent radicalization of some ethnic Albanians of North Macedonia. Multiple factors are important to consider for a better understanding of

²⁷³Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism.” 24.

²⁷⁴Sutarov, “The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and Western Balkans,” 108; Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism,” 51.

²⁷⁵Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism.” 22–24.

²⁷⁶Sutarov, “The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and Western Balkans,” 108.

²⁷⁷Selimi and Stojkovski, “Assessment of Macedonia’s Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism,” 51.

²⁷⁸Sutarov, “The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and Western Balkans,” 121; Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 4.

why so many ethnic Albanians in Macedonia accept radical Islamic ideologies and why some of them later violently radicalize and participate in violent extremist groups such as ISIS. Thus, the following sections of this chapter study various factors as potential causes of ideologically-based cognitive radicalization and also violent behavioral radicalization of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia.

C. POTENTIAL CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

This section uses the radicalization model proposed in Chapter II to explore the various factors that have contributed to the ideological and violent radicalization of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, such as accepting radical Islamic ideology, particularly Salafism, and also joining violent extremist groups such as ISIS. The radicalization framework, first, proposes to investigate political and socio-economic factors that have provided an environment conducive for radicalization to develop. Then, it suggests studying multiple factors that, initially, have proliferated ideologically-based cognitive radicalization and at a later stage have facilitated violent behavioral radicalization, such as participation in violent extremist groups like ISIS.

Thus, based on this model, the rest of the chapter is organized as follows. First, it studies various political and socio-economic factors, such as ethnic marginalization and unemployment, as sources of grievances and discontent among ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia. Such factors may create environments conducive for radicalization to manifest in general. Then, the chapter investigates various sources of religious mobilization, such as foreign Islamic NGOs, especially those with links to Persian Gulf countries, as sources of proselytizing radical interpretations of Islam in North Macedonia. Additionally, the chapter studies the role of radical Islamic clerics, family and friendship relations, recruitment networks, and ISIS propaganda as factors that have contributed to violent behavioral radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters among ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia.

1. Grievances among Ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia was the only Yugoslav republic that gained independence from Yugoslavia without a violent conflict during the 1991 to 1995 time

period.²⁷⁹ Since then, though, North Macedonia's political and social life has been characterized by heightened ethnic tensions between the two major ethnic groups: the Macedonians and Albanians. These interethnic tensions culminated in the 2001 armed rebellion of ethnic Albanians, who demanded more political rights and the recognition of ethnic Albanians as a constituent of the Macedonian nation and not just a minority.²⁸⁰ The international community intervened, preventing the conflict from escalating, and ended the crisis with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which was signed by the political leaders from both ethnicities in the city of Ohrid in South-West Macedonia on 13 August 2001.²⁸¹ The OFA laid the legal grounds for increasing ethnic minority rights, especially for ethnic Albanians as the largest ethnic minority in North Macedonia.²⁸² The most critical changes that followed after the OFA agreement were that government power was decentralized, more political power was given to local municipalities, and ethnic languages became co-official with the Macedonian language in municipalities that were more than 20% ethnic minority.²⁸³ Despite these positive steps, however, ethnic, socio-economic, and religious life in North Macedonia has remained highly contentious, divisive, and rife with the potential for the emergence of political radicalization, including religious radicalization and violence.

Indicators at the national level, such as per capita GDP, show that North Macedonia is better off economically than Albania and Kosovo (see Figure 17).

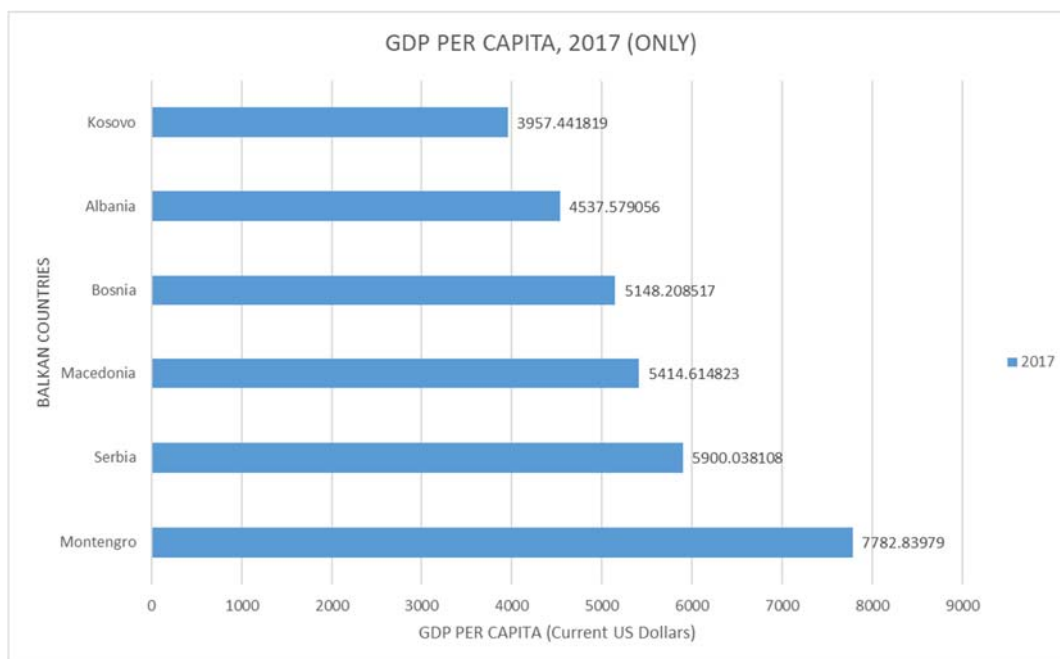
²⁷⁹Sabrina P. Ramet, "Macedonia's Post-Yugoslav Reality: Corruption, Wire-tapping, and Stolen Elections," 2, accessed 15 April 2019, <https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2471781/Chapter%20Bon%2BMacedonia.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> ; Klaudio Kavaja, " Ethnicity, Politics, and Education in Macedonia," *European Journal of Education Studies* 3, no. 9 (2017): 480, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.893142

²⁸⁰Armend Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement: The Travails of Inter-ethnic Relations in Macedonia," *Human Rights Review* 9, no. 1 (2008):59, DOI 10.1007/s12142-007-0029-z.

