Assessment of risks on national security/ the capacity of state and society to react: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania

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Violent Extremism and Religious radicalization in Albania, a report by the Albanian Institute of International Studies.

Abstract

The following report will present an in-depth analysis of violent extremism and religious radicalization as a national and international phenomenon. A comparative approach will be adopted in assessing the international and regional dynamics of this phenomenon. In turn, this report will provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic, ideological and other factors that drive the radicalization of Albanian citizens, as well as the capacity of government and society to combat extremism. Such an analysis will ultimately provide a better understanding of the implications that arise from the development of the phenomenon with respect to national security and the development of the state.

The purpose of this report is to generate recommendations for states and non-state actors in minimizing the effects of, and dealing with this issue, that is ultimately a threat to national cohesion. In conclusion, as reiterated during the Regional Security conference held in May 2015, this report seeks to argue that Islamic radicalization and violent extremism in Albania, as evidenced through clear tendencies towards the politicization of Islam and by an increase in the number of Albanian citizens that partook in the conflict in Syria and Iraq during the past 3-4 years through the creation of regional extremist circles, poses a potential threat to national security. The growth of jihadist groups and the expansion of their influence carry the potential to threaten religious harmony, which would be detrimental to the security, stability and the future of the country.

Executive Summary

The Albanian Institute for International Studies with the support of Open Society Foundation Albania has undertaken a comprehensive study on the religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania. This study aims to present a detailed, thorough and realistic analysis of this phenomenon. At the center of the study are the scrutiny of the multiple factors that have contributed to the violent extremism and religious radicalism in Albania and the analysis of effectiveness of the state capacity and society's response towards religious radicalism. Aware of the potential risk that this phenomenon constitutes with regard to the national security of the country and its prospective EU integration aspiration, this study presents policy recommendations for state and a societal stakeholders so that this phenomenon is curtailed and national cohesion is enhanced.

The Islamic tradition in Albania has historically been characterized by religious tolerance and moderation. The foreign fighters of Albanian citizenship that have joined violent and radical Islam of ISIL are 114 individuals according to official data of the Albanian state. Other organizations and research centers on security estimate the number of the Albanians involved as jihadists roughly at 140-150 individuals. It should be taken into consideration that approximately a third of these are returnees. The emergence of radical Islam in Albania is not an endogenous phenomenon. This study has identified a number of pertinent reasons for the presence of Albanian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

The proximate reasons relate to the weakened infrastructural role and economic inheritance of the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH) after the fall of the communist regime. The development and the maintenance of the religious institutions and religious freedoms in Albania during the transition lacked the financial or strategic support of state institutions. On the other hand, the Albanian Muslim

Community lacked educated clerics and national educational institutions after its re-establishment in the early 1990s. This vacuum provided the possibility for the penetration of foreign Muslim traditions and organizations that professed a different version of Islam. However, the study shows that social and economic reasons are as important as other factors for facilitating the emergence of radical Islam in certain regions in Albania. The Albanian foreign fighters come from underdeveloped regions, in which penury and relative deprivation dominate. The role of the state and societal institutions is rather weak in this area as well. One of the findings of this study is that the law-enforcing institutions of the state albeit being aware of the threat posed by radical Islam on national security and even having already approved state strategies to cope with terrorist threat, lack coordination and effectiveness in their response.

This study of violent extremism and Islamic radicalism offers, first of all, a detailed analysis of the current literature on this issue, so that to clarify the concepts upon which the analysis of the structural and strategic features of extremism is built. In this respect, the novelty of this concrete phenomenon resides in the territorializing of terrorism, transforming it into a strategic and geopolitical factor, not only in the Middle East, but also at the global level.

In the following part of the study, the analysis is focused on the situation of violent extremism and radical Islamism in Albania, by analyzing not only historical factors, but in particular by investigating the multiple causes of religious extremism and radical Islam these days. The main argument and feature is that of the instrumentalizing and misuse of the Islamic religious doctrine, in order to justify violent extremism and the participation of a number of Albanian citizens in the war conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The study is also based on the securitization theory, which offers the most comprehensive approach to the securitization of the Islamic religion and its transformation into a challenge for the national security.

The empirical grounding of the study, based on an intensive three year period of media monitoring of the extremism's activity, consists of the exploration of multiple sources of information on Albanian citizens involved in the war in Syria and Iraq. The information is crossed-checked and triangulated with the official information of the Albanian state institutions, and other foreign official and media sources. This study includes a number of important and useful findings of the survey conducted by AIIS

on the perception of the public opinion regarding violent extremism and radicalized religion in Albania.

Concerning the Albanian citizens involved in the conflict, during the period 2003-2011 before the civil war in Syria and Iraq, the data show that these citizens were quite a few. The main state actors and other interested parties demonstrated an increasing concern and attention on the issue two and a half years ago, after the war in Syria and Iraq had evolved into a wider conflict by including individuals from the Western Balkans. The first initial reports on the Albanian extremists that travelled to Syria date in the year 2012. However, the involvement and interest of the public opinion and of the Albanian media on this issue emerges later in 2014, after the terrorist attacks in the beginning of 2014 and of the increased and active presence in Syria of foreign fighters originating from the Western Balkans, primarily Albanians (from all over the regions and diaspora) and Bosnians.

Initially, the majority of the Albanian extremists joined the Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist organization, whereas a small minority joined ISIL. Yet, recently there is a reversed proportion between Albanians joining ISIL and those joining Jabhat al-Nusra. The majority of the Albanians involved have displayed their loyalty and allegiance to ISIL and its leader. Albanian extremists from Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia are organized in Syria in quasi-structured units.

The number of foreign combatants in Syria and Iraq arriving from Albania is around 90-150 people. According to official data, the number of Albanian citizens engaged in the war in Syria and Iraq is 114. Around 40 individuals have returned back to Albania. The flow of jihadists from Albania that are involved in the conflict has been on the rise during the second half of 2013 and of the first half of 2014. Whereas during the first half of 2015, this number has decreased close to zero. The main route followed goes through the territorial border of Turkey, which does not have a visa regime with Albania, whereas exiting the country the jihadists follow areal and land routes. Recently there has been an increase of alternative routes passing from Bulgaria or Greece towards Turkey, to follow then towards Syria and Iraq.

There were a number of victims among the Albanian extremists in Syria. According to official data there are 20 Albanian jihadists that were killed and the 7 is the number of the wounded individuals. A considerable number of individuals, 20-30 people have obtained a partial or full military training in Albania or in other countries in the region This group of foreign warriors from the Balkans, despite its exact numerical dimension including Albanians from Kosova, Macedonia, and Albania, tends to influence the perception of Albanians as extremists, by undermining their international position in the Balkans and in the world.

On other hand, the diffusion and geographic concentration of individuals indoctrinated with extreme religious ideology constitutes an important part of the analysis of radical Islam. According to the collected and analyzed data of this study most of the Albanian citizens involved in terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq originate from Muslim communities of a number of cities in Albania such as Pogradeci, Elbasan, Librazhd, Bulqize, Cerrik, Burrel, Kukes, and Dibra. This diffusion and geographical spread of the area coincides with the highest concentration of Muslim religious people. It should be emphasized that despite the presence of the Muslim majority in this region, in most of the cases, these individuals come from the poorest rural areas that are usually underdeveloped and isolated. The findings reveal that even a number of these individual come from the underdeveloped suburbs of large cities, such as Tirana, Durres or Vlora.

Islamic radicalization does have deep socio-economic causes. According to the analysis of the data on Albanian extremists it appears that most of the Albanian jihadists come from remote and religious areas. The penury in these areas accompanied by the absence of effective state in these proper areas has created a developmental gap and a lack of future perspective, which has facilitated the emergence of and influence of other actors such as Islamic foundations and their radical Islamic ideas. The unemployment rate during the period of 2010-2015 is around 18-21 % of the total work force, which is even higher in the specific geographical regions from where most of the Albanian extremists in Syria and Iraq come: such as Pogradec, Elbasan, Librazhd, Bulqize, Burrel and Diber.

The unemployment rate for the young generation of 17-35 years old, which is more exposed towards radicalism, is even higher, in some areas surpassing over 40-45%.

Whereas, the inability to survive creates the necessary initial conditions for religious mercenaries to emerge, the low level of education in these suburb and remote areas, which are undeveloped, is the key trigger for facilitating and enabling the Islamic radicalism. The lack of opportunities for education and the illiteracy in the remote areas plays a crucial role in religious and ideological manipulation.

Islamic radicalization does not constitute an indigenous Albanian phenomenon. It does have a global dimension even before developing in Albania. It is a phenomenon that has happened in many other countries in the world. It has happened with frequency in countries that have a consolidated democracy and a developed economy. The Albanians are not the first citizens to get involved in Iraq and Syria within the terrorists organizations. The very fact that many of the foreign combatants come from European countries, can serve as a stimulating factor also in Albania. The debates on religion in Albania have remained in general within the confines of the Muslim religious tradition which is quite moderate. However, radical Islam has managed to infiltrate in the Albanian environment due to certain factors, which are cultural, educational, social and economic. Historically, radical Islam has diffused through Islamic foundations. Currently it is being fed through religious extremists cells, outside of the control and authority of AMC (Albanian Muslim Community).

One of the causes for strengthening of Islamic radicalism has been its penetration into the Muslim community by indoctrinating an increasing number of individuals. The main reasons for this result are the actions and the non-intervention of the Albanian Muslim Community, as the main responsible institution for the religious Islamic activity in the country. Mosques and other objects of religious cults, where a considerable part of radical indoctrination takes place, have not been under the direct supervision of AMC. This institution has remained passive in those first years when the phenomenon was still in its initial stage.

According to the data obtained for this study, which were triangulated with other data coming from official state sources or media sources, there are a number of mosques (7-10) that are outside of the control of the AMC (from around 727 mosques and religious cults in total). Violent extremism, religious mercenary, Islamic radicalism, and the presence and training of the jihadists in Albania, potentially transforms the country into a territory of religious extremism by putting it into a potential target of

terrorist activities. Violent extremism and radical Islam threaten the image of the country and risks creating a wrong perception on Albania, which is a member of NATO, and a constant contributor in the fight against terrorism since the early 2000. Albania is also a candidate member of the EU.

The field-research and the interviews with experts and members of the Muslim community or with directors of important institutions, demonstrate that what unites the extremists is their isolation and marginalization from the rest of the society. These two factors influence the jihadists in making them strive to find a meaning in life. The refusal to build communication bridges with the other part of the society can be interpreted in two ways. One plausible cause is the socio-economic gap that the transition has created in Albania. Another cause or reason is the problem of state institutions which do not efficiently enhance communication, although they are to some extent responsible for creating reconciliatory strategies, and for transmitting messages of peace by the state itself. Albeit existing state strategies with regard to violent extremism and religious radicalism show the awareness of the state institutions on this emerging issue, the enforcement of the strategies is weaker than expected. A third reason is the failure of AMC to control all its religious cults. A fourth reason is the failure of the communities proper to provide information on time once there is an attempt of radical Islamic cells to emerge.

The absence of the trust in the rule of law constitutes another cause. This last issue makes the difference between the Western Balkan region and the Western Europe area regarding the process of radicalization of religion. In Western Europe where democracy is more consolidated the Islamic radicals concentrate in distinguishing between democracy and a political system which is based on the Islamic law. In the Albanian case, the extremists take advantage of the weakness of the state and its institutions to negate the existence of the whole social and political order. They claim that all this vacuum of the rule of law has to be replaced by Islamic Law or Sharia. The attempt to create a political party that could eventually be part of the mainstream political system has no chances to succeed. However, with regard to the long-term dynamics of the process, the increased interest of political parties during elections trying to obtain religious votes by playing or reviving the religious cleavage, remains a concern. Moderate Imams have articulated serious allegations towards the AMC for

its involvement in the support of political parties. This might create the conditions for the emergence of a political movement that might evolve into a new political party. Radical Islamism in Albania claims to countervail what it considers as religious discrimination. Albeit being a rare phenomenon in Albania, almost inexistent, during the last years alleged religious discrimination has been used as an argument by the radicals to indoctrinate the Muslim believers. The radical tendencies, the extremist outlook and the presence of religious mercenaries, even if in an embryonic form, risks to obtain a non-proportional attention of the elites and of the society by removing the attention away from the debates on important issues of consolidating democracy. This might have a great impact on the process of modernization of the Albanian society, which at best can stop or at worse might go towards a dangerous turn.