²⁸¹ Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement: The Travails of Inter-ethnic Relations in Macedonia," 55.

²⁸²Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 59.

²⁸³Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 61–62.



Same as Figure 4 in Chapter III of this thesis

Figure 17. 2017 GDP per capita in the Balkans.²⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the World Bank estimates that at least 33% of the population is poor, with 8.7% extremely poor.²⁸⁵ Additionally, despite the positive trends in the decline of unemployment since independence from Yugoslavia, as of 2018, national level unemployment is at 20%. Among the unemployed, the 15–29 age group is the most at risk of unemployment, with a rate of 37.05% (see Figure 18).²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴Source: “Report for Selected Countries and Subjects,” International Monetary Fund, last updated October 2018, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2018/02/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=2016&ey=2023&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&pr1.x=46&pr1.y=11&c=914%2C962%2C963%2C943%2C918%2C942%2C967&s=NGDPDPC%2CLUR&grp=0&a=>.

²⁸⁵“BTI 2018 Country Report: Macedonia,” Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI), 2018, <https://www.bti-project.org/de/berichte/laenderberichte/detail/itc/MKD/>.

²⁸⁶Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, “Activity rates of the population by age groups and gender, quarterly,” accessed 20 April 2019, http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat__PazarNaTrud__AktivnosNaNaselenie/400_PazTrud_Mk_24StapAkt_ang.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef.

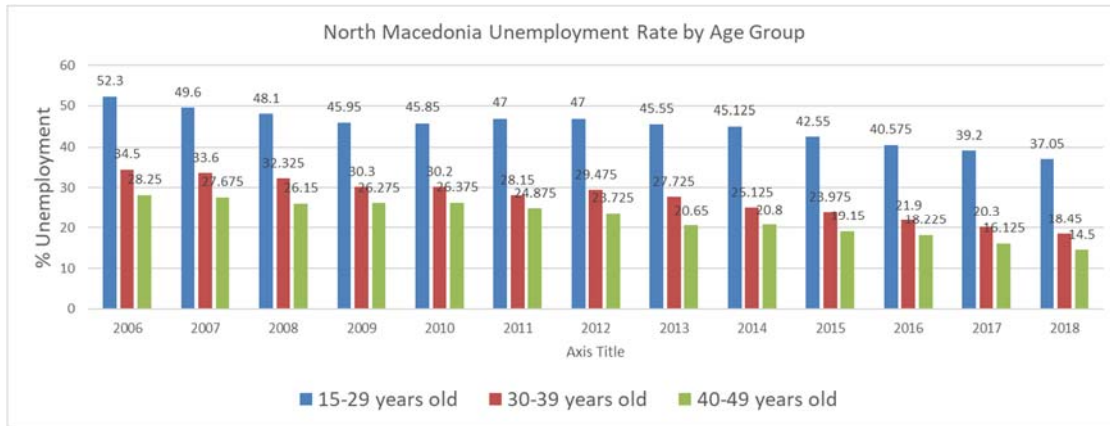


Figure 18. Unemployment rate by age group in North Macedonia.²⁸⁷

At the sub-national level, Harley Johansen identifies the economic differences that exist along ethnic lines in North Macedonia. Although the 2004 study is outdated, some of the facts are based on the only two censuses that are available for North Macedonia: 1994 and 2002.²⁸⁸ Johansen argues that “[b]ecause ethnicity in Macedonia is highly associated with municipal boundaries, it is appropriate to compare demographic and economic characteristics in municipalities, with the expectation that the most distinct differences will be found along the Albanian versus Macedonian divide.”²⁸⁹ Johansen realizes that unemployment rates are difficult to categorize by ethnicity within each municipality; however, general figures show that, by 2004, municipalities with ethnic Macedonians had 24.5 % unemployment, followed by relatively mixed municipalities with 29% unemployment, ethnic Albanian majority with 37% unemployment, and finally Turkish ethnic majority areas with 45% unemployment.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷Source: Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, “Activity rates of the population by age groups and gender, quarterly,” accessed 20 April 2019, http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat__PazarNaTrud__AktivnosNaNaselenie/400_PazTrud_Mk_24StapAkt_ang.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef.

²⁸⁸Harley Johansen, “Ethnic Dimension of Regional Development in Macedonia: A Research Report,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 45, no. 7, (2004):534, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.45.7.534>.

²⁸⁹Johansen, “Ethnic Dimension of Regional Development in Macedonia,” 536.

²⁹⁰Johansen, “Ethnic Dimension of Regional Development in Macedonia,” 542.

In regard to educational attainment, Johansen also identifies that ethnic Macedonian municipalities show a higher rate of attending university, followed by mixed ethnic municipalities, majority ethnic Albanian municipalities, and then majority Turkish municipalities.²⁹¹ In fact, since independence in 1991, education has been a highly divisive political matter between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians.²⁹² Albanian language education in Skopje University was removed from the curriculum following independence, including the department of education that prepared primary and secondary education level teachers in the Albanian language.²⁹³ In 1994, elite ethnic Albanians opened the Tetovo University to provide opportunities for university education for Albanians; however, the central government in Skopje declared it illegal.²⁹⁴ This further added more strain to already deteriorating relations between both ethnic groups. While the post-OFA government policies have improved education and provided better access for minorities, challenges persist in regard to improving quality in general.²⁹⁵ In particular, ethnic minorities, apart from being stymied from pursuing education in their ethnic language, also receive basic and low quality education in the Macedonian language. Lack of communication skills in Macedonian has had and continues to have effects also in the socio-economic standing of minorities, as they cannot compete effectively in the labor market.²⁹⁶

Ethnic marginalization, as demonstrated by political and socio-economic differences in North Macedonia, is a key cause of crime, political and ethnic radicalization, and violence. Ethnic and socio-economic marginalization, however, do not provide a strong causal explanation for Islamic radicalization in particular. Nonetheless, ethnic, cultural, political, and socio-economic cleavages provide opportunities for religious players to promote ideological radicalization and, later, violent behavioral

²⁹¹Johansen, "Ethnic Dimension of Regional Development in Macedonia," 541.

²⁹²Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement: The Travails of Inter-ethnic Relations in Macedonia," 62.

²⁹³Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 62.

²⁹⁴Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 63.

²⁹⁵Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 64.

²⁹⁶Reka, "The Ohrid Agreement," 65.

radicalization among ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia. First, however, it is important to understand how Salafism, a fundamentalist and radical interpretation of Islam, has proliferated in the country.

2. Mobilization of Religious Resources

Several religious resources have helped to spread extremism in North Macedonia. Christopher Deliso, for example, identifies various charities and NGOs, such as the IIRO or others tied to the Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Hercegovina (SHC), who attempted to open similar branches in Macedonia after establishing a foothold in Tirana, Albania, in the early 1990s. He asserts, however, that political and security authorities of North Macedonia were more suspicious of these organizations and were less welcoming when compared to the political elite of Albania.²⁹⁷ Nonetheless, despite the bureaucratic obstacles, some of these channeled funding and support through the Islamic Community of Macedonia (IVZ).²⁹⁸ More importantly, these religious-based NGOs from Persian Gulf countries found favorable conditions to extend humanitarian aid and establish local offices in Macedonia during the 1999 Kosovo War, a war that caused thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees from Kosovo to seek refuge among their ethnic cohorts in North and North West Macedonia, as well as in Albania proper.²⁹⁹

Deliso argues that besides humanitarian help and aid, these charities and NGOs began to create the infrastructure and networks for religious proliferation of radical interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism. Additionally, Deliso quotes a high official in the intelligence services of North Macedonia who stated that support was also extended in the form of allowing the best students from some of the country's religious schools, or *madrassas*, to be sent for higher education in Muslim countries in the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Qatar, and Yemen.³⁰⁰ The official also claimed

²⁹⁷Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.

²⁹⁸Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.

²⁹⁹Gezim Krasniqi, "The Forbidden Fruit: Islam and Politics of Identity in Kosovo and Macedonia," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 11, no.2 (June 2011): 191–207, 202–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2011.587285>.

³⁰⁰Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.

that “...when [the support] started, this meant only seven or eight [students] a year, but the number increased. These young people, trained in the foreign style of Islam, returned to Macedonia and began to spread that influence here.”³⁰¹

Along with ideological radicalization, violent activities of Salafists have occurred on numerous occasions. These various violent actions have ranged from intimidation to the use of force, including with firearms, to establishing radical leaders and clerics as imams in mosques and *madrassas* throughout the country, including in Skopje, the capital city.³⁰² Deliso, by corroborating various official and local sources, asserts that the *mufti* of Skopje, Zenun Berisha, has been crucial in empowering some of the Salafist groups to gain a foothold within the IVZ but also to be violently involved in the early 2000s.³⁰³ Additionally, European terrorist expert Claude Moniquet, in an interview for a Macedonian newspaper, claimed that “[w]hat some intelligence services in Europe are saying is that Mr. Berisha, like other people in Western and Eastern Europe, is playing the game of the Saudis, the fundamentalist Islam in the Balkans.” He continues to say that “[this] doesn’t mean that Mr. Berisha is a terrorist, or is linked to terrorists. That means that he tries for personal reasons, religious reasons, to promote very radical Islam in Macedonia.”³⁰⁴ Nonetheless, these claims came during the 2005–2006 period when the moderate leadership of the IVZ attempted to replace the Skopje *mufti* Berisha with another *mufti*—a move that some Salafists who supported Berisha did not approve of, and responded with violence. Yet, in IVZ elections at the beginning of 2006, the *mufti* Berisha was replaced with a more moderate *mufti* and the Salafi movement lost considerable access to resources and official power in the IVZ.³⁰⁵

³⁰¹Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81–82.

³⁰²American Foreign Policy Council, *World Almanac of Islamism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 515.

³⁰³Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 84.

³⁰⁴Risto Karajkov, “Macedonia: Big Rush in the Islamic Community,” World Press, last updated 26 September 2005, <https://www.worldpress.org/Europe/2153.cfm>; see also Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 84.

³⁰⁵Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 83–84.