There is no official indication by the AMC of the exact number of mosques that are outside the administration of this institution. On the other hand, the extremist language of hatred that has been used in a small number of official mosques controlled by the AMC remains a concern. Based on the information collected on Albanian extremists, we could say that the average age is around 31-35, relatively higher than those of the Albanians of Kosova, 21-25. One could argue that the process of Islamic radicalism has emerged in the last 5-8 years in Albania, whereas in Kosova this has happened in the beginning of the 1990s.

Secondly, this data reveals the increasing importance of the social media and of the internet as the main area for religious extremism to take root, by facilitating the transmission of the messages. New forms of socialization of the individuals have become crucial in this process, especially in those youngsters marginalized and isolated from the society by finding 'shelter' and relief in embracing extreme Islamic ideas and by participating in the war. The Internet and social media are quite useful and successful as radicalizing trigger mechanisms putting the extremists in contact with individuals ready to be part of their cause even in Albania. The amount of the information and the 'immaterial traffic' is quite difficult to be controlled in practice. These features of the social media and the Internet make the work of the specialized agencies rather difficult, even though in the last years we witness the establishment of specialized monitoring high technology structures.

The diffusion of radical Islam in Albania has happed also due to the fact that the main institutions such as Intelligence Service, or other institutions such as the General Prosecutor Office that have been involved in addressing this issue in the last 5-7 years have not really been effective in taking the right preventing measures. On the other hand, this process needs a relatively long period of taking roots in order to be effective and of having an impact on the national security. Due to the development in stages of radical Islam the measures that can be taken in each stage are different. Apart from the lack of instruments in enforcing the law, the institutions of national security have shown stark misconceptions and absence of proper understanding of the problem and its effects or consequences. This misconception is a corollary of the ineffective reaction of the institutions during the previous years in confronting the instigation of religious hatred though online preaching, which due to the recent technological developments not only have mushroomed, but have also made it difficult to track and forestall their effects on time. In the absence of clear de-radicalizing instruments, which should incorporate simultaneously the strategic and institutional approach with socio-economic approach, there are reasonable expectations that radical Islam shall be present in the public sphere, especially among those vulnerable groups of the Muslim community, using as the main instrument the Internet and social networks.

The study has shown that a number of Albanian extremists had a criminal past. The investigation in these individuals' past, which was acknowledged to the pertinent structures, shows that a third of them (or 30 individuals) have been involved in previous serious or non serious illegal criminal acts. The crimes for which these individuals were investigated, punished or imprisoned in the past include: terrorism, the illegal use of weapons, stealing, armed robbery, illegal weapon trafficking, drug and human trafficking, rape and family violence. In this respect, it is important to pay attention to the radicalism within the penitentiary system. The presence of individuals with a criminal past within the group of Islamic radicals helps to explain the violent and brutal actions manifested by the exponents of ISIL and Al-Nusra, including also some Albanians. Within the radical Islam structures there are organized crime structures that constitute a greater danger than the traditional structures of organized crime because the latter have not endorsed any religious ideology.

An important dimension of this study is related to the individuals that have returned back to Albania after their involvement in the war. The number of the returnees is relatively high (40), compared with the overall number of the Albanian jihadists in the conflict. Firstly, the psychological impact of the war is quite present. The studies on the psychological profile of the extremists involved in the war reveal that the majority of them suffer after their return in the home country from psychological disorders and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Due to the large number of the Albanians that have returned from the war in Syria and Iraq, this psychological dimension needs to be taken into consideration, not only for their clinical treatment but also for their possible reintegration in the society. It is precisely the challenge of their reintegration that is important. The interviews with religious representatives and officials show that there is a lack of interest of the Albanian state institutions in this direction. Although some of the returnees manifest repentance and disappointment for what they have experienced, most of them would find it hard to relinquish their extremist beliefs and their religious dogma (tekfirism) for which they have sacrificed a lot in Syria and Iraq.

The re-integration and the de-radicalization are two processes that have deep rooted social, political and religious and security dimensions. The social dimension concerns the process of de-radicalization in relation to the re-integration in society. Regarding the political aspect, the state has a political responsibility to deal with the returnee jihadists not only with repressive or enforcing means but also by changing and updating the legal framework in order to adapt to the new situation. The Albanian government has approved in parliament a change of the criminal code (Article 265/a,b,c) on the participation of Albanian citizens in armed conflicts in other countries (the next session undertakes a detailed analysis of the legal framework and of the strategies of the Albanian state). These processes require the implementation of a national action plan and a strategy to address the issue of national security and to ensure de-securitization (or the removal from the political agenda) of the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism.

The Albanian state has developed a number of domestic and external mechanisms to address the violent extremism. These mechanisms include the international framework, the legislative and strategic framework. What remains to be improved are

the inclusion of the civil society's agents and units and the inclusion of the religious Muslims.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, Albania and the Western Balkans region have been subjected to a wave of violent extremism and religious radicalization. Although the development of such a phenomenon is currently in its incipient phases, extremism and radicalization pose a potential threat to national security. This problem has become more acute due to the participation of Albanian citizens in the conflict in Syria and Iraq and their subsequent return. A steady amplification of the spread of this phenomenon can be observed during the 2011-2014 period. This report seeks to analyze, monitor and evaluate this complex phenomenon, and thereafter present recommendations to different actors as to the manner in which this phenomenon should be confronted.

The study of violent extremism and Islamic radicalization starts with an in-depth examination of contemporary literature on the phenomenon, in order to clarify the concepts that will serve as the fundamental tenets on which the analysis will be constructed, as well as the structural and strategic elements of extremism. Subsequently, the report will expound a novel feature of the phenomenon, namely the emergence of the territoriality of terrorism as a strategic and geopolitical factor. The report will focus on the historical factors and multiple causes that have led to the development of violent extremism and religious radicalization in Albania. The purpose of this report is to provide an inclusive analysis of the factors, the consequences, and the respective responses to the emergence of this phenomenon.

The premise of this analysis is the misuse and instrumentalization of the Islamic religion in order to legitimize violent extremism and the participation of a considerable number of Albanian citizens in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Such an analysis will be based on the securitization theory, which provides a well-rounded approach to the issue of religious securitization and the transformation of the Islamic religion into a national security challenge. From an empirical perspective, this report employs an extensive array of sources of information on the involvement of Albanian citizens in the Syria and Iraq conflict that result from intensive media coverage on the extremist activity over a three-year period. Such information has been cross-checked with official state records and foreign sources of information. In addition, a series of valuable findings from the poll conducted by AIIS on the perceptions of the general public towards violent extremism and religious radicalization in Albania have been incorporated into the report.

An important feature of the radicalization analysis is the geographic spread and the concentration of indoctrinated extremist individuals involved in terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, which requires a scrutiny of the socio-economic factors that have contributed to their radicalization. In order to obtain accurate, and to a certain extent, scientific findings, a data interpretation model which analyzes radicalization as a multi-stage process will be adopted. Such an analysis will ultimately provide a structured understanding of the Islamic extremism phenomenon in Albania, thereby clarifying the impact of any strategy designed to confront this phenomenon. In addition, this report explores problems associated with the return of Albanian extremists, their de-radicalization and integration in society.

Regarding the reactions of state and non-state actors to this phenomenon this report analyzes political, legal and strategic measures that must be implemented. Given that the primary responsibility in confronting this phenomenon, which can undermine national security, befalls on the state, this report will provide a detailed analysis of the legal and institutional measures that must be adopted, as well as the different strategies that the Albanian government should consider in order to combat violent extremism and religious radicalization. In conclusion, this report will offer recommendations in the form of potential strategies that can be adopted by

lawmakers, key institutional actors and the civil society in confronting such a threat to security.

2. The global and regional context

Terrorism, violent extremism and Islamic radicalization are amongst the biggest threats to international security since the end of the Cold War. Although the growth of such phenomena intensified in the beginning of the 1990's, academic literature on these issues fully developed only after the 2001 terrorist attacks in USA. In order to legitimize their actions, extremists rely on ideologies, particularly religious doctrines. Throughout the 2000's, a time when the expansion of violent extremism and religious radicalization had taken a global dimension, the attention of academics turned to terrorist organizations of a religious nature which were now largely accepted to be Non State Actors (NSA's). The NSAs posed a threat to national and international security.

The conflict in Syria was triggered by popular uprisings whose object was to put an end to Assad's dictatorial regime. Whilst still in its rudimentary phases, the conflict was essentially a power-struggle between the people and the state. This power-struggle eventually transformed into a clash between the regime and different rebel groups. It was clear that whoever succeeded in defeating the other would practically gain control of a considerable geographic space and resources such as oil[1], which are of strategic importance to the Middle East region. The prospect of victory facilitated the inclusion of terrorist organizations and foreign soldiers in this conflict. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) is the most powerful of such organizations,

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[1] Shatz, H. (2014, 8 September). *How ISIS Funds its Reign of Terror*. US: Rand Corporation. http://www.rand.org/blog/2014/09/how-isis-funds-its-reign-of-terror.html (10/07/2015).

continuously expanding by assimilating smaller groups, with the ultimate intention of creating an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In order for the organization to achieve this goal, recruiting volunteers became a necessity. In this respect, ISIL has sought to form regional and global recruitment circles. The Balkan region -perhaps not surprisingly- presented opportunities for recruitment. A considerable percentage of individuals in this region are Muslim, and from time to time ethnic conflicts marked by religious undertones have developed.

The number of foreign warriors engaged in the conflict has been gradually growing through the years 2011-2015. Reports from different sources vary, but in general it is understood that the number of foreign warriors ranges from 120.00 to 54.000. The International Centre for the study of Radicalism suggests that the total number of foreign soldiers in Syria amounts to 11.000-12.000 individuals, with only 3000 originating from the Western States. These individuals originate from 80 different countries.[2] On the other hand western sources claim the actual number of foreign warriors to be somewhere between 20.000-30.000 individuals.[3] Although the geographical spread of this phenomenon encompasses the entire European Continent, countries such as Germany, UK, Belgium and France currently supply the largest number of warriors. In addition, a considerable number of foreign warriors originate from the Balkans (including Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro).

The number of warriors coming from the Balkans is thought to be about 700-1000[4] individuals, with a considerable amount -220 to 330 individuals[5]- coming from Bosnia-Herzegovina, although this number is disputed in other sources. According to a report issued by the Central Intelligence Agency in the U.S, the number of Albanian citizens engaged in the conflict is about 140-150, with another 350 Bosnian citizens 150 Kosovar citizens 20 Macedonian citizen, 30 Montenegro citizens 30 and 3

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[2] http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/- 22/07/2015. According to a report published by the Syrian army, 54.000 foreign soldiers foreign soldiers coming from 87 countries have joined the conflict (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331 - 09/07/2015.

[3] Byman, D. & Shapiro, J. (2014, November). *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Policy Paper No. 34, Foreign Policy Series, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution, Tab. 2, P. 11.

[4] The number is the result of crosschecking between several sources such as ICSR, CTC(Combatting Terrorism Centre), CRS (Congressional Research Centre) with official sources of the Western Balkans including Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro.

[5] Azinovic, V. & Jusic, M. (2015). *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Atlantic Initiative, Sarajev0, p. 30.

Serbian citizens participating in conflict.[6] On the other hand, Kosovo's minister of foreign affairs has stated the number of Kosovar citizens engaged in conflict to be about 300.[7] Peter Newman from the ICSR believes that as of January 2015, the number of Albanian Citizens engaged in Syria and Iraq was about 90 individuals[8], whereas the prestigious Rand Corporation Research Center claims that at the end of 2014, the number of foreign soldiers originating from Albania was about 140-150.[9] Through a detailed analysis of official sources, this report will demonstrate that the official number of Albanian Citizens engaged in conflict (until 2015) is 114. On the other hand, several studies have been conducted in the Balkans region, especially in Kosovo and Bosnia, which claim that the number of soldiers originating from the Balkans has increased during the years 2013-2014, only to considerably decrease during the first half of 2015.[10]

Graph 1: The number of foreign warriors in Syria and Iraq (until 2015)[11]
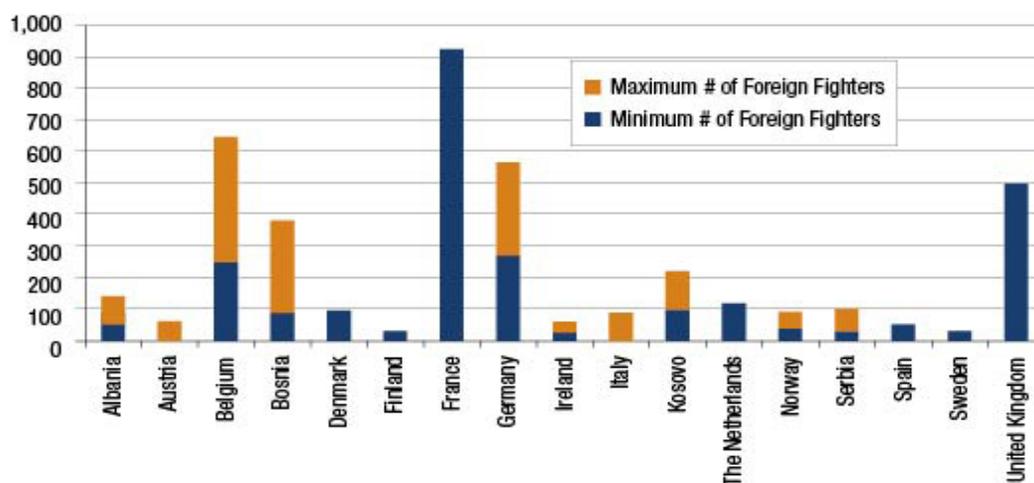
[6]Cited in Bardon, G. (2015). *ISIS Balkan Networks*, American Centre for Democracy, Working Paper. http://acdemocracy.org/isis-balkan-networks - 04/07/2015. The same figures are stated in "*Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria*," Washington Post, 11 October 2014.
[7]VOA (2015, 20 February). Interview with Skender Hyseni, Kosovo Minister of Internal Affairs. *Albanian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 8, Nr. 4, f. 12.
[8] Neuman, P. (2015) *Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Irak now exceeds 20.000*, në http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s - 02/07/2015).
[9] Jenkins, B. M. (2015). *When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerns Returning from Syria and Iraq*. Prespectives, 130-1-RC, f. 35.
[10] See Azinovic, V. & Jusic, M. (2015), ibid, f. 32
[11]   *http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/01/western-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-byman-shapiro (10/08/2015*

Given the complex dynamic of this phenomenon, providing an accurate approximation of foreign soldiers through evidence is not an easy task. The discrepancies between numbers presented from different sources are mainly due to three factors: i) the inclusion of family members in the conflict, ii) the fact that some of these individuals return or are injured/killed iii) the fact that people from the Albanian Diaspora in Western Europe and the United States of America also participate in conflict.[12] Turkey is an entry point to Syria for many of these soldiers, especially ones originating from the Western Balkans.[13] Many cities in the eastern part of Turkey, including Antakya and Kilis, serve as interconnection point through which guns, money and other supplies are smuggled. The majority of extremists however, have flown to Turkey through the Istanbul Airport, although ground-transportation methods are also used.[14] This process is furthermore facilitated by the lack of a visa regime and low transportation costs, thereby enabling whole families to travel through the Turkey-Syria border. The identification of individuals travelling across the border is difficult, especially in cases when ground-transportation methods are used. On the other side of the border, identifying these individuals becomes impossible due to the fact that rebel groups occupy many of these exchange zones. Despite difficulties encountered in producing accurate data regarding the number of foreign soldiers in Syria, the participation of large numbers of foreign soldiers indicates that these individuals can travel freely to conflict zones.

States have undertaken political, strategic and military actions in response to this phenomenon. Such efforts include military actions against extremists in Iraq and Syria, increase in co-operation between EU Member states, which have implemented legislative measures regarding the treatment of these individuals, and the formation of information-exchange agencies. In addition, states are currently drafting and implementing de-radicalization legislation. Balkan states have participated in such efforts in order to confront this relatively novel threat.

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[12] The intelligentsia services confirm that determining the exact number of individuals is a hard task because of these three factors.

[13] See Byman, D. & Shapiro, J. (2014, November). *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.* Policy Paper No. 34, Foreign Policy Series, Brookings Institution, P. 10.

[14] As stated in an article in Today Zaman Newspaper http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_turkey-main-transit-route-for-balkan-fighters-to-syria-iraq_357854.html (10/05/2015).

3. Violent extremism and Islamic radicalization in Albania.

The growth of violent extremism and religious radicalization in Albania poses a great threat. Therefore, it is imperative for authorities to provide adequate measures to confront these problems. The expansion of ISIL and Al Nusra, as reflected by the increasing number of people joining these groups, poses a threat to national security and religious harmony, which would be very damaging to the security, stability and future of the country. This phenomenon has been imported to, and diffused in Albania during the last few years. A series of factors that have facilitated such a growth will be examined in detail below. The first reports with regard to the participation of Albanians in the Syrian conflict emerged in 2012. The number of people who joined culminated in 2014. As mentioned above, there is no accurate estimation of the number of individuals that have joined the conflict, although cumulatively, sources estimate the number to be somewhere between 90-150 individuals. However, these reports often fail to include the number of family members that travel along with these extremists. In the case of Albania, 31 children and 13 women are estimated to have travelled to conflict zones.

Official sources state that the number of returnees stands at 40, further claiming that 18 have been killed in fighting and 7 have been injured. Thus far, Albanian authorities have arrested 15 individuals on the charge of 'inciting extremism and terrorism", with another 6 being currently wanted by the police. Two individuals currently under arrest are self-declared Imams. During their trial proceedings, the self-declared Imams have constantly refused to accept the fact that they are subjects of Albanian Law, stating that their actions can only be judged by the standards of Sharia Law. From a geographical perspective, the growth of this phenomenon is concentrated in the cities of Elbasan, Pogradec, Librazhd, Bulqiza, Cerrik, Kukes , Dibra, as well as in other rural locations surrounding these cities. In addition, this phenomenon is present in the suburbs of Tirana and Durres.

3.1. Religion, Society and Politics in Albania.

Today, a large part of Europe's Muslim population lives in the Balkans. These individuals uphold fairly moderated beliefs, which can be traced back to the occupation of the Balkan Peninsula by the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century.

However, these religious doctrines have not developed in a uniform manner across the different Balkan States. In some of these countries, religion (Christian or Muslim) has played a key role in shaping national identities and in shaping the structure of the state. In some other states, religion lost its importance due the creation of communist regimes, as it was the case with Albania.

Given that Albanian society is characterized by religious pluralism, no single religion has played a key role in building the state and national identity. Since its conception, the Albanian state has not encountered problems related to religious clashes. Religious belief has never been a component of national identity. Historically, religion has not served as an organizing ideology with respect to the state, nation or society.[15] However, the communist regime regarded the notion of religion as incompatible with its ideology, therefore viewing religious organizations as a threat to its existence.

The destruction of religious institutions and the ban on practicing religion contributed to the isolation of the country. In an effort to consolidate their power, the communists started a persecution campaign against Albanian religious leaders and clerics, declaring them enemies, traitors and fascist collaborators.[16] In the following years, in a move that was partly inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, religious institutions were either destroyed or transformed into propaganda centers of the new regime. A large majority of the 12000 mosques and 400 Catholic or Orthodox churches were destroyed or used as storage facilities, sport centers and cinemas. The clerics were violently persecuted and sent to labor camps. In contrast to most communist countries, the dictatorial regime in Albania outlawed all religious belief, thereby becoming the first atheist state in the world.

3.2 Transition, democratization and religious radicalization.

In order to understand the process of violent extremism and religious radicalization it is imperative to analyze the political transition of the Albanian state, placing special emphasis on the role of religion in the Albanian society and politics. The analysis

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[15] Rakipi, A. (2015, 21 March). The birth of a new radical influence in Albania, Mapo Newspaper.http://www.mapo.al/2015/03/lindja-e-nje-ndikimi-te-ri-radikal-fetar-ne-shqiperi (22/06/2015)
[16] Rakipi, A. (2015). Ibid.

below will serve as a platform to gain an understanding of the religious transformation of a small segment of the Muslim community, which increasingly developed extremist tendencies, as evidenced by the participation of Albanian citizens in conflict zones in the last 2-3 years.

The fall of the communist regime in 1990 would serve as a turning point for the development of religion. Through the last two decades, religion and religious institutions have gone through a dynamic process caused by economic, social and political factors. In addition, it is important to note that the development of religious freedoms and institutions coincided with the opening of Albanian borders. As a consequence there was an increasing influence of other countries in building the Albanian state.

The poll conducted by AIIS in March-April 2015 suggests that the number of Albanians practicing religion has increased considerably. About 21.4% of the Albanian population practices religion on a daily basis, whereas 53% of the population participates in all major religious celebrations of any given religion. 21.4% of the population does not practice religion. In this respect, it is clear that 'religious practice' entails a superficial commitment rather than a substantial one.

Graph 2: Religious practice
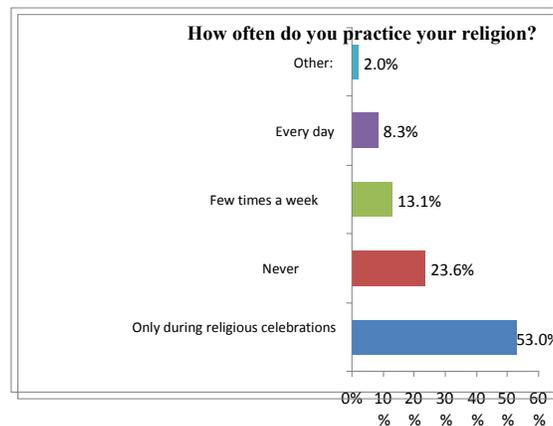
The development of religious freedoms and institutions has been deeply influenced by the political, economic and social developments during post-communist years. However, the development of religious freedoms and institutions was influenced and made possible due to the efforts of foreign religious institutions, international

organizations and other states. Their influence gained traction due to the fact that i) state finances were depleted, ii) there was a lack of political vision with regard to the importance of developing religious freedoms and institutions and iii) the lack of a legal framework regulating such institutions. However, throughout recent years extremist religious organizations and extremist movements closely tied with international terrorism were proliferating. As will be analyzed below, this development resulted in the emergence of 'problematic' organizations and other NSAs establishing their presence in Albania. In the years to come, their presence and actions would play an important role in forming a new national security challenge.[17]

Efforts to modernize Islamic religion have been problematic due to the recent radical and extremist tendencies exhibited by some groups of people. In Albania, the development of Muslim faith and religious institutions has been facilitated by religious harmony present in Albania. Polls show that 84.3% of the population agree on the fact that Albanian society is religiously harmonious (Graph 3, below). However, early experience in the 1990's shows that this process is not immune to radical and extremist tendencies. Although the data from the latest poll of AIIS show that Albanians have limited knowledge on the Muslim religion (77.7% of participants claim to have little or no knowledge), Islamic radicalization has gained traction due to several factors, which will be analyzed in detail below.

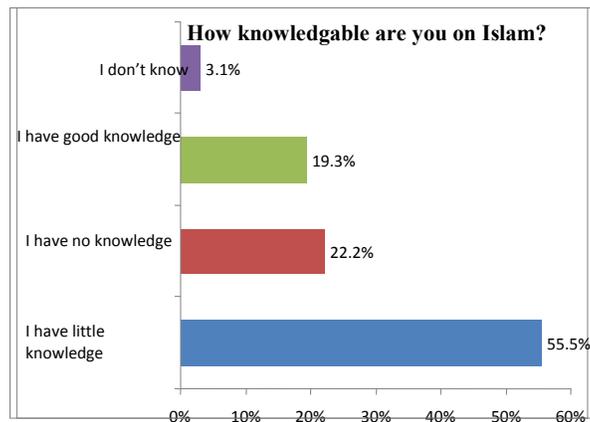Graph 3: Public perception on religious harmony

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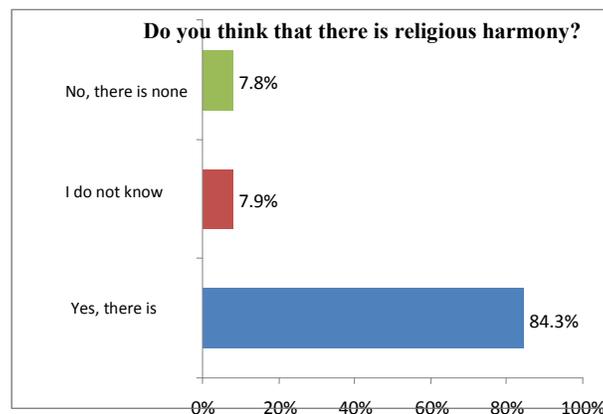
[17] For a specific study on matters of national security and religion see; Bumçi, A. (2004). *Çështje të Sigurisë Kombëtare. Rasti i Shqipërisë. Kufiri, feja, korrupsioni.* Tiranë: AIIS Press, and Woehrel, S. (2005). *Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans.* CRS Report for Congress, RL33012. https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33012.pdf (11/04/2015)

As evidenced during the 1990's transitional period, the process of the development of religion has not been immune from the influence of extremist and radical tendencies. Although the data from the latest poll by AIIS (Graph 4) show that Albanians have limited knowledge on Muslim religion (77.7% of participants declare they have little or no knowledge), due to a series of factors Albania has turned into a suitable terrain for the growth of Islamic radicalization.