Despite these setbacks, Deliso writes that the Salafists have continued to increase their influence—mainly in Skopje, but also throughout the Muslim communities in the country. They did so by creating “parallel structures” for both ideological proselytization and also for fundraising, including local activities and local charities. Specifically, they raised money from private for-profit enterprises, but also from foreign Muslim countries and their respective foreign charitable organizations.³⁰⁶ The extent of their influence and control is demonstrated in the 2010 public request by the top cleric of the IVZ, *reis-ulemma* Rexhep Sulejmani, for the government of Macedonia and the international community—specifically the U.S. Embassy and the EU—to support the IVZ and take necessary measures against radical groups.³⁰⁷ Moreover, the head of the IVZ also stated that various mosques in Skopje were under the control of radical imams who adhere to Salafism and were virtually beyond the control of the IVZ.³⁰⁸

Several mosques in particular have turned to Salafism, increasing the likelihood of cognitive radicalization in these neighborhoods. In particular, the Jahja Pasha and Tutunsuz Mosques in Skopje, in Cair and Gazi Baba municipalities respectively, were among the various mosques under Salafi control and outside IVZ influence; however, they were returned to IVZ control after the counterterrorism “Cell” operations in the 2015–2016 period.³⁰⁹

Extreme imams are another source of radicalization. The imam Rexhep Memishi, credited with the radicalization and recruitment of several foreign fighters from the municipalities of Cair and Gazi Baba in Skopje, regularly preached in both the Jahja Pasha and Tutunsuz mosques.³¹⁰ Additionally, Qehaja and Perteshi identify another

³⁰⁶Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 84, 89.

³⁰⁷Karajkov, “Macedonia: Big Rush in the Islamic Community.”

³⁰⁸Risto Karajkov, “Religious Battles in the Balkans,” World Press, last updated 26 October 2010, <https://www.worldpress.org/Europe/3641.cfm>.

³⁰⁹“Macedonia: Special Forces Conduct Raids against IS,” *The Economist*, last updated 12 August 2015, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=833431267&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&subtopic_2

³¹⁰Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 12–13; Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 18.

radical imam, Shukri Aliu, alongside Memishi, as having played a key role in the violent radicalization of many ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and also in Kosovo.³¹¹ Their religious studies in Saudi Arabia and Egypt can explain both imams' radical orientation towards jihadist Salafism. Qehaja and Perteshi, mention that both Memishi and Aliu were dismissed from higher religious education in Saudi Arabia because of their *takfiri* orientation, or the practice of excommunicating fellow Muslims and, at its most extreme, killing them.³¹² Additionally, before returning to their home country from Saudi Arabia, they both spent several years in Egypt, where they associated with radical Salafi circles.³¹³ Furthermore, Aliu was a key protagonist, or possible organizer, of many instances of violent acts aimed at taking control of the IVZ during the early 2000s.³¹⁴ After these incidents, he went to Kosovo and remained there until 2012 when Kosovo authorities, at the request of their counterparts from North Macedonia, extradited Aliu to face charges for those acts. Additionally, Qehaja and Perteshi note that both Memishi and Aliu have continually preached in Kosovo, near the border with North Macedonia. More specifically, they have lectured in the hometowns of Lavderim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi. They are credited as being two ethnic Albanian foreign fighters who became key leaders in ISIS and who influenced the travel to ISIS of many ethnic Albanian foreign fighters in the Balkans.³¹⁵

Another factor that might have contributed to the ideological and violent behavioral radicalization of some ethnic Albanians, especially the younger generation of foreign fighters, are friendship ties and group dynamics. Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, from their fieldwork and interviews in the Cair municipality, found that ideological radicalization in general but also violent radicalization in particular is most evident

³¹¹Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 12.

³¹²Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 13; Shane Drennan, "Constructing Takfir," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 7 (June 2008): 1, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/06/Vol1Iss7-Art61.pdf>.

³¹³Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 13.

³¹⁴Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 83.

³¹⁵Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 13.

among “similar friend groups and neighborhoods.”³¹⁶ Similarly, Vasko Sutarov identifies that “some [foreign fighters] lived on the same street, near the Jahja Pasha and Tutunsuz mosques in Cair, and knew each other and were influenced and recruited in the same manner.”³¹⁷

3. Global Jihad and ISIS Propaganda

Online media and communication platforms have also played an important role in spreading and promoting radical Salafi ideology in general, but also in supporting and disseminating the propaganda narratives of ISIS and other transnational violent extremist groups in particular. The case of the 18-year-old girl from Kumanovo, whose personal computer had radical religious content and propaganda videos from the conflict in Syria and Iraq, suggests that online propaganda might have strengthened her decision to travel to ISIS. Yet, this single evidence is circumstantial and does not effectively establish causation between propaganda and decision to travel and join ISIS. In general, however, online propaganda originating from ISIS in the Albanian language might have strengthened radical imams’ narratives and further catalyzed individuals or group to join ISIS.

Vese Kelmendi and Shpat Balaj, researchers at the Kosovar Center for Security Studies, collected and analyzed online content in the Albanian language from various platforms and social media from December 2016 to May 2017, including the profiles of four arrested radical imams on terrorism charges from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The authors identify relatively large numbers of followers, ranging from a little over 2,500 Facebook followers for the radical imam Balla from Albania, to just under

³¹⁶Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 22.

³¹⁷Sutarov, “The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and Western Balkans,” 106.