Graph 4: Knowledge of Islam – AIIS 2015

How knowledgable are you on Islam?

Response	Percentage
I don't know	3.1%
I have good knowledge	19.3%
I have no knowledge	22.2%
I have little knowledge	55.5%

Firstly, one of the most essential factors is that during the post communist period Albania was plagued by extreme poverty. The state did not have adequate resources to support the reconstruction of Muslim institutions. During communist years, such institutions were destroyed or reduced to shambles. A number of foundations and organizations mainly from the Middle East and Persian Gulf filled the vacuum that was left by the state. Such organizations provided financial support for the reconstruction of religious institutions. To a certain extent, such support came with the influence of a new Muslim culture that had not been present before in Albania, namely the Hanefi tradition.[18]

Secondly, clerics who played an important role in the revival and development of the Muslim faith were not adequately educated due to the fact that religious practice was banned for 50 years. The Albanian state did not provide resources to ensure the education of future clerics. Such a situation created favorable conditions for Middle

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[18] As officially stated by the AMC, see Bumçi, A. (2004). *Çështje të Sigurisë Kombëtare. Rasti i Shqipërisë. Kufiri, feja, korrupsioni.* Tiranë: AIIS Press

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Eastern countries to essentially provide training to these clerics, and instill new interpretations of religious doctrines that were at times not compatible with traditional Muslim beliefs in Albania. The scale of their influence in distorting the traditional understanding of the Muslim religion is certainly debatable. However, it is very clear that these states and organizations have largely contributed to the formation of a new religious culture in Albania.

3.3. The involvement of Albanian Citizens in Syria and Iraq: Numbers and facts

Before the start of the civil war in Iraq and Syria, more specifically during the 2003-2011 period, the number of Albanian citizens actively involved in jihadist activities was negligible. In the Balkan region such activities were largely undertaken by Bosnian citizens.[19]Specialized state organizations and other Albanian non-state actors turned their attention to this issue about two and a half years ago, as the conflict in Syria and Iraq had taken an international dimension, due to the participation of foreign soldiers, including individuals from the western Balkans.

The first reports on Albanian extremists travelling towards Syria were produced in 2012. The media and the general public began to focus their attention to this issue after a series of terrorist attacks in the beginning of 2014, noting the involvement of individuals from the western Balkans in the conflict (mainly of Albanian and Bosnian origin).[20] Such developments reflect the connection between extremist cell groups in the Western Balkans and Europe. Initially, a large majority of Albanian extremists joined a terrorist organization named Jabhat Al-Nusra, with only a small portion joining ISIL. However, throughout the years the situation was reversed, as more and more individuals started joining ISIL. Albanian extremists originating from Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia have organized themselves as a group in Syria, declaring their loyalty to ISIL and its leaders.

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[19] For a full report on Bosnian foreign soldiers see: Azinovic, V. & Jusic, M. (2015). *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo. Besides a case revolving around the arrest of an Albanian Citizen by the Syrian Authorities in Damascus, all other cases involve Bosnian Citizens; See Holman, T. (2014, June). *Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 7, Nr. 6, f. 9.

[20] The investigation procedure clarified that these individuals pertained to the Albanian Diaspora, two of whom were of Macedonian Nationality, whereas a third wan was a Kosovar who had lived in Switzerland. See Holman, T. (2014, June). *Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 7, Nr. 6, f. 8.

The number of foreign soldiers in Syria and Iraq originating from Albania is calculated to be approximately 90-150 individuals. As for official sources, the number of Albanian Individuals engaged in conflict is 114, whereas it is reported that around 40 of them (one third) have returned.[21] Reports clarify that the number of Albanian soldiers joining the conflict has steadily increased through the second half of 2013 until the first half of 2014. According to official sources, in 2015 the number of these individuals that were joining the conflict decreased to zero. In any event, such figures are disputable, as a result of the difficulty in identifying the movements of extremist individuals who mainly travel by car from Turkey, a state that does not have a visa regime with Albania. However, the decrease of the number of soldiers joining the conflict can be attributed to several factors, such as – inter-alia – the arrest of certain Imams and other individuals who sent individuals to Syria. On the other hand, such a decrease is partly due to the intensification of state efforts to eliminate this phenomenon as well as extensive media coverage that largely influenced public opinion.

It is interesting to note that the percentage of the Albanian population joining ISIL is much higher when compared with other, larger, European countries.[22] In the case of Kosovo, the percentage of population joining the conflict is even higher (about 300 people out of a population of 1.8 million). Some of the Albanian individuals joining the conflict have been killed during fighting. Media sources suggest that until April 2015 about 12 Albanian individuals were killed.[23] On the other hand, official sources state that the number of individuals killed in fighting is 18, with a further 7 individuals being injured. A considerable number of individuals joining the conflict (about 30) have received military training in Albania or other regions.[24]

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[21] As per data released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Albania.

[22] "*It Ain't Half Hot Here, Mom. Why and How Westerns go to Fight in Syria and Iraq*", The Economist, 30 August 2014. http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21614226-why-and-how-westerners-go-fight-syria-and-iraq-it-aint-half-hot-here-mum (28/06/2015).

[23] See Albanian Media reportings through the September- October 2014 period. http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2014/09/14/ne-siri-dhe-irak-deri-tani-40-shqiptare-te-vrare/ (06/07/2015). Gjithashtu Holman, T. (2014, June). *Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 7, Nr. 6, f. 8.

[24] Holman, T. (2014, June). *Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 7, Nr. 6, f. 8. As per Adrian Shtuni, at least 14 Albanian extremist have received previous military training, whereas 10 have received religious training; Shtuni, A. (2015), ibid. p. 13.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs - in cooperation with anti-terrorism departments of the state police and intelligentsia departments - has undertaken the following actions up until July 2013: i) three operations against groups who intended to commit terrorist acts, in total arresting 14 individuals while issuing arrest orders for a further 5 individuals ii) an operation against terrorist groups that led to the arrest of 5 individuals and arrest warrants for 2 individuals and iii) the arrest of four individuals on the accusation of committing terrorist activities. 15 individuals are currently under arrest by court order with another 6 being declared wanted by the police with the accusation of "recruiting individuals with the intention of committing terrorist acts and financing terrorist activities" as well as "inciting the public to commit terrorist acts".

3.4 The geographical dimension of the phenomenon

The analysis of various data collected for this report suggests that a large percentage of Albanian Individuals originate from Muslim communities in cities such as Pogradec, Elbasan, Librazhd, Bulqiza, Cerriku, Kukes and Dibra. This geographical spread indicates that a large majority of these individuals come from some of the poorest, isolated rural areas. However, data collected for this study indicates that some individuals come from undeveloped outer areas of Tirana, Durres and Vlore.

3.5 The factors that influenced the growth of violent extremism and Islamic radicalization in Albania

The phenomenon of Islamic radicalization does not originate in Albania. This phenomenon has a global dimension, and as such it is present in many other countries, most of which have a consolidated democratic system and a strong economy. Moreover, Albanians are not the first individuals to have joined the conflict in Iraq and Syria fighting for extremist organizations such as ISIL or Al-Nusra.

Religious debates in Albania have surfaced from time to time, but the nature of these debates has been highly theological. Despite these facts, Islamic radicalization has penetrated Albanian society due to a series of factors, some of which are cultural, educational social and economic. The growth of this phenomenon has been partly

influenced by Islamic foundations, whereas today religious extremist cells, which are not controlled by the Muslim community, are further advancing Islamic radicalization. There are many ways of studying the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization. Some of the methodologies used, place great importance on direct causes, superficial causes, deeply-rooted issues and historical causes. In order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, the report has adopted the Veldhuis & Staun analytical model, according to which the causes of such a phenomenon may be broadly defined at a macro level and a micro level.[25] As a result of on-site monitoring and interviews conducted by experts, it is noted that the larger part of Albanian citizens who have joined the conflict in Syria are isolated and marginalized from the rest of society.

These two factors often influence extremist to find a new meaning in life. The refusal to create or rebuild communication bridges with the rest of the society may be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, this occurrence is due to the large-socio-economic gaps produced by the transition period. Secondly, this occurrence is further reinforced by the lack of communication between state institutions, which have the responsibility to create a decent standard of living for communities. Thirdly, it is due to the failure of KMSH to control all cult establishments. Lastly, this is a problem that has been created by the communities themselves, as they failed to inform the authorities regarding attempts to create radical cell groups.

Another cause is the loss of faith in the rule of law. This factor differentiates the radicalization process in Albania from the Western Europe, where these states have a consolidated democracy and radicals focus more on a comparison between democracy and a political system based on Sharia law. The slow and difficult process of Albania's democratization, the weakness of the Albanian state in implementing legislation and ensuring the development of the law, and the high level of corruption, especially corruption in the judicial system have been used by extremists in order to radicalize a small section of the Albanian Muslim community, seeking to convince them that Islam is the solution to their problems.

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[25] Veldhuis, T. & Staun, J. (2009, October). *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*. Netherland Institute for International Relations, P. 21.

The lack of an effective judicial system stands out as the most problematic factor that has influenced young Albanian citizens. According to Mr. Ermir Gjinishi, Ex Vice chairman of AMC, religious doctrines have been misinterpreted to serve political objectives.[26] Extremists wish to ascertain that the weakness of the state and its administration has resulted in a dysfunctional system of governance. They argue that the vacuum created by the lack of the rule of law must be filled by the Sharia law. But, the problems in Albania do not come as a result of a lack of good legislation. Rather, the problems faced are a direct consequence of the failure to implement these laws, which ultimately leads to a dysfunctional judicial system. The lack of rule of law is used as a tool by extremists to penetrate the political system in Albania. In 2007, a group of individuals sought to form a new Islamic political party. However the AMC, the larger Muslim community, and the cultural and political elite of the country did not support this movement. This movement represented the first effort to politicize religious beliefs.

However the effort of radical Islam to create a political party and thus infiltrate in the legal system has no chance of success. Another question that merits discussion is the growing interest of political parties in electoral campaigning to try gathering votes from religious communities. This issue has been raised from time to time as political parties accuse one another every time the country is approaching election time. Strong accusations have been advanced by Muslim priests in support of political parties.[27] This issue may very well result in the creation of a new political movement.

Another cause of Islamic radicalization in Albania is religious discrimination. Although this is not a wide-spread phenomenon, throughout the last few years it has been used as an argument by radicals in order to indoctrinate religious believers.

However, discrimination based on religious beliefs should not be confounded with Islam-phobia, a phenomenon which has not been present in Albania due to religious harmony. UC Berkley has commissioned a study which sets out the difference between Islam-phobia and discrimination. The study clarifies that "Islam-phobia is

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[26] Interview with theologist Ermir Gjinishi, ex- vice- chairman of the AMC, daten 10 July 2015.
[27] In an interview for Agon Channel, the Imam Neki Kaloshi states that the public support of representatives of religious institutions towards political candidates supports the argument that these communities are politically affiliated. http://agonchanneltv.com/category/video/page/13/lajme/lajme/page/3/ (16/06/2015)

the counter response to a perceived Muslim threat; it is an irrational animosity towards Muslims as well as a fear of the Muslim community in general. This concept has been used in Western States in order to explain marginalization of Muslims, especially during the first decade of the 21st century.

Islamic radicalization has developed in Albania partly due to the fact that key institutions such as intelligence services, executive departments and the prosecution office have not paid attention to this matter during the last five to seven years. These institutions have not taken proper pre-emptive measures. On the other hand, the growth of Islamic radicalization has taken place through a relatively long period of time. Therefore, this development can be divided into several stages, which will be analyzed below. The measures that could be taken to combat this phenomenon are different and dependent on the stage of its development. Security institutions have shown a total lack of knowledge as to the development of this phenomenon, its impact and the consequences that it brings.

In Albania, the process of Islamic radicalization is rooted in socio-economic causes. There are two main schools of thought seeking to ascertain which factors influence Islamic radicalization. On the one hand, academics believe that the phenomenon of radicalization is rooted in poverty, economic struggle, illiteracy and unemployment in Muslim countries.[28] On the other hand, there are those who believe that the lack of economic and socio-cultural development is not the cause of the growth of radicalization.[29] In Albania, the emergence of the phenomenon is largely related to socio-economic factors. As reiterated above, almost all individuals who have joined the conflict originate from some of the poorest areas of Albania, living in segregation from society as a whole.

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[28] Inspired by the modernization theory, the authors argue that Islamic radicalization is a political reaction to the growing inequality, economic downfall and lack of knowledge in Muslim countries, which have been caused by the West and the economic interests of the Muslim Elite; see Taspinar O. (2009, June). *Fighting Radicalism, not 'Terrorism': Roots Causes of an International Actor Redefined*. SAIS Review, Vol. XIXX, No. 2, ff. 75-76.

[29] Empirical studies suggest that a considerable number of extremists are neither poor nor un-educated, but they undergo the indoctrination process as a result of ideological beliefs; see Barro, R. (2002, June). *The Myth That Poverty Breeds Terrorism*. Business Week

Extreme poverty and lack of state structures has led to the underdevelopment of these areas which in turn fostered a general lack of perspective in life that characterizes these individuals. Extremist organizations and Islamic foundations have constantly endeavored to instill a new perspective and purpose in the life of these desperate, forgotten individuals. Through the 2010-2015 period 18-21% of the workforce in Albania was unemployed. This percentage is much higher in rural areas from where these individuals originate, such as Pogradec, Elbasan, Librazhd and Bulqiza.[30] The level of unemployment in the 17-35-age group- which is the most susceptible to indoctrination- ranges from 40-45%.[31] Furthermore, low levels of education and literacy act as catalysts for the indoctrination of these individuals.

Concerning the public perception of the causes that influence the growth of this phenomenon, the poll conducted by AIIS clarifies that 41.3% of participants blame extreme poverty, 21.1% point to financial reasons whilst about 10% point to low levels of education. 12.6% blame radical Islamic ideology itself. (graph 5)

Graph 5: Causes leading to the involvement of Albanian Citizens in Terrorist Organizations
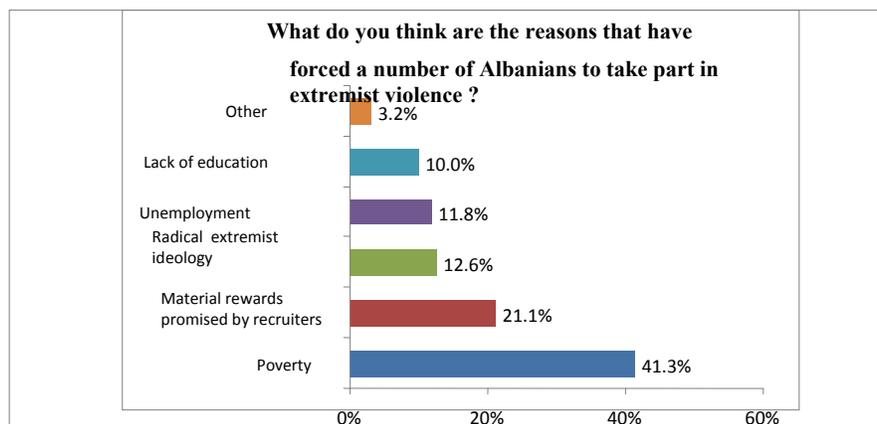
Another cause of the growth in the number of extremists and the penetration of extremist ideology in Albania is the failure of the Albanian Muslim community- as the most important institution of religious activities- to prevent the growth of this

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[30] As per data issued by INSTAT: <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/themes/tregu-i-punës.aspx?tab=tabs-5> (30/06/2015).
[31] INSTAT, ibid.

phenomenon. Not all the mosques and other cult objects wherein the indoctrination of these individuals takes place are under the jurisdiction of the AMC. The Albanian Muslim Community has failed to take any action that would prevent the initial growth of the phenomenon. From an analysis of media sources and data gathered for this report, it results that there is a small number of mosques[32] (about 7 to 10) ,which are not under the jurisdiction of AMC, out of a total of 450-500 cult objects. Recently there have been efforts to ensure that this small number of mosques should be incorporated into the jurisdiction of AMC. However, as reiterated above, the extreme religious tones and hate-spreading messages conveyed in some official mosques are worrisome.

Based on the information gathered on extremist individuals, their average age is 31-35 years, relatively higher than the age of Kosovar individuals, which ranges from 21-25 years old.[33] Firstly, this proves that the Islamic radicalization process has started 5-8 years earlier in Albania, in comparison with Kosovo. The process in Albania started during the 90's, meaning that individuals who are now indoctrinated have been exposed to this ideology from an early age. Given the relatively young age of these indoctrinated individuals, social media and the internet play a key role as they produce a virtual environment that facilitates the spread of extremist beliefs and the indoctrination of young gullible individuals. Online forums serve as a platform of communication used by fighters in Iraq and Syria to influence young individuals in joining their cause. Of course, the virtual nature of these communications makes it very hard for specialized agencies to track them down, although recently new online monitoring structures have been created to deal with this particular issue. [34]

On the other hand, as part of their efforts to indoctrinate Albanian citizens, radicals use a series of arguments based on international events. For example, changes emanating from the Arab Spring have contributed to the growth or radicalization in Albania. The radicals claim that the Muslim population in Albania must embrace the

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[32] Interview with officials of the AMC
[33] Shtuni, A. (2015), ibid. f. 13.
[34] There are about 25.000 twitter accounts belonging to ISIL that were created in 2012, which cumulatively send a total of 200.000 messages per week. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-use-of-social-media-for-online-radicalisation (20/07/2015).

creation of an Islamic state as a result of the social and economic degradation that has been a hallmark of the transition years.
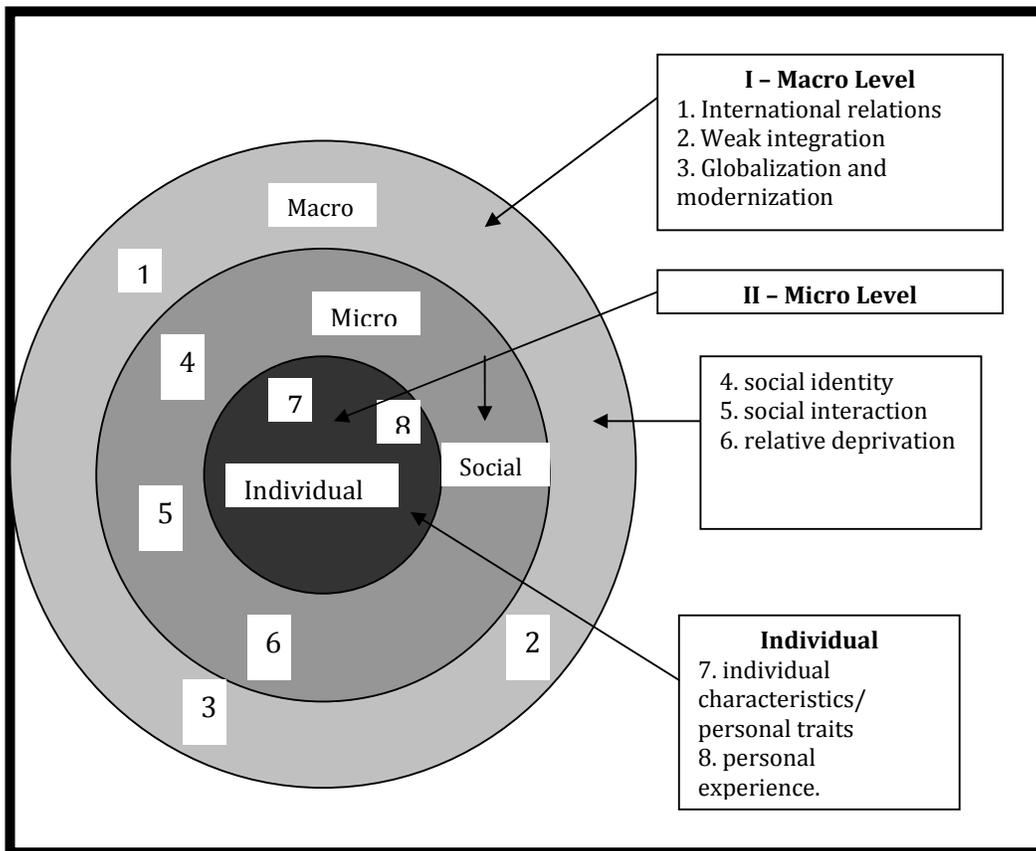
Such arguments are advanced by individuals holding communions in mosques under the control of the AMC, who frequently point to the latest developments in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and the Middle East in general. During these events, they spread messages of hate against the Western States and especially the United States of America, which has been identified as the greatest enemy, as a result of the great injustice it has caused to Muslims in Iraq, Syria and beyond. Extremist individuals in Syria and Iraq present themselves as warriors who protect Muslim brothers, willing to give their lives in the name of Allah. At the same time, they oppose the moderate Muslim population in Albania, thus remaining loyal to the Tekfirist line of thought, fully rejecting democracy.[35]

Police records regarding the illegal activities in mosques where Genci Balla and Bujar Hysa were preaching have shown that these individuals advocated religious and military movements. The police have confiscated guns, ammunitions, camouflage-wear, binoculars and other military objects in the residences of their close collaborators. Hatred towards Israel forms an important of part of extremist preaching by these individuals, although anti-Semitism has never been part of Albanian culture.

The separation of influencing factors at a micro and macro level will serve to distinguish causes of radicalization from precipitating factors which account for the sudden spread of the radicalization process (see table 1). Such analysis will ultimately aid in forming a fundamental understanding of the phenomenon, and thereafter in assessing whether they pose a threat to the security of the community and national security in general.

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[35]As per media reports on extremist preachings of the arrested Imam's Genci (Abdurrahman) Balla and Bujar Hysa.http://www.reporter.al/dosja-e-xhihadit-roli-imameve-ne-rekrutimin-e-militanteve-shqiptare/ (08/07/2015).

The different causes which lead to religious radicalization is presented in detail in Table 1[36], below.

I – Macro Level
1. International relations
2. Weak integration
3. Globalization and modernization

II – Micro Level

4. social identity
5. social interaction
6. relative deprivation

Individual
7. individual characteristics/ personal traits
8. personal experience.

3.6 The radicalization process: the need for a model

As a result of the multi-dimensional nature of Islamic radicalization, academics have developed a series of conceptual and empirical models in order to dissect the phenomenon into its constituent causes. Taking into account the specific circumstances presented in Albania, such as the development of 'grass-root terrorism', for the purposes of this study the Veldhuis & Staun model will be adopted

[36] Veldhuis, T. & Staun, J. (2009, Tetor). *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*. Netherland Institute for International Relations, f. 23.

in order to gain a conceptual and empirical understanding of the phenomenon.[37] One of the most popular models is called the 'top-down' model, which differentiates between the different stages of the radicalization process that an individual undergoes. (table 2, below)

Table 2: The multi-stage model of the Islamic radicalization process

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Contact between the radicalizator and a person who may embrace radical ideas	Gradual change in behaviour and religious beliefs. Unusual behaviour and the use of new communication mediums (mainly through the internet)	Change in social life, socializing with like-minded individuals Regression from societal and family connections.	- The process of moral "strengthening' mainly through viewing violent videos online and war scenes of combating jihadists Departure to the conflict areas

The process begins when the (radicalized) individual considers extremist ideas. This process usually starts in the early ages, and its development is supported by the extreme poverty, unemployment and the lack of education which increases an individual's vulnerability to indoctrination. This process is facilitated if the radicalized individual meets with a radicalizer, (hereafter referred to as 'the radicalizer) who endeavors to indoctrinate the individual by introducing him to extremist religious practices, thereby changing his behavior. During this phase, the individual becomes ideologically opposed to the western democratic system whilst embracing anti-Semitic beliefs and a rejection of moderate Muslim beliefs. The process continues when the individuals socializes in extremist circles, which may be present in his community or in the Internet.

During this phase the individual familiarizes himself with violence (through videos and internet) and becomes increasingly concerned with the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

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[37] Veldhuis, T. & Staun, J. (2009, Tetor). *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*. Netherland Institute for International Relations, ff. 14-18.

The most useful aspect of this model is the fact that it dissects the radicalization process into specific stages, which enables for strategies to be developed in order to deter the radicalization of an individual during each stage. For example, during the first phase it is possible to focus on pre-emptive measures in order to identify and punish 'extremists', such as radical imams who seek to indoctrinate individuals in mosques, prisons, or other educational or religious centers. The authorities may choose to monitor the activities of these individuals, or initiate campaigns in the Muslim community in order to educate them as to this threat, and promote the building of communication bridges with the community.