18,000 followers for the radical imam Memishi from North Macedonia.³¹⁸ Additionally, the authors study various other religious websites and classify the content and messages in three broad categories: “(i) extremist groups that are pro-violence; (ii) propaganda material, such as calls for jihad or support for imprisoned imams; and (iii) trends and attitudes towards the state, institutions and society in general.”³¹⁹

The details that the authors provide show that online narratives and content in the Albanian language build off of the four broad ISIS propaganda narratives identified in the Kosovo and Albania chapters (Chapter III and IV, respectively). Briefly, these themes are: 1) the establishment of the caliphate and its implementation of full sharia law; 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah* (emigration), as well as the mandate to conduct jihad and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood..³²⁰ Similar to both the Kosovo and Albania cases, the first theme—the caliphate under sharia law—appeals to all Muslims in general, but also to the foreign fighters in particular. The second and third messages, which are built on the narratives and themes that focus on blaming the West and secular states as enemies of Islam and the Muslims, and the obligation to emigrate (*hijrah*) and wage jihad to protect Islam, appeal to those who strictly adhere to jihadist Salafism, an extremist ideology that justifies violence for protecting the faith. Additionally, the fourth theme builds on narratives that appeal to the younger generation of foreign fighters who are socially marginalized and seek to belong to a greater cause.

³¹⁸Vese Kelmendi and Shpat Balaj, *New Battlegrounds: Extremist Groups Activity on Social Networks in Kosovo, Albania, and FYROM*. (Pristina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, November 2017). 18, https://www.academia.edu/35299881/NEW_BATTELGROUNDS_EXTREMIST_GROUPS_ACTIVITY_ON_SOCIAL_NETWORKS_IN_KOSOVO_ALBANIA_AND_FYROM

³¹⁹Kelmendi and Balaj, *New Battlegrounds*, 6.

³²⁰Gartenstein-Ross et al., “The Islamic State’s Global Propaganda Strategy.” 5–6.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter analyzed various factors that may have caused ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to become radicalized and join violent extremist organizations such as ISIS. As the discussion has shown, several factors have caused 156 North Macedonian citizens (almost all of them from ethnic Albanian origins) to travel to ISIS.

Initially, fragile political, social, and economic conditions shaped by tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians have created environments conducive for radicalization and extreme behavior to emerge, such as crime, political, and ethnic violence, but also religious radicalization and violence. Persisting domestic instability, along with regional conflicts in the Balkans such as the Yugoslav Wars of Secession from 1991 to 1995 and the Kosovo War in 1999, have provided opportunities for foreign charities and NGOs from Persian Gulf countries to establish a local presence and provide humanitarian support.

Secondly, some of these charities and NGOs, especially those tied to Saudi Arabia, have also introduced a radical interpretation of Islam, such as Salafism, among the Muslim communities of North Macedonia, including among the ethnic Albanian minority who are predominantly Sunni Muslims and who traditionally follow the moderate Hanafi interpretation of Islam. In particular, some of these charities have provided the opportunity for young ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to travel to Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to receive a religious education. This education, in turn, has infused individuals with extreme understandings of Islam, in addition to some embracing jihadist Salafism and advocating for violence as a primary means of protecting the faith and the faithful. Some of these new and young clerics have returned to North Macedonia and have continued to proselytize Salafism in general. Some imams, such as Shukri Aliu and Rexhep Memishi, however, have continued to spread a more violent version of Salafism, jihadist Salafism.

Finally, ISIS propaganda in the Albanian language applies similarly across the Balkan countries with ethnic Albanian populations, including Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These propaganda efforts most likely have strengthened local radical

imams' preaching and recruiting narratives and, as a consequence, have helped inspire the decision of many ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia to join ISIS. Among many propaganda themes and messages, four of them may have appealed to ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, similar to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and Albania proper. These themes are: 1) the establishment of the caliphate and its implementation of full sharia law as the only true arrangement under which Muslims can live; 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah* (emigration), as well as the mandate to conduct jihad and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom; 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West; and 4) the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood. It is important to note that because of similar linguistic, cultural, and religious identities across all ethnic Albanians in the Balkans, the themes and messages just mentioned apply equally to all ethnic Albanians who embrace radical interpretations of Islam.

The next, and final chapter, provides a summary of the findings as well as acknowledges some implications and suggestions for policy development with a focus on preventing violent extremism at a national level for Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, but also at a regional level in the Balkans.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aimed to answer the following question: What factors have influenced ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia to become religiously radicalized and join violent extremist groups such as ISIS? To answer this question, this thesis began by providing a brief historical account of ethnic Albanians. Specifically, Chapter I provided an overview of how they came to be dispersed among several countries in the Balkans, specifically in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Chapter II began with a literature review on radicalization, focusing on three broad bodies of literature. First, the chapter outlined Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory, which provides a basis for understanding sources of grievances and their role in explaining the emergence of ideological and violent radicalization.³²¹ Second, the chapter considered Social Movement Theory, which informs how social processes, political opportunities, and mobilizing structures transform grievances into collective action that seek social and political change.³²² Third, the chapter drew concepts from Religious Fundamentalism Theory literature, such factors that influence the rise of fundamentalist interpretations of religions around the world, including Islamic fundamentalism.³²³ Additionally, the chapter considered factors that influence the emergence of radical interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, and justification of the use of violence to protect one's faith.³²⁴

Based on this literature, Chapter II then presented a radicalization model designed to investigate the various socio-economic, political, and religious factors that may contribute to ideological radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular among ethnic Albanians. Specifically, the radicalization model focuses on various

³²¹Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, ix.

³²²McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 23, 141, 261.