During this phase the government must take due measures in order to close down the mosques which are not under the control of the AMC. During the second phase, authorities may endeavor to identify susceptible individuals which exhibit 'strange behavior' and seek to de-radicalize them through social programs. In this case, the de-radicalization process takes place before the individual may travel to conflict zones. During the third stage, authorities may refer to social service directorates and teachers in order to instruct them to exercise due caution and educate young-adults who show signs of indoctrination and radicalization. During the fourth phase, the government may increase policing measures, so as to prevent individuals from joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As with every analytical model, the Veldhuis & Stein model has its limitations, in that individuals may become radicalized in a manner which does not fall under the specific stages as reiterated above. Nevertheless, this model remains very useful in explaining the radicalization process in Albania.

3.7 The importance of family in war: Women and children in Syria and Iraq.

A novel feature of the study of the participation of Albanian extremists in conflict zones is the re-location of their families. As per Peter Newman, about 10-15 percent of individuals that have traveled to Syria are women.[38] In the case of Albania, official sources indicate that at least 13 Albanian Citizens have travelled to Syria during the 2012-2014, along with women and 31 children. The investigative network BIRN reports that several children have now become orphans and are destined to remain in

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[38] Cited in "*The Economist*" : "*It ain't half hot here, mum. Why and how westerners go to fight in Syria and Iraq*". http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21614226-why-and-how-westerners-go-fight-syria-and-iraq-it-aint-half-hot-here-mum (22/05/2015)

Syria as their parents have been killed in conflict. In addition, official sources state that families usually live in war camps, whereas the fathers fight for extremist groups. There has been at least one reported case wherein a jihadist under surveillance by the Secret Service and the prosecution has taken his children to Syria without the consent of their mother. In this case two police officers have assisted the jihadist to travel abroad illegally.[39] The transportation of women and children to conflict zones is a specific feature of the radicalization process in Albania, which comes as a result of the patriarchal understanding of the family unit in which the man of the house takes major decisions.

3.8 The criminal past of extremist individuals

A substantial number of foreign warriors involved in the conflict in Iraq and Syria have a criminal past. Information gathered on these individuals shows that some of them have been previously convicted. Investigations on their past reveal that about a third of these individuals have committed criminal acts in the past, with some of them committing multiple crimes; including terrorism, possession of illegal firearms, robbery, drug and human trafficking. A report issued by a western intelligence agency states that over half (52%) of foreign warriors that have joined the conflict from the EU had previously committed criminal acts.[40] Given the criminal pasts of some of these individuals, their use of violence and brutality- as showcased in video recordings- does not come as a big surprise. This fact gives weight to the argument that one of the objectives of ISIL is targeting a specific group of individuals who have a criminal past, as evidenced by the slogan of the organization: "Sometimes people with the worst of pasts can create the best future". The process or radicalization of individuals in correctional facilities has intensified during the last years, given that many individuals regard this process as a form of spiritual cleansing.

3.9 Returning home: Re-integration and de-radicalization

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[39] Cited in Bogdani & Bezaj, referring to the sources of the prosecution office Bogdani, A. & Bezaj, F. (2014, 16 December). *Dhjetëra fëmijë shqiptarë "pengje" të xhihadistëve në Siri*. (BIRN) Reporter.al. http://www.reporter.al/dhjetra-femije-shqiptare-pengje-te-xhihadisteve-ne-siri/ (20/07/15)
[40] Cited in Archick, K. & Belkin, P. (2015, April). *European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States*. US: Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, R44003, f. 28.

About 40 Albanian Individuals have returned from the conflict zones, a relatively high percentage when compared to the total number of Albanian Jihadists.

On the onset, it is important to understand the psychological impact that war has on these individuals. Studies on their psychological state show that they are inclined to post traumatic stress and other mental illnesses upon their return.[41] Given the high number of returnees, their psychological condition demands careful consideration concerning both their treatment and possible re-integration in society. The de-radicalization of these individuals is one of the most complex issues that must be addressed in the fight against extremism. De-radicalization is a difficult process and its success is not guaranteed.[42] The main difficulty relates to the fact that the experiences of these individuals are deeply ingrained in their mindset. Although some of them show remorse or disappointment when faced with their actions, most of these individuals refuse to renounce their extremist convictions.

Re-integration and de-radicalization are two different and multidimensional processes. From a political perspective, these processes must be seen as responsibilities of the state in dealing with the returnees by changing the legal framework in order to accommodate their rehabilitation. For this reason, the Albanian government has amended the Criminal code (Article 265/a,b,c) which delineates legal measures related to the participation of Albanian citizens in armed conflict. Viewed from a national security perspective, these processes require clear strategies or action plans in order to ensure the de-securitization of the Islamic extremism phenomenon.

As mentioned above, the number of extremists returning to Albania from conflict zones is about 40. It has not been possible to interview these returnees so as to understand their radicalization process, travel itinerary and involvement in conflict. However, the analysis presented below is based on reports issued which purport to answer these questions by interviewing some returnees from the Balkans, including Kosovo.

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[41] Byman, D. & Shapiro J. (2014). *Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists.* Foreign Affairs, November/ December

[42] Interview with Arben Ramkaj, Myftiu of Elbasan, ibid.

These individuals have made the Albanian authorities face a national security crisis because of the skills that they have acquired during conflict, and because of their connections with terrorist groups. Although Albanian legislation has been amended to criminalize participation in armed conflict abroad, this law does not apply to some of these individuals as they have returned before these changes could be enacted. On the other hand, the enactment of this law poses another kind of problem, as extremist individuals will now fear to return home given they face a lengthy jail sentence if they do so.

From an analysis of the findings it is concluded that many of these returnees use social media to offer detailed information on actual developments in conflict zones. Through the social media they document these experiences, and sometimes they call for individuals to join these conflict and furthermore they valuable information on how to travel to Syria. The fact that they participated in conflict makes them heroes to a young generation of extremists with radical tendencies. On the other hand, these returnees may be considered trained war veterans who are experienced in using firearms and explosives. This fact increases the risk of terrorist acts being committed in Albania and the region. Furthermore, many of the extremists who have returned are trained in guerilla fighting and may seek to build a global circle of jihadists.[43]

This direct challenge to national security is reinforced by the fact that through the last month's there have been about 20 terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Australia, Canada and Tunisia. It results that some of the extremists which have returned do so with a clear goal that is either to form terrorist groups in their countries or create terrorist cell groups whose goal is to send people to the fighting front. According to Charles Farr, the director of the counter terrorism office of the United Kingdom, "Syria has deeply changed the rules of the game." He argues that "these people not only return with radical ideas, but they are deeply traumatized and fully prepared to use violence."[44]

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[43] Byman, D. & Shapiro, J. (2014, Nëntor). *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Policy Paper No. 34, Foreign Policy Series, Brookings Institution, f. 2.

[44] Lynch, C. (2013, July). *Europe's New 'Time Bomb' is Ticking in Syria*. Foreign Policy. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/09/european_fighters_jihadists_syria?page=0,1 (14/04/2015)

In addition, these individuals may seek to gather funds to be transferred to terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. The data gathered from the poll conducted by AIIS show that the Albanian public is inclined to show empathy and is willing to accept extremist, which have returned to their homeland, and furthermore they support efforts to re-integrate these individuals. 51.9 % of the participants are in favor of re-integration, whereas 24.3% state that they would f like for these individuals to be punished.

Graph 6: The Government's reaction as to individuals whom have returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.
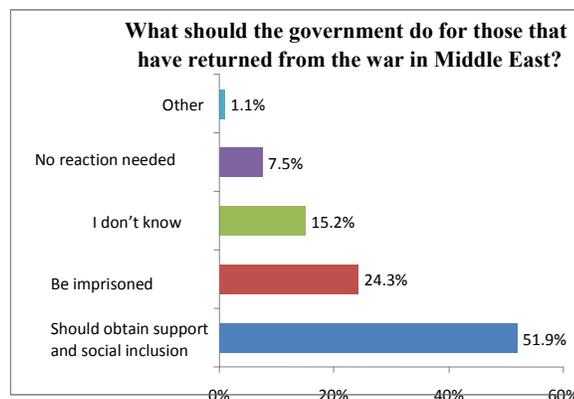
However, it is important to understand that many of these individuals may be completely disappointed from their experiences in conflict zones. They might serve as an example to the larger community, in order to delegitimize extremism and Islamic radicalization. Any program seeking to re-integrate these extremists must focus on ensuring that there is actual assistance from the state that will serve to detach these individuals from their extremist pasts.

3.10 State reaction: legislative changes, institutional structuring and the government's strategy in confronting the phenomenon.

Throughout the last two years, the Albanian state has developed a series of instruments and mechanisms, both internal and external, which serve to confront Islamic radicalization and violent extremism.

3.10.1 The international framework

The involvement of extremist in the Iraq and Syria as foreign warriors and the fact that they may recruit more individuals or attempt to use violence upon their return, has led the United Nations to ask member states to change their legal systems in order to punish this category of their own citizens. This obligation is specified in Resolution 2178 of the Security Council[45] on the exchange of information on suspects for involvement in terrorist activities.

As regards the mechanisms and external instruments, as a NATO member state Albania has been involved in anti-terrorist coalitions for more than a decade.[46] Albania has been very active in international forums organized by international organizations, becoming a signatory to conventions enacted by the UN[47], OSCE[48], Council of Europe[49], treaties or initiatives designed to fight terrorism. In addition to these commitments, Albania has cooperated with its regional partners, SECI AII CEI or SEECP[50] among others, in matters that relate to terrorism. In 2011, Albania signed the Police cooperation declaration joining the initiative along with partner states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro and Austria. In addition to these multilateral agreements, Albania has ratified a series of bilateral cooperation agreements on the war against terrorism with Bosnia-Herzegovina (2010), Lithuania(2010), Macedonia (2005), Serbia (2010), Turkey (2008) and Romania (2002)

3.10.2 The legislative framework

In addition to this international legal framework, Albania has developed an internal regulatory and legal framework designed to confront these issues, by preventing

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[45]http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2178%20(2014) (12/07/2015).
[46]http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224822.htm(12/07/2015).
[47] For a full list of treaties signed by Albania in the UN as regards the war against international terrorism see; https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2_en.xml (12/07/2015).
[48] Albania is a signatory to the European Convention against Terrorism
[49] In 2007 Albania ratified the EU Council Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, and furthermore the country in a member of the expert committee for the evaluation of money-laundering and financing of terrorism activities measures.
[50] CODEXTER (2014, November). *Profiles of Counter-Terrorist Capacity: Albania*. Council of Europe, f. 1.

terrorist activities and punishing entities that finance their activities. During the last few years, the state has developed new mechanisms to fight the growth of violent extremism and reduce the number of Albanian citizens joining the conflict in Iraq and Syria. Legal mechanisms designed to fight terrorism and violent extremism is found in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania. As per Article 28/2 of the act: "terrorist organizations are criminal organizations of a unique nature, composed by one of more individuals who co-operate with the intention of committing acts of terrorism". Chapter VII of the Criminal code contains 17 other articles which delineate the kinds of terrorist violence, the creation and financing of terrorist organizations, recruitment and training of individuals in order to commit acts of terrorism.

Article 230 of the Criminal code has been amended to incorporate crimes of a terrorist nature with the intention of creating panic in society, or destabilization of key structures of a political, economic, social or constitutional nature, thus including i) kidnapping individuals, ii) serious damage to public property, infrastructure, transport systems, abducting airplanes ships or other transportation vehicles, iii) the production, purchase or possession of explosives, biological chemical or nuclear ammunition and so forth.[51]

Article 230/a is designed to deter the financing of terrorism, by punishing such behavior with 15 years of imprisonment, whereas article 230 imposes sanctions for individuals who hide funds used to finance terrorist activities. In 2007, more amendments to the Criminal Code were enacted -specifically as regards article 231 of the Code- in order to incorporate into national law the obligations undertaken by Albania as regards the ratification of the European Convention on the prevention of terrorism by punishing "the recruitment of individuals with the intention of committing terrorist acts or financing terrorist activities," even in instances when these acts are directed to another state, an international institution or organization.[52] On the other hand, the Criminal code of the Republic of Albania does not expound

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[51] http://www.pp.gov.al/web/kodi_penal_2013_shtatordoc_823.pdf (12/07/2015).
[52] ibid

special procedural actions to be applied in investigating terrorist activities, although there is a special law regulating the sequestration of property in these instances.[53]

The lack of legislation in this regard does not undermine the fight against terrorism, as Albania has adopted Resolutions No. 1267 and 1373 of the UN Security Council, which deals with such matters. On 10/10/2013, Parliament enacted Law Nr.157 "On measures against the financing of terrorist activities During the last few years government has pushed for amendments to article 265/a,b,c of the Criminal Code. These article delineate security measures applied to individuals who participate in military conflicts in a foreign state (article 256/a); the organization or participation in military conflicts in a foreign state (article 256/b); call to join military action in a foreign state (article 265/c). These articles complement an already wide legal framework regulating terrorist activities, violent extremism and the financing of terrorist activities in Albania.