³²³Almond et al., *Strong Religion*, 7–10.

³²⁴Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 45, 85, 135, 167; Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 4–7, 32–31.

political and socio-economic factors, including unemployment and education, as sources of discontent and grievances that may create favorable settings for ideological radicalization and violent behavior to emerge. Second, the model proposes investigating the role of foreign charities and NGOs, specifically those with ties to Persian Gulf countries, as entities that could be spreading radical interpretations of Islam, particularly Salafism. Third, the model proposes investigating the role of radical Islamic clerics, kinship relations, online recruitment, and ISIS propaganda as factors that have contributed to violent radicalization and recruitment for ISIS in particular. These three sets of variables—socio-economic conditions, NGOs and charities with ties to Persian Gulf countries, and social connections and propaganda—make up the proposed radicalization model.

Chapters III, IV, and V then used this model to analyze the rise of ideological and violent radicalization among ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia and, specifically, to investigate those who have joined ISIS. The chapters drew data and evidence from reports, databases, national censuses, policy papers, journal articles, secondary literature, and online information from various governmental and non-governmental organizations.

B. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This investigation yielded several key findings. First, evidence from official government sources and independent reports revealed that, since the start of Syrian civil war in 2011, 358 Albanians from Kosovo, 150 Albanians from Albania, and 156 Albanians from North Macedonia joined ISIS.³²⁵ These numbers were measured according to the Muslim population for each country and the results showed that Albania had a foreign fighter recruitment rate of nine foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslim citizens, Kosovo had a recruitment rate of 21 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslim

³²⁵*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v., “Syrian Civil War,” last updated 24 January 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>; Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 3–6; Vurmo and Sulstarova, “Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats,” 14; Qehaja and Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus*, 8; Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, 4.

citizens, and North Macedonia had a recruitment rate of 23 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslim citizens.³²⁶ In other words, North Macedonia had the highest rate of foreign fighters per its Muslim population.

The relatively high recruitment rates for North Macedonia and Kosovo, which are approximately two times the recruitment rate of Albania, indicate that North Macedonia and Kosovo are at a higher risk of recruitment than their neighbors. This does not suggest, however, that Albania is not at risk. Furthermore, demographic analysis of the foreign fighters for each country, based on limited data from official and other sources, showed that foreign fighter recruitment occurred throughout each country, and included a mix of individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds, different age groups, and different genders, as well as entire families had joined ISIS. Therefore, no single factor explains the path to violent radicalization and the decision of some ethnic Albanians to join ISIS. This finding begs the question: what accounts for these rates of recruitment?

The investigation into the causes of radicalization and recruitment in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia did point to some possible causal factors. First regional conflicts may have contributed to the radicalization process in certain countries. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, especially the Bosnian War of 1992–1995 and the 1999 Kosovo war, provided the opportunity for various Islamic NGOs and charities from Persian Gulf countries to establish footholds in these war-torn countries.³²⁷ As discussed in Chapter IV, during these conflicts some NGOs and charities channeled money for terrorist activities, falsified identification documents, provided wages and sanctuary for jihadist militants from the Middle East, and supported terrorist activities within the Western Balkans.³²⁸ All of this was done under the guise of providing humanitarian aid

³²⁶It is important to note that in the case of North Macedonia the calculations were based on the latest census data conducted in 2002, in contrast to 2011 census data in the case of Albania and Kosovo. Thus, the calculations for North Macedonia are not as accurate when compared to those of both Albania and Kosovo.

³²⁷John R. Lampe, “Bosnian War,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last updated 27 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bosnian-War>; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Kosovo Conflict,” accessed 7 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict>.

³²⁸Zoto, “Failure and Successes of Jihadi Information Operations on the Internet,” 46–50.

and developmental assistance. For example as discussed in Chapter IV, Islamic charities, such as IIRO, al-Haramain, and al Muwafaq, were found to have ties to or to be directly involved with terrorism.³²⁹ Following the 9/11 attacks, and with the help of the U.S. government, most of these charities were shut down, financial assets were frozen, and key individuals were arrested and deported to their respective countries.³³⁰ Nonetheless, the presence of these fake charities and their focus on aiding militant jihadists introduced jihadi Salafism to the region.

Alongside these charities that support terrorism, other legitimate humanitarian organizations and charities have continued to operate in the Western Balkans, including in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. They have provided infrastructure building, education, and other social services within communities where these countries' central governments have failed to address socio-economic grievances effectively. Critically, these charities have facilitated the proliferation of radical interpretations of Islam, especially Salafism. As described in Chapter IV, the Islamic Development Bank and the Albanian-Islamic Bank have made possible various developmental investments in areas such as religious infrastructure and education. These projects have helped introduce Salafism throughout the countries studied, which began the process of radicalization.

Perhaps more importantly, as discussed in Chapters III, IV, and V, these charities have provided scholarships for higher theological education in Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, for many Albanians. After finishing their religious studies, these young clerics have returned to preach radical interpretations of Islam.³³¹ Nevertheless, accepting radical ideology, such as Salafism, does not fully explain why some ethnic Albanians choose to join violent extremist groups while many others do not. As discussed in Chapter V, in Kosovo and North Macedonia, the role of radical religious clerics, such as Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu, and their close connection with other radical clerics

³²⁹Zoto, "Failure and Successes of Jihadi Information Operations on the Internet," 59.

³³⁰Zoto, "Failure and Successes of Jihadi Information Operations on the Internet," 60.

³³¹Arben Kulloli, "Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations," (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009), 49, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/4918/09Mar_Kulloli.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

in Kosovo, provide an important link between radicalization and the relatively high recruitment rates for both these countries. Their influence helps explain the high concentration of foreign fighters in specific communities where they have preached and created close networks of radical believers—mostly along the border with Kosovo. Similarly, in the case of Albania, the role of the radical imam Almir Daci, who preached in three villages in the southeast of Albania until he traveled to Syria to join ISIS, helps explain the relatively high numbers of foreign fighters from this specific area.

Personal relationships, specifically family and friendships, have also contributed to the decision of individuals to join ISIS. This is more evident in the case of Kosovo, where a family of ten individuals composed of three brothers, with their wives and children, traveled as one family to ISIS in September 2014.³³² Similarly, two younger brothers of the notorious ISIS foreign fighter from Kosovo, Ridvan Haqifi, also joined ISIS.³³³ Instances of families and friends traveling together as a group to join ISIS are also evident from Albania and North Macedonia, although to a lesser extent than the Kosovo case.

Lastly, ISIS propaganda and online radicalization are also important for considering sources of radicalization among Albanians. ISIS propaganda, which included messages in the Albanian language, may explain at least one case of ideological and violent radicalization in the countries studied. As described in Chapter V, an 18-year-old girl from Kumanovo, North Macedonia, joined ISIS, and her personal computer contained propaganda videos from Syria and Iraq.³³⁴ No sufficient evidence was available, however, to establish with certainty a direct causal relationship between online propaganda and decisions of ethnic Albanians to join ISIS. Generally speaking, though, ISIS propaganda might have strengthened local radical imams' recruitment narratives and, as a consequence, have influenced the decision of many ethnic Albanians from these three countries to join ISIS. Among ISIS's various messages, four broad themes were

³³²Zëri, "Familja dhjete anetareshe ne ISIS" (10-member family in ISIS),

³³³Koha, "Prinderit e 'Shehideve' shqiptare te ISIS ne pikellim dhe te braktisur" (Family of Albanian ISIS 'martyrs,' in sorrow and forgotten).

³³⁴Selimi and Stojkovski, "Assessment of Macedonia's Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism," 24.

presented: 1) the establishment of the caliphate and its implementation of full sharia law, 2) the religious obligation to join the caliphate through *hijrah* (emigration), conduct jihad, and achieve eternal salvation through martyrdom, 3) the perception that Muslims are under attack from the West, 4) and the appeal of jihadist adventure and brotherhood.³³⁵ These messages are general and broad but, when coupled with specific messages from local clerics, or encouragement from personal ties, may help explain the radicalization process among Albanians and their willingness to join ISIS.

C. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Between 2014 and 2015, the governments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia all updated their counterterrorism laws and began conducting counterterrorism operations to foil radicalization and recruitment networks responsible for supplying foreign fighters to ISIS. Albania and North Macedonia specifically arrested and sentenced individuals, including radical imams, believed to be involved in calls for jihad and ISIS recruitment in particular. Kosovo also sentenced radical imams and individuals directly implicated in recruiting Kosovo Albanians to join ISIS. However, contrary to Albania and Macedonia, Kosovo authorities additionally arrested as many as 80 individuals, including 13 imams, most of whom were not directly tied to calls for jihad or recruiting for ISIS.³³⁶ Most of these individuals, including the imams, were released because of lack of evidence and showed that, without robust evidence, these arrests could be counterproductive. Specifically, they could be construed as the government attacking certain groups without due cause, alienating those members. More importantly such steps might alienate nonviolent radical imams and their close circles of believers from the government and the rest of society.

In addition to specific counterterrorism policies, each country also introduced national strategies for countering and preventing violent extremism more broadly. In particular, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia followed the 2015 request of the UN

³³⁵Gartenstein-Ross et al., “The Islamic State’s Global Propaganda Strategy,” 5–6.

³³⁶Kursani, *Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo’s citizens’ involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*, 29.

Secretary General to develop and implement national plans of action aimed at preventing violent extremism.³³⁷

Albania, in particular, has been recognized for developing a CVE Strategy and Plan of Action in line with international frameworks for addressing violent extremism, including the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and best practices from countries such as the United States.³³⁸ Specifically, Albania's National CVE Strategy and Plan of Action delineates specific duties and responsibilities at the ministerial level, emphasizes the role and importance of civil society in the CVE efforts, and plans to address various socio-economic factors, including education and employment, countering extremist propaganda, and focusing all CVE efforts and engagements at the local community level.³³⁹ While this is clearly an important start and approach, the challenges of addressing radicalization and violent extremism are numerous. The following are some recommendations that each country could consider.

1. Governments should include all religious communities, local community leadership, and families as key players in CVE efforts. Families and friends are the first to identify possible elements of radical behavior within the family, friend, and close community circles. This bottom-up approach is critical, since there is no single pathway to violent radicalization. At the same time, however, families and communities need to be better educated on how to identify indicators of radical behavior and what resources at the community level are available to address this threat.
2. Governments should help their respective Muslim Community Associations, as the official and legitimate religious organizing bodies, to take administrative control of mosques that they claim to be outside their control and under the influence of violent radical imams and clerics. This action will prevent radical clerics, who directly and openly advocate for

³³⁷Peter R. Newman, *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region*, (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), King's College, 28 September 2017). 47–48, <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/346841?download=true>.

³³⁸Newman, *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorisms*, 47.