3.10.3 The strategic framework

Albania has developed a strategic framework in order to confront international terrorism, as it intensified after 2001. For the first time terrorism was constantly mentioned as a threat to national security in the National Security Strategy of 2004. This strategy has been radically altered, as parliament enacted the new National Security strategy in 2014. Therein, terrorism was redefined as an internal threat and not only as an external threat.[54]As per the NSS (2014) "Extremist ideologies are based on the lack of knowledge, poverty, and the absence of state institutions and the globalization of society." These causes have paved the way for the radicalization of weak individuals and their recruitment to join international conflicts. Because of its expansionist tendencies, extremism can pose a threat to the cohesion and values of Albanian Society.[55] The strategic framework is reinforced by two other documents: i)

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[53] Law 10192, dated 14/11/2009, " On the prevention of organized crime and trafficking by means of pre-emptive measures on property.
[54] As per the NSS (2014): "International terrorism dominates the spectrum of asymmetrical threats and poses a direct threat to regional security and the security of the Albanian State. Albania has been exposed to the potential risk of a terrorist attack as a NATO member." http://www.parlament.al/web/pub/teksti_17880_1.pdf (15/07/2015).
[55] SSK (2014), ibid., f. 23.

The national strategy against terrorism (2011-2015)[56]and ii) The Strategy Against Organized crime, Illegal Trafficking and Terrorism (2013-2020).[57]

A new police force has been created within official police structures, namely the Anti-terror directorate, whose mission is to minimize the risk of terrorism in Albania and the coordination of all action taken by executive institutions with the National Informative Service, intelligentsia agencies, in confronting terrorism, violent extremism and religious radicalization.

3.11 The reaction of society and the Albanian Muslim

This institutional framework comprising of strategic and legislative measures cannot compensate for the need of involvement of the civil society, the Muslim community and other non-state actors, who can enhance the cooperation and coordination on the war against violent extremism. In this respect, the cooperation of state institutions with the Muslim community is a key element that will contribute in fighting Islamic extremism, by placing special importance to the relationships between members of the community in key geographic areas.

However, as explained above, the lack of state finance as regards religious communities has been one of the key factors that facilitated the infiltration of foreign religious extremist influences in post- communist Albania. This holds true even for the Albanian Muslim Community. Some of the leaders of this community who have been interviewed as part of this study, state that the lack of financial resources has been the most essential problem faced by the community in recent years.[58] Given the state of the economy in the early 90's, the community could not receive financial support needed to rebuild mosques and schools. The lack of qualified clerics who could guide the community posed another – yet equally important – problem. Whilst the state failed to address these concerns, the AMC's demand for financing and education would attract the attention of a considerable number of Middle-Eastern

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[56] Approved by VKM Nr. 675 (06/07/2011).
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[58] Interview with Me. Ermir Gjinishi, ex-vice-chairman of the Muslim community

foundations. Throughout the years, AMC has become increasingly dependent on their support.

Today there are about 20 of these foundations operating in Albania. These foundations were very active during the 90's decade, as there was virtually no state-oversight over their activities. It is clear that these organizations have already established themselves in the local community. The scope of their activities has taken a new dimension; in addition to religious activities, they hold charity events, aid the homeless, and construct hospitals. These actors would later on threaten national security, due to their connections to terrorist organizations operating in the Middle East. In recent years, they have been portrayed in an increasingly negative fashion by the media. Their presence became problematic due to a multitude of causes, such as the fact that they introduced previously unknown religious practices, or spread radical ideas in society. It is argued that they have ultimately introduced terrorist or extremist ideologies in Albanian society.[59]

The spread of Salafism and Wahabism is reflective of the fundamentalist nature of these organizations, which managed to create the right premises for the radicalization of Islam and the growth of violent extremism.[60] Several mosques are not under the control of the AMC as they have been funded by these organizations or believers themselves.[61] The failure of AMC and the State in overseeing their activity created the premises for the religious radicalization of small groups of individuals, who were susceptible to extremist tendencies. In an attempt to spread their religious beliefs, these foundations financed the education of the future generation of clerics, in Turkey or Middle-Eastern Countries. At the same time, this generation of Albanian clerics would certainly exert a great deal of influence in the AMC and wider Muslim community. This new generation of clerics would be regarded as a threat because they were educated in countries which foster radicalism and Islamic extremism. On the long term, there exists a real danger that they will spread radical beliefs in the community and aid in forming extremist cells within local Muslim communities.

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[59] Bumçi, A. (2004). *Çështje të Sigurisë Kombëtare. Rasti i Shqipërisë. Kufiri, Feja Korrupsioni*. Tiranë: AIIS Press: f. 60.

[60] The "saudist" tradition of Islam is regarded as a conservative, radical and puritan option, which does not conform with our tolerant traditions.. Bumçi, A. (2004). *Çështje të Sigurisë Kombëtare. Rasti i Shqipërisë. Kufiri, Feja Korrupsioni*. Tiranë: AIIS Press: f. 60.

[61] Miranda Vickers, "Islam in Albania," Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, March 1, 2008.

One of the most typical cases, which is reflective of this threat, involves Genci Balla, a 35-year-old Imam educated in Saudi Arabia, who was arrested in April 2014 as a result of an anti-terror operation, on the suspicion that he directed recruitment net and that he had transported 10's of warriors to Syria and Iraq. Along with Mr. Balla, Mr. Bujar Hysa and other collaborators were arrested. [62] These Imams had strong connections with extremist groups in Kosovo, whose leaders had also been educated in the Middle East. Kosovar authorities had recently jailed these individuals precisely because of their connections with terrorist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.[63] However, Albania was in need of qualified personnel, which could guide key institutions of the AMC. In order to fulfill this requirement, many Albanians were sent to study abroad in the Middle East or Turkey. Up until the end of the year 2000, when a private educational institution was established, there was no other opportunity for receiving theological education than through these radical Islam organizations and education centers. There is no accurate data as to the number of Albanian who have studied in the Middle East and Turkey, as well as the organizations that have financed their studies.

It is believed that a couple of hundred individuals have been educated abroad. A large majority of them have returned to Albania. Some of these individuals have pursued a theological career, whereas others have chosen to pursue further education in other fields. It is noteworthy that many of these individuals now hold key positions in religious institutions. The return of these individuals created a new problem within the Muslim community. The new generation of theologians was critical of individuals within the community whom were regarded as the "old generation", deemed as unqualified to pay key roles in the administration of the Muslim community institutions. The new generation of theologians demanded greater representation within the Muslim administrative structures. This clash for power within the AMC has intensified during the 1998-1999 period.
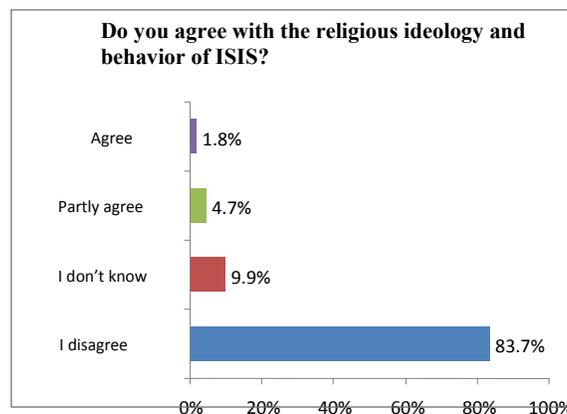
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[62]   (http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/rekrutonin-shqiptare-per-ne-siri-7-te-arrestuar-mes-tyre-dhe-dy-imame-ja-emrat/ - 05/07/2015).

[63] Bytyci, F. (2014). *Indebted to America, Kosovo Struggles to Curb Islamist Recruits*. Reuters.
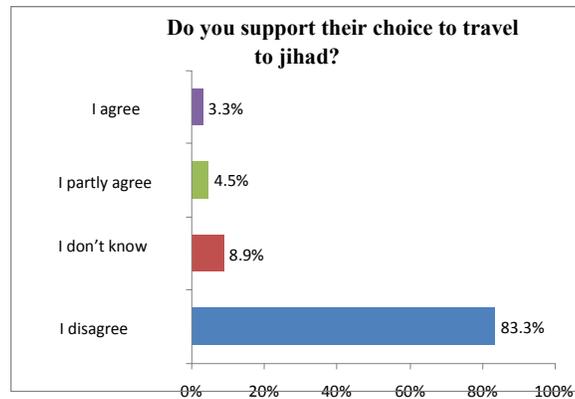
Based on our research, it is concluded that a majority of conflicts is related to properties under administration by the AMC, with different groups accusing one another of mismanaging these properties. The issue of land ownership is closely related to the inability of the community to gain independence from these foreign organizations. Because of the failure of the state to return land properties to the AMC, the community was forced to support itself by seeking aid from these foreign organizations. In a more general sense, the problem of land ownership in Albania is one of the key issues of the transition process. Although more than 2 decades have passed since the fall of communism, land ownership continues to be a highly contested matter in Albanian society and politics.

The poll conducted by AIIS shows that 83.7% of the participants do not agree with the ideology of ISIL and its terrorist activities. Furthermore, the majority of participants (83.3%) are against the participation of Albanian Citizens in terrorist organizations. (Graph 8)

Graph 7: Acceptance towards ISIL's behavior and religious ideology.

Do you agree with the religious ideology and behavior of ISIS?

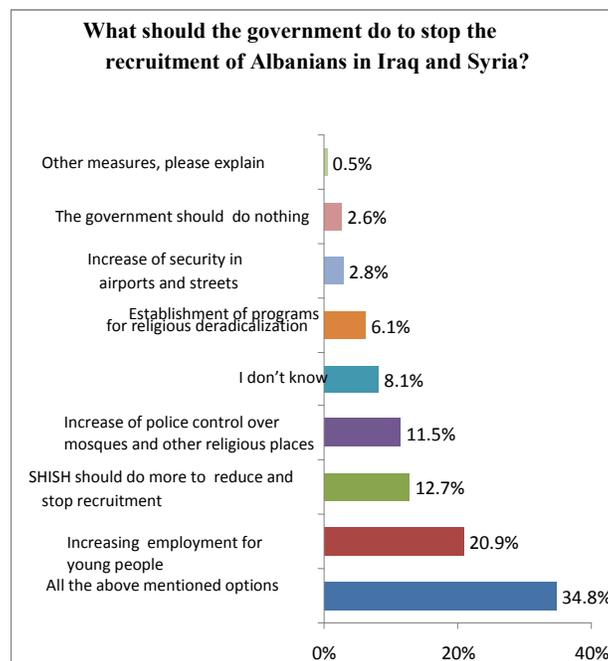|	
Agree	1.8%
Partly agree	4.7%
I don't know	9.9%
I disagree	83.7%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Graph 8: The reaction of the public as to the participation of Albanian citizens in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Do you support their choice to travel to jihad?

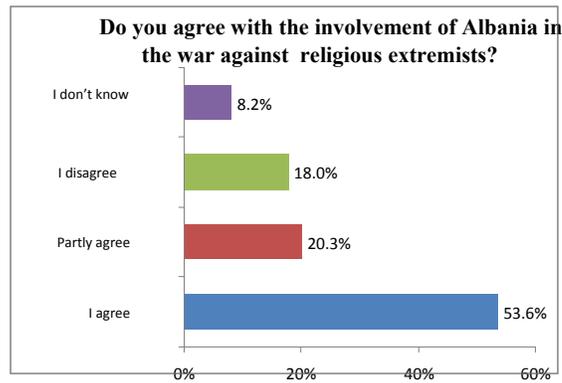| Response	Percentage
I agree	3.3%
I partly agree	4.5%
I don't know	8.9%
I disagree	83.3%

Moreover, participants seem to agree that Islamic radicalization and the participation of Albanians in conflict is influenced by a multitude of factors. 34.9% of participants state that there is a need for a thorough engagement of state institutions to produce de-radicalization programs, a greater engagement from intelligent services in preventing recruitment of young adults as well as a need for measures to increase employment especially for this age group, and especially in rural areas or the suburbs of large cities, wherein the ideological exposure to extremism is greater. (Graph 9)

Graph 9 : Governmental Action to prevent the recruitment of Albanian citizens

What should the government do to stop the recruitment of Albanians in Iraq and Syria?