³³⁹The Albanian Government, "VKM Nr. 930 , date 18.11.2015," Qendra e Botimeve zyrtare (Center for Official Publications), accessed 2 March 2019, http://botimezyrtare.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf.

resorting to violence and extremist behavior, to preach in places of worship where large numbers of believers attend and are influenced.

3. Governments should increase opportunities and help provide accountability of the Muslim Community Associations for centralizing financial resources and donations. This will increase transparency and better management of finances for wages, infrastructure building, religious education, and other religious matters. More importantly, foreign funds and donations should not go directly to local NGOs but through government channels for checking compliance with laws on financing terrorism and money laundering. The Al Haramain and Muwafaq foundations, directly tied to terrorism activities, were among some of the charities that took advantage of lax laws and regulations to illegally channel money and harbor suspected terrorists in the 1990s. Albania, in fact, adopted and improved money laundering and terrorism financing laws in 2008, North Macedonia in 2014, and lastly Kosovo in 2016.³⁴⁰ This policy prevents dubious foreign charities and radical clerics from managing their own finances and projects and utilizes foreign funds that could otherwise be used for hidden agendas.
4. Muslim Community Associations should be allowed to control the religious education system, including curricula, licensing of religious teachers and imams, and any other matters that involve theological education. Additionally, the Muslim Community Associations should have oversight for and control over private institutions that provide religious education in order to ensure compliance with official religious teachings and national education laws.
5. The official Muslim community should do a better job creating and managing online and social media platforms to provide alternative sources of online information of religious materials that conform with traditional interpretations of Islam.
6. The government should better coordinate, facilitate, and lead the efforts of Western NGOs that provide social and developmental assistance to communities at risk. Priority should be given to communities who are

³⁴⁰Government of Republic of Albania, “Law on Preventing Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing Nr. 9917, date 19.5.2008, changed to law nr. 10391 date 3.3.2011,” accessed 8 May 2019, http://www.pp.gov.al/web/ligj_parandalimin_pastrimit_parave_financimit_terorizmit_1_568.pdf; Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, “Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism No. 130, date 03.09.2014,” accessed 8 May 2019, <https://www.legislationline.org/legislation/section/legislation/country/31/topic/5>; Government of Republic of Kosovo, “Law on Preventing Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing, Nr. 05/L-096, date 15 June 2016,” accessed 8 May 2019, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=12540>.

identified as high risk, such as youth, rural areas of the country, and underdeveloped suburban areas in major cities.

7. Security and intelligence agencies charged with counterterrorism policing must be able to differentiate between fundamental interpretations of Islam and violent extremist ideologies. This implies either educating security and intelligence personnel on the subject, or having subject matter experts on religion, radicalization, and violent extremism as consultants.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The thesis has identified several areas that need further research in order to better understand the radicalization of Albanians in the Balkans and individuals who join ISIS. First, a lack of demographic and socio-economic data of foreign fighters at the individual level hinders an accurate assessment of the sources of grievances at the individual level and their potential link to radicalization in general and violent radicalization in particular. This is especially true for Albania and North Macedonia foreign fighters. In the case of Kosovo, however, detailed demographics were available for 334 out of 358 foreign fighters.³⁴¹ Additionally, in the case of Kosovo, general socio-economic data were presented for 54 out of 358 foreign fighters. While a sample size of 54 individuals is a relatively small number, it is significant when compared to no available socio-economic data in the case of foreign fighters from Albania and North Macedonia. Thus, more rigorous research and fieldwork is necessary to collect and obtain data at the individual level for foreign fighters from each country, especially in the case of Albania and North Macedonia. This critical information will allow researchers to investigate individuals' motivations and their potential role in ideological and violent radicalization.

Further research is also needed on the role that online propaganda plays in the radicalization process. Specifically, the thesis explored the role of ISIS propaganda in the Albanian language as a potential source of violent radicalization and recruitment of some ethnic Albanians. Apart from one possible case, no other evidence was found to suggest a direct causal link between online propaganda, radicalization, and recruitment to ISIS.

³⁴¹Azinovic, *Extremism Research Forum: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 13; Xharra and Gjonaj, "Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo," 18.

Overall, this potential source of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters originating from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia is currently understudied. Two studies published in 2017 provide important insights for understanding the role of social media and online platforms in the dissemination of radical religious messages and content, including ISIS propaganda themes and messages.³⁴² Nonetheless, these studies explain the dissemination and circulation of radical religious content in general and do not focus on foreign fighters specifically. An accurate study would require interviews with foreign fighters who are already in prison, and also their respective families.

Finally, more research is needed to better understand the radicalization of ethnic Albanians in the diaspora. A 2018 news article from the news agency Balkan Insight identifies that ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia have also been radicalized and joined ISIS from the Albanian diaspora communities in Italy.³⁴³ Such a follow-on study is important for understanding the extent of the relationship between the radical networks in the diaspora and the home countries in regard to financial links, logistics, and also ideological influence.

³⁴²Kelmendi and Balaj, *New Battlegrounds*, 18; Garentina Kraja *The Islamic State Narrative in Kosovo: Deconstructed One Story at a Time*, (Prishtina: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, September 2017), 16–33, https://www.academia.edu/35042182/THE_ISLAMIC_STATE_NARRATIVE_IN_KOSOVO_DECONSTRUCTED_ONE_STORY_AT_A_TIME.

³⁴³Maria Chereseva et al., “Balkan Terror Trials Reveal Links to Western Europe,” Balkan Insight, last updated 9 January 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/09/balkan-terror-trials-reveal-links-to-western-europe-01-08-2018/>.

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