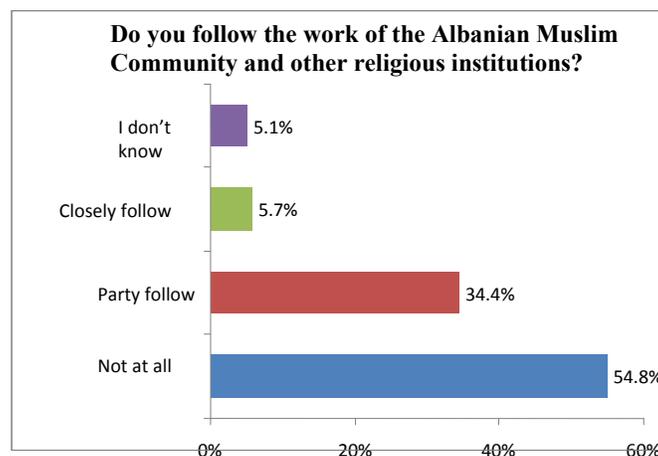| Response	Percentage
Other measures, please explain	0.5%
The government should do nothing	2.6%
Increase of security in airports and streets	2.8%
Establishment of programs for religious deradicalization	6.1%
I don't know	8.1%
Increase of police control over mosques and other religious places	11.5%
SHISH should do more to reduce and stop recruitment	12.7%
Increasing employment for young people	20.9%
All the above mentioned options	34.8%

A large number of participants approve of the measures undertaken by the state against terrorism and extremism, (about 73.9 % support the involvement of the state in international coalitions, which fight religious extremism – Graph 10)

Do you agree with the involvement of Albania in the war against religious extremists?

I don't know	8.2%
I disagree	18.0%
Partly agree	20.3%
I agree	53.6%

However, when asked about the activities of the AMC, the majority of participants state they have no contact with the community and do not participate in its activities. Thus, participants feel that there is a communication gap between the AMC and the public.(Graph 11) Such a problem needs to be confronted with a communication strategy that must be developed by the AMC not only as regards the Muslim population by the larger population in general.

Graph 11: Information of the public on the activities of AMC

Do you follow the work of the Albanian Muslim Community and other religious institutions?

I don't know	5.1%
Closely follow	5.7%
Party follow	34.4%
Not at all	54.8%

3.12 Implications on Albania's EU integration

In addition to the bilateral agreements on the war against terrorism and violent extremism with regional partners and EU Member states, in the last years Albania has furthered institutional cooperation with EU structures in line with its integration process. For example, chapter 3 of the stabilization and association agreement (2006) expressly mentions cooperation in fighting terrorism. Article 82 states that parties will cooperate to prevent the financing of terrorism, whereas article 74 states that parties will cooperate to prevent acts of terrorism, placing special importance on cross-border crimes. Such collaboration comprises, amongst others, exchange of information on terrorist groups and their supporters as per international law, as well exchange of information regarding methods, devices and training used in combating terrorism.[64]

Given its status as an EU candidate country, Albania has to fulfill certain criteria, which may be of a legal, economic, social or political nature. The fight against organized crime, terrorism and illegal trafficking forms part of these requirements.

As regarding the progress report of issued by the EU commission in 2014, with respect to the   fight against terrorism, the Commission stated that Albania has continued to implement the Action plan and strategy, by amending the criminal code, the criminal procedure code and by undertaking necessary steps to prevent the financing of terrorist activities. However, the report notes that the lack of a clear strategic plan, especially as regards the terrorist asset-freezing program, will ultimately undermine efforts to fight terrorism.   According to the commission, Albania must increase its capacity to prevent radicalization, by taking necessary measures to address the "foreign warrior" phenomenon.[65]

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

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[64] European Union Council (2006) http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/albania/st08164.06_en.pdf. (20/07/2015)

[65] EC Staff Working Document (2014). *Albania 2014 Progress Report*. European Commission.http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-albania-progress-report_en.pdf (20/07/2015).

In 2015, the number of Albanian Individuals joining the conflict in Iraq and Syria was zero. Although this is clearly a positive result, it has no bearing on the spread of radical Islamic ideology, as evidenced in several court sessions of individuals accused of terrorist activities. During the trial, all these individuals stated that they don't recognize Albanian law. Albania is a country with a moderate religious population but the growth of Islamic extremism in the post-communism years through Middle Eastern foundations and other actors has developed into a highly problematic issue. If it continues to be a lack of clear de-radicalization strategies, which must comprise of institutional as well as socio-economic measures, then it is to be reasonably expected that Islamic radicalization will advance in the public sphere, especially as regards certain vulnerable groups of the AMC.

The instrumentalization of the Muslim religious doctrine has turned into a threat to national security. However, this legitimizes political and military measures, which must be employed in order to fight this phenomenon. As stated in the National Security Strategy (2014), the prevention, control and neutralization of the extremist Islamic threat is of fundamental importance to national security as its advancement may undermine religious harmony.

Moreover, violent extremism, Islamic radicalization and the recruitment of soldiers in Albania may change the country into a favorable location for the development of terrorist groups and put the country into a potential target of terrorist activities. In September 2014, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ditmir Bushati in a joint interview with the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. John Baird has stated that "there are individuals in certain areas of Albanian whom have been trained to commit terrorist acts and prepared for the so called War for Jihad in Syria."[66]

If the threat of a formation of a regional or global jihadist net is not neutralized whilst in its rudimentary phases, this threat may transform the country into an entry gate for jihadists to penetrate Europe of the Balkans. Furthermore, violent extremism and Islamic radicalization threaten the image of the country and its development as it may lead to foreigners forming a mistaken perception of Albania that is a NATO Member

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[66] See http://gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2014/09/03/shqiptaret-ne-xhihad-bushati-po-luftojme-fenomenin-ska-lidhje-fene/ - 03/07/2015.

and contributor to the continuous war against international terrorism. A negative perception of the country by international partners may lead to a reduction of FDI and a loss in tourism revenues. Understanding the complexity of the violent extremism phenomenon is a necessary condition for an efficient policy aimed at combating this threat. Dealing with the extremist threat requires a multitude of local, national, regional and international efforts.

At a national level, the family unit, civil society and media must work together in order for the population to realize the dangers this phenomenon poses to national security. As regards de-radicalization, any approach taken must include psychological treatment, which will in turn serve to better understand the process through which young individuals are indoctrinated. Such strategies must be flexible, and they should address individual radicalization as well as radicalization of groups or communities. There are certain factors that incite violent extremism, and these are different in every state. Although it is true that there is no universal approach that can be adopted, experience shows that cooperative and constructive dialogue between society and government structures is a precondition to the success of the war against violent extremism and Islamic radicalization. Government agencies must create a favorable environment of cooperation between the different groups of society, such as leaders of communities, religious leaders, NGO's, the private sector and media. Empowering civil society with the necessary means to combat this threat may bring more efficient results, whereas governmental cooperation may result in more efficient measures available for fighting this threat.

4.2 Recommendations

The recommendations, which you may find below, are not meant to present an exhaustive list of measures that may be undertaken by state institutions and other actors. Rather, they seek to present a clear and integrated map of the measures that may be undertaken according to the different stages of the development of the phenomenon of violent extremism and religious radicalization in Albania. The recommendations are presented in the form of "best practices", based on two memorandums of the Global Forum against terrorism, The Hague Marakesh

memorandum[67] and the Ankara Memorandum,[68] which have been adapted as regards the specific social, economic and political conditions in Albania.

I. Identifying and fighting violent extremism.

Best practice 1: Investing in the long term growth of good faith relationships with the communities of religious believers which are most exposed to the recruitment process, by analyzing all matters that are significant to the community such as poverty, unemployment, and isolation from urban centers,

Best Practice 2: The phenomenon of violent extremism and Islamic radicalization is a multi-dimensional problem, and consequently it must be treated as such.

Best practice 3: Every approach taken to fighting this threat must take into account specific traits of individuals which might make them susceptible to indoctrination.

Best practice 4: It is necessary to understand the nature of this threat before formulating a coherent strategy that may effectively put an end to the growth of this phenomenon.

Best practice 5: The strategy against violent extremism employed by state departments must be based on scientific analysis, which demands an assessment of the factors influencing indoctrination, including psychological factors.

Best practice 6: Any program designed to fight violent extremism must avoid identifying the problem as belonging to a specific religion, locality or community.

Best practice 7: Developing a wide range of activities, meant to offer a non-violent alternative to individuals in need, by providing channels through which that may exert their anger and frustration, whilst simultaneously empowering individuals who can influence the behavior of these individuals and the wider community.

Best practice 8: State institutions such as the police, prosecution office and intelligent service agencies must implement long term programs designed to train staff as regards violent extremism and Islamic radicalization.

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[67] Hague-Marakesh Memorandum 2015 on the Best practices to be followed through an effective strategy for combating the foreign warrior phenomenon.
https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/140201/14Sept19_The+Hague-Marrakech+FTF+Memorandum.pdf (14/05/2015)
[68] Ankara Memorandum on best practices for dealing with violent extremism.
https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/72352/13Sep19_Ankara+Memorandum.pdf (14/05/2015).

II. Identifying and preventing individuals travelling to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq through an inter-institutional approach.

Best practice 1: Collecting and processing detailed information from governmental agencies, communities and the media in order to identify possible recruitments, always respecting the rule of law and human rights. In addition, a stronger collaboration is required between experts of civil society, academics and the private sector in order to prevent the phenomenon of online recruitment and the transformation of social media into a recruitment instrument.

Best practice 2: The creation of an operational agency is essential to the success of every state strategy against violent extremism.

Best practice 3: Developing legal and procedural measures in order to minimize the risk of individuals becoming extremist mercenaries.

Best practice 4: Implementing identification measures in order to stop foreign soldiers from travelling to conflict zones. Albania must strengthen its collaboration with intelligence agencies of partner states, as well as reinforcing analyzing mechanisms as regards individuals partaking in extremist activities, by using all means available in order to prevent individuals from obtaining travel permits.

III. Dealing with returnees

Best practice 1: State and institutional actors must encourage individuals to return voluntarily and give certain guarantees to those individuals which demonstrate the willingness of authorities to aid their integration through a de –radicalization process.

Best practice 2: A wide range of informational sources must be employed in order to identify these returnees. As for the recommendations of the OSCE, one of the most effective instruments in this regard may be the use of community policing measures in specific areas of the country.

Best practice 3: Building evaluation systems in order to analyze their mental condition and determine the best approach that can be taken to re-integrate these individuals in society.

Best practice 4: Strengthening the investigation and criminal proceedings process regarding these individuals, through a better accumulation of data and sharing of resources.

Best practice 5: Testing counter-terrorism state actions which may be employed in case returnees intend to commit terrorist acts of a specific nature.

Best practice 6: Developing all-inclusive programs of social, economic and cultural re-integration.

IV. Building public-private partnerships.

Best practice nr 1: Increasing the financial and administrative power of the AMC through financing its activities from the state budget.

Best practice 2: Strengthening the cult committee, by expanding its powers and staff in order to coordinate actions and increase the efficacy of the collaboration between state authorities and other actors.

Best practice nr 3: The development of new concepts on the nature of the phenomenon is a critical element of every successful program against violent extremism.

Best practice nr 4: The civil society may contribute in the confrontation with violent extremism and Islamic radicalization in Albania by i) spreading peaceful messages against violence ii) establishing specialized research centers, and iii) building channels of communication between state institutions and communities most exposed to the treat of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism.

Best Practice 5: The community must participate in events against violent extremism and Islamic radicalization.

Best Practice 6: Albanian Institutions must collaborate with the civil society so as to organize activities related to Islamic radicalization.

V. The role of the Albanian Muslim Community.

Best Practice 1: Reinforcing control mechanism on mosques and other cult objects, and ensuring that the AMC is the sole authority which supervises the community.

Best Practice 2: Closer collaboration between State institutions and religious institutions, through an agreement wherein certain measures against extremism are agreed upon.

Best Practice 3: Developing open public meetings with religious community in all areas but more importantly in areas where individuals are more exposed to indoctrination.

Best Practice 4: Empowering the Theologian's Council in order to address the misinterpretation of religious doctrines.

Best Practice 5: Empowering women and young adults within the Muslim communities through funding and organization of educational activities.

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